

SHADOW DAYS

A NIGHTSHADE *Novella*

PHILOMEL BOOKS

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HOME WAS A WORD WITHOUT much meaning for me, but Portland was the closest I'd come to knowing one. That ended with a phone call, like it always did.

"Morning, Seamus, my boy," Uncle Bosque said, his voice crackling through the static.

Since I'd turned eighteen at the beginning of the month, I didn't appreciate that he insisted on still calling me "boy." But considering that it was Bosque, I had to accept that he likely saw anyone who didn't possess a stock portfolio worth at least five million dollars as less than a real man.

I rolled over in bed, blinking at the clock. 7:00 a.m. On a Saturday. Bosque was one of those workaholic types with an unhealthy commitment to productivity.

"Hey, Uncle Bosque," I croaked around the morning frog lodged in my throat.

"Exciting news," he said. "I'm taking you home."

I sat up, rubbing my eyes. "I'm sorry?"

"Home, dear nephew. We're finally going home."

"What are you talking about?" I rolled out of bed, stumbling toward a laundry basket. I found a clean pair of jeans and pulled them on with one hand while holding the phone to my ear with the other. "You want to take a trip to Ireland?"

This was the only possibility I could dredge up. Ireland was as much home as anyplace else: I'd been born there.

"No, no." Bosque's laugh was indulgent, as if I'd just asked if he was taking me to meet Santa Claus at the North Pole for Christmas. "We're moving to the family estate."

The phone dropped from my hand. I swore under my breath.

"Shay?" Bosque's voice sounded tinny from where the phone lay.

I scooped it up. "Sorry, I'm here. We have a family estate?" This was the first I'd ever heard of it.

"Of course." Bosque's tone implied that us having an estate was akin to keeping a family photo album.

"Where is it?" Now that I was beginning to wake up, I felt the too familiar discomfort, like a rock had landed in my gut. Another move. He was talking about another move.

"Colorado."

I closed my eyes. "When?"

"You haven't asked *where* in Colorado," Bosque said. "I think you'll be quite pleased."

"Where?" I forced myself to be polite.

"Vail." I could hear the self-satisfaction in Bosque's reply. "Think of all the rocks you can climb there. They have these rather large ones called the Rocky Mountains." He laughed at his own poor joke.

When Bosque had learned a couple years ago that bouldering was a favorite hobby of mine, he'd regarded me with amusement, asking if I planned to try lion taming next. My uncle had no interest in my outdoor hobbies. His only close encounter with nature had been indulging my request for a pet rabbit when I was four. I'd had to give up Floppy when we moved from Oxford to Mumbai three weeks later.

"Vail. Great," I said quietly.

"Excellent school," Bosque said. "Quite a pleasant town. We'll have a fine life there."

He threw around the word we easily, but I was betting I'd be in Vail and Bosque would be globe-trotting as usual.

"I'm sure it will be great," I said. "So . . . when?"

"A car will pick you up in two days." Bosque's reply was clipped. "And I'm sending someone over to ship your personal effects."

I didn't care about where we were moving—there was always a *where*—it was when that really mattered. *When* was two weeks before I was supposed to start my senior year of high school.

"Two days?" My voice cracked. "Please tell me you're kidding."

The other end of the phone was silent.

I counted to ten, forcing myself to take slow breaths.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Bosque. I guess I was just really hoping to finish up school here."

"I can understand your position, Shay," Bosque said. "I assure you the Mountain School in Vail is an exceptional school, far better than your current academy."

I swallowed my objection, though my current school was just fine. If Bosque said I was moving, I was moving.

Bosque cleared his throat. "The car will arrive at noon on Monday and take you to the airport. I'll be waiting for you at my jet so we can arrive at our new home together. I trust you'll be ready for the trip?"

Surprise made me forget I was angry. I usually moved alone, seeing Bosque only in passing if he decided to drop in at my new school. Relocating to the family estate must really mean something to him.

"I'll see you Monday," I said.

He hung up.

I stumbled my way toward the kitchen, knowing I'd never get back to sleep. My mind churned as I attempted to call up images of Colorado. Mountains, skiing, hiking, climbing. I rattled off positives, but I was having a hard time getting past how pissed off I was that

Bosque had decided to yank me out of Portland. I'd been here for over a year. It was the longest I'd been anywhere in the last decade. I had friends. I lived in a cool city. And I was about to start my senior year in high school.

Not anymore.

I found Ally in our common area standing in tree pose, her eyes closed, while the coffeemaker chortled and steamed at her back.

She opened one eye. "You know it's Saturday, right?"

I mumbled an affirmative, grabbing a mug and sloshing myself a cup from the half-brewed pot.

"Taking me up on my offer to teach morning yoga?" She threw me a wry smile.

I dropped into a chair. "I'm moving."

She abandoned her serene posture and joined me at the kitchen table. "What?"

"My uncle called," I said. "We're going to Colorado."

"But school starts in two weeks," she said. "Why now?"

"Why ever?" I sipped my coffee, avoiding her worried gaze. "This is my life. Always has been."

"Your uncle's a real nutclubber, huh?" Ally said.

I cracked a smile for the first time since the phone call. Ally believed in only cursing with newly invented words. After I'd met her and commented on it, she'd replied: "The best thing about English is its inventiveness. There are always new words. If you're sticking with standard cussing, you're not thinking hard enough."

"Yeah, that's one way to put it," I said.

"All right." She patted my shoulder, heading out of the kitchen. "Seeing how we don't have much time left, I'll wake up the rest of the crew."



Two hours later my housemates and I were fully caffeinated and wrestling my stuff into boxes.

“I’ll give you my first child,” Mike said, hefting my stack of *Walking Dead*.

“No deal.” I roll another sweater into a ball and sank it into a suitcase. “Put them in the trunk and back away slowly.”

“Pimplepus!” Ally jumped out of the way before a stack of books crashed to the floor where she’d been standing.

Sam, my other housemate, who’d been not so much packing as offering instructions to everyone else while he sat on the bed picking out tunes on his acoustic, glanced in her direction.

“Top heavy,” Sam said.

“Excuse me?” Ally glared at him.

Sam grinned at her. “The bookshelves, babe.”

Mike wrapped his arms around Ally. “Hey, don’t insult my lady friend. I might be forced to defend her honor.”

Sam pretended to cower.

“I think I’m better off without that brand of defense.” Ally shoved him off.

Mike laughed and began gathering up books. “Dude, these are seriously warped. Why don’t you get some nice books?”

For a moment I wished I could stop time and stay in this place with these people. I’d spent a week arguing with Bosque over my moving into this house for the summer. He’d been unconvinced that living with real people as opposed to a mostly empty school dorm would be in my best interest. I couldn’t help feeling like I was being yanked away from my friends as payback for winning that last battle.

Mike had made a tower of yellowing paperbacks. “If I put all these outside our house on the curb, I don’t think I could get five bucks for them.”

“Leave him alone,” Ally said, offering me an apologetic smile.

“Look at this one.” Mike held up a tattered copy of Arthur C. Clarke’s *Imperial Earth*.

“Face it, Mike,” I said. “You have no taste. I’m ready to defend the value of flea market books and the utter genius that is cover art from the seventies.”

“Yeah?” Mike said, handing the book to Ally and picking up another one. The cover had fallen off, leaving the title page naked, so I could see it was Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of Champions*. “Nice cover art here.”

I shrugged. “Read it too many times. And dropped it in a lake once.”

“Maybe if you read books too many times, I wouldn’t have to help you cheat your way through all your lit classes,” Ally said, sticking her tongue out at Mike.

“Don’t I remember you being my girlfriend?” Mike pulled her in for a kiss. “Aren’t you supposed to be nice to me?”

“Not in my contract,” Ally said, but she kissed him back, smiling.

Still wearing the half-dazed grin he couldn’t fight off whenever Ally kissed him, Mike tried to frown at the shelves of Penguin Classics still waiting to be put in boxes.

“Seriously, man. Augustine, Aquinas, Hobbes, Seneca. You haven’t read all this philosophy. You aren’t that boring.”

“Yes, I have,” I said. “And philosophy isn’t boring. If you ever cracked one of those books open, you’d know that.”

“I prefer learning via proxy,” he said, putting his arm around Ally.

She sighed. “I’ve created a monster.”

“An ignorant monster.” I jumped out of the way when Mike tried to sucker punch me.

The screen door banged open and closed, and a moment later Kate stood in my bedroom door, breathless.

“I’m here! Tell me it’s not true!”

She was wearing jeans and a T-shirt layered beneath the hoodie I’d loaned her at the bonfire we’d had last weekend. I knew the smile I shot her way was muted by regret. I’d been toying with the idea of asking Kate out. She was cute, smart, and funny. Now the best I could do was an “I’ll miss you” hook-up, which would only leave me feeling like an ass.

My uncle really is a nutclubber.

“We’re packing boxes for the fun of it,” Sam said, striking a minor chord.

“You haven’t helped pack a thing,” Ally said. “But yeah, he’s leaving us.”

“Why?” Kate kind of threw herself at me. I was kinda expecting a hug, so I caught her. She smelled like strawberries, and I started to rethink the merits of that good-bye hook-up. Then I remembered that I don’t want to be That Guy . . . most of the time.

“The usual,” I said, enjoying the way she tucked her head underneath my chin. “My uncle’s work is moving, so am I.”

“If you’re in boarding schools anyway, why do you have to go anywhere?” Mike asked.

My teeth clenched and I let Kate go. “I don’t know, but I’ve learned that arguing about it doesn’t do any good. I just have to move when he tells me to.”

“Sucks,” Sam said.

“Write me a song about it,” I said, not wanting to mope.

Sam grinned. “Maybe I will.”

“But no more Elliott Smith stuff,” Mike said. “Just ‘cause he died doesn’t mean we’re all waiting for his replacement.”

“I’m not trying to be Elliott Smith.” Sam glared at him.

“Uh-huh,” Mike said. “Your ‘Saturday Market’ sounded just like ‘Rose Parade.’”

“No, it didn’t.” Sam threw a pleading gaze at Ally.

“Sorry,” she said.

“Damn it.” Sam shoved his guitar aside.

“Language,” she said.

Sam picked up his guitar again and repeated the angry movement. “Mangleguts!” he said, managing to keep a straight face.

