



2016

Four Gray Walls and Four Gray Towers: A Novel

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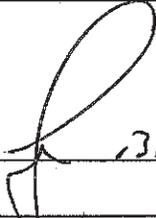
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Thesis title Four Gray Walls and Four Gray Towers: A Novel

Intended date of commencement May 7, 2016

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Date

Reader(s)  Lynne A. Kneaf 4-20-16
Date

Certified by  Rusty Jones 5-3-16
Date
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Four Gray Walls and Four Gray Towers

A Novel

By

Cassandra Christopher

Synopsis

Callie Montgomery, a high school senior, discovers she has magical abilities. She, along with several of her peers, travels to Avalon to find the immortal King Arthur.

Dancing Fire

My bed was too small. I stretched until my arms dangled off the sides at the elbows and my ankles bent at the bottom edge. This bed used to swallow my fear, the dark, and mean roommates, but it hadn't provided solace in years.

Emily, my current roommate, banged open the door with a kick. She dumped her button-covered backpack on the bed and threw an envelope across the space between us.

"Letter for you," she said without looking at me. I picked it up as she shoved books and condoms into her bag.

"Don't wait up," she threw over her shoulder as she opened the door.

"Never do," I replied flatly. I checked the return address, although I already knew who it was from. The flouncy script was as familiar as my own chicken scratch. The postmark was in Spanish, but I had long ago given up caring where the letters came from.

I tore open the flap and found a hand painted card. A photo and the bottom of a check peeked out, and I opened the card to pull them out. The photo showed a blonde woman nearing fifty, painted with makeup and dressed like a model half her age. Next to her stood a rotund, balding man with his arm around her waist, who looked like he had stretched to his full height for this photo and still measured more than an inch shorter than the woman.

Dearest daughter, the note read,

The only thing missing from this paradise is you. If only you weren't in school. The locals are so kinds and Jeff speaks enough of the language that everyone is absolutely enthralled by him, as usual.

I tried to get you a present for your birthday, but what do you buy for the girl who asks for nothing? Just cash the check and get whatever you want.

Kisses!

P.S. I'm trying to convince Jeff to take you with us (wherever we are) for Christmas. Wouldn't that be fun?

The check was made out for a thousand dollars; my birthday had been nearly a month before.

I glanced at the photo and giggled at the idea that anyone would find my stepfather enthralling. Maybe they, like my mother, found his financial status compelling, but without a few hundred dollar bills passed around I doubted anyone would stick around to hear Jeff butcher Spanish.

I opened the top drawer in my bedside table where an empty glass pie dish sat. I snapped my fingers and felt familiar warmth spread across my fingertips. The flames danced just on the edge, almost touching my fingernails. I lit the picture and watched it ripple for a moment before dropping it in the dish.

I wiggled my fingers and watched the flames dance, an extension of my hand. Jeff would never agree to take me anywhere after I burned his house down. My mother's wishful thinking used to be hopeful: promises of visits and vacations, once I had done penance for making Jeff angry, but it never happened. Her promises and baits were

eventually painful, but now they were as pathetic and contrived as I'm sure were Jeff's language skills.

My phone buzzed as a reminder lit the screen. I groaned and turned it off; I didn't need to read the banner to what was coming.

I grabbed my bag and ran out the door. The short staircase, covered in burgundy carpeting, led into a long hallway lined with wooden doors. A set of double doors at the very end was my destination. I lifted and dropped the heavy knocker just once as a clock faintly chimed the hour.

Dinner Time

The door swung open almost immediately.

"I'm surprised you still knock."

I was certain that Mary Donne had never slouched. In the five years I had attended Aubrey Owen Preparatory School I had seen nothing but ballet perfect posture from the headmistress. Her hair was pinned tightly in a twist, another sharp constant. Her face was sharp and angular, but her natural sternness was softened by a smile. She stepped aside to let me in her apartment.

"I will knock until I die," I said, walking past her and taking a seat at the kitchen island. "What's for dinner?"

"Do you mind Chinese leftovers?" Donne opened the fridge and pulled out paper cartons, lining them up on the island counter between us.

"I am always a slut for pork lo mein," I answered, peeking in the cartons.

"How has your week been?"

"My roommate still sucks." I found the carton of noodles and took the chopsticks
Donne offered. "Can't you fix that?"

"All of your roommates suck, in your opinion. I'm not sure giving you a new
roommate would help."

"Are you suggesting that I'm the problem?" I feigned a hurt expression. Donne
merely raised an eyebrow.

"I'm suggesting that you're too picky."

"You try living with teenagers and then tell me I'm picky."

"You are a teenager. Show a little sympathy for them."

"Can't," I said around a mouthful of noodles. "I'm too weird."

"Mhm." Donne picked up a fork and picked through her own carton. "I don't
think you're as different as you claim."

"I have an idea: let's talk about something else."

"You're the one who brought up your roommate."

"Oh, psh." I set my food down and folded my hands like a therapist. "How has
your week been?"

"Lots and lots of paperwork," she answered.

"Anything interesting?"

"New student coming in."

"Boy or girl?"

"Boy--a senior, actually."

"A senior transfer?"

"Slightly troubled past, but he seems committed to turning himself around."

"'Slightly troubled'?" I repeated.

"You know I can't tell you," she said.

"I know." I slumped over the island. "Can you at least tell me his name?"

"William," she replied. "I think he goes by Will."

"Is he in any of my classes?"

"All of them, actually," Donne said with a smile. "I suggested he have a guide for his first few days, and his family agreed."

"Who exactly did you suggest?" I enunciated each word, no longer impeded by rice.

"I thought you might be a good fit."

I stared in silence, ready to erupt in anger.

"Now, Callie, just listen--"

"I absolutely will not, because this is entirely presumptive." I smacked my hands on the table for emphasis and the tops of my palms smarted.

"You need something! You need more than this!"

"Why?" I demanded. "Why do I need more? I pass my classes, I get along with teachers--"

"You've gone through at least one roommate each year, sometimes two--"

"Shannon was stealing from me! That wasn't my fault!"

“You have got to interact with people your own age, and you’ve got to do something more than schoolwork.”

“I don’t want to do any more than this! This is enough for me.”

“It won’t be forever.”

“How would you know?”

“Because you won’t be here forever.”

The energy evaporated. We had both pushed back our chairs to make our arguments with the fullest force, and now as the energy evaporated we both collapsed back down in front of the white cartons.

“I don’t want to do it,” I mumbled.

“You never do,” Donne said gently. “But you need to.”

She smiled when I glanced up.

I shook my head and agreed. We passed through the rest of the hour with surface-level chitchat. Sunday dinner was an institution, a commitment unquestioned since the first year I spent Christmas break in my dorm room, and not even a fight would provide an opportunity for an early exit.

I left as soon as we finished eating, promising again not to be too unkind to Will, and retreated back to my still-empty room. I locked the deadbolt behind me and climbed back on top of my bed, spread eagle once again, and pulled a thick leatherbound tome from underneath the bed frame.

I flipped to the first illuminated page, an illustration of a dozen knights on horses with a lady in white, her hair covered in an ivy wreath.

"What stories will you tell me tonight?" I asked aloud.

Will

The next morning I found a text from Donne:

Come to my office before class.

I squared my shoulders as I walked downstairs to Donne's office. The school was split into three parts: two buildings built pre-Civil War and an attachment built in the 1960s to join the two. Donne's office was in one of the oldest parts of the school.

The hallway into her office, panelled in dark wood and carpeted with the same wine-colored shag as the dorms, felt like a cave. Donne's office walls, by contrast, were painted mint green. The beige carpet held some suspicious stains, but even the imperfections felt more inviting than the perfectly claustrophobic hall.

"Morning," I said as I sank into an overstuffed white chair in the corner of the room.

"He's not here yet," Donne replied without looking up from her paperwork.

"Tardiness is not a good first impression."

"His first impression of you is rather more important than you of him," she said, raising her eyes over her glasses.

"Fine. I'll be nice."

"I'm sure you will." The corners of her mouth turned up almost imperceptibly before she returned to her work.

A silent fifteen minutes passed before her door opened. A middle-aged blonde woman and a man with a salt-and-pepper beard walked in, followed by a boy about eighteen. He was the only one who glanced back at me, his sharp blue eyes dulled by a glossed-over look of boredom.

"Mr and Mrs Somerick, it's good to see you again," Donne said as she stood.

"Will, how are you?"

"About as good as can be expected."

Mrs Somerick made a show of grabbing her son's arm in a panicked embrace to cover the sharp jab of her elbow into his stomach.

"Of course, Will doesn't want to leave home." She smiled tightly.

"Of course," Donne nodded, then glanced back at me. I stood and cleared my throat.

"Hi," I said, extending my hand to Will. "I'm Callie. I'm your student guide."

"Oh, how nice," Mrs. Somerick interjected. "You've already got a friend."

Will glowered at my hand before meeting my eyes.

"What did you do?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Punishment? Or did you need the volunteer hours?"

I dropped my hand and my smile.

"I did it as a favor," I said flatly. "Grab your bag--we've got fifteen minutes until class starts."

He didn't move for a moment, just stared. I got the feeling that if I broke the gaze first he would count it as a victory, like a five-year-old who wins a staring contest.

"Will," his dad broke in. Will rolled his eyes to look at his father.

"Get your bag. We'll be moving your things into your room while you're in class, so come find us after you're done."

"Okie doke." He swung the tattered bag over his shoulder and faced me, bowing dramatically. "Lead the way."

I looked back at Donne, who was already absorbed in finalizing Will's paperwork. She glanced up as Will and I left, just barely smiling.

You owe me, I thought as Will and I left the office.

"So tell me about the old girl," he interrupted my thoughts. "Is she a hardass or a softhearted grandmother type?"

"Neither."

"Somewhere in between then? I can work with that. What's my first class?"

"History."

We crossed the threshold from the old building into the addition. Students milled around the hall, prolonging the inevitable as long as possible. We attracted stares--Will more so than I. He was an oddball, dressed in an almost-punk denim vest and tattered button down that barely fell within code. His hair was a darker blonde than his mother's, falling all over the place like it had never been combed. His backpack was covered in buttons with sayings like, "Vote for Pedro." He even had a "They Can't Lick Our Dick" Richard Nixon campaign button. Where there were no buttons, however,

there were sewn-on patches of random fabric, particularly over any identifying label or logo. It didn't entirely hide the fact that the bag was high quality--and expensive.

"Do new students appear so rarely that they become a spectacle?"

"Of course not," I answered. "But you're the first senior transfer in my memory--and I've been here since I was thirteen."

"So I am an odd fish."

"If you want to put it like that, yes."

We walked into homeroom--at least, I walked. Will strolled--and nearly faceplanted into the teacher.

"Ms. Walker?" I tapped her on the shoulder, but she didn't move. "What are you doing?"

"The energy is changing." We walked around to face her, but found the silver-haired instructor's eyes were closed. "It's not just in the room; it's the entire school. I felt it when I got up this morning."

"I may have an explanation for that," I said. Ms. Walker opened one eye, glanced at me, and jumped when she saw Will.

