

Follow the girl with the pink balloon . . .



# THE BALLOON MAN

by Carla Trueheart

\*COPYRIGHT 2019\*

All Rights Reserved

Cammie's Journal 27 March          

*It's five o'clock and I've missed him; I can tell by the silence that has fallen over Well's Park. When The Balloon Man is here, pushing his white cart amid trickles of spring thaw or drips of summer sunlight, the park always pumps with excitement. It's like something out of a TV commercial or a movie, as though the park is set up and staged this way, his magical, colorful presence and the green grass and the gold-emerald trees. People expect him to delight, but around me today, the park is just a normal park in March: debris blanketing the ground, crushed bags of potato chips and smashed cigarette butts, litter deeply embedded in the slush of the past winter.*

*Free Balloons! Free Balloons! Free Balloons! Like a carnival barker but silent. That's the draw for most people—free balloons for anyone of any age who would want one—even though some parents questioned his motives early on when he handed balloons to the kids. He just gives anyone who asks a balloon, and they walk away, small hands or big hands clutching a white ribbon, their expressions somehow changed. Mostly it's sad to happy, but occasionally it goes the other way.*

*The Balloon Man is amused by the colors, only the specific colors, of the balloons people ask for from the white cart. He imparts some little bit of advice or worldly knowledge, tucks a balloon string into a waiting hand, and watches his customer walk away. He waves off any mention of money. I always wonder what he would say to me if I ordered a balloon, what color I would*

*choose, and how I would feel when the white ribbon vibrated in my palm. The balloon of some color would bob in the wind and catch a swirl of breeze, threatening to lift me up and take me away. Maybe that's what I really want, to drift away.*

*Maybe that's the only reason anyone wants a balloon.*



## Chapter One

There isn't too much I can do about it—at this moment, my journal is officially lost.

The backroom at Tie-Dye Me is a mess right now—it's *always* an unorganized mess in the back of the store—but despite that, for the past hour I've sifted through cardboard boxes of tie-dyed shirts, tossed aside little packets of incense, and upended cartons of light-up toys. All of this in search of a little green book that seems to have fallen off the earth via some bizarre portal surrounding Tie-Dye Me. In the ten years I've kept a journal, I never once lost it, left it somewhere, misplaced it . . . even *dropped* it. Now I have to face the fact that this current journal is swimming in some other galaxy, wrapped in space matter, spinning its way through a black hole. Sucked and gone.

When I head back to the register, still envisioning this massive black hole and actually hopeful for that scenario, my father looks a little relieved that he's finally getting a break. It's not like we're busy at the store right now, he's just not fond of running the register. He prefers to be in the backroom messing around with our inventory, talking to vendors about new possible items to sell, stocking the shelves around the perimeter of the store, or outside of Tie-Dye Me running errands. We're set in a massive tourist area surrounded by lots of other little stores in a quaint shopping area called Redfield Village. There's so much to do and see outside the glass door of Tie-Dye Me. Our street is like its own little world.

"I'm going to unload the box of carnival candles," my father says, and brushes back a frizz of long, thinning hair. "I think we'll put them right by the entrance."

He's in his late forties now, and he's starting to look it. His hair is ratty and reaches his shoulders like a 70's rockstar. It used to be a sandy brown, pleasant and youthful, with life and bounce. Now, it's streaked with gray and recedes from his scalp in more than one place. It's not that noticeable because I see him every day, but when I look at old pictures on my phone, the transition becomes so real it's kind of terrifying. He's still a good-looking guy, but age is definitely not playing nice with him.

"I pushed the new candles toward the corner," I reply. "It's a little bit of a mess back there right now."

"More of a mess than usual?"

"I lost my journal," I admit.

He reaches behind him, to the back counter, and extends a green book with a huge yellow peace sign on the cover. "You mean this one?"

"Oh my God."

He lets out a raspy laugh, pressing a palm to his beer belly, as I grab the journal and hold it to my chest.

"It was right here on the counter."

"Thank you, Dad." I don't need to ask him if he read it—I know he didn't. "I was a little worried."

"Good thing it ended up in the last place you were," he replies, still laughing at my expense. "It could have been anywhere in the world, Gypsy Girl."

With that he winks and leaves for the backroom.

There are a few unique things about my father. One is that he has universe-sized dreams that he sees to fruition. He never wanted to be an employee, but the employer, so he decided early on that he was going to open his own store in New England. Tie-Dye Me is best known for—surprise!—a line of tie-dyed clothing, but more than that, we stock incense and candles, novelty items, light-up stuff for hippies, used CDs and records, sixties paraphernalia, and baked goods. The baked goods come courtesy of my best friend Lizzie Fry’s mom, who has nothing to do with herself since Lizzie Fry left for university two years ago. Surfing along the unicorn food trend of colorful concoctions, and adhering to our tie-dye theme, the baked goods are all purples and pinks and swirled with edible silver glitter.

There are no customers in the store right now, so I open my journal to where I left off. I inhale the thick scent of incense that is always dominant in the store and envision the words in my journal as they would have looked in space when they’d been presumably sucked through a spinning black hole. Honestly, if the journal hadn’t been lost in space but jacked by some weird nosy journal thief, I wouldn’t be so upset if they read my secrets or the musings of my everyday life in the journal. At least not as upset as most people. Girls write things, and people forget the embarrassing passages after a while. It’s not that at all. It would just truly rattle me if someone read all the little scribbles about The Balloon Man.