Ally smiled and nodded. “Good boy.”

“I’m going to miss this,” I said, and then wished I hadn’t. Everybody got quiet. Kate sighed.

Ever the mother hen, Ally strode up to me, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Miss, schmiss. You’re not getting away from us.”

“You’re going to keep him here as a hostage,” Mike said. “Nice. His uncle’s loaded.”

Ally ignored him. “I know you have this whole social media aversion thing—”

“I’d rather read . . . or go on a hike,” I replied automatically. “I’m content with texting.”

“No excuses,” she said, wagging her finger in my face. “We’re setting you up a Facebook page right now.”

“Uh—” I started. But she was already heading to my laptop.

“No! A blog—make him do a blog.” Sam stood up, trotting to meet her and sliding into the chair at my desk before she had a chance to.

“Wait a sec—” I shook my head, but Ally had already begun to giggle, whispering in Sam’s ear while he typed.

“Give the guy a break,” Mike said. “He’s already being exiled from the coolest city in the continental U.S. and now you’re giving him homework.”

Ally glared at him. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You’re the expert,” he said, giving me an “I tried” glance. But she was right. Ally was the social sun around which we all orbited.

“A blog and Facebook it is,” Sam announced. He clicked between two screens, as of yet empty templates. Tabula rasa: a clean slate, like my new life.

“I don’t know about this,” I said. “What am I supposed to write about? I don’t think people will want to read about my boring life.”

“Write nice things about us,” Ally said. “We’re suckers for flattery. And witticisms. I believe you are capable of witticisms.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “Give me an example.”

“If you need an example, I may have been wrong about you,” Ally said.

“You have to let us know you’re doing okay.” Kate pulled the hoodie a little tighter around her. I doubted I would ever get it back.

I peered over Sam’s shoulder. “Fine. But how am I supposed to even use these? You made up the password. I don’t know it.”

Ally grinned. “Sure you do.”

She waited a beat, watching me.

I began to laugh. “Nutclubber.”

“What else?” She hugged me, and I made a mental note to change it as soon as I had a minute alone. I didn’t want to imagine all the things Mike and Sam would post if I left the sites open to them.

Ally’s phone buzzed. She looked at it and began texting with the speed and precision of a cyborg.

“Your first send-off is at Lisbeth’s house tonight,” she said.

“My first send-off?” I asked.

“Sure.” She smiled at me. “You have two nights left in Portland, right?”

God, I’d miss this place.





AFTER TWO NIGHTS OF GOING-AWAY parties I was not of a mind, body, or spirit to climb into a car with a driver who looked like at any moment his muscles were going to rip right through his dark suit. Why my uncle's drivers always looked like they could double as pro wrestlers never failed to perplex me. I tried to stay hidden behind my sunglasses as I was driven to a private airstrip and herded to my uncle's Gulfstream G650.

Like with the moving argument, I'd learned that trying to convince Bosque I'd be happier flying on a commercial airline like normal people rather than taking these trips featuring only me, the pilot, and a flight attendant was completely pointless. As usual the latter member of that party looked twenty-something with piles of midnight curls rolling over her shoulders and enough buttons on her blouse undone to leave more than a teasing glimpse of her abundant cleavage. I knew that would be a bonus for any normal warm-blooded teenage male or something, but considering it was my uncle's plane, I was slightly creeped out. After my second going-away party, I was more in a state to cuddle with a toilet than a hot girl, so it only left me more pissed off.

The trip from Portland to Vail was mercifully short. And with the flight attendant serving me ginger ale after ginger ale, I almost felt normal by the time I exited the plane. I stopped in surprise, not at

the sight of another hulking driver waiting for me, but because my uncle stood next to him. I knew he said he'd be there when we spoke on the phone, but part of me didn't believe it would actually happen. Never in all the moves I'd made, and those numbered more than I cared to count, had Bosque been around to welcome me to my new "home"—this was like the director of the FBI showing up to usher an informant into witness protection.

He lifted his hand in greeting as I approached, a brief smile touching his lips. "Seamus."

"Hey, Uncle Bosque," I said. I'd never been able to get a fix on Bosque's age. His attitude led me to believe he was my mother's older brother, but his hair was impossibly free of gray. Considering he made a zillion dollars or something every year, he could afford a decent haircut, but instead his dark hair was slicked back so it clung to his scalp tighter than a helmet. He didn't quite manage up-to-date fashion either. His suits looked like they'd been tailored in the 1920s, though they were obviously brand new.

He patted my shoulder. Bosque wasn't big on hugs, and that was okay by me. The driver opened the door to the car, and Bosque gestured for me to get in. He slid into the seat beside me. The car rolled away from the plane and onto the airport's service road. My instinct was to peer out the tinted windows so I could gaze at the mountains, but I figured if Bosque was here, he wanted to talk to me.

"I trust you're well," he said.

"Well enough." My headache was gone. But I'd been planning on using the rest of the day for a nap. I hoped my uncle didn't have big plans for us.

Bosque slid his dark suit jacket off his shoulders, folding it in his lap. "I thought it best that I join you here for a few days. It's only proper, given that this house holds so much of the family legacy within its walls."

I nodded, though I wasn't following his line of thought.

“I also need to make a few visits to the school,” he said. “Their admissions process is more rigorous than that of any institution you’ve attended. There will be a slight delay before you can begin classes.”

My eyebrows went up. “Is there a problem?” It couldn’t be my grades, because those were always good. Besides, even if I’d been an academic disaster, Bosque was the sort of man who snapped his fingers and changed the world. I couldn’t imagine what the holdup could be.

Bosque shook his head. “Simply administrative obstacles that you’ve no need to concern yourself with. I’m sure you can find ways to distract yourself until the matter is settled.”

“How long?” I asked. Having my summer vacation extended wasn’t a bad thing. On the other hand, school was the only place I was likely to meet people.

“A few weeks,” Bosque said.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I’d been ready to argue that I should have just stayed in Portland, finishing my senior year there like I’d wanted to. But arguing with my uncle never got me anywhere.

“I guess I’ll hit the trails, get some good hikes in,” I said, slumping down in the seat.

“That’s the spirit.” His phone buzzed and I looked away as my uncle fell into quiet conversation with whomever had called.

My gaze wandered to the window, finding snow-covered peaks and mountain slopes painted in greens that ranged from jade to ebony. Portland had been a great place to live because I’d spent so much time outdoors. Adventurous, sure, but it was also soft. The air had been perpetually damp in Oregon, giving the rivers and forests a mellow quality. Colorado felt *wild*. The air that slipped in when I cracked the window was dry, sharp, and biting. I shivered reflexively.

“Stunning, isn’t it?” Bosque was looking at me.

“Yeah,” I said. My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out to see a text from Ally.

Are you there yet? Why haven't you updated your status?

I sighed, punching in a response. *Landed, not home yet. Uncle's here.*

Really???

Affirmative. Gotta go.

“Friends missing you already?” Bosque asked.

“Yep.” I shoved my phone back in my pocket, trying to ignore the knot in my gut. Trying to pretend I didn’t wish I was back in Portland.

“You’ll make new friends,” he said. “I assure you. You’ll be well taken care of.”

“By the school that won’t let me in?” I asked.

Bosque gave me a measured look, not blinking until I said, “Sorry.”

We spent the rest of the trip in silence. My headache had revived itself and Uncle Bosque was reading *The Economist*. I wasn’t sure how much time had passed, an hour maybe, in which I’d nodded off, when he cleared his throat.

I rubbed the grogginess out of my eyes. When my vision cleared, I didn’t have the sense to catch myself before I swore, starting at the behemoth that stood outside my window.

My uncle laughed. “It is impressive, is it not?”

Impressive wasn’t the word I would have picked. It was enormous. The car had stopped at the end of a long drive lined with expertly manicured trees. The house, if you could call it that, had four stories. The first three were lined with immense, mullioned windows while sharp eaves of the fourth cloaked what I guessed were the attic’s rooms.

In a place this big is it still called an attic?

In the crooks and shadows lining the top of the mansion were

dozens of stone creatures. Some innocuous: deer, owls, and horses; others, sinister beasts that inhabited only myth. Twisting winged serpents, gargoyles, and chimeras leered at me as I climbed out of the car. The stone exterior was a somber gray and its facade looked out of place against the backdrop of mountains. A house like this belonged amid lonely English moors.

I'm moving into evil Hogwarts, I texted Ally.

She answered a few seconds later. *Nice. Too bad you're a Muggle.*

Obviously she'd found that funny, but I was still freaked out by the place. It wasn't just the way the mansion looked. With each step I took toward the front doors, my skin crawled. It was a warm September day, but I couldn't help shuddering.

Uncle Bosque appeared entirely at ease as he took long strides to the doors. They swung open as if in welcome.

"Good afternoon, sir," a tall, thin man greeted him. "Everything is in order, per your instructions."

"Excellent," Bosque said. My uncle beckoned me toward the open doors. My feet had rooted themselves to the ground, making each step I took cumbersome. I was even more uncomfortable when the thin man bowed as I walked past him into the house.

Waiting in the front entryway were a dozen or so more people, men and women all dressed in crisp black and white uniforms, heads bowed in respect. I wanted to scream and jump around them like a maniac just to see if they'd keep up the deference act or clobber me like any sensible person would. As unnerving as the silent staff was, the entryway itself was even more intimidating. The room was broad and round. A chandelier hung suspended in the air above us, the darkness of the wrought iron offset by the sparkle of crystal. On the wall opposite the front doors two staircases rose to meet the balcony ringing the second floor.

My contemplation was broken by the solid thud of the front doors closing.

“Shay,” my uncle said. “This is Rowan Estate’s staff. They’ve done me the courtesy of gathering to meet you. You’ll rarely see them assembled like this. I prefer they do their work out of sight.”

I slid a critical gaze at my uncle. Did he really talk about people like this?

None of the staff flinched. Their heads remained bowed. Not only was I moving into a small castle, apparently I had also been transported through time back to the nineteenth century.

“Should my nephew require anything, I trust you’ll see to it.” Bosque spoke to the thin man. “Thomas is the head of the house staff. I’ll leave his number with you, Shay. Don’t hesitate to contact him in my absence.”

I nodded.

Thomas bowed deeply in my direction. “It will be a pleasure to serve you, Master Shay.”