"Will Somerick, Ms. Walker," I introduced. "Will is a transfer."

Ms. Walker raised her eyebrows in confusion. Will mimicked the action.

"You have a rather strong energy about you, young man."

"So I gathered," Will nodded.

Ms. Walker pursed her lips and appraised Will carefully. His sarcastic, saccharine tone had not gone unnoticed.

"Take a seat, Mr. Somerick," she said slowly. "Callie, may I have a word?"

I followed Ms. Walker up to her desk as Will sat in the back and propped his feet up on the desk in front of him. Several other students had entered while we were talking to the teacher, and regarded Will like an exhibit.

"I don't like his energy, Callie," the teacher confided, hushed. "There's something that doesn't fit well with the school and I haven't quite figured it out yet."

"I'm sure his energy just needs time to adjust to the new setting," I tried to assure her, but she shook her head.

"Are you his friend? Do you know him already?"

"I'm just a student guide, Ms. Walker. I only met him twenty minutes ago."

"I sense a--a kinship, a connection between you two."

I nodded as the eccentric instructor rambled on about Will's energy. She had been with the school much longer than I had, and I wasn't sure she had ever cut her hair. It hung well past her waist, but it gave an air of warning: something is different about this one. She wore crystals for protection and gave tarot readings at parties.

"You'll keep an eye on him then? Will you make sure he doesn't disturb too much?"

"Oh, of course--I mean, I'll give it my best."

She patted me awkwardly on the arm.

"There's a good girl." She turned away from me and walked over to her chalkboard. Will lowered his feet as I walked toward the desks, and I realized he'd been saving me a seat.

"So let's talk about the Roman invasion of Britain..."

"Tell me about these people."

"What people?" I looked around the dining hall expecting to see some standout group, but nothing immediately jumped to attention.

"All of them," Will clarified. "You've been here for--what did you say, five years? Tell me about the kind of people who come here."

"Mostly carbon copies of one another," I answered, looking back down at my plate.

"So you don't know any of them."

The challenge in his voice was clear. Keeping my hand close to the table, I pointed and leaned in conspiratorially.

"Two tables down is your new roommate. Don't expect to make a friend out of him; I don't think anyone but Donne has ever heard him speak. At the table behind you is my roommate--no, don't look. Depending on what you like to do with your free time you can pick an official club, since those usually like to sit together. If you want a lunchroom diagram you can have it, but the most awesome people you'll ever meet are not going to be in this room."

"You're in this room."

"Yes, yes I am." I ignored his grin and went back to my food.

"Where's the best place to hide if you're skipping class?"

"The roof," I replied, immediately regretting my answer.

"How do I get up there?"

"Damned if I know," I said between bites, keeping my eyes on the table.

"You know anyone who does?"

"Unfortunately, no." I dumped my silverware and napkin on my tray and stood abruptly. "Hurry up."

The roof was off-limits and all official passages were locked up tight, but one particular window had been overlooked. I climbed out after classes, and after depositing Will in Donne's office to be taken to his dorm room.

The low roof of the addition provided almost no view of the coast because of the high trees surrounding the school, but the feeling of isolation from everything was worth so much more than a view. I climbed up on one of the many tarp-covered crates that had been placed out here for indefinite storage and worked on homework for the next day: a task before a treat.

After I finished thirty pages of history reading, I pulled my favorite book out of my messenger bag. The old leather felt soft and smooth from wear, but didn't fray or crack anywhere. I had found the book buried deep in the history pit, a place in the library where the floor sloped down and created a sunken cavity. Few people, other than the librarians, traveled down to the pit, and I wondered if I was the first student to hold this book since it had been placed on the library shelf.

I started to flip through the pages to find another new story, but before I could decide on a page I heard the high window behind me creak. I turned to see Will's outrageous hair peeking over the sill as his hands pushed the sash up. I shoved the book back in my bag as he hoisted himself up over the frame, knocking his head in the process.

"What are you doing?" I said as he dropped to firm ground.

"You said this was the best place to come." He smiled infuriatingly as he pulled himself up the back of my crate. "I can see why; it's great out here."

"You're an ass," I said. "What did you do, follow me?"

"Kind of," he replied. "I asked around a little—turns out, my roommate speaks monosyllabically. I asked if you spent time with Donne a lot, and got a head nod. I asked if he no how to get out to the roof, head shake. I asked if he had seen you out on the roof, and he *said* yes. It was mind-blowing.

"And then I started wandering, and kind of figured out there were only two ways out here. One is the maintenance door over there—" he pointed to the opposite wall where the only door to the roof was located.

"And the other was somewhere on the opposite side. So I went to the other side, and saw you through the window. How did you find that window, anyway? Nobody's dorm is up here."

"Donne's apartment is up the staircase beside the window," I said without emotion. "Did you think I would just be okay with you climbing out on my roof?"

"It's not your roof, is it?"

"Screw you."

"Come on, I'm sorry." He put out his hand to stop me, but I recoiled.

"I'm not gonna hurt you, I swear," he exclaimed. "Seriously, how'd you find this?"

"I flew up from the trees." I grabbed my bag and slid down off the crate.

"Callie," Will called, but I didn't turn. I heard him clamber off the crate and catch up to me.

"Come on, Callie, I just wanted to find a place—"

"What gives you the right?" I whirled on him.

"What?"

"I've been here for five years, including most holidays and a good portion of the summers. *I* need a place to get away from these people, and in less than twenty-four hours you decide that you're entitled to it, too. Have I got news for you: you're not entitled to anything here, not this roof, not my friendship, not anything."

I turned and walked past him back towards the crate, and continued on to the maintenance door. I pulled out my key ring and slid a stolen copy of the master key into the lock. The door was open and shut before Will fully turned around.

The Book

I ran back to my empty room and locked myself in. Emily had meetings all night and wouldn't come back any time soon, so I plugged in my electric tea kettle and pulled the book out once more. I flipped mindlessly through the pages without really seeing anything until the kettle whistled.

I dropped the open book on the bed and poured hot water into a mug of instant coffee. When I turned back to the book I saw an illustration I hadn't noticed when I set it down: a girl in a blue medieval dress laying in a field next to a boy dressed in the same style of clothing. Neither looked terribly wealthy, but they looked content. I sipped my coffee and turned the page to the beginning of the story.

Let it be known to the reader that Nimue was a great lady whose talent lay in fire. Let it also be known that despite her disadvantage in handling water, Nimue developed talent with all elemental magic.

Nimue, at sixteen, was unmarried. She hid proof of her fae blood from her family and yet she had no suitors to speak of. Her mother began threatening to send her to a convent where, Nimue knew, she would be found out and burned. Her fear rested deeply and caused terrible attacks on her nerves.

But a young man came. He was younger than Nimue's father would have liked, but he had connections to the royal court of Pendragon. The whispers said he wasn't safe--the son of a demon, saved only from his destiny of evil by immediate baptism after birth. His official title in the court was advisor to the king himself (this a neighbor discovered after his arrival). He courted Nimue, traveling to her village from the Pendragon court and writing often in the interim.

And then he revealed himself.

"Nimue," he said one day. They lay in the field outside her village where she knew her parents were hoping she would give him a reason to marry her. She could

not bring herself to seduce him here, however, in a place that held such innocent childhood memories, so instead they watched the clouds.

"Do you know who I am?" He broke into her reverie.

Nimue turned to face him. His tone implied that finding faces in the cottony billows could wait.

"Of course I do."

"Who am I, then?"

"You're a member of the court, you're my...friend, a favorite of the king..."

"Those are merely what I am," he smiled. "Who am I?"

Nimue was at a loss.

"I would like to show you who I am."

Oh, she thought. It was inescapable after all.

"I didn't expect--I knew you would, I just didn't think...today..."

"Nimue."

She looked up from the grass she had been pulling apart. His face was kind, but she had heard they were only kind if you didn't say no.

"I would like to take you to court with me."

Perhaps a marriage proposal as a trade for her services?

"I think I know who you are," he continued, oblivious to her thoughts, "but I'm not quite sure what you are just yet. I would like to find out, but I would like to take you to court for ease of access."

She swallowed at the perceived double meaning, but he continued undeterred.

"The lady Elaine, daughter of Igraine, is in need of a lady-in-waiting, and I think you'll do.

"What do you want to take me to Tintagel as?"

"Would you believe my apprentice?"

"I can't be an advisor."

"That's rather a good thing, since I wouldn't be much good at teaching you how to advise."

Nimue fell silent, considering the offer. To leave her village and enter palace life would mean a whole new set of people to fool, but it would mean she had not failed her family. Perhaps this offer, rather than marriage, would be her savior.

"What will you teach me, then?"

"How to burn anyone and anything to the ground and be respected for it, not in spite of it." His eyes were cold, and he wondered if this lesson was one he had learned without a guide.

"Why would I want to burn anything?" she said slowly.

"I don't imagine that you do want to, at least right now."

He took both her grass-covered hands in his own and held them together.

"Your hands hold power. I want to train your mind to use that ability."

He slowly pulled her hands apart, and she let the fire string together between her fingers so that yarns of flames kept her fingertips connected.

"This is the most beautiful part about you."

Nimue smiled at his kind words, but his eyes were on the sparks.

I slammed the book closed, nearly spilling my coffee on the pages. I set it down quickly and shoved the book under the bed. My hands were shaking; I couldn't concentrate. Her fear and her isolation, her family's disapproval--it was painfully familiar. I had heard her name before but couldn't quite place it. I recognized the court name, though: Tintagel was on the Cornish coast of England.

Chapter Break?

The room is engulfed in flames and the smoke is beginning to fill my lungs. Even though the fire doesn't burn my skin I can feel the horrific heat. Will is screaming my name through the crackling fire, but I can't pay attention to him. My mother is burning in front of me as I try to kill the flames, but they only burn brighter.

I awoke choking on air, and realized I had woken much earlier than my alarm. I decided to visit Ms. Walker before classes to shake off the nightmare. I forced myself to think clinically about the story--facts, names, timeline--rather than let thoughts about personal connections creep in.

Familiar Himalayan drums that frequently floated through her closed door covered my first knock, and after a moment of no answer I pounded on the door. It opened almost immediately, Ms. Walker looking a little frazzled without her normal headscarf.

“Yes, Callie, what is it?”

“I—I had a question about some mythology...” I trailed off, unsure because of her distractedness. Even as long as Ms. Walker had been around, I still wasn’t entirely comfortable with her. She looked surprised that I had come to her for help.

“Oh. Well, come in then.”

I stepped into the strange office at her behest. Sunlight filtered through bead-covered windows onto purple carpet squares. Pillows sat on the floor as chairs, and a floating table served as her desk. I chose a pillow and dropped to the floor.

“I was hoping you could tell me about Nimue,” I said slowly.

“Anything in particular?” she asked. Once she was over the surprise of my abnormal use of her office hours, she settled into an almost autopilot routine of making tea.

“Not especially,” I said slowly. “Maybe just her background? Kind of an overview?”

She settled into a pillow between me and the desk, her teacup in both hands.