It’s borderline creepy stalker, even if I’m in denial about the whole thing. I’ve followed the guy around Massachusetts parks for two springs and summers now, so the journal is literally littered with facts about him: his hair is blond and wavy, his skin is fair, he’s around my age, his eyes are light and possibly blue, his hair sweeps over those possibly blue eyes when the breeze kicks in, and he gives out free balloons in the park. I’m not sure why he gives out the free

balloons, but I do know that I'm intrigued by the whole persona. Intrigued enough to follow him around and write about him in my journal, incessant, like he's the only interesting thing in my entire life. God, he probably is. Looking at it that way, it might have been best if my journal *had* ended up in the spinning black hole. That way, I might forget all about The Balloon Man and my secret excursions through the sunlit parks of upper Massachusetts.

It's Wednesday afternoon and Tie-Dye Me is a dead zone. It's the normal midweek slump, so I plop down on a swirl-colored stool behind the counter and doodle balloon shapes in my journal. Lizzie Fry's mother waves at me from way across the store, weird and frantic, like she hasn't seen me in years. She's set up in her corner, a glass case in front of her packed to the brim with sugary, glittering treats that I really want to stuff in my mouth right now. Between us are aisles of tie-dyed shirts set on hangers and bins of CDs and records. A loud colorful world, yet the same every day.

Lizzie Fry's mother doesn't bother too much with our hippie and hipster merchandise; she's just here to sell her baked goods. She's an older divorced lady, warm and soft-featured with a collection of sparkly earrings that do not match her personality but fit well with the themes of Tie-Dye Me and her UnicornTreat designs. I've often fantasized that her and my dad would hook up in some way, but Lizzie Fry's mom is earth and my father is fire. The two would never ignite.

My father returns from the backroom, arms laden with cardboard boxes, and sets them down by the glass front door. As weak March sunlight filters through the store, he starts to unload the candles, an awesome line of carnival scents: candy apple, caramel corn, root beer float, cotton candy, and salt-water taffy. Each candle comes in a highly decorated glass jar, and we're going to sell them for twenty bucks a pop.

“Banana Split!” he calls and lifts a glass jar for my inspection.

“Great!” I call back and doodle in my journal again. The balloon shapes have morphed to floating park benches and faceless suns.

I watch my father unpack and load up shelves for a while, little beads of sweat forming around his hairline, as the clock spins its way toward four o’clock. Lizzie Fry’s mom watches too, but then gets bored and heads out for the day soon after, waving behind her as she passes through the door. Just after four, my father is finished setting up the candles and moving them around so they’re esthetically pleasing to the customers. This is an art form, one that my father has mastered, colors and themes in specific patterns, though I couldn’t tell you how it all works. It just does.

“All unpacked,” he says as I stash my journal onto the counter behind me. “Tomorrow we can price, unless you wanted to do it tonight while I run the register.”

It’s actually a nice day again outside, and I was hoping, as I did yesterday and all the new spring days before, to see what The Balloon Man is up to in his ventures around the parks.

“I can price them,” I say. “But before that I should get some dinner for you, or at least make some plans.”

“If you could run down and get us some burgers, that would be great,” my father says.

“And if I make a few stops for fresh air along the way?”

“Not a problem, Cammie.” He reaches over to the counter and picks up my journal.

“Take this with you,” he says. “Leaving it around the store never seems to end well.”

“No it does not,” I say and smile.

With that, I grab my pocketbook, fish out my keys, and am out the door into the late March sunshine.

\*\*\*

Well's Park is not only the best place to watch The Balloon Man, it's also a haven to rejuvenate and be one with nature. On the south side of the park there's a small lake with a gray pier for boat launches, and around that pier are lake weeds that shoot up from the water and connect with the shore. In my early days of watching The Balloon Man, when he'd left the park for the day and I grew bored, I would envision planting my feet between those weeds. One day I did it. Since that day, I have been hooked on the feeling of cool water swirling around my bare ankles and rising up my calves. That's why I come to Well's Park in flip-flops, even though it's only the end of March and still tingling cold.

Today I'm early for The Balloon Man, or so it seems because he hasn't been spotted pushing his white cart through the slush of the park, so I've made my way over to the water. Beside the weeds, I slip off my flip-flops and sink my feet between the weeds and water. Through the late-day sunlight I lift my arms to the sky and close my eyes, letting the orange of day seep through my eyelids. If I concentrate I can feel the heaviness of air in my arms, like I'm holding up a ginormous balloon. I breathe out and let it go.

At some point during my moment of solitude, I hear the familiar squeaks of his cart and the excited giggles of children who follow him like he's the ice cream man. Quickly, I pull out from the water, shake my feet dry, and slip on my flip-flops. From a distance, as I inhale the sweetness of weeds in water, I watch him, rubbing a hand over my arm to combat the rising chill. The Balloon Man reaches down into his cart to extract a balloon, and because he's so far away, it

is not until he inflates it that I see the color, a cheery yellow. He hands it to a girl with a high blond ponytail, then dives back to the cart for another balloon, red, which he extends to the girl's mother. She smiles in delight, bops the balloon against her daughter's, and they laugh and then depart.

There is a bit of sneaking and creeping after that, following The Balloon Man down pathways as he makes the rounds, dodging his eyes as he hands out balloon after balloon. Finally, I head back to my car, extract my journal, and then situate myself inside the empty park gazebo. I write. Hair spilling over my eyes, pen in frantic scribbles. Rushed over with March breeze, inhaling fresh air, dredging up the flashbacks to all those times of watching, waiting, asking and thinking. When I look up from my journal, The Balloon Man is gone.