A strangling sound bubbled forth from my throat.

“Perhaps dropping the formalities with my nephew would be best,” Bosque said, smiling. “These young people have different sensibilities about the world.”

“Of course, sir,” Thomas said. “Dinner will be served at seven thirty.”

“And our guests?”

“They are expected at seven, sir.”

“Very good.” Bosque put his hand on my shoulder, steering toward the staircase on the right side of the circular foyer. “Let me show you your room. Your things will be sent up shortly, if they haven’t already arrived.”

“Guests?” I asked as we climbed the staircase.

“Two dear friends are joining us for dinner,” my uncle said. “A close business associate of mine and his son, who will be one of your classmates. I’m sure you’ll become fast friends.”

Great. Uncle Bosque was making playdates for me.

My eyes wandered to tall double doors at the center of the balcony, but Bosque led me away from them toward a long hallway.

I pulled back, pointing at the closed doors. "What's in there?"

His eyes shifted onto me, then away. "The library."

"There's a library?" Maybe this wouldn't be so bad.

"I'm afraid the library is one place I'll ask you to stay away from," he said.

I started to protest, but Bosque shook his head. "It's not a traditional library, Shay. It houses valuable books. Collector's items and personal records. I have to ensure its contents remain in pristine condition. Only a trained archivist can use its collections."

"Can't I at least see it?" I asked.

"You have plenty of books, Seamus," he said. "Any you need you can order and have them sent here. There's nothing of interest to you in my library. Please respect my privacy."

His words had a note of finality that quelled my instinct to push the issue further, but it was like a bur under my skin. Bosque knew I'm a reader, and he knew I liked old stuff. Antiquity rated as interesting bordering on cool in my book. Plus, I hated the way he was treating me—like a kid who might mess up his fancy house. I was a senior, not a preschooler.

Anger had stoked up in my gut enough that I was about to argue with him again when the art lining the hall he strode down caught my eye. The burning outrage in my stomach went ice cold, quickly becoming nausea. I tripped over my own feet and stopped to stare at one of the dozens of floor-to-ceiling paintings. A naked man, almost life size, was bent backward in the portrait. Shadows swirled around him, snaking along his pale skin as if they were alive . . . and slowly twisting him apart. Though no physical implements of torture were present in the painting, the man's torment was clear. I forced my eyes off the picture and turned around to examine the painting on the opposite wall. This portrait held a woman, her clothing no more than

rags dangling from her body. She was on her knees, head bowed in defeat. Gashes covered her shoulders, stomach, and calves. Crimson pooled beneath her, darkening until it bled into the swirling void that filled the rest of the canvas.

“Are you coming, Shay?” Bosque had reached the end of the hall and was turning a corner.

I nodded, worried I’d gag if I tried to speak. *What the hell kind of art is this?*

It wasn’t as if I didn’t know that art was full of violence. I was pretty sure I’d seen a hundred depictions of the martyring of Saint Sebastian alone in museums throughout Europe. But something about these paintings made me sick. They weren’t tragic at all—they failed to evoke the grief of death, loss, and sacrifice that martyr portraits aimed for. The paintings that filled this mansion seemed to depict torment with a life of its own and torture that was still occurring. Why would my uncle want to collect images like that? Why would anyone?

I didn’t want to give it too much thought and decided I’d just look straight ahead when I walked down this hall. My eyes flicked over a marble statue at the corner where my uncle had turned. Its beautiful, gleaming shape resembled the work of classic masters of sculpture. The man looked like any rendition of Greek or Roman heroes of myth with one exception. He had wings. Not pleasant, silky-feathered angel wings. The long, folded appendages sprouting from the sculpture’s shoulders looked like they’d been stolen from a giant bat, or possibly a small dragon.

“Weird,” I muttered under my breath as I passed it, liking it better than the paintings but not that much better. “Too weird.”

I found Uncle Bosque waiting for me at the end of another hall. He opened the last door on the left.

“Your abode.”

I stepped into the room and was kind of relieved that unlike the

rest of the house, it wasn't as big as an airplane hangar. The bedroom had dark wood accents and a lot more of a bed than I'd had in a while, but otherwise it felt like a place I could make my own. My trunk was already sitting at the foot of the bed, and several shipping boxes were stacked near the closet. A brown-wrapped package rested amid the bed linens.

"This is great," I said. "Thanks."

"The bathroom is two doors down across the hallway," Bosque said. "The cleaning staff is here every Tuesday. If you set out your laundry, they'll wash and press your things for you. They will also keep your room and the bathroom in pristine condition."

"Uh . . . can they not do that?" I asked, shoving my hands in my jeans' pockets.

"Excuse me?" He eyed me curiously.

"The bathroom is fine," I said. "Yes, pristine. All good there. But my room is my room. I'd rather not have strangers scouring every inch of it on a weekly basis. I'll keep it clean. I swear."

He laughed. "If you're worried about their discretion, you needn't be. I'm certain they would understand if you have gentlemen's literature among your other books."

I coughed, feeling a blush scramble up my neck and into my face. I didn't know what was worse, that my uncle had just referred to porn as "gentlemen's literature" or that he assumed I had some.

"That's not it. Seriously." I didn't look at him while I spoke. "I haven't ever had a personal cleaning staff. I don't need one now. What I need to know is that I have some real privacy in this megamansion."

Bosque smiled, his gaze telling me that he didn't believe I was anything other than a teenage porn hoarder, which made me even more uneasy about the wacko paintings in the hall and what kind of "gentlemen's literature" he might have stashed in that library.

Yuck.

“As you wish. I’ll instruct your staff to treat your bedroom as sacrosanct.”

“Thanks, Uncle Bosque.” I sat on the edge of the bed. “Is this house usually empty? I mean am I the only one living here? Because it’s pretty huge.”

“Yes, it is,” he said. “The art collection is rare, and I do allow the local historical society to schedule tours when I’m not in residence. I’m sure they’ll be disappointed that the premises are being returned to private occupancy only.”

“History, huh?” I said. “When was it built? I didn’t think they had places like this out west.”

“One of the reasons the tours were in demand,” Bosque said. “In terms of architecture it’s one of a kind. Built in the late nineteenth century by one of our ancestors who did quite well in the Colorado gold rush.”

“Pikes Peak or bust?” I ask. “That one?”

“Glad you to hear you’ve taken in some history at those schools I’ve sent you to,” he said, stepping toward the door. “I’ll leave you to get settled. Dinner is in a few hours.”

“Uncle Bosque?” My voice felt small, more childlike than I’d ever want it to be. “Are you going to live here too?”

He looked at me, squaring his shoulders. “You know the nature of my work.”

I clenched my teeth, wondering why I’d even care about sharing a house with an uncle I barely knew. Still, he was my only family.

“I’ll be here tonight,” he said. “But tomorrow I’ll be traveling again. I’ll return when the school’s admissions process is complete. I want to be certain everything goes smoothly when you first matriculate.”

“Right,” I said.

“I’ll be waiting for you in my study,” he said. “It’s at the far end of the west wing. When you’re ready, come find me and we’ll take a

tour of the house before dinner.”

I nodded, suddenly exhausted.

Bosque left and I flopped onto my back. My head struck the package sitting on the bed. I'd forgotten it was there.

The mailing label showed it had shipped from Portland, mailed overnight to arrive today. I opened it up to find my hoodie folded neatly around a plastic bag full of chocolate chip cookies. Kate's handwriting looped across a note card.

Don't forget us. Xoxo

It wasn't anything but thoughtful, and still I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach. Tomorrow I'd be alone. In a place where I had no friends. In a house big enough to shelter an army but that was home only to me.

If I was going to stay sane the next few weeks while I was waiting for the school to let me enroll, I was going to have to get creative. Very creative.

I rolled onto my stomach and texted Kate. *Don't know how I'll make it without you. Sure you won't be cold without my hoodie?*

My phone buzzed almost instantly. *I wouldn't say no if you sent it back. Miss seeing your face already.*

I was about to text back when I realized I could do better.





I STARED AT THE SCREEN, wondering where all these Facebook people had come from. Either Ally had done some serious recruiting or people think making friends with strangers online is a good way to spend time. I was still in the middle of designing my blog when there was a knock at the door.

“I expected you’d want that tour by now,” Bosque said.

“Sorry.” I closed my laptop. “Got distracted.” The blog would have to wait.

I kept pace with my uncle’s long but casual strides through the arched halls.

“There is little within these walls that is without value,” he said. “I trust you’ll take care to treat your home with care.”

“No problem,” I said, gawking at one of the sicko paintings and then at my uncle. He glanced at the painting, then back to me. I’d been waiting for him to say something about them. Silence.

Awkward.

Our walk through the estate took almost an hour, leaving me with not infrequent thoughts that I could easily get lost in the place. The second and third floors were filled with bedrooms and quiet parlors, while the fourth floor had some more bedrooms and a lot of storage.

The larger gathering spaces of the mansion were clustered on the ground floor. The kitchen was enormous and reminded me of something out of *Beowulf*—built to feed a horde of ravenous thanes and not one solitary guy like me. The dining room featured a table that could seat two dozen guests. Four places were already set with bone china plates, sparkling crystal goblets, and gleaming silver utensils. I was glad the place settings were clustered at one end of the table. Otherwise dinner would have required us to shout our conversation along its length. A ballroom, its floor so polished that I could look down and see my own face, adjoined the dining room. The last room Bosque showed me was what he called a “gentlemen’s lounge” and to me looked like PETA’s worst nightmare. The walls were covered with taxidermied beasts ranging from familiar—wolves, foxes, deer heads, and mink pelts—to exotic—a huge lion rug, with head still attached, covered the floor next to the fireplace. Bosque helped himself to a cigar out of the tall humidor and I wondered why “gentlemen” liked to look at dead beasts while they had after-dinner drinks. I half expected to find neat stacks of my uncle’s “gentlemen’s literature” on the end tables—a thought that made me shudder.

When my uncle swept his hand around the room and said, “All of this is yours,” I managed to stop myself from cringing.

“This is your legacy, my dear nephew.” He smiled, gazing at me. “I hope you will enjoy your days at Rowan Estate.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s really . . . impressive.”

“Isn’t it, though?” he said. “I’m delighted you’re here and can appreciate the fortune your ancestors worked so hard to provide for you.”