“Okay,” she began. “Nimue is distinctly Arthurian. It’s the most widely-used name for the character referred to as the Lady of the Lake. In some stories she was responsible for giving Excalibur to Arthur. In another she raised Lancelot as her own son, which is why one of the books in the Vulgate Cycle is named Lancelot of the Lake.”

Most of the information flew over my head, and my face must have reflected my confusion.

“Do you know how King Arthur died, according to Sir Thomas Mallory?”

I shook my head. She rolled back over her pillow and stretched to grab a book from the bottom shelf of one of the built-in bookcases. She flipped to the last page before handing the book to me.

“That,” she said, “is an illustration by Katherine Cameron. Arthur was wounded fatally in a battle and had one of his knights throw Excalibur into that lake.” She tapped on the page for effect.

“Out of the water pops this boar with the women on it. One, presumably the one holding Arthur in this picture, is Nimue.”

I nodded, still not sure what this had to do with the story in my book.

“What about when she was younger?”

“There isn’t really anything about her as a young woman that I’m aware of,” Ms. Walker mused. “There are stories that she had an affair with Merlin, who was her teacher, and that she eventually locked him in a cage of some sort, but not much else.

“What sparked the curiosity?”

“Just something I read,” I mumbled, closing the book and scrambling off the pillow. “Thank you for talking to me.”

“Anytime. And Callie?”

I stopped just short of the door.

“I really do want you to be careful around Will. He’s absolutely rude, and he has the worst energy patterns.”

I nodded and scurried out the door.

I ran into Will coming down the main staircase as I walked toward the cafeteria for breakfast leftovers.

“Hey, where you headed?” He matched my stride, hands in his pockets.

“Food,” I replied.

“Mind if I join you?”

“Nope.”

I refused to make eye contact with him until we sat with our plates full of bacon.

“Look, I just wanted to say I’m sorry for yesterday—“

“You don’t get to apologize yet.”

“Excuse me?”

“You don’t get to apologize to me yet,” I repeated. “Your apology means I have to at least pretend to forgive you. I can’t do that until at least the end of today, maybe tomorrow morning. You can apologize then.”

He sat motionless for a moment before pushing his chair back and picking up his plate.

“This is why you don’t sit with anyone else,” he said, seemingly more to himself than to me, before moving to another empty table.

I locked my eyes on my bacon and toast.

“Just like old times.”

I laid my head back in exhaustion and caught Donne staring at me. I couldn't tell if her face was painted with disappointment or resignation. Probably a little of both, and I suddenly felt like the molecules in the air were filled with Will's anger and Donne's

chagrin. I jumped up from my table and dropped silverware in the process, creating enough noise for the people around me--and the people watching me--to notice, but I grabbed the fork and knife and shoved my tray into the cleaning cart as quickly as possible.

It was raining outside but I didn't stop for a coat before I ran upstairs and climbed out on the roof. While I was on top of these crates I finally felt like I could breathe. I raised my hands through the drizzle and imagined I could do as much as Nimue--the fire, the opportunity to run. I felt her family's disappointment and her lack of community, and I put my hands together like she had and imagined as I drew them apart that the same strings of fire emanated from my fingertips.

If only, I thought.

And then I smelled burning hair.

The Visit

"For god's sake, sit still."

Emily had my hair in one hand and scissors in another, trying to fix what I had destroyed.

"How did you do this again?"

"Matches and candles," I muttered as she yanked at another singed piece.

"Mhmm, yeah, you had a match this far back on your head."

"Ow!"

"Seriously, sit still."

Emily's cousin, with whom she'd stayed for seven or eight weeks over the summer, was a hairdresser. When I came back to our room she'd seen my smoking tips and told me to sit in her desk chair while she grabbed scissors.

"There's just barely enough good hair here to hit your bangs at your eyebrows," she muttered.

"That's too short!"

"That's too bad," she responded, the swishing scissors acting as punctuation.

Emily and I both missed our first few classes because of my hair. I barely made it in the door of my literature class before Mr. Ferretti, who had a ridiculously strict no-late-entrance policy, locked the door.

"Sorry," I threw back at him after stepping on his foot.

"Perhaps," he said slowly, "since you are already standing, you would do us the honor of reading our first poem."

I sighed and dropped my bag to the floor to dig out my literature anthology. I flipped to my bookmark and took a spot behind Mr. Ferretti's podium as he sat at his desk in the corner.

"Please, everyone, turn to "The Lady of Shalott," I began in my best imitation of the teacher. In my peripherals I could see his frown deepen, but I continued.

"This lovely poem, written by Alfred, Lord Tennyson, was crafted in an era of obsession with King Arthur. The Victorian poets really just wanted to suck Lancelot's

dick, but because they weren't allowed to say that out loud they took out their frustration in poems about girls dying because they, too, could not suck Lancelot's dick."

"That's enough," Mr. Ferretti's olive skin reddened as the class tried to hide their laughter. "Please take a seat, Miss Montgomery."

"But I haven't yet read the poem," I protested innocently.

"Sit."

I grabbed my bag and took a seat in the back corner. I mostly hated Ferretti, but I loved his classroom: the entire back wall was covered in bookshelves, and his desk sat diagonally in the corner opposite the door. He didn't have a single piece of technology in the room, so it felt a little like a bachelor's study.

"Mr. Somerick, perhaps you will read for us."

Ferretti never asked anything; his requests were part of his manners, but refusing was rarely attempted, so Will cleared his throat.

Willows whiten, aspens shiver.

The sunbeam showers break and quiver

In the stream that runneth ever

By the island in the river

Flowing down to Camelot.

Four gray walls, and four gray towers

Overlook a space of flowers,

And the silent isle imbowers

The Lady of Shalott.

*Underneath the bearded barley,
The reaper, reaping late and early,
Hears her ever chanting cheerly,
Like an angel, singing clearly,
O'er the stream of Camelot.
Piling the sheaves in furrows airy,
Beneath the moon, the reaper weary
Listening whispers, 'Tis the fairy, Lady of Shalott.'*

On and on he read about the girl who would die no matter what she did. I started thinking about Nimue. Why didn't Tennyson consider that Nimue, if Eleanor was so closely connected to Lancelot, might save her? What killed her? If Nimue had been present she probably wouldn't have let it happen.

But Nimue wasn't real.

But my burnt hair was.

Will finished the poem and Ferretti droned about style and form, all the worst parts about a poetry class, and I started to daydream about Nimue and whoever the boy was who took her to court. I wanted to keep reading, but there was no guarantee that the story would be there when I reopened the book.

As Ferretti released us, Donne walked in the room and we all froze.

"Callie, could you come with me please?"

"Is there a problem?" I was terrified that someone had seen whatever had happened on the roof, or that I was going to be punished for missing my morning classes.

But it was much worse.

"Your mother is here."

"When did you get bangs?"

"Very recently," I said dryly as my mother wrapped her twig-like arms around me.

"Oh, I was hoping to take you to a salon while I was here, but maybe we can just shop instead. I'm sure you need all sorts of things for your last year of school, and it's hardly ever just us girls but Jeff stayed in California for a business meeting and told me I could fly out to see you--"

"Mom," I interrupted. "It's the middle of the school day."

"Your headmistress said you're an exemplary student and that you could miss a day of classes. Oh, I just missed you, sweetheart!"

She grabbed me again and I raised an eyebrow over her shoulder at Donne, who just smiled.

"Just let me make sure there isn't anything I need to do before we go," I said, pushing my way out of her arms.

"What are you doing to me?" I half-whispered at Donne, safely inside her office.

"It's perfectly fine for you to go with her--as I understand it, you've missed most of your classes today anyways."

"I had an accident this morning."

"Fall off the roof?"

I stayed silent in surprise. I hadn't known anyone else knew I went up there.

"Do you think you're the first student to use those crates as a hiding place?" She matched my whispered tone.

"I think you should forgive this indiscretion and tell my mother that, actually, I have a rather important class today."

"The only important thing you should be doing is leading Will, and if the episode in the hall this morning is any indication you aren't doing that anymore." She dropped any and all playfulness; I rarely saw her this serious.

"I don't owe you any favors today, Callie," she said.

"Please," I whispered.

"Callie, come on," my mother called. "I want to get some lunch, I'm absolutely starving. The plane food was terrible and I forgot to pack something extra in my purse so I haven't had any decent, good-quality food since--"

"Coming, Mom!" I sighed and turned away from Donne.

"Have fun!" she called after me. I grimaced as I walked out of the inner office.

"Hey!" Will's face appeared in the doorway, followed by the rest of his lanky frame. "Where're you headed off to?"

"Lunch, and shopping," I said through gritted teeth.

"Oh," he said slowly. "So everything's okay, then? With your family and whatever?"

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"Well, cause your mom is here--hi, Callie's mom--I thought something happened."

"No, she's just visiting." I started to push past him but paused and turned back around. "I was going to show you the library today, damn it."

Understanding and hesitation spread across his face. He was still angry at me for my bitchy outburst this morning, and not necessarily in the mood to help me escape an uncomfortable situation.

"Yeah, about that..."

"Mom, I'm not sure I can go with you--I really do have to show Will around, it's only his second day."

"I mean, that's true, and I do have some reading to do." He spoke slowly and noncommittally, obviously keeping open the option to back out.

"See, Mom? I've got an obligation. Will's a brand new student, for god's sake. It's my job to help him get around."

"I'm really lost without her, Mrs. Montgomery."

I cringed at his attempted respect. My mother hadn't used my surname since my dad died when I was in elementary school.

"Actually, it's Mrs Price. Marilyn Price--and what was your name, I didn't quite catch it?"

"Will Somerick," he put out his hand. Donne leaned over from her desk to watch the exchange through her doorway. "It's nice to meet you. Your daughter's been the absolute best guide I think I could have had. We've made loads of friends and I really feel settled in."

He said all this while pumping my mother's hand up and down. His sarcasm went right over her head, and she beamed at the perceived compliment.

"But really, that's why I need Callie for the day--I've only been here for twenty-four hours and I'm just lost in this big old school."

"Maybe you could join us then!" My mother immediately turned back into Donne's office. Will now wore a look of horror to match my own.

"I didn't mean to..."

"You got too invested," I said. "You didn't know yet."

We saw Donne nod her head with a smile, and groaned in unison.

Big Bang

Lunch was a sit-down affair that ate up two hours. We immediately went shopping afterwards, Will hiding his laughter behind clothing racks as my mother put me through a dozen ridiculous outfits. I tried to stop her as we walked out of the fourth store.

“Mom, I really do have to study at some point today, and I’m sure Will does too. We need to get back.”

My mother glanced sidelong at me as she tried to hail a cab.

“Are you sure? You couldn’t spare a few more hours for a little shopping? I’m sure Will wouldn’t mind.”

Will stood behind both of us, a silent pawn scared to say anything that would get him in deeper than he already was.

“Really Mom, we need to go back.”

She sighed as a yellow taxi pulled up to the curb.

“Fine,” she conceded as she climbed in the back. “Aubrey Owen Prep Academy, please.”