Cammié's Journal 30 March

*The Balloon Man is so mysterious, so all-knowing, that I conceive and believe he knows how much I think about him and the balloons and the white cart. I imagine my thoughts as wisps of paper in the park that fly from my mind as though they had wings and The Balloon Man scooping up those papers, swiping them right out of the air like silver flying things, and knowing me deep down. My thoughts are gypsies, and I wonder if he is the same type of gypsy—a person with magic on the mind who drifts in both thoughts and existence. We're the same, and that's why I think about him so.*

*The first time I saw him, I thought he was hired by the park people. Park goers offer The Balloon Man money or ask how much it costs for a balloon, and I suppose that's how they first think of him too. But then a little boy, skin a deep chocolate, hopped up to his white cart, extended a few bucks, and asked for a red balloon. The Balloon Man told him he would not take his money, and tucked the white balloon string into the little boy's hand. The Balloon Man told the little boy that someday he'll do a nice thing for someone.*

*That was the first spring. I followed him that summer, writing down what I saw of him: blue balloons, yellow balloons, purple balloons, white balloons. It was hard at first to find the starry details of his face because there was always a balloon there, or his head was always down filling a balloon with helium, or he was tying a string for a customer. Next spring, I worried that he was not doing this anymore, that he went to college or went into the service or got married to some petite little thing with glossy cheeks, red and round. But he came back and back and back.*

*He is always clothed in a uniform of sorts—the same outfit every time he is on the job—jeans, loose fitting but not sagging, and a white collared shirt. The buttons are an ordinary white and the shirt hangs loose around his waist. He is a medium-build masterpiece, not too thin, not overweight. He wears sneakers, probably for comfort around the park. His features are not sharp but boy next door. You grew up with him. You can trust him.*

*The balloons are magic. I know this much. I have seen this much. People change when they receive their balloon and their little piece of Balloon Man advice. There is something there, more than humanly possible, something that goes way beyond what should be believed. Magic caught up in the inflating air, answers to questions deep within the plastic boundaries, yours for the taking. Mine for the taking. What color do I ask for? What do I want the balloon to tell me? How will my face contort—smile, frown, other—and how will I drift away in the end?*



## CHAPTER TWO

When in Rome, do as the Romans do, and when in Tie-Dye Me, do as the customers do. Our regular clientele suffers from overuse of marijuana, obsession with strobe lights and lava lamps, hygiene that isn't quite what society would deem acceptable, and bodies soaked in patchouli oil. I'm used to all of this. I am one with the culture. Over the years I've developed my own signature dance within their little cult, a gypsy girl they can identify with, the girl behind the counter with the bundles of clothes and the rhapsody hair. If anyone thought of what it would be like to hold me, I imagine they'd think of a great many rags.

My father emerges from the backroom of Tie-Dye Me amid a puff of marijuana smoke. Lizzie Fry's mother has gone out to retrieve lunch, and since she probably would disapprove of my father's marijuana consumption (although how could she not know this?) my father wasted no time digging into the stash in the back when she left. He smiles at me, tilts his head like he does when he gets high, and plops himself down on the swirl-colored stool.

"Smells like cinnamon in here today," he says. "You smell cinnamon, Gypsy Girl?"

"No, Dad," I say and laugh. "It smells the same way it always smells in here."

"Incense and Peppermints," he says, holding his stomach all jolly. "My dream come true."

The store is his baby. *I'm* his baby. At one point, I believe my mother might have been his baby too, but she's gone now. Not dead, but dead to me. When I was thirteen, my mother came home early from her job as real estate agent and announced that she'd been fired. I was sitting in my room that day, scribbling on a homework worksheet, and knew something was terribly wrong

in the house when I heard the murmurs out in the kitchen. When my father started hollering at her—which he never did—I lifted my butt to go figure out why. It wasn't her fault that she was fired, or so I thought. The truth was that she had been caught sleeping with a client in a vacant house, which did not surprise me then and does not surprise me now. My father and mother never married; she was a free spirit, and he never could keep her contained. They met at a concert and my dad fell in love with the force of cement balls zooming through castle walls. My mother loved him back, but never in the monogamous way. Not one man for life. That wasn't her style.

So I learned to hate her, fold her up and tuck her away. I put up the necessary walls to keep her out and constructed barricades so that she could never, ever enter again. This I know about myself. I am her child, I am my father's daughter, I am a gypsy. And I am the kind of girl who does not forgive and forget when a family member destroys an existing structure. If she wanted to kick down those family walls, the ones filled with cut-out flowers and yellow curly moons and years of Mother's Day cards and glittering ornaments and homemade love, then I will build stronger walls and fill them with my dad and only my dad. Hate in my heart is not something I like to live with, but since she did what she did, my loving gypsy heart has learned to live and beat with a ginormous portion of mom hate.

"Off to the races tonight?" my father says, leaning back on the stool and examining the overhead lights. "What are you betting on horses at night? Coming back smelling like fresh air?"

"Yeah, I'm betting on horses." I push on his back so he doesn't fall backward right off the stool and onto the floor in a heap of stoned middle-aged man. "I'm just driving around at night, looking at the world."

“Has the world looked back?”

“Not yet,” I say. “But I’m out there waiting.”

He lets out a raspy laugh, then picks up a red crystal ball and peers through it like it’s a magnifying glass. I take it from his grasp and set it back down in the display. For a man who loves his store so much, he does not treat the merchandise so well when he’s soaring the blue skies.

When Lizzie Fry’s mom returns with lunch—Cobb salad for me and some fancy ziti from the pasta place for my dad—I pick over the contents of the plastic salad container while listening to my father sing Jim Morrison songs like a drunken sailor. A few regular customers stream in, and I tap my fingers against the counter waiting to ring them up. My father finally disappears to the back again to make some phone calls. I sigh and watch Lizzie’s mom across the store. Then I tell her to watch the counter while I run out to my car and grab my journal.

My current life is a calm unchanging sea, so at the moment, I have nothing new to write. In desperation, I flip back a few pages to where I first wrote about The Balloon Man’s return to the park this month. Around the spring equinox, when I first went to the park to see if The Balloon Man had returned, I spoke with a woman who frequents the park with her Golden Retriever. More like I *interviewed* her. She’s a sporty girl, there at Well’s Park for exercise, dark hair twisted up in a tight ponytail, skin always tanned. Not the type of girl to believe in the magic of a Balloon Man. So, the perfect candidate.