“Are there family records?” I asked. “Like in the library?”

His smile vanished. “I’ve told you that the library is off-limits.”

“I know, but—”

He cut me off. “All you need to know about the past is before

you. This place. These creature comforts are the gifts your family left you. Names and dates on pages are but a shadow in comparison. Don't bother thinking about it."

I opened my mouth and his eyes flashed. I had to look away. I'd never gotten used to the unsettling silver shade of my uncle's eyes.

"The library must be left alone," he said. "That is my only restriction on your residence here and I expect you to honor that rule."

I nodded, keeping my eyes averted.

A polite cough sounded in the doorway. Thomas offered me a thin smile.

"Master Bosque, your guests have arrived."

"Excellent." Bosque strode from the room, passing Thomas and leaving me standing alone, still lost in thoughts about what kind of family I came from and how I was supposed to live in this gigantic place all alone.

"Master Shay." I looked up when Thomas addressed me, frowning at the formal and disconcerting title. His smile was sympathetic. "Pardon me, sir. Shay—will you follow me to the dining room?"

I shrugged, trailing after Thomas and wondering what friends of my uncle could be like. A minute later I had my answer: Uncle Bosque had friends that worked as models for Armani. At least that's what they looked like. I assumed the pair were father and son, but I couldn't pin down how old the senior member of the party was. His face didn't look quite old enough for him to be the father of the boy who was clearly my age. They both had blond hair that Rumpelstiltskin could have spun.

Bosque waved me over. "Shay! I'd like you to meet dear family friends. This is Efron Bane and his son, Logan."

Efron extended his hand. His grip was firm and his smile blinding in its perfect whiteness.

“Welcome to Vail.” He pushed his son toward me. “My son has been anticipating your arrival. You’ll be in school together.”

Logan looked like he was fighting not to roll his eyes.

“You’re a senior?”

Logan managed to partially hide his sigh, but not the boredom in his barely polite smile. “Yes.”

I decided to make one more attempt at friendliness. “I hate to admit it, but I’m really dying to start school. Life’s kinda boring without it. Who knew?”

“I heard there was a delay,” he said, apparently not amused by my joke. “But the Mountain School has rigorous admissions standards. I’m sure you understand.”

“Mmmmmm” was all I could muster in response. Logan and I were not cut from the same cloth, and he was starting to piss me off after two minutes of conversation. The hole of loneliness that had been living beneath my ribs started to grow.

“Let’s take our places, shall we?” Bosque moved to the chair at the head of the table. He gestured for me to sit on his left while Efron and Logan sat opposite me.

The moment we were gathered at the table, the doors to the kitchen swung open and a swarm of uniformed staff were piling silver chafing dishes before us. My vision of the *Beowulf* kitchen didn’t seem too far off. Even if we weren’t an army, they were going to feed us like one. As one by one the lids were whisked off serving platters, my mouth watered. The scent of the food that filled the air was irresistible. My uncle favored a hunting theme in his dining room as well as his lounge; the meal was dominated by meats: suckling pig, braised venison, and roast pheasant were accompanied by sautéed vegetables and steaming mounds of whipped potatoes.

I hadn’t noticed until that moment that I was starving. Since I had moved to food nirvana, I giddily heaped slabs of meat and a

huge spoonful of potatoes on my plate until it was full. The vegetables could wait. Logan watched me scarfing down food, his mouth twisted in disgust as if he'd been forced to dine with a Neanderthal. But Efron and my uncle both looked delighted as I ate with abandon.

Bosque nodded in approval when I gave him a thumbs-up. He turned to Efron.

"As you're aware, much to my regret I cannot remain here with my nephew." He gestured toward Logan. "I'm trusting you'll help Shay get settled into his life in Vail."

"We wouldn't dream of having it any other way," Efron said.

I nodded my thanks at him while musing that pheasant might be the most delicious meat I'd ever tasted.

"The estate is a bit out of the way." Logan was picking at his own food. "He'll need a car to get into town and to school, of course."

"That's true," Bosque said. "I'm not storing any cars here at the moment. I hadn't thought of that when I made the arrangements for Shay to come here."

I tried to say, "I'll figure something out." But it came out as, "Irnlfugshmt," because my mouth was so full.

Efron turned to his son. "You've been favoring the Lotus. You could lend Shay your Mercedes CL600."

Logan shrugged and looked at me as if expecting me to melt with gratitude, but I spluttered, "No, no. That's okay." I was pretty much relieved I hadn't spit mashed potatoes on him.

The golden-haired boy arched his eyebrow. "You'd prefer something else? We also have a BMW, if you don't mind last year's model." I was desperate to convince myself that I'd only imagined his shudder of disgust.

"I'm not really into cars," I said, trying to figure out a way to get out of this without offending anyone. The offer was generous, but I wanted to feel out Vail and find my place here. Making first impres-

sions with flashy wheels wasn't my style. And if townie-boarding school relations were as bad here as they were in some places I'd lived, I knew that driving through town in a brand-new car wasn't the way to make friends. "I can find something on my own."

"Forgive my nephew," Bosque said, smiling at Logan. "He fancies himself something of a bohemian."

"Ah," Logan said, pursing his lips.

Efron gave his son a chastising glance. "Whatever makes Shay comfortable, of course."

"Of course," Logan repeated, studying the steaming slices of rare beef on his plate with disdain.

I was getting tired of being talked about like I wasn't in the room. "I'd rather have something that can take a beating. I may need to go off road."

Logan chewed on his meat, eyeing me. "Off road where?"

"Anywhere," I said. "I'll head for the best hiking spots. Sometimes it takes a rough road to get to them."

Efron and Logan exchanged a glance.

Bosque smiled at me but shot a stern glance at Efron. "Seamus is an experienced hiker. He won't find trouble. There's no need to be concerned."

"If you're certain," Efron said. He pointed the tip of his steak knife at me. "It's more of a wilderness around here than you'd imagine. Keep that in mind when you're exploring."

"Always do," I said. "I'll read up on the terrain before I head out."

"You'll forgive me if I don't offer to accompany you," Logan said. "Outdoor pursuits have never been able to hold my interest."

There's a shocker.

"No worries," I said. "I'm used to hiking alone."

"An independent spirit," Efron said. "How charming."

Logan's mouth curved up, but his smile made me feel like he was enjoying a joke at my expense.

“But surely you’d enjoy spending some time at the country club,” Efron said. “Logan and his friends while away the hours there.”

“It sounds like he’d be better off running with the wolves than joining me at the club,” Logan said with a snicker.

“Logan!” Bosque’s clipped tone froze Logan in his seat. He blanched, shuddering like a rabbit cornered by hounds. Efron gripped the edge of the table, knuckles white with tension.

I forced a laugh. “No, no. He’s right. I wouldn’t fit in at any country club. I can’t swing a golf club to save my life.”

Bosque’s gaze slid my way. “You’re quite forgiving. I do not appreciate rudeness at the expense of my family.”

“My sincerest apologies,” Logan whispered. “I didn’t mean—”

“Seriously.” I appreciated that my uncle wanted to keep me happy, but he was taking things a little far. “Not a big deal.”

“I’m sure Shay will find his niche,” Efron said quietly.

Bosque relaxed back into his chair. “He will indeed.”

Logan stared at his plate. His hands were still shaking.

After that, dessert was tense at best, with conversation limited to Efron updating my uncle about some new real estate development in Vail. I was relieved when Efron declined my uncle’s offer of an after-dinner cigar. I didn’t think I could take any more of their company. Logan hadn’t managed to make eye contact with me or my uncle since Bosque’s outburst. Even if he could, I was pretty convinced Efron’s son and I had nothing to talk about.

But when we said our good-byes at the door, Logan paused beside me and reached into his pocket.

“Please,” he said as he pressed a card into my hand. “If you need anything.”

“Sure,” I said, barely managing to keep a straight face. *Who the hell has business cards at age eighteen?*

If this guy was what all the students at my new school were like, my senior year was going to blow. Big time.



FOUR



IT TURNED OUT I had to use Logan's card the very next day. I pulled myself out of bed at 9 a.m. If I'd known that was the last decent night's sleep I would get at Rowan Estate, I would have slept longer. Uncle Bosque was already gone by the time I wandered into the kitchen with a growling stomach. A note waited for me on the giant island.

Early flight. Be well.

So much for family reunions.

If I was worried about having to hunt down breakfast, it was for nothing. The immense Sub-Zero fridge was stocked with fresh fruit, milk, yogurt, cheeses, and meats. I found bread and an abundance of nonperishables in the pantry. I made a note that at least I was in the best-possible situation should the apocalypse occur. My only disappointment was that I'd been hoping for some leftover pheasant, but apparently leftovers weren't permissible at Rowan Estate. I could find no evidence of last night's feast in the fridge, though I knew we'd barely made a dent in the food that had been set before us.

I threw a sandwich together and headed back to my room. Though I could have eaten in the kitchen or in any other of the hundreds of rooms in the mansion, I felt uneasy outside my bedroom, like an animal that only feels safe in its den.

Before heading to Craigslist to look for wheels, I popped onto Facebook.

Whoa. Seriously. How did all these people find me?

I scrolled through the comments, chewing and smiling. I almost choked a couple of times, startled by the appearance of people I hadn't seen in years. I didn't know if it was my stomach getting full or the sight of familiar faces and greetings from around the world, but I felt a little better.

Reminded of all my globe-trotting, I decided to go one better and post some of my favorite photos from places I'd lived. Instead of labeling them, I made a game of it, asking my friends to tell me where I'd been. I figured that was more interesting to everyone than if I'd just left a slide show of my moves for all to see.

Satisfied that Ally couldn't harass me for neglecting her "keep-Shay-socially-involved" project, I moved on to my main goal of the day: transportation. It didn't take long to find what I was hoping for. A used truck, not too big but with enough room for my gear if I was heading out for a serious climb. The price was right; plus, it was already beat up and I didn't want to buy anything that was too pretty to bump around poorly maintained trailheads.

I called the number listed and the gruff-voiced man at the other end of the line said he'd hold the truck for me but only for the day. As I dialed Logan's number, I tried to forget how much I hadn't liked him.

"Yes?" He already sounded bored.

"Hey, Logan, it's Shay," I said.

"Yes, Shay. How may I help you?"