My mother bargained for more of my time all the way back to the school. I finally settled on a few hours after class the next day.

“Would you like to join us, Will?”

“Actually, I think I’ve got an orientation meeting tomorrow,” he shrugged.

“That’s too bad,” my mother pouted. “Maybe over the weekend we—“

“Mom watch out!”

The skateboard, left on the sidewalk in front of the school by a group of kids still playing nearby, was nearly the cause of a broken leg for my mother. Before her foot touched down, however, a solid wind blew just under it and scooted it out of the way.

But the board was no longer a concern as I felt flames licking at my fingertips, and the dying wind did nothing to fan them out. Just as the wind calmed I felt heat rise

up my arms, and I looked down to see that the flames had somehow caught onto my bare skin. I screamed, but I felt no pain.

I was immediately numb to the world around me: my mother panicking and trying to get the attention of anyone in the school, the cab driver behind me still waiting for his fare, and Will trying to hold me still, presumably in an attempt to put out the flames. His help had the opposite effect. When he touched my arms the flames jumped higher, but it didn't seem to hurt him either. I had a vague realization that I was still screaming and that I couldn't stop.

Will told me later that I passed out. I woke up in the hospital infirmary where a nurse was trying to find skin to bandage. My mother was sitting in a chair with a teacher holding the smelling salts she had, in my memory, always carried. I didn't see Will, and I drifted into unconsciousness once again.

When I woke up again my mother was swearing she'd seen flames. Donne sat in the chair next to my bed while my mother paced. I glanced down at my arms: no dressing and no burns.

"It had to be an optical illusion, Marilyn," Donne assured. "Neither Callie nor Will have any burns of any kind--there's no way they could have been on fire."

My mother stopped immediately and glared at Donne with enough steel and ice to match the cold medical room around us. Aubrey Owen Prep prided itself on remaining as true to historical accuracy as possible, with the exception of the infirmary. Donne had made it her mission to keep everything as updated as the budget would

allow, and when something could not be updated it was kept in the best shape possible. It made for an excellent selling point for the school, but it was always a little disconcerting to walk from colonial-era panelled walls into stainless steel, cold tile, and sterile curtains.

“Mary, I’m not hallucinating.”

“I’m not insinuating that you are.” Donne spoke slowly, like she was choosing every word to make the lightest impact possible. “But I am going to ask, for Callie’s sake, if you’ve been keeping up on your medical--”

“My medical state is none of your business.”

“It is when it involves one of my students.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“Is she really?”

Donne stood to deliver this blow. Neither of them realized I was awake yet, I was sure, since I doubted either of them would say any of this if they were aware I was conscious.

"How dare you," my mother bit off.

"She lives here! She cries here, she made her first friend here! She eats Christmas dinner here, for God's sake--she's practically orphaned."

"I do the best I can."

"Within your limits."

"I told you, my health is none of your business."

"Are you having episodes again?"

"I'm doing fine! Stop asking about my health and start asking why, if there was no fire, why my daughter passed out! Why did Will have a panic attack? Maybe you should be more concerned about what exactly is going on with your students."

"Part of what's going on with my students is their home life, or their lack thereof," Donne said quietly.

"Maybe Callie would have more of a home life if she wasn't here."

My mother's threat fell to the cold floor and echoed against the hard room, turning the silence into clatter. I shifted uncomfortably and both sets of eyes flew to my bed.

"Oh, Callie." Donne rolled her eyes at my mother's sudden syrupy care. "How are you, sweetheart? Are you hurt? Are you in pain?"

I swallowed my annoyance at her ignorance and pushed myself up against the pillows.

"I'm fine, Mom. Actually, I think I'll be okay enough to go back to classes tomorrow."

"I actually don't think that's a good idea--"

"I agree with your mother," Donne interrupted. "We don't know what happened, and we need to keep an eye on you for a little while."

"Where's Will?"

"He's back in his room," Donne said, once again choosing her words. "His parents came back and insisted he be in his own space."

"Is he okay?"

"Honey, Will is fine." My mother's impatience came through her sugary concern. "Headmistress Donne and I are concerned about you. Can you tell us what happened earlier?"

"What time is it?"

"It's almost seven--"

"Callie, stop diverting." The syrup in my mother's voice had dried into bitterness. "You have something to tell us and I want to hear it now."

"I don't know what happened."

"Don't lie to me, Callie--I have a right to know."

"I swear, I don't know what happened," I protested. "Can I go back to my room, too?"

"Well, let me get a nurse and we'll see." Donne walked across the room to the nurse's office and my mother quickly took the chair next to my bed.

"Callie, I think you've spent too much time away from home."

"I don't have a home," I said quietly, but she kept talking over me.

"I think it would be best if we found a school near Jeff's house for you to finish out your senior year. It would be good for us, I think--we can spend some time together before you go to college and leave home for good, and you and Jeff can build your relationship back up--"

"Jeff isn't going to let me move back into his house, Mom."

"Honey, that was years ago. He's really warming to the idea of spending more time with you and I think that if you and he just had a good talk--"

“I burned his house down.”

“And everything was replaced by insurance,” she assured me. “Callie, I just don’t think this is a good environment for you anymore.”

“What medication are you on?” I interrupted.

“Excuse me?”

“I heard you say something about meds,” I said slowly. “What are you taking? How long have you needed them?”

“What the headmistress said was out of line.” She pursed her lips in anger. “I think it might be best if we get you a private tutor--how does that sound? Then you wouldn’t have to worry about a new school until college.”

“I’m not leaving. This is home--my family is here.”

“I’m your family. This is a toxic environment and I’m calling Jeff tonight,” she said with finality. Donne started walking back towards us with a nurse and my mother dropped her voice. “I don’t want to take you away from this, but what is comfortable is not always what is best.”

“I don’t want to go,” I cried. My mother raised her hand to silence me.

“Changed your mind?” the nurse said.

“No, she hasn’t,” my mother answered. Donne raised a silent eyebrow.

“Well, then, I think you can spend the night in your own bed, but I’m going to give your roommate my cell phone number,” the nurse said, oblivious to the silent battle happening across my bed. “I’ll be on duty all night, so if anything happens tell her to call that number first.”

“We’ll do that.” My mother snatched the card from the nurse’s hand as she rose.

“Callie, I’m going to go get you some dinner.”

“I can just eat something from the kitchen.”

“I’ll bring you a shrimp salad.”

I sighed. I hated seafood.

The shed behind the school was, like the roof, mostly for maintenance and storage. The difference was the kind of storage: the shed was not so much a shed as it was a reinforced storage unit, used specifically for faculty members and, in rare cases, students. I had a few trunks that my mother wanted to move out immediately; over the next month she wanted to have me completely moved out and at home full-time by Thanksgiving. It was terrifying me.

I navigated my way through the boxes and dust sprinkled over my shuffling feet. My mother tiptoed behind me, trying not to touch anything that would get her dirty. I wondered how she was going to help me move anything out.

“It’s over here,” I threw over my shoulder. A tower of boxes, all with my name on them, stood higher than I remembered. I tried to lift the first one and nearly knocked myself over.

“I’m going to need some help.”

“Oh,” my mother replied without moving.

“Is somebody in here?” a voice called from the door.

“Yeah,” I replied to the somewhat-familiar voice. “In the corner.”

Above a short pile I saw a familiar pile of messy black hair, and the head attached to the hairdo came out from behind the boxes.

“What’re you doing back here?” Michael asked. My former French tutor’s confusion was evident, and I hardly knew how to make him understand what was going on. I wondered for a moment why he was in the shed in the first place, since he had graduated last spring, but I wasn’t going to question the only source of help I might have.

“I’m moving some stuff out,” I settled. “Do you mind giving us a hand?”

“Sure,” he shrugged.

Between the two of us, we carried the few boxes out and onto the cart that would be shipped to Jeff’s house. My mother supervised, and as soon as we were finished she swore she would never set foot in the shed again.

“There’s no one forcing you to, Mom,” I muttered. I reached back to my pocket and found it empty.

“I think I left my phone inside--I’ll be right back.”

The tears stung my eyes as I, instead of finding the straightest path to the back, wound my way through the maze I had set up not long after I first enrolled at the school. The boxes were my safe place before I found the roof, and I couldn’t leave them behind without walking it once more.

My phone lay on the floor next to the square void in the heavy dust. I picked it up slowly, trying to stop time before I rejoined my mother.

“Callie!” she called

“I’m coming,” I choked out.

“Callie, are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” I screamed, too loud and too sharp.

“I’m coming back there,” she announced.

“Mom, I’m coming out, you don’t have to—“

“Callie, I’m your mother and you need to tell me what’s wrong.”

The heat in my hands made my palms tingle, and opening and closing my fists did nothing to stop the flames.

“Mom, seriously, I just need a minute, I’ll be fine...”

She came around the corner of a box and I could see in her face that every argument was going to circle back to being happier at home. I closed my eyes to block it all out but she pushed her way in.

“Honey, I swear it will get better,” she started. “You won’t miss this place so much once—“

“Yes I will!” My voice broke and tears forced their way through my closed lids.

“This is so much more home than Jeff’s house ever could be! I wish it would burn down again so I could stay!”

“You don’t mean that,” she said, taking a step back.

“I do! I wish it would burn down, I wish I was holding the lighter this time! I would fucking burn it to the ground so I never have to go back there and I never have to see his greasy face again and I wouldn’t have to pretend that you love me anymore and—“

“Callie!”

The box behind me caught fire. I spun to try to put it out but everything I touched caught the flames. I could hear my mother step away from me, towards the back of the building.

“Mom, get out! Go that way!”

She started running as soon as I pointed, but she ran into a false end I had built into the maze.

“No! Toward the door!”

I started toward her but the cardboard was quickly catching and the boxes around me were becoming flame and ash. I pushed through the boxes, setting small fires every time I pushed a stack over, but I couldn't reach her. She had walked herself into a hole in the maze, and I had further trapped her with the toppling boxes.

“Callie!”

The voice was Michael's, not Will's, but the situation was terrifyingly familiar. Two arms grabbed me from behind and pulled me toward the door. My mother screamed, far out of reach or sight, and I fought the arms to go towards her voice.

“Get her out! Get her out of there! Let me go, I need to get her!”

“Callie, you can't go back in there—“

I broke away from Michael's grip and ran to the back. I could only hear whimpers, but I could hear her.

“Mom!”

She whimpered a little louder, and I jumped a toppled stack of boxes to find her. Her coat was burning beside her and her skin was crinkling in the flames. I grabbed the fabric of her shirt and pulled her by the shoulders as far as I could before running into burning boxes.

“Mom, I need you to help me get over this,” I whispered to her, but she had stopped making noise. I made a snap decision and bent over the boxes.

“I made you,” I whispered to the flames. “I can make you stop.”

The crackling sounded like laughing, but I tried again.

“You will die, because I gave you life and now I’m taking it away to give it to my mother.”

The flames on the box danced for a half second before shrinking down until they were nothing but smoke. I dragged my mother over the boxes and almost to the door before Michael came up behind me and picked her up.