I’d witnessed her once at The Balloon Man’s cart and was intrigued by the interaction. She did not ask for a specific color, but The Balloon Man handed her an orange balloon, and she grasped the string tightly while gritting her teeth. He whispered something up close to her, and

her face muscles rested as she nodded back. When I interviewed her and asked her what happened, she told me, with hesitation, that she *always* felt determined, that the stress of constant high productivity left her in a perpetual feverish, sweaty state. But the orange balloon felt like, and I quote, “the release of a thousand hot suns.” That has to be magic.

Lunch turns to dinnertime as I continue to do what I always do: journal and ring up customers. Watch Lizzie’s mom and remember how she used to be my best friend’s mom, not the lady across the store who is as bored as I am. Pay attention to my father so he doesn’t burn down the store or fall on his head. Drum my fingers and crave something outside the glass door of Tie-Dye Me that I have not yet been brave enough to hunt down. Identify it. Ask for it. Seek it.

“Dad!” I call and head for the backroom. He’s not on the phone but sitting at his old beat-up desk, gazing at the ceiling as though there’s an interesting bug up there. “I’m going to pick up some dinner. Mrs. Fry is leaving soon, so it’s just the two of us.”

“Hate the register,” he says.

“I won’t be long.”

“You’ll be long,” he says, but smiles. “Off to the races.”

“Off to the races,” I return. “But at some point I’ll be back with dinner for you.”

With that, I’m off to Well’s Park. I don’t know if I’ll dip my feet in the water this time, but I do know that I’m on a mission for more journal material, or, if bravery should pounce onto my shoulders and lift me, I might actually ask for a balloon.

\*\*\*

At Well's Park, the sporty ponytailed girl speed-walks by me, tugged onward by her Golden Retriever, and I shift forward on the park bench. She remembers me. That's why she picks up her pace when I attempt communication.

"Excuse me!" I race after her. "Do you know if The Balloon Man will be here today?"

"Just missed him," she says. "He was here about an hour ago."

"He's gone for the day?" My heart tumbles. "Will he come back? Did you hear anything?"

She shrugs, jerks the dog's leash toward her, halting. "He might have gone over to Michlin Park until sunset. He used to do that last year, a friend told me."

"Thank you!" I dig my car keys out of my flowered pocketbook and dash back to the parking lot. Michlin Park is a fifteen-minute drive, and though my father is awaiting burgers for our party-of-two dinner, and the sun is melting fast, and the breeze has picked up some late-winter bite, I'm up for the journey. A part of me understands, like some flashing sign is going off in my head, that this time I meet The Balloon Man, it will be different.

I always say that, but this time, it will be.

\*\*\*

My Jetta is a mess. It's forest green and comfy, a rolling metallic representation of me. I roll down the window and let the cold air refresh and color my cheeks and consider cleaning the Jetta out next weekend. It's a disaster inside, but because the contents are everything I love and need, I think just an organization would be best. In the backseat there are at least two balled-up dark green skirts, three colorful bandanas, an old sunhat that may or may not be beige, and a

brown bag of quick eats in case I get stuck somewhere in northern Massachusetts indefinitely.

I've never been stuck somewhere in Massachusetts indefinitely, but I'm hopeful.

If you're not from New England, you probably think of Massachusetts as either a) a place where people talk weird and eat primarily seafood or b) a place where witches were hung in 1692. We are both of those things, but I actually live more inland, not by the ocean and not quite in the area where my speech would have a striking accent to the ear of someone outside of the area. Tie-Dye Me is located in Redfield outside of Boston and Salem, so while we don't get much sea air, we do have tourists, especially in the fall. Not only are we close to the main cities, we're also close to a massive concert hall, and music-lovers are the cornerstones of our business.

When I arrive at Michlin Park, I duck down in my car. The parking lot here is butt up against the brown-green field, and Michlin Park is a tiny little joint. Not much action, but the draw here is the bridge walkway that arches over a babbling brook. When I peek up this is what I see, the brook catching the falling sun, golden light spilling over the dark water and forming shimmering crystals. I whisper some ooohs and ahhhs, thinking about the many wedding parties and cameras that bridge must have seen, until I spot something that shimmers and shines even brighter—The Balloon Man.

He's here, so I quickly gather up my pocketbook, toss my car keys deep inside where I'll never find them, and smooth out my hair. It's a long wavy mess, too long to manage, really. I'm constantly inquired about my mental state in keeping up such a hairstyle, but it fits my lifestyle: I'm either rushing around helping my father at Tie-Dye Me or I'm out and about in a world that does not know I'm watching and existing. My hair really just requires a fast shampoo,

conditioner when I remember, and some hand fluffing thereafter. It does smell nice, though. Vanilla and coconut in a basic cheap formula.

The Balloon Man is not busy at the moment. In fact, I'm wondering if he's pondering leaving for the day. There is not much action here, due to the sun melt and time of year, and he's just standing at the far end of the bridge, gazing at the crystals on the water. I'm crazy about the connection we just made. We were both looking at those crystals, thinking on them at the same time. I also note, for the millionth time, his hair color. It's a light color that might best be summed up as blond, although there are a staggering amount of ways to say blond without saying blond: fair, light, golden, lemon, platinum, pale, champagne, yellow . . . I guess I would put us both in the golden blond category, with his much closer to champagne and mine much closer to yellow.

With not many people here, it will be impossible to hide myself or shy away from him. I stay put in the Jetta, grab my journal, and sink down in the driver's seat.