I bit my tongue so I wouldn't ask him if he was training to be a concierge. After clearing my throat a couple times to make sure I'd gotten rid of all that brewing sarcasm, I said, "I'm sorry to bother you, but I was hoping you could give me a ride somewhere."

There was a pause, then he said, "Of course. What time should I pick you up?"



As much as I didn't relish the idea of spending any more time with Logan Bane, I had to admire his timeliness. He pulled up in a sleek, silver Mercedes at exactly 11:00 a.m. When I climbed into the passenger seat, he half smiled.

"Good morning," he said. Logan was wearing a crisp white shirt with a black cashmere sweater draped around his shoulders.

I was about to ask when his polo match was and then I realized he'd probably take the question seriously. From the way he smirked at my crumpled jeans and hiking boots, he didn't think much of my wardrobe either.

"Morning," I said. "I wrote down the address."

He took the slip of paper and frowned. "We aren't going to a dealership?"

"Nah," I said. "There's a truck I'm just going to take off someone's hands. I don't need to bother with a dealership."

"Mmmmmm" was his reply.

I was impressed that we managed to have a conversation, if a completely uninteresting one, about all the real estate Logan's father owned in town, that lasted the duration of the trip.

"That's it; turn here." I broke into his explanation of luxury housing developments, pointing at the tired-looking blue pickup with a For Sale sign tucked beneath its windshield wipers.

Logan started laughing but tried to pretend he was coughing when he realized I was serious. He frowned, eyeing me. "Does Bosque not give you an adequate allowance?"

"This is all need," I said, not meeting his gaze. I was uncomfortable enough with the wad of cash in my pocket. I didn't need to think about the fact that I could have used the money Bosque gave me each month for "discretionary spending" to buy a new car and have enough left over for at least three more. I was grateful that Bosque wanted me to have everything I needed or wanted, but I didn't want

to end up becoming someone defined by my wealth. In other words, I didn't want to be Logan Bane.

I hurried out of the car and was about to tell Logan he didn't need to join me, but he was already climbing from the driver's seat.

A man who looked like he could be my grandfather, as well as a onetime member of a biker gang, came out of the ranch-style house.

"You Shay?" he asked, looking at me, at Logan, and at the Mercedes.

I managed a smile. "Yeah."

"And you want the truck?"

"If it runs as well as you claim," I said.

He laughed, offering me a grin with more gaps than teeth. "Bought it new. Maintained it myself. Should last you ten more years if you bother to take care of it."

"Sounds great." The guy selling the truck looked from me to Logan as if trying to suss out how the two of us had ended up in each other's company. I was wondering the same thing. At least Logan had brought the CL600 and not the Lotus. Maybe he'd thought if I saw the Mercedes, I'd change my mind about borrowing it. Not a chance.

"Cash okay?" I asked, rubbing the back of my neck.

One of his bushy eyebrows went up. "Course."

I handed him the money and he frowned.

"Fifteen hundred, right?" I said.

"Yep." The man's shoulders were tight. His eyes wandered to Logan. Logan was gazing at the old man like he was a circus freak. The man shuddered.

I stood there, waiting while he seemed to think something over. He said, "Title and registration are in the glove box. Keys are too."

"Thanks." I reached out to shake his hand, but he turned away, walking at a fast clip to his front door.

"The locals are interesting, aren't they?"

I jumped at the sound of Logan's voice right next to me.

He smiled, glancing at the truck. "So you're an antiques collector?"

"Thanks for the ride, Logan," I said.

"Let me know if I can be of any further assistance." He swaggered back to the Mercedes with a lazy wave.

A loud banging drew my attention to the house. The grizzled truck seller was hammering something to the front door. It was only after I'd gotten into the truck that I saw what it was. The man slipped into the darkness of his house, closing the door behind him. A crucifix was suspended in the center of the whitewashed wood.

The engine roared to life when I turned the key in the ignition. I rested my head on the steering wheel and did my best to convince myself that driving back to Portland wasn't an option.





AT MIDNIGHT I COUNTED two things I'd accomplished and could be proud of: I had a mode of transportation that I was pretty sure could handle anything I threw at it and I had a blog.

I wouldn't have thought writing a blog would give me any real sense of satisfaction. But it did. I worried a little that my sudden smugness as I gazed into the glowing screen of my laptop might have been linked to the fact that I didn't have anyone to talk to and the blog was a way of talking to myself without feeling crazy. But I also thought Ally would approve, and even more people had populated my Facebook page, so I felt inspired to write something for them. Bonus that cute girls were starting to show up. Facebook = cute girls I didn't know, one in particular named Melissa, feeling sorry for me and writing nice messages so I wouldn't be lonely. How's that work? I wasn't complaining. Maybe I should act even more lonely. All in all, it had been a decent day.

I could have sworn I'd just closed my eyes when I sat bolt upright in bed. The clock informed me I'd been asleep about five hours, but nothing in the dark room could tell me why I was awake. And I knew something had woken me. A sound. A crash from above.

I held my breath, listening. Nothing. Only the pounding of my pulse.

Must have been a dream.

I got out my iPod, put on “Broken Bells,” and waited to drift off.

Though I’d pretty much convinced myself that a nightmare had jolted me awake, the first thing I did the next morning was head to the third floor. I wandered slowly through the east wing corridor that was above my bedroom. Methodically checking each room, I found only unused bedrooms and sitting rooms, but no evidence of the crash that had woken me. That left me feeling like an idiot, so I decided to forget about the nightmare and take myself out to breakfast. It was pouring, which was a bummer because I’d hoped to make a short, exploratory hike that afternoon. Armed with my laptop and some comics, I located a café in downtown Vail and had a huge stack of buttermilk pancakes while I read.

Once I’d finished the comics, I pulled out my laptop and discovered I had even more Facebook friends. Go, me. Or probably go, Ally. Her mother hen instincts probably had her recruiting people to visit my page like a madwoman. My mini geography quiz had been solved, so I uploaded more pictures, trying to make the locations a bit harder. I was trying to think up my next blog post when the waitress returned to fill my coffee cup for the tenth time.

“You movin’ in, hon?” she asked.

I laughed, but when I glanced at my watch said, “Oh.” Morning had drifted into afternoon. And it was still raining.

“Just teasin’, sweet cheeks.” She smiled. “We’re havin’ a slow day. No rush.”

“Thanks,” I said. It wasn’t like me to lose track of time, but after a few minutes I knew that wasn’t what had happened.

I didn’t want to go home.

That place didn’t feel right to me. From the nightmare I’d had, to the weird art, to the sheer emptiness of it. Sitting in a café until my blood was pure caffeine was a way of delaying my return to Rowan

Estate. But I couldn't stay here forever, even if the waitress said she didn't mind.

I paid the check and dashed through the spitting rain back to my truck, but I didn't drive home. I'd figured a couple things out: I knew what my next blog post would be and I didn't want to be alone in that house anymore.

I was lying on my bed trying to get in touch with my inner tech geek and frustrated that what I'd thought was such a brilliant idea had ended up in fail mode. It was too late to go back to the store, but something had to be wrong with the handheld video camera I'd brought home. Or maybe I'd read the directions too quickly and missed something.

I'd wanted to get reactions. Facebook was fun and the blog . . . introspective?

But video? Video took things to the next level. If I had to have solitary confinement in Vail, at least I could show people what was happening and have a little more interaction with the outside world. Rowan Estate should have been the perfect place for my experiment. I'd never run out of weird stuff to tape, and it had that whole haunted mansion thing going for it. Sometimes a little too perfectly.

I played back the video again. The first shots of the house were fine. My brief "hello" from my bedroom was fine, but once I went down the hall, the picture went haywire. It was all the more frustrating because I'd thought shooting the winged statues would be my "hook" for the webisode. I guess my career in video journalism failed before it began. I watched the scenes one more time.

To hell with it.

I uploaded the video as it was. My eyes ached from rereading the tiny type in the instruction manual. Maybe someone online would know an easy fix for the camera. If not, I could start from scratch tomorrow.

My mouth was open, throat dry, and I knew I'd cried out in my sleep. It had happened again. I rubbed my eyes before I looked at the clock. 5:00 a.m. Maybe it was a recurring nightmare, but the crash startling me from sleep had been identical to the sound that had woken me the night before. I rolled out of bed, and a chill made me shiver though sweat beaded on my chest. Stumbling to my closet, I groped around until my fingers closed around the neck of a baseball bat.

The air was even colder in the hallway, making the hairs on my arms stand up and my skin prickle into gooseflesh. The blood roaring in my ears made me feel like an idiot at the same time that it tightened my grip on the bat. Trying to listen so hard it made me dizzy, I climbed the stairs to the third floor. A blast of frigid air hit me the moment I stepped into the east corridor.

Isn't heat supposed to rise?

I wanted to turn into a pathetic, shuddering lump, but I forced myself to stand still because I thought I'd heard something. It might have been a breath of wind seeping in through the old windows, but it had sounded like whispering.

I took the bat in both hands, moving toward the sound. My heart climbed into my throat, hard as a rock, and stuck there, choking me. Snatches of sound drifted toward me, a hissing of murmurs. It was closer now, just around the next corner. I inched forward, drew a quiet but deep breath, and steadied myself.

With a shout I jumped around the corner into the next hallway. Something was there. Something huge. Its arms stretched toward me. And something other than arms, something much worse, loomed in the shadows behind the thing. I yelled and swung the bat as hard as I could.

The bat met its target and cracked, splintering into sharp pieces as it disintegrated against the marble statue.

"Goddammit!"

I beat my fist against the wall. Those frickin' statues. The cool

pale stone face of the winged woman gazed serenely at me, unperturbed by my attempt to club her to death with a bat.

Exhausted and embarrassed, I convinced myself that the baseball bat was a far better sacrifice than one of my uncle's precious pieces of art.

I picked up the shards of woods, making my way to the kitchen to throw them out. I grabbed a tub of ice cream and headed back to my room, where I turned on the lights, plugged my iPod into speakers, and blasted the Ramones.

I wanted to pretend that it hadn't happened. That I hadn't climbed out of bed and crept upstairs. That I hadn't attacked a sculpture with a baseball bat. And most of all, that beneath the cracking of the wood against marble, I hadn't heard laughter.