“Callie!” Now I heard Will’s voice, and I turned to see him and several others gathering around the now-unsavable shed. The familiar smell of burning hair followed me out of the shed and I collapsed on the lawn in front of Will.

I woke up from a nightmare, the edges of my sheets singed where they weren’t soaked in sweat. Emily’s bedside light flicked on and I held up my arm to block the painful brightness.

“What the fuck? How are you setting everything on fire?” she snapped, staring at the smoke on my sheets.

I looked down at my unburned hands and arms. *I don't know*, I screamed in my head.

I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't—

“I’m gonna take a walk,” I said, climbing out of bed.

“You’re gonna break curfew?” Emily said. “Don’t you think Donne will be disappointed if you get caught?”

“I don’t care,” I said. “I need air.”

“Please don’t accidentally fall and die,” she said as she flicked her light off. “And get rid of the matches while you’re out.”

“Sure thing,” I mumbled as I stuffed a blanket into a bag. I tripped over several unidentifiable objects, causing Emily to mumble a few obscenities directed at me

I started up the stairs and glanced out the window before opening it. Sitting on one of the crates was a tall, gangly figure in a completely inappropriate hoodie, slouched over an mp3 player. The door at the top of the stairs opened and Donne rushed down the stairs when she spotted me.

“Are you okay? Did you have another attack? What--”

“Please,” I stopped her. “Please, just pretend you didn’t see me.”

“What?” She glanced over my shoulder out the window. We stood there for a moment before she put her hand on my shoulder.

“Do you need to go out in this?”

“Yeah, I do.”

She sighed in resignation.

“Make sure Will calls me if something happens.”

She started down the stairs to the main floor. I waited until I couldn't hear her footsteps before I opened the window and climbed out onto the roof.

“You're invading my space again,” I called to Will as I dropped to the ground.

He jumped in surprise. I opened my umbrella and made my way to the crate he had claimed.

“You're not supposed to be out of bed.”

“You had a panic attack--don't give me medical advice,” I admonished. “By the way, you're doing it wrong.”

“Doing what wrong?”

“Hop down.”

He complied and I pulled the tarp up to reveal a little of the wooden crate beneath. I set the umbrella in a crack in the slats and rested the tarp on top of it, and spread the blanket on top of the rough wood.

“A rain fort,” he said in wonder.

“I'm sorry I invaded your space.” He smiled apologetically as we got settled on the blanket.

“I forgive you tonight,” I replied. “It seems we both need the space.”

“Callie...I don't know what happened...there was fire...”

“Yeah. I don't know what happened,” I lied.

“You were on fire.”

“There weren't real flames, Will. It was some kind of illusion--”

“I touched the flames.”

“Everyone said it was just light reflecting,” I deflected. “You had a panic attack, your mind could easily have been seeing something that wasn’t there.”

“Callie, you did something—“

“I can’t explain it to you right now,” I said, exhausted. “Please don’t make me try.”

He paused, creating silence shattered by raindrops on the tarp.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” he said. “Is she gonna be okay?”

“She hasn’t regained consciousness,” I said, quoting the doctor’s empty words. “She’s pretty badly burned in a couple places--my stepdad is coming in the morning.”

“Okay.”

Silence again filled the space between us.

“I moved the board,” he said suddenly.

“You what?”

“The skateboard your mom almost tripped on,” he said. “I moved it.”

“You weren’t anywhere near it.”

“I moved the wind.”

“You’re ridiculous and you’re having delusions of grandeur,” I said without looking at him. I couldn’t help but think about my mother’s hidden medications and what they might be for.

“I’ve done it before.”

“Will,” I started.

“Just watch, will you?”

I looked up to see him move one hand like a conductor. The tarp floated up a little and he smiled.

“That’s a coincidence,” I said.

“Fine,” he said, the happiness melting away. “I’ll pull out the big show.”

He put up both hands and slowly danced them back and forth in time, up and down. The air started to follow his motions with a half second delay. The breeze would be on my face one moment (along with more rain) and then the tarp would be blowing out. There was wind on my back and in my hair, and when Will dropped his hands it abruptly stopped. Before I could say anything he pushed his hands out toward the rain. A wall of air kept the rain from hitting the ground; it flew up and over to the other side before falling the rest of the way, or it was blown well beyond us before gravity could take hold of it again. His hands fell back to the blanket and he breathed heavily; whatever it was, it required a lot of energy from him.

“What the hell,” I breathed.

“Yeah.”

“Why would you show me this?”

“Because of the fire,” he said quietly. “It wasn’t light, Callie. I felt the heat; it should have taken my skin off.”

“I told you, your mind was playing tricks.”

“No,” he protested. “No, a panic attack doesn’t cause hallucinations. I know, I’ve had them before. I know what I saw and what I felt and...”

I zoned out. He just kept protesting and I couldn't handle it all at once. Will was insane, or delusional. And from what I had just seen, his delusions might have been contagious.

"My mom wanted to have me committed."

"I don't necessarily disagree with her."

"You were on fire," he repeated.

I paused and thought about my hair, and bed sheets, and the shed. None of it made sense, but I didn't have any skeptic fight left in me.

"Yeah," I said simply.

"Where did the fire come from?"

"I don't really know."

"Yes, you do! Why were you on fire?"

"I don't know!" I screamed. "I don't know what it is, or if it's me or something else--I have a really bad history with fire, okay, which is part of why my mom wanted to pull me out of school which I think has more to do with Donne than it does with me setting another fire but usually nobody gets hurt when it happens but I know I can't leave and go live with her and my stepdad full-time because Jeff is an ass who hates me--"

"Callie!"

I looked up at Will, but he was looking at the blanket where I was making singe marks.

"Damn it," I breathed.

“What the actual fuck,” Will said, scooting away.

“Oh come on, you do a goddamn magic show and I didn’t freak out--this is nothing. Calm down.”

“Your hands are on fire, and you want me to calm down?”

“My hands aren’t on fire,” I said, lifting them to show him my palms. Black burns on the blanket marked where my hands had been.

“Then how did they do that?”

“Like this,” I said, and let the flames spring to life.

He stared at my hands for a moment before passing his hand over the fire. The flame sprang up as soon as his hand came near and the tarp caught fire.

“Shit,” Will muttered, but the rain put out the small fire pretty quickly.

“You can’t do that,” I admonished.

“Do what?”

“I don’t know--what did you do?”

“I didn’t even touch the flame,” he protested. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You did something,” I accused. “You did something today, too.”

“I don’t know what I did! You were the one on fire!”

“I’ve never set myself on fire before!” I realized too late that was a lie, but Will continued on.

“I don’t get it,” he said. “What is it?”

“How the hell should I know?”

The knowledge of the book in my room weighed on my mind as we fell silent, unsure how to deal with the repercussions of our newfound talents.

“When did you find out?”

“It’s complicated,” I said. “My stepdad’s house burned down a few years ago, and I couldn’t make it stop. Everything I touched just seemed to catch fire. But a few days ago...It’s just complicated. What about you?”

“I just started playing one day,” he said. “I thought, well, I thought there was a ghost. I could feel something moving in the air that wasn’t supposed to be moving and I tried to reach out to it. The air around my hand moved.”

“Whose ghost?” I asked.

“What?”

“If you thought it was a ghost, whose ghost did you think it was?”

“My brother,” he answered after a pause. “He died when I was thirteen.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“Yeah,” he said flatly. “I thought he was visiting me, trying to tell me I’d be okay. Instead, it turned out to be not okay at all.”

I couldn’t tell him he was wrong. We sat in silence for almost an hour before Donne knocked on the window to bring us in.

Decisions

I skipped classes the next day and took a cab to the hospital. In a burn unit, you have to scrub in and sanitize. There are little prepackaged sponges with hedgehog-like

prickles on the back so you can clean under your nails, and you have to wear a sanitized hospital gown and gloves over your clothes. No food, no drinks, and no germs allowed.

I took the book with me and, when I got to my mom's room, I pulled a chair right next to her bed and read her a few stories. I checked the bookmark and found Nimue was right where I had left her, so I replaced the ribbon and skipped back a few sections to a story about knights and Guinevere.

By the time Jeff walked in I was fully immersed in the words and didn't hear him until I finished the story.

"What kind of story is that?"

His condescending voice from the doorway made me jump. I closed the book and turned to face him for the first time in over a year.

"A fairy tale," I said stiffly. "I found it in the library."

"Marilyn doesn't need fairy tales," he said, keeping his distance. He walked to the other side of her bed and grabbed the chair against the wall.

"You shouldn't really be here," he said gruffly, grabbing my mother's limp hand.

"Why not?"

"Tell me what happened," he said, ignoring my question.

"There was an accident in the shed..."

"She's burned, Callie." His stony voice silenced even my defensive thoughts. Jeff had always had a talent for making me feel as guilty as possible.

"It's not what you think," I whispered.

"Tell. Me. What. Happened."

“There was a fire in the storage shed behind the school, and I couldn’t get her out.” I couldn’t look at him, so I focused on the ugly diagonal pattern of my mother’s blanket weave. “We were moving out my stuff so I could come home...”

“You’re not coming to my house.”

“Mom said--”

“Your mother was wrong,” he interrupted. “You’re not coming into my house. Especially not now--you are not coming back to Florida with us.”

“Us’?” I repeated.

“I’m having Marilyn transferred to a hospital at home as soon as she’s awake,” he said.

“You don’t know how long that will take.”

“Regardless, she’ll be coming back with me. And you will be staying here.”

“And if I don’t want to?”

He barely acknowledged my small rebellion.

“Then I’ll tell security that you are responsible for your mother’s injuries and, as a serial arsonist with a severely violent mentality, you cannot be allowed near her.”

I fell silent in terror, as Jeff knew I would, until a nurse came in. He started shuffling with the charts and the whiteboard, and made so much noise in the deafeningly quiet room that I excused myself to go to the vending machine.

The M&Ms got stuck against the glass, like they were just punctuation to my situation. The nurse from my mother’s room found me banging on the machine with everything I had (which wasn’t much).

“Here,” he said gently, pulling me back. “You’ve got to hit it just right.”

With a single swift kick to the side of the machine my chocolate and a bonus bag of Pop-Tarts fell to the vending machine floor.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as I pulled the snacks out.

“Don’t worry about it.” He smiled as he spoke, his slightly accented words tilting his lips upward. His teeth showed his age, and he sported a few gaps in his wide smile.

“Things seemed pretty icy in that room,” he prompted. I dropped my head and started counting the tiles as we walked.

“Yeah,” I bit off. “My stepdad and I...don’t see the situation the same way.”

“What is the situation?”

“The woman in the bed is my mom,” I said cautiously.

“So I gathered.

“Basically he thinks I’m responsible for her getting hurt.” The words came out in a rush. Even though they didn’t reveal anything particularly important, I suddenly felt like I was baring my soul to a stranger.

“Are you?”

“I don’t know.”

He nodded as I sat in a chair in a waiting room area near the nurses’ station.

“I’m Emrys, by the way.”

“Callie. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Tell me, Callie, why does your stepdad think you’re at fault?”