Cammié's Journal 31 March

*I'm going to order a balloon.*

*Just do it.*

*Just do it.*

*Just do it.*

*What do I have to lose? The Balloon Man gives them out so often, he probably doesn't even remember his customers. He will forget me and my order the moment I walk away, over the bridge, out of his life forever. But I will always have that balloon to remember him by, until it deflates and I am left just as deflated, days later. Then maybe I'll come back? And around and around this will go. Balloon, deflated. Balloon, deflated, Balloon and girl deflated.*

With a strong surge of bravery and memories of following him for two springs and two summers and thoughts of *finally* ordering a balloon, I step out of my Jetta and let the door slam closed behind me. Too loud, oh God. He glances across the bridge, eyes expectant for a new customer, and stands erect like a businessman. I've noted his age before: a few years older than me, maybe twenty-two or so. Another mystery. His looks put him at twenty-ish, his career as no-profit-at-all Balloon Man puts him at like sixty.

I cross the bridge toward him and start to lose my bravery and gusto at the midway point.  
*31 March: Turned Back!* The crystal water below me reflects upward, and I feel tiny specks of warmth and gold dance on my cheeks. I pull back, until I catch the still-expectant look in The Balloon Man's eyes. Now I have an unpleasant mixture of both guilt and nerves rolling around

inside me, something volcanic that meets with the sunlight crystals until I'm all lava and heat and melted insides and outsides.

"Hello," he says from afar.

His voice is calm, masculine but not macho. He lifts a flaccid balloon from the cart and positions it on the silver tank at the back. Air starts to inflate the thing, puffing it out with a faint swooshing sound that I pick up as pleasant audio as I move closer, step by step. It's pink. A pink balloon. He ties a white ribbon to the bottom and glides it forward, letting it bop and hobble in the light breeze between us. The air dips a few degrees cooler, and as I reach for the balloon, not only does my heart swell with something beautiful and indescribable, but I lose my footing where the bridge meets the grass and fall forward like a tumbling page in a book.

"Whoa," he says.

He reaches out with his free hand, but in order to save myself a cliched first meeting, I've stabled myself. God.

"You okay?"

I nod. Speechless. Stupid. Shy.

"Okay." He holds out the balloon again. I guess I didn't have to choose the color. The color chose me.

"Thanks," I say and let him tuck the white string into my hand. I know from watching that he likes to do this, even if some customers shrink away from the contact. "I like pink."

I don't like pink. My favorite color is green. Green like the earth, natural beauty, trees, grass, parks, mountain caps and meadows.

"No, no," he says. "You're a green girl."

“Then why did you give me pink?”

He scratches behind his ear and moves the cart a touch, so it’s not wedged between us.

“You tell *me* why I gave you pink.”

Here’s the little piece of advice, the worldly knowledge he gives, coming at me live. I’ve craved this for so long, and here I am, in the middle, and I have nothing to say. The only thing I feel is a strange beautiful swelling in my heart, swelling, swelling, swelling like the inflating balloon itself. If I could remember being born, it would feel like this I’m sure. Something new, fresh, buoyant with the buds of love and life.

“I’m not sure,” I say. “But yeah, my favorite color is green normally.” I want to ask him how he knew I was a green girl, but maybe it’s just obvious in my persona. It has to be.

He points a finger at me, grins but it doesn’t meet his eyes, and turns to move away.

I can’t help but follow, trying to block his path so he can’t leave.

“I have to keep moving,” he says. “I can’t settle in one place.”

“There’s nobody here,” I remind him. “Hardly anyone.” I spot a male jogger, dressed in a one-piece blue and white deal, on the path. The Balloon Man keeps moving, and for as shy as I was to meet him and speak even a few short sentences, now I’m equally as brave and demanding. “Can I ask you a question?”

“You can try.”

“Do you have a name?” I ask. “Why do you give out free balloons? Where do you—”

“What are you, a reporter?” he says, and I sense that he doesn’t want to answer questions or say anything else. He’s pleasant when handing out balloons, but private and grumpy with all other social interactions.

“No,” I say, and my balloon nearly hits me in my own face. “I’m just curious.” I keep trailing behind him as he moves his cart to the path that surrounds the small park. “Can you at least give me a name?”

“Ripley,” he says.

“My name is Chamomile.” He didn’t ask, but there it is.

“What?” He finally stops pushing the cart. I thank my mother right now, as much as I despise the woman, for giving me that name. “Like the tea?” he asks.

“Flower,” I reply. “But made into a tea. It’s known for promoting sleepiness, which is ironic because I’m sort of an insomniac.”

“Ha,” he replies. “You and me both.”

“Actually, most people call me Cammie.”

That thumps his curiosity in me down a notch, and he nods and starts to move away again.

“Wait,” I say.

“What?” he says and stops.

“You didn’t answer my question about why you give away free balloons.”

“I don’t recall saying I would answer any questions.” He turns his cart so it’s facing the bridge. The sun takes a huge bite into the horizon, and the crystals disappear from the water. “It’s time for me to go now.” He tips his head. “Excuse me.”

I’m blocking the cart, begging him in a pathetic nonverbal action, to stay with me right here, between the bridge and the rest of the park.

“Do you work?” I say.

“I’m trying to,” he replies.

“This is your only job?”

No reply.

“So you’re this super nice guy who gives out free balloons to little kids, but you’re mean and nasty to girls who are curious about your personal life?”

“How about this,” he says. “I step into your office or school or wherever you happen to spend your days, and I come up to you and start asking you personal questions. What’s your name? Why do you work here? So then I’m a stalker and you call the police. Why is it any different for you coming up to me and following me from park to—” He stops, catches himself.

I let out a little “Oh,” in understanding. “I’m sorry,” I say, and realize he has a point. I’m a creepy stalker. I already sort of knew this. “I was just intrigued, that’s all.”