PEOPLE LIKE SUPERNATURAL occurrences—even a whiff of the paranormal gets a lot of folks drooling. Or else people enjoy the suffering of others. Specifically my suffering. It could be both.

Those were the types of conclusions I drew when I logged onto my media pages the next day and saw all the buzz about it. My initial reaction was sour at best. I could hardly muster cheerfulness given my previous night's adventures.

Give the people what they want. Or so they say.

I was going to try my best to do just that, if for nothing but the sake of saving my sanity. When I moved through the empty halls of Rowan Estate, my jaw ached and my temples throbbed because I was listening so hard, waiting for any sign of the murmurs I'd heard the night before. But there was nothing. The only living thing in the house was me, and I was pretty sure I wasn't going to last very long like this.

The interactive aspect of the video and Facebook worked the best for alleviating my sense of isolation, so I started there, reading through and responding to comments before trying out the video again. I got the same fuzzy crap anytime I tried filming the statues. Instead of stomping on the camera, I decided to try some experiments, approaching the sculptures from different angles. I got the same results every time.

I ditched the video and went for old school. My digital camera failed, giving me only blurred shadows where the statue should have been. I wished that was more of a surprise. And it meant another trip into town, but getting out of the mansion was pretty much a relief. I took the scenic route, though anywhere on this stretch of I-70 could qualify as scenic. But I'd decided to wind my way through the small mountain towns that dotted Vail Valley.

The previous day's rain had given way to gentle autumn sunlight. I drove with the windows down, steering my way through Frisco's Main Street. Catching sight of an open parking space right in front of the Next Page bookshop, I decided to stop in, not that I needed any more books, but Frisco was much more my speed than Vail. I lingered in the bookstore, picking up three novels and a hiking guide for the region. I'd stared at a book titled *Coast to Coast Ghosts: True Stories of Hauntings Across America*, but I couldn't bring myself to pick it up.

I kept heading east and toyed with the idea of going all the way to Denver and spending the night there instead of returning to Vail. But it wasn't like I knew anyone in Denver either. I doubled back but drove right through Vail without stopping. I did withhold the string of curses I wanted to shout out the window at the town that was getting under my skin. No reason to start a rumor that I was the new local crazy dude living alone in the weird mansion.

Man, what if I am that guy?

I was pulling into the parking lot of Avon's Wal-Mart—the only place I thought I could find a cheap instant camera—when my phone buzzed. I didn't recognize the number.

"Shay?" I didn't recognize the man's voice. He spoke my name in a clipped, nervous fashion.

"Who is this?" I asked.

"Are you in Vail? Have they moved you into Rowan Estate?"

I killed the engine. "Who is this?"

The line went dead. *What the hell?*

I found the number in my call log and pressed the call button.

A tinny voice answered, “The number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try again.”

The tension that had eased out of my limbs the farther I drove from Vail dug its way back into my shoulders. I slammed my fist into the steering wheel and took a few deep breaths before I went into the store.

I hated that it was already dark by the time I got back to Rowan Estate, but that was my own doing. I had stayed in Avon for dinner, reading my novel and listening to the conversations of people around me. People who weren’t exiled from their friends. I wanted to punch myself in the gut for all the internal whining I was doing. It was pathetic. Several hours of reading about Katniss Everdeen’s problems made me decide my life was pretty damn good. I was tired of feeling sorry for myself, and I was also just plain tired.

It might have been smart for me to go to bed early, anticipating being woken at five in the morning again, but I wanted to finish up my experiment. Using the Polaroid I’d dug out from one of my boxes, I snapped photos of the statues and waited for them to develop. Blurry. No image. I snapped more photos with the instant camera I bought, wondering if it was even worth getting them developed. Time for manual labor.

I started sketching and lost track of time. It was 1 a.m. when I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore. I dragged my sorry ass to bed, hoping I’d sleep through the night.

No such luck.



SEVEN



LACK OF SLEEP MADE ME feel like a man possessed, and possession wasn't something I wanted to think about, but I was trying my best not to let that show up on Facebook. I didn't want my new online friends to decide I had multiple personality disorder.

Once I'd posted the sketches, the buzz was all about defining what they were. I had no idea, but Victoria and Liz had some interesting theories. None of which made me feel better about my living situation. I resisted the temptation to ask Liz if she'd accept a transfer student when she mentioned she was a teacher. I'd take mountains of homework over the stuff I was dealing with.

When Victoria loaded that clip about the assassin angels from *Doctor Who*, I ran around the mansion double checking that none of the statues had moved. For a few minutes I'd been convinced that each night, when the crash woke me up, it meant the statues were systematically closing in on me. But all the winged, marble people were in the same places they'd been the day I moved in. I pretty much felt like an idiot after sprinting around the house.

Other theories: gargoyles, but there were gargoyles like the ones I'd seen all over Europe on the outside of the house. These statues seemed different.

That was all I could take of the house for that day. The sun spilled in through the windows, ridding the dark hallways of their gloom

and beckoning me outside. At first I thought I'd take a stroll through the gardens, only to discover they were filled with more creepy statues. Some of the sculptures were the winged men and women that I'd seen in the house, but others looked like mad scientist experiments. In the back of my mind I knew they were creatures of myth: chimeras, griffins, Stymphalian birds, but they only looked like monsters to me.

The gardens stretched for what looked like a mile until they disappeared into a dense pine forest. Abandoning the idea of exploring the grounds, I headed to my truck and escaped into the foothills for my first hike in Colorado.

At 5:30 a.m. I sat in the middle of my bed. All the lights were on and I'd turned the hallway lights on too. Radiohead was cranked up so loud that I doubted I'd hear myself even if I shouted. My eyes burned, and it wasn't the blasting music that made my teeth rattle. I couldn't take this. How was I supposed to live in a place that wouldn't let me sleep and was slowly convincing me that poltergeists had rented out the room right above mine?

Something in the house had to be causing the noise. Supernatural, electrical, whatever it was I had to find it and stop it. If I didn't, I would be driving back to Portland within a week. Still bleary eyed, I grabbed my video camera and headed into the hallway, watching the screen as I walked. Sure enough, when I reached the statue at the corner, the picture began to wave and then turned to static. I kept walking, gazing at the screen as it flickered back to life like nothing strange had happened. Each time I neared another statue, the screen gave out again. I was passing through the balcony of the foyer, heading toward the west wing, when the screen skipped and went black. Not static this time; no image at all.

I checked the camera, its glowing red light telling me it was still on, still working. The black screen crackled and went still, crackled

again. I stood still, staring at the image. The crackle came again and again in a steady pulse. Each time it happened, the camera vibrated in my hand like I was standing next to a speaker putting out a loud, super-low bass line.

I looked up to see where I was. The double doors of the library loomed in front of me. My mouth went dry. The library. The place Bosque told me I couldn't go.

I took a step forward. The camera jumped in my hand. I swore as I dropped it. It clunked on the floor. When I picked it up and examined it, it didn't seem to be damaged. That same steady crackle pulsed on the black screen.

I backed against the rail of the balcony's landing and slid down until I was sitting. I'm not sure how long I was there, staring at the tall wooden doors.

He told me not to go in.

Screw it. I can't live like this.

I left the camera on the cold floor and pushed myself up. When I tried the handle, I found the door was locked. No surprise there. I bent over, examining the door. Getting in wouldn't be a problem; I could pick the lock easily. When I stood up to get what I needed to open the door, something else caught my eye.

At first glance it appeared to be decoration, an ornate carving that covered the thin gap between the two doors. As I examined the strange object, I saw that it contained some sort of bolt mechanism. A second lock. And one I had no idea how to get open. I rammed my fist into the door, but swore to myself I'd find a way in. Maybe I'd invite my online pals to the first-ever battering ram building party of the twenty-first century.

When I got back to my room, my phone was buzzing. The clock on my nightstand read 7:00 a.m.

Must be Uncle Bosque.

I picked up the phone.

“Don’t.” The voice was almost too soft to hear.

“What?” I said.

“Don’t.” The whisper came once again before the line went silent.

I brought up my call log. No call had been registered.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I put the phone on my bed and backed away from it like it was a hissing snake. Then I turned around and dug through the pile of laundry where I knew my sketch-book had been buried.



EIGHT



SMART GIRLS ARE HOT. Especially when their brilliance helps you break and enter. Rachel had the weird lock figured out the next day. More and more people were showing up on Facebook—lots of girls. I must be cuter than I thought. Everyone wanted to know what was in the library, including me. That was good. I needed the encouragement.

A few people were worried, and I didn't blame them. I wasn't looking forward to facing the wrath of my uncle if he found out what I was up to. My online friends made some good points about staying out of forbidden rooms. But I also couldn't handle trying to forget about the creepy night noises that kept me awake. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but life at Rowan Estate was slowly killing me. Victoria's shouts of: "OPEN THE DOOR! OPEN THE DOOR!" drowned out all rational warnings from my other friends.

I brought my laptop to the kitchen, reading through the latest comments while I made scrambled eggs. No good breaking family law on an empty stomach. What Rachel had discovered was unsettling, but not enough to rid me of an appetite.

Scarfig down eggs doused in hot sauce, I felt more alive than I had in days. I was going to get inside that library. I would know what had been harassing me ever since I got here. So what if the lock was

the nine circles of hell. Dante was a great artist, his works labeled classics, and his depiction of hell was symbolic, not literal, right?

The *Inferno* theme fit with my uncle's décor. The stairs leading to his office were set in an archway that was lined with sconces of the seven deadly sins. Put that together with the torture paintings and the maybe-demon statues and it might just be that Bosque had a medieval-hell fixation or something. And I could hardly put the blame on my uncle. What if this stuff wasn't his at all? This was a really frickin' old house. Any of this oh-so-precious but creepy junk could have been here from the time of its construction.

Sufficiently fortified by eggs and Tabasco, I headed to the library doors. I had my sketchbook with me, where I'd copied down Rachel's notes. I'd brought my camera along as well, though I harbored serious doubts about its usefulness if I did get inside.

Squaring my shoulders and convincing myself one last time that this was indeed a good idea, or at least not a disastrous one, I began to turn the dial. Each one clicked as I moved them into the correct order. The circles of hell descending toward Lucifer's abode. *Limbo*. *Lustful*. *Gluttonous*. As I thought about the levels of torment, I shivered. *Miserly*. *Wrathful*. *Heretics*. The air around me grew colder like I was descending with Dante and Virgil to the frozen lake and the icy breath of Lucifer himself. *Violent*. *Fraudulent*. *Traitors*. Where do misbehaving nephews belong?