“Because it’s happened before,” I said quietly.

“You’ve hurt your mother before?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “I--the kind of accident. There was one when I was younger and my stepdad thinks I’m responsible for that one so he assumes I’m responsible for this one.”

Emrys nodded as though he understood, while I was quite sure he did not.

“Let me ask you Callie, do you find yourself in these kinds of accidents often?”

“More often lately,” I said.

“Mhmm,” he hummed. “Do you know why you’re having these accidents?”

“I can’t control myself,” I mumbled. I didn’t know why I was still talking, but I couldn’t seem to help myself. The more Emrys asked, the more I wanted to tell.

“Would you like to control yourself?”

“Excuse me?”

“The question is, do you want to control yourself?” he repeated. “Whatever is happening with you, it seems to happen when you don’t want it to--or, perhaps, when you don’t want to admit you want it. Are there situations where you like being a little out of control?”

“I...I don’t understand...”

“Yes, you do,” he insisted, his scraggly teeth showing through his words. “Do you like being a little out of control?”

“I mean, I guess, but not with this--and everyone likes not always being in control, not everyone can handle being in control--”

He held up his hand and I stopped babbling instantly. It wasn’t rudeness, or shock; I suddenly wanted to stop talking.

“If your control problems are something you want to deal with, I know a place where you can get help.”

“I’m not going to a psych ward.”

“No psychologists,” he promised. “A historian in training who likes to analyze every inch of his surroundings, but if you can get past that you’re golden.”

“What kind of place?” I asked slowly.

“Just call this number if you’re interested. I don’t think you’re crazy, Callie.”

I looked up from the paper he handed me.

“I think you might be gifted.”

I stared at the paper all the way back to the school. I had Googled the number and the only thing that had come up was a listing for a landline in Virginia for a married couple, now dead. I didn’t want to call just to find out I didn’t want to go to whatever program this was, but I was curious.

I glanced at my clock and realized I was late. Because of the accident, which happened on Sunday, Donne had asked me to come to dinner today.

I tripped on the stairs up to her door, making my knock more of a bang. The unlocked door swung open from the force of the push which made me privy to Donne's angry voice.

"How dare you...cold approach...I told you I didn't approve..."

Her voice was muffled in the other room, and I closed the front door quietly as I rubbed my bumped head. Indistinguishable mumbles came through the wall next to the freezer, and I only caught two more words when I grabbed an ice pack:

“Absolutely not.”

I turned around in time to catch Donne’s terrifyingly angry face appear in the kitchen before it softened into shock.

“What are you doing here?”

“I tried to knock, but the door was already open.” I gestured with the frozen gel but her distracted gaze wasn’t focused on anything, least of all her insignificant front door.

“I don’t have time for dinner tonight, Callie.”

“What?” The dining hall had already shut down for the night, which would force me to either bribing kitchen staff (something I was not unfamiliar with, but it would be difficult with a possible concussion) or leave the school grounds.

“Here.” She pulled her purse out on the countertop and shoved a twenty dollar bill in my general direction, unaware of the generous allowance I had been given. “Take this and order something. I’ve got too much to do tonight.”

“I don’t mind you working while we eat...you’ve done it before...”

“Callie!” The exasperation in her voice was almost painful. Rarely was I her opponent if it was not an equal battle. “Just go.”

I picked up the money and left, the gel pack still against my forehead. She hadn’t even asked about it.

I wandered out and down the stairs, the door slamming behind me. I jumped at the sound, and as a result caught a glance out the same window Will had climbed out of just days before. A light shined on the roof and I stood on my tiptoes to see who had invaded my space.

Will tiptoed around a crate in the dimming foggy light, his phone to his ear. He turned suddenly and met my eyes, and waved frantically. I slid the glass back and balanced the ice pack between the sill and the pane. I hadn't had to climb through the window since before I got hold of a master key, and here I was clambering out for the second time in two weeks.

"Is this for real?" Will's voice echoed across the rooftop, bouncing off crates and bricks and concrete. I walked over to the crate, holding the ice pack to my head. Will jumped down from the crate smoothly and held up a finger to keep me from talking.

"When can I leave?"

I leaned in to try to hear the person on the line, but only caught incoherent noises.

"But you're serious--this is for real?...Yes...Got it. Thank you!"

Will hung up the phone and promptly crowed like a rooster.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I tried to shush him, glancing over my shoulder to make sure no one would come to investigate.

"I'm getting the hell out of Dodge!" He crowed again, and spun to his knees before he flopped down on his back.

"Where exactly are you going?" I asked.

“Somewhere I’m not a freak,” he said. “I’m going somewhere I can breathe, open air, no more stifling from my parents or teachers.”

“Is it an anarchy compound?”

“Funny.” He sat up as I sat down. “You should come with me.”

“To where?”

“I..I don’t actually know,” he admitted. “They said it was like a camp, or a home or something...”

“Who said?”

And then he told me how he had left the school and walked around downtown for a few hours. A girl, who he guessed was a senior in college, started talking to him while they both waited for a crosswalk light. She knew things, he said, about not belonging and wanting to be more. She knew things about him, like his name and about his parents, and she gave him a card with a phone number. She said if he wanted to get out, this was a surefire way to do it. He took the card, went to dinner alone, and said afterwards knew he needed whatever was on the other side of the phone call.

“I’m sure if we explain to them what you can do--here, I’ll call them back. There’s no way they wouldn’t want you to be there, too.”

I pushed his phone down and withdrew my own card from my pocket. He glanced at it and shook his head.

“No, that’s the wrong number. See?”

He was right; his number didn’t match mine.

“Maybe it’s a singular thing, so they know who’s calling.”

“Try it.”

So I did. The line rang twice before a click indicated a recording that informed me the line was no longer in use. The recording was silent for a few seconds, and I started to tell Will to dial his number, but the recorded voice said if I needed to get ahold of someone who had once been at that number to press one.

The line began ringing again and a voice picked up the phone this time.

“Ladies in Waiting Finishing School, this is Margie, what can I do for you today?”

The voice sounded vaguely like Fran Drescher, and at least twice as bored as she ever was on *The Nanny*.

“I’m sorry, I think I have the wrong number.” Will, leaning close so he could hear the call, shook his head vehemently and smiled.

“No one who calls here ever has the wrong number,” she said. “Who gave you the number?”

“Someone called Emrys?”

Silence.

“I’m sorry, honey, could you repeat that?” The boredom was gone, replaced by urgency.

“He said his name was Emrys.”

“What’s your name and where are you?”

“Callie--Callie Montgomery. I’m a student at Aubrey Owens Prep.”

She mumbled my words back to me and I heard the faint sound of keyboard keys clicking.

“Are you with William Theodore Somerick?”

“Theodore?” His mouth crinkled at the mention of his middle name.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” More keyboard clicks followed. “I’m going to connect you to a new line, honey--hang on a sec.”

The clicking silence dragged on while Will looked at me, a hopeful question on his downturned lips.

“Hello, Callie?”

“Yes?”

“Hi, my name is Sarah. I need to know--did the man tell you his name was Emrys or did you see it, read it somewhere?”

“Of course he told me his name--where would I have read it?”

“Okay, Callie, I need you to make a decision pretty quickly. Your friend--Will--he’s agreed to travel here and work with the teachers we have. I need you to make that same decision, but of course I can’t force you.”

“I’m confused.” I sputtered. “Where would I be going?”

“That doesn’t matter.” I raised my eyebrows at her presumption. “What matters is that the man who approached you put you in a great deal of danger, and because of that you need to be removed from your school as soon as possible.”

“I don’t want to leave,” I said. Will’s face fell. “This is the only thing even close to home for me.”

“I’m sorry, but that isn’t an answer,” she said. “You either request to be removed from the grounds as soon as possible--which it seems that your friend has done--or you

clearly state that you want nothing to do with us. You have twenty-four hours before we can no longer intervene.”

“I don’t even know where I’d be going. Why would I go to a finishing school?”

“All you need to know is that you have the ability to do something that Emrys finds valuable enough to force me into action, and that I do not run a finishing school. Technically I don’t run a school at all. I run a training program, and if you understand the urgency of the situation you will agree to be trained.”

“You said I have twenty-four hours?”

The line went dead.

Will started listing the reasons I should leave, and I pulled myself up onto a smaller crate to sit.

“Literally there’s no reason not to go,” he said. “You don’t have to deal with the rest of the school year. You can’t start fresh and maybe make some friends. You won’t set random shit on fire anymore.”

“What about my mom?”

“Your mom is the biggest reason you should go, cause you never want to do that again.” He was so vehement, and so sure that this was what we both should do.

“Aubrey Owens is the only permanent place in my life,” I said. “I don’t know if I want to leave that.”

“You’re going to have to leave in a few months anyway,” he argued. “You can’t stay here forever.”

“Michael is,” I mumbled.

“Who’s Michael?”

“He’s a teacher’s aid with a research grant--it doesn’t matter! I don’t want to go.”

Will fell silent and sat next to me, his eyes closed and his hands palms up. Wind gently started to brush my hair back, and got steadily stronger. My fingers tingled as the unknown element in Will’s breeze made contact.

“That,” he said slowly, keeping his eyes closed, “is why I have to go. I can’t just make a breeze for the rest of my life.”

“I don’t--”

“You should want this.” He closed his fists and the wind stopped. He looked at me with more sincerity than I ever expected to see from him. “You should want this more than I do. You should *need* this. Why are you so scared?”

“I’m not scared.” My voice sounded thready, like it could break if Will started the breeze again.

“Then you’re comfortable, which is worse.” He stood and stretched. “You want this, and your shitty parents, and a pseudohome, instead of reality. I don’t, so I’m going to go pack. I’m leaving.”

He hopped down and walked to the window. I watched as he nimbly climbed up and over the sill, like he’d been doing it as long as I had. I missed the breeze on my face.

I redialed the number after he was gone. There was no in between this time, just Sarah’s voice.

“When would we leave?” I asked.

“The day after tomorrow.”

I skipped my classes and went to the hospital again the next day. Jeff was still there, but refused to acknowledge my existence. It was better than the alternative, I supposed, but it would have been nice to have someone to share the pain.

Donne found me just after I came back with a bag of hospital fries in hand.

“It’s time to go,” she said, sitting next to me.

“I’m not leaving yet,” I said, not meeting her eyes.

“You can’t skip class--your mother is doing fine for now.”

“I’m not coming back today.”

“Callie,” Jeff interrupted, acknowledging me for the first time. “You need to leave.”

“I’m not going anywhere for now.” I met his stare and refused to blink. He just shook his head and leaned back into his newspaper.

“You can’t stay here forever,” Donne said quietly.

“I won’t be, but I’m not coming back tonight.”

Donne sat back in her chair, not ready to give up.

“Callie.”

“Would you please just leave?” I said, mimicking her angry tone from the night before. “You’re making things more difficult than they really have to be. I’m not leaving and you can’t force me back to the school.”

Donne blinked, her expression somewhere between being slapped and general acceptance. She rose from her chair and started to walk out, but paused at the door.