Now I’m the one who wants to leave in a hurry. I step onto the bridge, where I’d only just missed falling moments ago, and hear the squeak of the cart wheels behind me. As embarrassed as I am, and as much as I crave my flee to my Jetta, the sound of the cart wheels lifts something up in me, a creaking mystery I’d still like to solve. My pace slows.

“Hey,” he says as we walk over the bridge. “It’s okay. You’re not the first person who’s asked me those questions.”

I shrug.

“I’m just really focused when I’m working,” he goes on.

“I understand how it is when you’re trying to work,” I tell him. “I work for my dad, so I know customers can be annoying at times. I work at Tie-Dye Me. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Maybe,” he replies. “So are you done asking questions now?”

We’re at the end of the bridge. The air has turned colder with the disappearance of the sun, and twilight twists and falls around us, bathing us in a dim purple glow.

“I’m done,” I reply. “And I’m sorry for following you through the parks. I really was just curious about you. Not many people walk around handing out free balloons, you know?”

He nods. “Understandable.”

The man is a well of mystery. I want to dive down to the bottom, ask why he does it, why he gave me a pink balloon, how he knew my favorite color was green, and who he is at the core. I want us to be together gypsies. But my courage faded with the daylight.

“You should wrap it around your wrist,” he says, indicating my balloon. “Before you lose it.” He moves forward, takes the balloon from my hand, and forms a little O at the base of the string. He ties it up and slips it over my wrist. “Hang out in the park a little while,” he says. “Stand on the bridge with your balloon and think on things.” He gestures at my pink balloon again. “But don’t stay if it gets too dark.”

With that, he moves to an older black SUV in the parking lot, loads his cart into the back like a pro, and sets off. I watch, note that the park is clear of murderers and rapists, and follow The Balloon Man’s instructions.

*Pink is new beginnings, I think, holding the string. Pink is things that bud and open gentle but strong, sad but beautiful. Pink is new and pink is romance. New Adventures.* Maybe The Balloon Man thinks I need all that. In this moment, with the pink balloon around my wrist and the March breeze slapping my cheeks and the brook churning below me, I have a sense of

*yes!* This is what I want or need. An adventure, something new and pink and budding. It's as though the string is an antenna feeding me the information in electric pulses. Electric *magic*.

So when I get home I'll write about this in my journal. About my first experience with The Balloon Man and the pink balloon and how magical the man truly is, how he looked right inside my soul, found the stagnant gypsy heart. As the pink balloon dances on my wrist and silhouettes like a dark teardrop against the darkening purple sky, I envision drifting away. The pink balloon is going to carry me someplace else.

## Chapter Three

I'm still not quite over my meeting with The Balloon Man. I've written about the encounter in my journal, but now, on Saturday, our busiest day at Tie-Dye Me, I have to do my dance as gypsy girl behind the counter. My journal is out in my car so I don't lose it again and so I won't have the distraction. It seems since Lizzie Fry went off to university, I've replaced her with my journal in the same way her mother has replaced her with UnicornTreats.

Thinking about Lizzie has made me nostalgic, so while Old Dora, a regular client and stereotypical Tie-Dye Me shopper, combs through the albums and Pink Floyd blares over the store speakers, I send a text to Lizzie. She's made friends at university, and it's a Saturday, so her time for texting me back might be limited. Still, I venture a try, and send a quick *Hello*, with our standard apple emoji thrown into the text. The apple is our special thing, a forever reminder of our first meeting.

Lizzie was not in my grade school, but in middle school, around the time her parents got divorced, she moved in with her grandmother and started going to my school. In eighth grade, we both worked on the graduation committee toward the end of the school year. The committee was in the auditorium one Wednesday after school, and I was sitting on the floor jotting down table arrangements with my back against the stage. Lizzie was up on stage working on these fake apples that were supposed to be used for table numbers. She had a whole basket of them and accidentally kicked the basket over, leading to me being repeatedly struck on the head with dozens of hard tumbling apples. We went to the nurse together, and Lizzie felt horrible about

what happened. We laughed at the whole thing afterward and became instant best friends, inseparable.

Right now I envision her walking around her campus in Florida, The Sunshine State, with a crowd of bubbly girls behind her. She was not a friend magnet in high school—we were each other’s only—but university or freedom or being out of her teen years has brought out a change that is only noticeable through social media. Pictures of her and I pretending to like sports so we could sit with the other kids at games have been replaced with her actually sitting centralized in the college bleachers while blond girls with white teeth smile all around her. I wonder if it would have been the same for me if I’d gone to university.

As if she can sense the text floating in the stratosphere toward Lizzie, Mrs. Fry comes up to the counter, sets her palms on the wood, and eyes my phone. There is something unspoken between us, and she gives me a half-smile before turning away from my cell.

“She’s at the retreat this weekend, remember?” Mrs. Fry says. Her hair is thick and bushy, like Lizzie’s, only her hair is caramel brown and Lizzie’s is much darker, like a smidgen above true black. “They were going to camp out at the lake and were limiting phone use for the experience.”

“I didn’t know.” I place my phone down on the counter. Old Dora is still flipping through the albums. “I guess it’s good that she’s still a nature girl at heart.”

Mrs. Fry nods. I suppose we both know that we’ve got the same hole somewhere in our heart, not to scale of course, but about the size and shape of Lizzie. There’s also this whole surrogate mother thing she has never addressed. I’ve given her room to move in but she’s not yet taken residence.

“You know you could meet new people at all the places you go to,” she says at length.

“Make new friends.”

“The world is my friend,” I reply. “I go around.”

“I know you do.” She drums her fingers on the counter and a few sticks of loose incense fall from atop the wood rack. “And I know as you get older, connections are more difficult to make, but maybe you could gather a group at the park or library or even a church or something.”