The sound of clockwork gears turning sent me stumbling back two steps. A final loud click and the door was unlocked.

My fingers shook as I gripped the handle.

I had to do this.

I leaned forward, letting gravity push the handle down. The door opened, swinging inward. I slipped inside and closed the door behind me.

My breath stuck in my throat. After all the nightmares and refer-

ences to hell, I'd expected the locks on the doors to be guarding something horrific. I couldn't have been more wrong.

The library was larger than any room I'd seen in Rowan Estate outside of the ballroom. It was also one of the most beautiful spaces I'd laid eyes on. Built-in bookshelves lined the walls on each side of me, stretching two floors up. A balcony ran along each wall, accessible by identical, tight spiral staircases that rose from the main floor to the center of each balcony, giving access to the upper shelves of books. The wooden columns separating the bookshelves were covered in ornate carvings. Some symbols looked vaguely familiar; others I'd never seen.

The outside wall of the library was divided by an enormous fireplace. The mantel was at least two feet above my head and the fireplace itself was wider than three, maybe four of me put together. A portrait hung above the mantel, and I didn't want to look at it because I worried it was more of the grotesque art that lined the mansion's walls. When I did finally force myself to stare at it, I was pleasantly surprised . . . for a little while.

This painting wasn't anything like the others. It was a simple, if austere, portrait of a man standing behind a woman who was seated in the chair. They gazed at the empty library, solemn faced. Despite the lack of violence in the portrait, I found myself needing to look away. The picture turned my stomach as if I'd eaten stones for breakfast instead of eggs. Despair pressed onto my chest, stealing my breath. What was it with the art in this place? If it didn't make you want to vomit, it depressed the hell out of you.

I didn't look at the painting again, instead focusing on the jewel tones streaming in through the stained glass windows that lined the outside wall on either side of the fireplace. The colors captured sunlight and made it dance, washing the library with kaleidoscopic hues.

Turning in a slow circle, I tried to detect anything sinister about the place. Nothing.

The library held books, simple furniture, and in one corner a tall cabinet and a grandfather clock. When I tried to open the cabinet, I found it locked and decided to leave it that way. Strange as it was, I was tired of picking locks.

Maybe leaving it alone would get me sent to a slightly less horrible circle of hell.

My adrenaline from working to get inside the library had been spent. And there was nothing here. My life in Vail suddenly felt like one sick practical joke. And I was pissed.



NINE



HERE'S A GOOD RULE: Don't make and post web videos when you're paranoid, sleep deprived, and angry.

I broke that rule big time. I still can't believe I did it.

Fortunately the people that had been hanging out with me online were the forgiving sort. Lucky me. Seriously.

I had to make it up to them. Some of the comments were so sweet I thought I should write personal thank-you notes.

Dear Emily, Roses are red, violets are blue, I would go crazy if not for you.

On second thought, that was just creepy. I'd stick with the videos.

I'd considered fessing up about the weird phone calls as part of my mea culpa, but I was already walking on the edge of crazy cliff and I needed to keep my friends. I didn't think it would be a good idea to share anything that might scare my helpers away.

With my sketchbook in hand I went back to the library, determined to find out what about it made it off-limits. Ignoring the painting, fireplace, and cabinet, I headed for the bookshelves. Though it was unlikely I'd see a book with *forbidden* written on the spine, maybe I'd find something.

Glancing at the titles gave me no clues other than that a sometime owner of this place liked turn-of-the-century books. I pulled *Westward Ho!* off the shelf, leafing through its pages.

Someone hadn't taken very good care of this book. A few of the pages were covered in ink.

Wait a sec.

I laid the book open on the floor so I could get a better look at the defaced pages. The pen marks on the page were deliberate—and exquisite. A pattern, but a pattern that made what?

I grabbed another book, *Songs of a Wanderer*. It took less than a minute to find the ink designs scattered through the pages of the text. Again the drawings were linked as if they connected random phrases and letters on the pages. But if they were linked, it couldn't be random. Could it?

Wondering if my discovery might be a fluke, I left the books and went to the opposite wall of bookshelves. I ran up the spiral staircase and took three books from various locations on the wall. All three had the same markings hidden inside.

Who could have done this? And why?

I needed to think about what my next step was. Besides, I'd already come up with my homework assignment for the day. What's better than thank-you notes?

Thank-you sketches.

Posting the library sketch garnered some flattering remarks about my artistic abilities, probably more than I deserved, but not much in the way of problem solving. I took the suggestion to look under the Persian rug in front of the fireplace seriously. Rowan Estate is the sort of place to have trapdoors, but this rug wasn't hiding one. I didn't blame people for their interest in the portrait, but nothing about it seemed off. That's not completely true. Though I'd seen the portrait

a few times, it still left me feeling like someone was trying to drill a hole in my chest. Stranger still, if I looked at it for very long, I started to hear a sound, like someone very far away was crying.

To me that was steering back toward crazytown, which I didn't want to do, so I decided against any focus on the portrait. Besides, I was getting kind of obsessed with the marked-up books. I spent the afternoon pulling books from shelves and searching for marked pages. It didn't take long to discover that not all the books had been altered, but a hell of a lot of them were. When I had a stack of a hundred books, I took a break, looking at my tiny towers of clues.

I had no doubt there were more patterns hidden in the stacks, but there was no way I'd get through all of them. I'd never make it through the books I'd already stacked up.

It was time for a little help from my friends.



TEN



I'D NEVER BEEN MORE GLAD that I had my own bank account because otherwise I would have had to do some serious explaining about the gigantic postage bill I ran up sending packages all over the country.

Waiting to hear back from friends about the books was hard. I did some more hiking, sent out personal thank-you sketches to Liz and Victoria since they'd been taking such good care of me, and hunted down some more patterns from books I hadn't sent out.

I was excited and frustrated. I hoped that the books would enlighten me as to what was hidden in the library—and I was more and more convinced that what I saw, a beautiful room full of books, was not why Bosque wanted to keep me out of the room—but I also knew that given the number of books left to go through, I'd never get the whole story. I just hoped I could get enough of it to find some answers.

Fortunately, I didn't have to wait long. The clues poured in so fast I could barely keep up. It's a good thing I wasn't in school. Also a good thing: everyone helping me seemed to be avoiding work and school themselves.

My bare walls were no longer bare; instead they were covered with pages from the texts, clues, and notes being sent from too many places to count.

But it still didn't make sense.

First there were names: Alistair, Nightshade, Cameron, Rowan, Marise, Lumine. The more information about these people we gathered, the stranger the clues got. At first I thought it was a family chronicle, but the dates didn't work out. People don't live to be 283. They just don't.

With that set of clues leading to a dead end, I focused on the others. These phrases appeared to be part of a history. Alistair's name came up again, but in the context of his participation in a war. The factions in conflict were unlike anything I'd come across in my history classes: Conatus, Searchers, Keepers, Guardians. I didn't know what to make of them. And the war centered around a woman (I assumed she was a woman) named Eira. Again, this was no part of the wars in medieval Europe I'd heard of. I even went back to my Western Civ texts to try to find some connection, but there was nothing.

The final group of clues I didn't even want to deal with. It put me right back in creepy, hellish territory. Witches. Lots of stuff about witches. And elements. Not the periodic table of elements you memorize for chem class. These were old-school elements: earth, air, water, and fire.

I was right back to where I'd started: frustrated, angry, and tired. Maybe I was on a wild-goose chase. I wasn't supposed to be in this library, and what I'd found hadn't led me to any of the answers I'd hoped for. Part of me was tempted to call it a day, lock up the library, and hope my uncle never found out I'd been in there. It couldn't be too much longer before he got me into that school. And the thing that went CRASH in the night would have to get tired of tormenting me eventually.

Why was I doing any of this?

I'd started a blog post apologizing to everyone for wasting their time when I came across something new. It was a clue from a book like the others, but it was not like the others.

Records you seek are behind time's wheel.

Not a name. Not a history. Not witches.

This wasn't a clue; it was direction.

Time's wheel. Something else I hadn't heard of, but the phrase was simple enough that I was sure I could figure it out. And I didn't have to do it on my own.

I said it out loud, as if to reassure myself that this was the right way to go.

"Records you seek are behind time's wheel."

My phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw I had a new text message.

Stop.

I looked to see who it was from. The message vanished. It had been there. A text that only read *Stop*. And now it was gone.

Maybe the ghost haunting my phone was a friend. Maybe it was an enemy. Either way, I wasn't stopping. Not now. I was closing in on something vital, closing in fast.



ELEVEN



I DOUBTED I WOULD HAVE figured it out on my own. From the triskelion to the face of the grandfather clock, the library was filled with wheel-like objects. It turned out the clock was in fact just a clock. The triskelions were part of window decorations, which meant behind them were the grounds of the estate. I only wanted to start digging up my uncle's garden as a last resort.

Before I had to find a shovel, Anthony and Becky rescued me, pointing out that one of the symbols I'd sketched was the pagan calendar. With a little more digging—I was still grateful I wasn't doing the literal kind—I learned that the pagan calendar is also often called the witches' wheel of the year. As much as that information was useful, it made me shudder. More witches. I wished I could find a clue that was, like Traci said, about rainbows and happy stuff. Then again, I was pretty sure Dante didn't see any rainbows on his trip through hell.

The wheel had been carved onto one of the wooden columns on the second floor of the library. I looked at it for a while. Weird words were carved around its circumference: Mabon, Samhain, Yule, Imbolc. Anthony had written that they were the eight major holidays of the year. Inside the first circle was another circle. These symbols I recognized as astrological signs.

Great. More puzzles. I was guessing I'd have to line up the astrological signs with specific holidays. Maybe I'd need to invest in a telescope. I ran my fingers over the polished wood, tracing one of the wheel's spokes until my hand reached the intricately carved compass rose at its center. When I touched the rose, I thought I felt the wheel move.

I put more pressure on the wood. The rose caved, retreating within the center of the wheel. Ignoring the sudden jump in my pulse, I pushed steadily until I heard a solid click.