“If you want me to come get you instead of taking the bus back, just call.”

And she was gone. I kicked the away bag sitting next to my chair, hidden under my coat. I wondered if she knew I wasn't planning on coming back at all.

Boot Camp

The camp sprawled before me. Emrys guided Will and me through a flat map of the area, but the hill we stood on gave me a three dimensional view of everything Emrys tried to point out. I had never been much for map reading, or staying focused on something that didn't ignite my interest in the slightest, but I could double study with Emrys's words and the view below me.

“...In the forest down here there's a garden where you can tend a garden and the garden will grow based on your emotions while you're tending it, so you'll need to be careful if you decide to work with that bit. In the arena you can challenge someone to a duel--non-lethal, of course. I and the other instructors will make sure you kee safe...”

He rambled on about the different aspects of what seemed to be a boot camp, including the fact that we would all sleep in tents. I spotted waving white fabric behind a cluster of trees and wondered if that was my new home. This didn't seem like a permanent spot; it seemed like someplace to run before you ran into your worst nightmare.

Emrys said something about a research facility just below us and I wandered to the edge of the hill. One of the only solid structures looked more like a hastily constructed cabin than a library, and a familiar silhouette stepped out of the building

though I couldn't quite say for sure who it was. In a moment he was out of my line of view and I glanced straight down to see a girl sitting about halfway down the hill, reading a book of what looked like sheet music. Occasionally she would wiggle her fingers like a dancer marking her routine, but otherwise she remained still.

"You'll start classes in the morning," Emrys said behind me.

"I just left school," Will joked. "I didn't want to walk into more studying."

"It's not quite what you're used to," Emrys replied as he rolled up the map. He walked down the hill with no indication of whether we should follow or not. Will took a few tentative steps down the decline, but I kept still. Emrys walked around the corner of what he had called the research center and disappeared, but moments later returned with the familiar-looking man. They started up the hill and I suddenly placed the dark hair and glasses.

"Michael!" I called. He looked up from his conversation with Emrys and waved for a moment before quickly dropping his eyes back to the older man. I was a little pissed at the sort-of dismissal. I had known Michael for years, passing him in hallways and sitting with him at meetings. I even ate with him every now and then. He had known about all of this. Maybe he suspected that the fire wasn't an accident? Maybe he was the one who told Emrys where to find me.

"Who's that?" Will asked. Emrys answered for me.

"This is our historian, Michael," he said.

"I know," I answered. Emrys wrinkled his eyebrows together.

"You know?"

“I mean, I know Michael,” I clarified. Emrys still shook his head.

“He will guide you for a bit--hopefully it won't take the rest of his day.” He gave a look that said we had better not take up all of Michael's time. I started to wonder if the kindness I had seen in the hospital had been genuine.

“We'll start in the library,” Michael said. Typical, I thought. Michael had always been a bookworm. I wondered what it was that made Michael special enough to get him here, but his sterile here's-what-you-need-to-know voice cut off any pointed comments or questions.

“You'll have to learn a notation system,” he began, swiftly moving down the hall. “We have spells for just about everything, but to practice them you have to be able to read them. I imagine that's where you'll start tomorrow.”

“Spells?” Will interjected.

“Did you think you'd flick your fingers and magic would just happen?” Michael smiled good-naturedly, but Will looked a little like he was sulking.

“I mean, we're doing magic?” Will pushed.

“What else would you call it?” Michael replied. Will had no response.

“What do you research?” I asked.

“Spells, mostly, but sometimes the history of the magic they do here.” He pulled out a ring of keys as we reached the small building and unlocked the side door. He swung it open and stepped aside for us to enter.

The room was floor to ceiling books. Old, new, some hardbound and some paperback--the shelves covered nearly every surface. A table in the middle held a dozen

or so books and a couple of leatherbound journals, as well as a Macbook. It was a researcher's paradise.

"This is just the research room," Michael said giddily. "Through that way there's another four rooms, and then there's a basement as big as this floor. It's amazing."

"Are these all spells?" Will asked.

"No--a lot of it is personal history of certain witches," Michael answered. "The more important ones anyway."

"So you just...read all day," I concluded, running my hand along a bookshelf.

"I'm compiling a history," he said. The glee returned to his voice.

"A history of what?"

"Magic," he answered. "It's tough, but Emrys has been helping me find the right source material and work with the right witches. We've held a couple of seances but the dead will say almost anything if it means they can stay here for a while longer, so those aren't exactly reliable."

"What do you know so far?"

Michael launched into a detailed description of the different kinds of magic he had researched and connected. Something about Druids and Celts and very, very old Welsh--I pulled a book off the shelf and started flipping through aimlessly until I heard a familiar name.

"What about Nimue?" I asked, slapping the book shut.

"She's a witch; or, rather, she's a Lady with a huge amount of power. One of her parents was probably Fey in hiding, and the records say she was born to two humans but

I don't think that much power could occur in a watered-down lineage. It's a problem I've been running into recently, how much magic can be passed from parent to child--"

"Michael," I interrupted. Will leaned against the table, confused. "Nimue. What is a Lady?"

"The Order of the Lady, more commonly known as the Ladies of the Lake, were a group of outrageously powerful witches who caused a lot of trouble between the late fifth century and the early seventh century. They kind of tried to take a lot over all at once, and it didn't work so well."

"What did they try to take over?"

"The British Isles," Michael answered matter-of-factly.

He told Will and me about the Fey, powerful nature magic embodied in a human-like creature. When they crossed with humans, they often created magical offspring. The strange thing was that most of the magic only flowed into their daughters. These daughters married other fully-human men and their daughters possessed magic, although not as strong as their mothers, and so on.

"But what about the Ladies?" I pressed.

"Well, the Ladies were this coven, for lack of a better word, where these daughters could come together and work on their skills. There was a high priestess known as the Lady of the Lake."

"Like in King Arthur," Will said. Michael nodded his approval, giving Will cause to look overly self-satisfied.

"Nimue was one of the Ladies of the Lake during the reign of King Arthur, yes."

"King Arthur isn't real," I argued.

"Yeah, he is," Michael said, pulling a book from a shed behind him. He flipped to the appropriate page and handed me the book. Spider web-thin lines connected script that seemed to be names. I made out only two at the bottom of the page: Arthur, connected by a small squiggle to what looked like Guinevere.

"These aren't kings in the normal sense," Michael said. "Kind of like over kings. Like, if the kings had a king."

"Why would the kings have a king?" Will asked.

"To keep the peace," I mumbled, tracing the lines in the book up to the top of the page. Michael nodded his agreement.

"England wasn't always England--it was tribes of people who never wanted to band together and, really, only wanted to fight each other. Arthur is more like a king of the kings."

What gives him the right to do it?" Will asked. "Why couldn't some other king just fight him and become the highest king?"

"Because Arthur is part Fey, part warrior, and very much immortal."

I glanced up, raising an eyebrow.

"Do you believe Arthur is still alive?" I asked, drawing out my words.

"I do."

"You have any proof?" Will asked.

"Not yet," Michael admitted. "It's not really the primary interest for people like Emrys."

“He wants more research on practice than on history,” I guessed. Michael nodded. He turned to pull down a large tome, bound tightly in red fabric that looked like it had been repaired on the spine several times, and needed it again. He flipped to an early chapter and dropped it on the table between me and Will. The pages were covered in the same sheet music-like squiggles I had noticed on the hill.

“This is how spells are annotated,” he said, running a finger along one of the bars. “The top records your left hand and the bottom records your right. Watch.”

He pulled his hands together until they were not quite touching, one on top of another like he was holding a clarinet. The difference between Michael’s hands and that of a clarinet player was almost the difference between the clarinet player and a dancer: his thumbs tucked and his eight fingers fanned. He proceeded to play his imaginary instrument and sing along to what were presumably the corresponding lyrics on the page.

Will obviously tried to read along and watch simultaneously, but I couldn’t stop watching Michael’s fingers. No matter what his other fingers did, his pinkies kept time: one-two, one, one-two, one, a beat in between each quiver.

The words he sang were completely foreign, and I hardly registered them until he finished the spell and I realized I missed the strange tone. I didn’t have long to care about the missing music, however, because the glass lamp above my head shattered.

I fell to the floor and instinctively put up my arms, anticipating cuts and a shower of broken glass, but nothing touched me. I looked up and saw the explosion contained,

frozen, within a single sphere just a few feet wider than the original fixture. I looked at Michael, who winked at me before he began whistling.

The tune could have been the exact opposite of its counterpart. Where the first had been a Mass-like hymn, this one could have been a ragtime beat. Immediately the glass danced back into place. It was like nothing I'd ever seen, unless Disney cartoons counted. Shards pirouetted until they found their pas de deux partner, shavings connected like a corps of snowflakes and danced in perfect time until they joined a larger piece, until once again it was just over and the glass was intact again.

“Mother of McGovern,” Will breathed.

“That’s what we do here,” Michael said with a canary-eating grin. “That’s what you’ll learn to do.”

“We have to sight read like that?” Will said.

“You’ll practice,” Michael said. “You’ll practice a lot, actually. Please understand that today is your last day of leisure, so enjoy it.”

“On a scale of one to the Insanity Workout, how intense?”

“You’ll probably feel like you went through the workout three or four times a day for about six weeks.”

“Mother of McGovern,” Will repeated, a refrain I was going to become very familiar with.

Michael explained a few of the broader purposes of the camp: to get us to control what we already had, and to train anyone who wanted to develop something that didn’t necessarily come naturally.

“I fall in the second category,” he confided. “My mom was a witch--earth element, with a propensity for growing vegetables. She was terrible with herbs though. Anyway, she didn’t pass anything natural on to me, but I spent a fair amount of time here when she was an instructor.”

“How’d you end up at the school?” I asked, and immediately regretted it.

“She died when I was about fourteen,” he said flatly. “Emrys sent me to school as close as he could. It didn’t hurt that a couple of our summer instructors teach full-time at Aubrey Owen.”

“Who?” I asked, surprised.

“Walker, for one,” he said. Suddenly I was less surprised.

“Why didn’t you just move here when you graduated?” Will asked as Michael led us out of the research building.

“I want more than this,” he said. “I’ve had both worlds my entire life. I was in public school before my mom died, even when we spent loads of time here. Aubrey Owen is insulated but at least it’s got proximity to reality. This is cut off from everything, and I don’t want to be cut off.”

Michael fell into a silence that didn’t want to be broken, so Will and I concerned ourselves with looking around at the camp. Michael led us further down the hill until we stopped at a corral.

“Horses,” he said stupidly with a wave. I might have retorted snarkily, because Will and I could clearly see the horses too, but he didn’t quite look out of his reverie. We walked around the corral and into the tent attached to the wooden fence. A burly man in

jeans brushed a horse in the corner, but when he spotted Michael he walked to the entrance of the tent, almost as if to stop us from going any further.

“Can I help you?” he asked in an accent I couldn’t quite place.

“New kids,” Michael said. He introduced the horse man as Nikolaus, who nodded in our general direction and asked if either of us had experience with horses.

“Not really,” I shrugged. Will shook his head.