I shrug and realize she really has tried to take up residence. I’m just closed up for whatever reason. It’s all the more depressing when realization hits you and you actually start to make sense of your melancholy.

“I’ll try,” I say.

“It’s nice that you stayed behind to help your dad with the store,” she says. “But there’s more to life than the store and bouncing around from place to place trying to find somewhere to fit in.”

Old Dora ambles up to the counter with two albums in her grasp.

“The Doors?” I say. “One of my father’s favorites.”

“I know,” Old Dora says. Her eyes are perpetually bloodshot.

Lizzie Fry’s mom goes back to her UnicornTreats counter while I ring up Old Dora. I place her albums in a brown bag, seal it with a round Tie-Dye Me sticker, and send her on her way. Then I sit back and dwell on what Lizzie’s mom said. It wasn’t that I didn’t go to university because of the store, I didn’t go because my father needs me in other ways too. He has nothing else in the world since my monster of a mother played sex house with some random guy and lost

her job and her relationship. I mean, if love comes around only once for some people, then my father is doomed to walk the rest of his life alone.

A few customers roam through the store while the speakers spit out more 60's and 70's tunes. I fall back on comfortable thoughts, like The Balloon Man and the pink balloon he gave me. It's April now, and pretty soon is his high time in the parks. I wonder if he remembers me at all, but since he kind of mentioned that I follow him from park to park, I bet he does remember or at least tries to forget.

After a while, my father comes out from the backroom. He glances at Lizzie Fry's mom, who, let's face it, really does not need to be at the store. We can sell her UnicornTreats without her here, but I get the loneliness thing and I guess my father does too.

"Do you want me to go get you some dinner?" I ask my father.

"Maybe," he replies and straightens out a display of flower power notepads. "If you leave now, maybe you'll be back by eight o'clock." He laughs his raspy laugh at my expense, as usual. "I've taken to storing donuts in the backroom."

"I drive around and lose track of time," I say, all apologetic. "It's easy to do when you're all alone." I let out a sigh, and he stops laughing.

"Something bothering you?"

"No."

"Another Abraham Lincoln dream?"

"No."

He surveys me, searches my soul in that mysterious way that dads do. They always talk about mother's intuition and women's intuition, but they rarely mention men's masterful perceptions, particularly when it comes to their little girls.

"This have anything to do with the pink balloon that's tied to your bedpost?" he says finally.

"No."

He narrows his eyes, disbelieving.

"Did you hit something again?" he jokes.

"No," I say. "It was only that one time I hit something."

We share a smile, because I've definitely hit something while driving more than one time.

"How about we dance," he says and grabs my hand, spinning me beneath his arm. "Or we could get high?"

"Not going to do that right now, Dad."

"Well," he says and lets go of my hand. "You let me know if you need anything or want to . . ."

I lose his words as something green and round bobs around outside the store window. The green thing hovers in the air like a kite, floating, and something inside of me leaps as I make the connection. How and why in the world . . .

"Dad," I say with an urgent air I had not expected. "I need you to go in the backroom for a minute. Um . . . check out that shipment of glow-in-the-dark peace signs, okay?"

“I’m not going to stock the—” He sees the green balloon just as The Balloon Man opens the glass door of Tie-Dye Me and attempts to tug the thing through. “Ohhhhh,” he says.

“Another balloon.”

“It’s not like that,” I say. “Just *please*.”

He smiles and finally scoots away to the backroom. It’s just now that I realize my heart is ticking through my veins, quick like tickling feathers, thankfully not hard and uncomfortable.

The Balloon Man visually inspects the store, checking out the *That 70’s Show* mugs and the psychedelic posters of dudes and gals riding on top of rainbows.

The Balloon Man spots me behind the counter and heads for me, not picking up anything to buy. This leads me to believe, as much as my frantic brain can process the thought right now, that The Balloon Man has ventured into Tie-Dye Me this afternoon to see *me*.

“You’re making house calls now?” I ask stupidly, and point upward at the green balloon.

“I gave you the wrong color balloon,” he says and stops in front of the counter, not addressing my moronic opening to our conversation. “It’s rare that I give out a wrong color when people don’t give me a specific request, but it does happen.”

“So you came and found me?”

“Well, yeah.” He glances up at the balloon. “Giving out the wrong color is a big deal. Things like that drive me nuts.”

He reaches into the air between us and hands over the balloon, and I register how lucky I am to have received two balloons from The Balloon Man in one week. *And* he even brought this one to me personally. Words shoot through my mind, everything I want to write in my journal about the interaction, the way The Balloon Man looks inside my own environment, the familiar

incense scent in the air and the crazy warm lighting playing on his features. I wrap the white string around the base of the swirl-colored stool and watch the green balloon for a moment.

“What are my directions?” I say.

He tilts his head.

“You said with the pink balloon, I had to figure out what it meant. Is it the same with the green balloon?”

“No,” he replies. “I already told you you’re a green girl.”

“So why—”

“It was my mistake,” he interrupts. “Now I’ve set it all straight, so I’ll see you.”

He turns to leave, and for a second I consider letting him go, because there are still questions here. I can continue to write about it in my journal: Why did he make a mistake? What do the colors mean to him? Why did he feel the need to set it all straight?

“Wait,” I say. “Why is it so rare for you to give out a wrong color? Like, how do you know what color to give people?”

He turns back to me and shrugs. “I don’t know,” he says. “I just do.”

“You don’t know why you pick certain colors for people? I mean, you give people advice along with the balloon, so you must know why.”

“I don’t give advice,” he contests. “I merely offer a suggestion for people to look inside of themselves.”

“And you need balloons to do this?”

“People do, yeah,” he says. He turns his head toward the glass door as a guy about our age, blanketed with tattoos, comes through. “It’s all in the color. I can’t explain it, other than that.”