What had been an invisible line along the edge of the bookcase column widened, revealing a gap in the wood. I slid my fingers in the space and pulled. With a soft groan the panel swung open, revealing a hollow chamber inside the column.

My heart was trying to climb out of my throat as I peered inside. More shelves were hidden in the dark space, and they weren't only filled with books. Jars filled with what I could only guess was formaldehyde neatly lined one shelf. My guess was formaldehyde because of the objects floating in the jars. One looked like a rat fetus. Another held a heart. My own heart now had serious competition from my stomach for trying to relocate somewhere outside my body.

I decided to stop looking at the jars and gazed at another shelf. The objects I found were just as disturbing as the jars. A whip rested next to a sickle-shaped blade. Beside these were a mortar and pestle and still more jars, but these held dried herbs, not next week's biology dissection assignment.

The top shelf was stacked with books. These books, however, weren't the known works of literature I'd found in the rest of the library. They were obviously much older. I took one of the books from the shelf. It was large, and I rested it on the floor so I could easily look at it.

Whether a biology text or some kind of bestiary, its contents were strange. It had no title or table of contents. Each page was filled

with notes and illustrations that didn't make any sense. I recognized some of the creatures as the same types that filled the gardens outside in statue form. In the book, however, they were laid out like specimens. Sometimes drawn in full form, others dissected as if the author intended his readers to desire close inspection of the mythic beasts.

The most unusual illustrations appeared at the end of the book. One page featured a man in a style that reminded me of Leonardo da Vinci's "Vitruvian Man," and on the opposite page was not a man, but a wolf drawn in the same style. The next dozen or so pages of the book held variations on the same theme, man and wolf. Sometimes completely separate, but sometimes the images were blended in forms ranging from grotesque to simply frightening. Though weird and morbidly fascinating, I didn't know how it connected to the clues we'd found in the books. Not wanting to get off track, I set it aside and pulled down another book.

Like the first book, this text was obviously very, very old. The title jumped off the cover in letters so black it looked like someone had stamped it there with a branding iron. I felt my eyes go wide as I read the words.

Bellum Omnia Contra Omnes

"I know this," I said. A chill, like fingers brushing along my neck, made me jump at the same time I whirled around because I thought I'd heard something. A sound like a long, sad sigh had filled the room. My gaze swept the library, one, two, three times, but I was alone.

The bright, gemstone colors from the stained glass windows were giving way to the thick pour of twilight. I didn't want to be in the library after dark. I returned the animal book to the shelf but took the second text out of the library when I returned to my room.

If this book was what I thought it was, I'd stumbled on a gold mine. I didn't mean literally—this text was much too precious to sell, and I was proud if my family had been smart enough to hang on to

it. It almost balanced out the gigantic ick factor of the jars, whip, and knife that had also been hidden in the column.

Bellum Omnia Contra Omnes.

The War of All Against All.

My friends in Portland already knew I was a philosophy geek. I read the classics almost as loyally as I did comics. I guess my online friends were about to get a big dose of Shay's nerdy side too.

Sitting on my bed, I ran my fingers over the words of the title, noticing the way the letters were indented in the cover.

"Hey there, Mr. Hobbes," I said. "Why didn't this book of yours get published?"



TWELVE



I NEEDED TO BRUSH UP on my Latin if I was serious about reading the text. And I'd definitely need to unpack my Latin-English dictionary. This book was a beast. From the little I'd gleaned, it was history . . . or maybe philosophy. The book itself was broken up into three sections that I thought were related, but I didn't know how. I couldn't quite figure out what it was. And it didn't sound like Hobbes, which was disappointing. I worried that maybe the book was a Hobbes knockoff that one of my ancestors had found without bothering to investigate the book's origins. Was I the heir of aspiring but failed philosophers? That wouldn't be very encouraging.

Even if it wasn't Hobbes, it was unusual enough to hold my interest. One of the first things that caught my attention, besides the title, was that the book didn't start with text. The first pages were all maps. There were four different maps, their sites and topography described in Latin. I'd searched the book for a publishing imprint or a publication date but hadn't been able to find one. From the style of the maps and the illuminations on the title pages I guessed it was from sometime in the Middle Ages. Not exactly precision dating.

I'd spent the most time gazing at the first map. Something about it bothered me, but I hadn't quite figured out why that was. I needed to post another video and get some feedback, but first I thought I'd clear my head with a serious hike, the kind that would eat up most

of my day and make my legs feel like they were about to fall off. If I was exhausted enough, maybe I'd sleep through the nightly crash.

I pulled out the map where I'd marked out the trails I wanted to hit. I stared.

"No way," I said.

I stared some more.

Finally I opened Hobbes's book to the first map.

The terrain was identical. But that was impossible. The map in the book I'd found had to be at least five hundred years old. And it was European.

It had to be a coincidence. For the next hour I pored over the two maps, searching for some discrepancy. Another mountain here, a different river there. But there was nothing. It was unmistakably the same place. The only difference was that my current map was filled with towns, but of course those wouldn't have been around when the medieval map was created. But who could have made it? And why?

I guessed I had another video to make.

My phone rang when I was right in the middle of setting up the shot. I grabbed it, having had enough of phantom calls.

"Leave me the hell alone!"

"Excuse me?" My uncle's voice was more amused than shocked.

"Oh . . . Uncle Bosque," I said. "Sorry. I've been getting prank calls."

"Do you want me to have the phone company look into it?"

"No," I said. "I'll work it out. I should have checked the number before I answered the call. I would have known it was you."

"No apologies needed, my boy," Bosque said. "I haven't been in touch as often I should have been. Is all well at Rowan Estate?"

"Uh—"

He didn't wait for me to answer. "Excellent. I'm sure you can guess why I'm calling."

"Uh—"

“The Mountain School is ready for you to join them,” he said. “You’ll start classes on Monday. Everything has been arranged. I’m sure Logan can drive you to your first day of school if you’d prefer not to go alone.”

School? Now? What I’d been waiting for since I moved here was happening. I should have been happy—this meant things to do and people to see. But I needed more time.

All I said was, “Logan doesn’t need to drive me. I bought a truck.”

“A truck?” I heard him laugh. “Of course you did.”

How was I going to solve these puzzles when I was at school all day? I guessed if I still got woken at 5 a.m., I could work in the library then.

“And because I want to make sure everything goes smoothly,” Bosque continued, “I’ll be coming to stay with you for a bit.”

“You’re coming home?”

“I am,” he said. “I’ll be there Wednesday. You need only to weather the first two days on your own.”

Eight days. He’d be here in eight days. Once Bosque returned to Rowan Estate, it was the end of my trips to the library.

I had to find answers by the fastest means available.



THIRTEEN



THEIR ARGUMENTS MADE SENSE. I couldn't find fault with them. Going into an uncharted cavern system was dangerous. And yeah, I saw *The Descent*. It was nice to have so many people worried about me, seriously—and I wouldn't have gotten anywhere with this stuff if it hadn't been for everybody's help online. But I wasn't going to listen this time. I thought about posting my climbing resume on my Facebook page to prove that I wasn't a novice but figured that would most likely make me look like a self-centered ass.

But come on, I couldn't ignore the caverns! After everything we'd been working through, I'd finally found something that might be real. This was different than confusing histories, family trees full of quasi-immortals, insane clues about witches and elemental forces, and gross things floating in jars. A map was concrete. A map offered a place I could go and things I could see.

I'd been itching to try out spelunking no matter what. This connection had simply presented the best opportunity: kill two birds with one stone.

I took all the precautions. I used the time I wasn't sleeping to read up on the terrain. Some pretty serious storms had been moving through the valley, but they were supposed to clear out by Sunday. That's when I would go.

I convinced myself that Victoria would have my back, but I felt guilty, knowing that Liz, Melissa, and Stephanie would be worried. Whether my online army of friends decided I was brave or a fool, I hoped that when I came back with answers, they'd forgive me.



FOURTEEN



WHY HADN'T I LISTENED to them? I'd had my share of adventure in the eighteen years I'd spent on this mortal coil, but I never thought I'd meet my maker facing off with a bear. The grizzly stared at me, the sharp hazel of its eyes catching the autumn sunlight as though a fire kindled within. If I'd seen this beast on television, its bulk and hot breath safely separated from me by a web of fiber optic cables or satellite-beamed images, I might have thought it beautiful, or at least breathtaking.

But here, alone on this path that I'd started to believe was only a game trail, the massive brown bear was nothing short of terrifying. The grizzly reared up, its head blocking out the sun when it reached full height. Twice my size, if not more.

Its roar vibrated through my limbs, shaking them out of their frozen state. I backed up a few steps, hoping the bellow was a warning and not a sign of impending attack. Unfortunately, it wasn't my lucky day.

The bear dropped to all fours, snuffing the ground casually but all the while keeping watch. Frothy drool dripped from its snout. It loped steadily forward, closing the distance. I knew it was about to charge. Something instinctual roiled through my blood, screaming at me that these were my last few minutes on earth.

I pushed my pack off my shoulders and tossed it on the ground in front of me, hoping the trail mix within would distract it.

No interest.

I took two steps backward before the bear barreled at me like the force of nature it was.

Air fled my chest when the bear hit me, laying me flat out on the ground. I rolled onto my side, trying to remember what I was supposed to do.

Curl into a ball. Protect your head.

My muscles didn't want to move. I reached for my legs, trying to pull them up to my chest. My hands touched warm liquid. Though I didn't feel pain, I knew it was my blood. The lack of pain meant I was in shock, which was very, very bad.

Strange flashes raced through my mind. A sting of guilt when I'd seen the NO TRESPASSING sign at the trailhead. The burnished autumn day, perfectly balanced between warm sunlight and chilled breezes, carrying me up the mountain slope. The solitude and silence of the towering pine trees. A low snuffle turning my head, alerting me to the approaching bear. Shock, followed by denial: there are no bears in this part of the Rockies. Only ghost grizzlies—sightings that no one believed were real. I'd read the guides. I knew this terrain. Disbelief had locked my knees, holding me in place. Denial gave way to hollow fear as the grizzly sighted me, its snuffling becoming growls, its gait lumbering but aggressive.

My choices. My mistakes. The wrong turns I'd made. I'd let obsession drive me here.

A final thought raced through my mind: *I wish I'd never moved to Vail.*

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