“You know your elements?” he asked.

“Fire,” I said, at the same time Will said, “Wind.”

“Lovely,” he said, though his tone hadn’t changed and I couldn’t tell if he meant it or not. “You both will take lessons with Mara--starting tomorrow, I assume?”

Michael shrugged in response.

“Fine,” Nikolaus said. “I’ll see you both soon.”

He punctuated his dismissal with a return to his horse, and Michael tilted his head to direct us out of the tent.

“He doesn’t like you,” Will noted as we left the tent.

“No he doesn’t,” Michael agreed. “If you go all the way down on your left you’ll run right into the kitchen. You might spend some time there,” he directed at me. “Most likely, though, you’ll be in battle rings.”

“What the hell are battle rings?” Will asked.

“What the hell is a McGovern?” Michael countered before pulling back a tent flap to indicate we should go inside.

The tent must have been insulated--no light came through the fabric. The only illumination came from the hundreds of candles all going at once. The fragrance of the space was so strong I wondered how I had missed it from outside, and I wondered how I had ever lived without the pungent scent. I suddenly felt like my mother was not in a burn ward, my home was not behind me, I had no anxiety and no fear. I was safe, and complete, and whole.

“The meditation tent,” Michael whispered. “You come here to recuperate. You may need this after your first few days, but wait until you’ve been taught how to properly meditate or you may never be able to leave on your own.”

He stepped back and pulled the tent flap again. Will and I moved slowly, reluctantly leaving the sanctuary and all it promised us.

“A couple of rules,” Michael said once we were outside the tent. “Don’t go into that tent alone. Number two, don’t go around the enclosure alone until you’ve been here a while; you will get lost.”

“The enclosure?” I interrupted.

“It’s what we’re in now,” Michael explained. “The camp is made up of a few different parts: the enclosure, where all the stations and training areas and the mess hall are; the beds, which are just more tents but they’re built a little more like buildings and they hold, well, beds; and the hill.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate the rise from which we had come.

“That includes the wall at the top all the way down to the research cabin.”

“Where to next, tour guide?” Will said as Michael began leading us away from the hill.

“Your beds,” he said. “You’ll unpack and get ready for lunch, and then we’ll get you into what you might call an orientation.”

Will tried for the rest of the walk to the beds, which was farther than it originally looked, to get Michael to explain what the orientation was but Michael held firm.

“You’ll find out.”

And that was his final word. He silently sent us into our respective beds that were shared with five other people each. I immediately spotted my things shoved against the end of a dresser and tried to climb into what seemed to be my bed my bed when a hand reached out to grab my ankle.

I did the logical thing: I screamed.

“Keep it down,” someone hissed. I supposed it came from the general direction of the ghost hand but I was too terrified to figure it out. I started shaking my foot until I made contact with something softly solid, which I assumed was a face.

The string of profanities supported my assumption.

“What the hell, man?” someone said behind me. I turned to see a figure, outlined in my fear and the darkness of the tent, crawl out from under a cot near the tent flap. I stepped towards their hiding spot and heard rustling as I moved. A glance revealed my attacker to me: a girl about my age, her black hair twists, braided with red streaks, covered in gray dust. She brushed her jeans and clapped her hands together to get rid of the majority of the dirt.

I felt the person behind me move closer, and I turned to see another girl of my own age, but the physical opposite of her companion. The little light coming through the tent almost reflected off her ridiculously pale, almost translucent skin. She raised an overdrawn eyebrow and batted too-long lashes at me in annoyance.

“You screwed it up,” she said.

“What?”

“We were trying to trap the light.” The black girl spoke now, less accusing than the blonde.

“Until you let it out,” the first girl muttered.

“She didn’t know.”

“Whatever,” the blonde responded, frustrated.

“I’m really sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine, Kennedy and I will try again later.” My attacker held out her hand. “I’m Gemma.”

“Callie,” I said, taking her hand. She helped me haul two of my bags onto the bed that would be mine. The sheets whistled softly as they released trapped air, like pent-up anxiety at being left without an occupant.

“What’s your element?” Gemma asked immediately, hopping up next to the bags and folding her legs underneath her.

“Fire,” I said, pulling clothes and books from the first bag. Gemma pointed out which dresser would be mine and told me to look under the bed, where I found two rolling plastic crates for overflow storage.

“What’s your element?” I echoed as I pulled open drawers.

“Don’t really know,” she shrugged. “I’m not bad with anything, but I don’t have a particular propensity for any one element.”

“Must be nice,” I muttered as I packed away a shirt that still smelled like smoke.

“I don’t know, I guess. Couple of the instructors told me that once I’m here for a while they’ll figure it out.”

“How long have you been here?”

“Two weeks,” she grinned.

“And your friend?”

“Kennedy? Oh, she’s been here a while. Like, *years*. I don’t know exactly how long.”

“I can’t imagine being here for more than a couple of months,” I said.

“You know what you’re gonna do when you leave?”

“Technically I graduated high school last semester,” I said. I hadn’t told anyone that yet, not even my mother. Donne had given me the option to graduate early, but I had declined. I had wanted to stay at home a little while longer. I blinked away tears as I thought about the school and struggled to finish the answer to Gemma’s question.

“So I’ve got options,” I started, working into a ramble. “I could go to college, but I don’t have a clue what I would study. I like history but that isn’t gonna get me a job, so maybe I’ll travel for a while. My mom wants me to travel...”

I kept going until I noticed Kennedy paying attention.

“What?”

“There’s nothing wrong with a history major,” she said simply, without snide.

“Okay.”

Later on, after dinner, Gemma told me Kennedy was an early sophomore at one of the local colleges studying American History. She had wanted to be a teacher but she couldn’t make certain plants stop growing every time she left the camp, especially ivy. One day a professor stopped her outside and no matter how much she tried to coax him through the door, he wouldn’t go. The ivy, spurred on by Kennedy’s panic, grew into a tangled mess that tripped the professor on concrete, resulting in a concussion. The school board decided they needed to close the building for renovations because the ivy was becoming too destructive. Kennedy withdrew at the end of that week.

But at that moment I just didn’t like her. She interrupted conversations she wasn’t a part of and interjected unwanted thoughts, and she was rude. I didn’t consider that I had intruded on her space, or think about what I’d temporarily interrupted for her, or that she most likely felt the same way about me that I had felt about Will only a few weeks before. Even after I learned more about her I couldn’t rinse out the bitter taste of her first impression.

Gemma and I made small talk until dinner, when the three of us walked to another tent they called the mess hall. It was three or four times the size of any of the other temporary structures I had been in, but it slammed me with a memory so hard it stung.

When I was little my dad had loved the old tv show *M*A*S*H*. He used to trade half hours with me--one for his show, one for my cartoons. The mess hall could have

been an exact replica of the show set; I wouldn't have been surprised to see an impossibly young Alan Alda somewhere in the room.

Gemma kept babbling about something that had happened before I arrived, grabbing a tray and walking through the line. Kennedy stood behind her and saw my sudden tears. She raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything as I wiped my eyes quickly and snagged a tray of my own.

"What is this?" I asked as I was handed a plate. The only familiar food was a pile of spinach, sans dressing.

"Looks like shepherd's pie and applesauce and salad," Gemma said, stabbing at the yellow mush with her fork.

"Is there a problem?" Kennedy asked, looking somewhat amused.

"It's...I...it just doesn't look entirely familiar."

"It's okay," Gemma cut in. "It doesn't look appetizing to anyone. We're just used to it. If you want non-questionable dishes tell somebody you're a vegetarian. The Earthlings aren't very good cooks but we've got some of the best produce in the state."

Kennedy cleared her throat.

"Well, okay, so you can't tell them you're a vegetarian," Gemma corrected. "But if the food looks especially suspicious you can ask for a vegetarian plate."

"Earthlings?" I asked.

"Earth elementals," Kennedy said. "Long before I got here somebody thought the nickname was cute and it stuck."

"Are there nicknames for everybody else?"

“They’re not...all kind.”

“I’m not a wilting daisy,” I pressed. “What are you gonna do, call me a Charizard?”

Gemma giggled.

“You’re kidding me.”

“Not at all,” Kennedy said.

“What about wind elementals?”

“Usually blowholes,” Kennedy muttered. Gemma elbowed her.

“Air elementals aren’t usually known as the nicest people,” Gemma said.

“Officially they’re supposed to be Avatars. Unofficially they get called a lot of other things.”

“Oh,” I said simply.

“Water elementals are generally the most boring people on the planet,” Gemma continued, undeterred. “There are a *lot* of them, though.”

Kennedy cut in with a joke I didn’t understand and Gemma took off on something that happened earlier in the day. I fell silent, wondering if Will felt as pigeonholed.

After Kennedy and Gemma finished their food--and I moved mine around enough that it looked like I had eaten at least half--I followed them to the dish dump where three students with an abundance of tattoos took our trays.

“Water elementals,” Gemma said. “The ink is color charmed H₂O.”

“How does it stay? I mean, water evaporates--if it’s just water then why doesn’t it disappear?”

“Beats me,” Gemma replied. “I told you, water elementals are weird.”

We made our way out of the tent and into the bright, now-setting sunlight. Neither Gemma nor Kennedy seemed interested in playing tour guide so I told them I’d wander for a bit. They let me know I needed to be back in our tent by sunset; something about a mandatory late-night ceremony. It was all I could do not to run when they were out of sight.

I found myself wandering back to the center of the camp. Sunlight reflected off the cream-colored tents, brightening my surroundings but not my mood.

Before long I heard horses’ hooves. I saw the corral in between rows and ducked quickly into the connecting tent. Nikolaus was now out of sight, but the other side of the tent opened directly onto the fence of the corral.

The only experience I’d had with horses was early in my mom’s relationship with Jeff. He still thought my impression of him mattered to my mom, and in his ignorance didn’t realize that at almost twelve years old I was a little past my pony phase. He had half a dozen horses brought to his house for a party that most of my class had been invited to, without my knowledge. In the year after my dad died my classmates were not entirely interested in getting to know me, which made for an awkward gathering. Near the end of the day I picked a horse, a mottled blue gray mare that the trainer told me was an Andalusian. I climbed into the saddle and didn’t get off until everyone had left, despite my mother’s anxious attempts to bring me back down to the ground. I wouldn’t

get off until she and Jeff had both gone inside for a drink and the trainer came over to pull me down.

He told me then that if I loved the horse so much, I could come take riding lessons from him and he'd even let me learn on the Andalusian mare. I jumped down from the horse, petted her mane, and told him horses were smelly creatures.

“You get used to the smell,” he said with a smile.

“I just spent two hours with my head buried in her hair,” I said disdainfully. “I won't get used to that.”

I walked away as he loaded the horses into their trailers, my mother peeking out from the kitchen window.

In the years since that party I had never gotten used to the smell of horses, but I didn't realize how much I associated that smell with safety and rebellion. So long as I was atop the mare I didn't have to care about the people who didn't care about me.

I leaned against the corral railing, watching the horses mull around, and breathed deeply. This was rebellion. This was safety.