The balloon color gives you an answer. People know the answer, sometimes, and they pick the right color. All is well with a red balloon. Those are the traditional people who are vaguely happy. The insanely content and happy people pick yellow balloons. Sad people pick darker colors like blue and even black.”

“How do you know all of this?”

“The colors speak to me,” he says. “I really couldn’t tell you more than that.”

“And pink balloons?” I ask. “That was an answer to . . .”

“You need something new in your life,” he says. “Among other things.”

“Like what other things?”

He shrugs. “I have to go now.”

“Wait,” I say. “If the pink balloon was telling me I need something new in my life, then why did you change it to green? I’m already green.”

“Exactly,” he says. “I’ll see you.”

“But—”

“Customers are waiting in the park and the sun goes fast this time of year.”

He glances once at the green balloon, then around the store as the tattooed guy flips through CDs. Then he walks away and out the door.

---

*Cammié's Journal 7 April*

---

*In the pink of April I wonder and spin, a star out of balance, lost in the sky and searching for home. The Balloon Man is real now. I have touched the white string and the smoothness of his balloons. There is something of his essence in them, something of magic. I can only bounce along searching as a lost star does, always searching for home. I was a balloon without a true color, or a color so far away it was not discernible, like a star's color. An enigma to most, though not to The Balloon Man. He saw pink in me. I am now a pink balloon girl, star girl.*

*I have answered the old questions but found new ones. I have seen close-up sparkles in his hair. I have found the true color of his eyes, a blue-green reminiscent of tropical water. I have felt the magic of what he does, even if he might not know all the magic he possesses. Even though he might not know what his balloons do, or what it means to hear the sound of his voice up close when for so long I have heard it from so far away it was almost a whisper. He knows I am a gypsy—saw that inside of me—but I'm starting to feel like he's definitely a gypsy too. A lost star. I have suspected that all along.*



## CHAPTER FOUR

We're home now, my dad and I, in our apartment on a Tuesday evening. Tie-Dye Me is closed for the day, so we're relaxing with some pepperoni pizza and a fantastic field green salad from LeRoy's Pizza Joint. LeRoy is actually French, but he makes a rocking pizza. I pick away at some gorgonzola crumbles and dried cranberries as my dad chows down his slice of pepperoni pizza. He has about three slices falling off a paper plate on his side of the table.

Our apartment, because we spend so much time at the store, is not fancy. If we had beds at Tie-Dye Me, we would probably just live there. The living room in the apartment is dull with a dirty beige carpet, and the kitchen is small, just enough room to hold a few appliances and a two-chair square table that looks more like a thrift store end table. There are two bedrooms—both with twin beds and no light or humor—and a bathroom that retains odors for way longer than I would like. My father says old walls hold more scents.

"She tried to call again," he says and picks up a can of Budweiser.

"I know," I reply, and don't make eye contact. "You already told me."

"You ignore me when I tell you."

How can he not hate the woman with the same raging passion that I hate her? What she did to him was way worse than what she did to me. I get that he might still love her and I get that parents might try to keep it cool for the sake of their kid, but God, the woman is a monster and I don't talk to monsters. I am firm on that.

"She always calls around the beginning of the month," I say and continue to pick at my salad. "And in all the years she's tried . . ."

“Look,” he says and swallows a hefty wad of mozzarella. “During your teen years her and I understood the pissed off attitude. But you’re twenty now, and it’s time to—”

“What?” I say. “Be mature about the whole thing? Make peace with the monster? Take her phone calls when all she’s going to do is say that she loves me and begs forgiveness for ruining my life?”

“Cammie . . .”

With a squeak of chair legs, I exit the kitchen, sulk to my room.

The stale atmosphere in here does little to make things better. When we moved here I didn’t bother to put up any posters, no artwork, no fangirl pictures of cherished rock bands. Nothing. All I have in me are words, so I wrap a green bandana around my head, pick up my journal, and get to it. I scribble *i hate her*, all lowercase, and then make big X marks around the words. It’s almost art.

“Hey,” my father says and rests his hands on the doorframe. “I’m sorry. I’ve been stressed because the store is running a little under.”

I shrug. I’m not usually mad at him. In fact, the mom argument is the only argument we ever have and continue to have. He can’t just let it go.

He walks in, glances at the pink balloon still floating from my bedpost, and sits on the end of the bed. He peeks over at my journal, which might be the first time he’s ever really looked at what I’ve written in here.

“Is that about your mother or about Lizzie?” He points to the *i hate her* chorus.

I take a breath. The power lifts my chest and sinks it back again. “I don’t hate Lizzie.”

I can only imagine what Lizzie's mother has told my dad to force him to that conclusion, especially since we were just talking about my monster mother and the journal entry is so obviously mom hate. I really don't hate Lizzie. Her and I were like sisters, or maybe closer because we never fought. Thinking of her, I'm subjected to a flashback of hanging out at the Redfield Ice Cream House, eating away our problems. One time, Lizzie wanted to date this guy Fred Chandler, and he said yes but then backed out with a painful "Just not into it" about a half-hour before their date. Her and I walked to the Redfield Ice Cream House, ordered sundaes with extra hot fudge, and sat chowing beneath parking lot illumination, our legs dangling from the cement wall. Then there was the time we ordered peanut butter sundaes after the SATs. Strawberry and pineapple when it was back to school time. Peppermint in the dead of a boring winter.

God, I guess I do hate her.

"So she moved on," I say and wipe my eyes. "And I . . ."

"You're twenty," my dad says. "You have miles and miles yet to walk."

"I'm not sure where to step first," I admit.

He reaches over and rubs my shoulder. "Lately it feels as though you're scared because the first step is there."

I shake my head, not understanding.

"What's with all the frantic journaling?" he says. "With the mysterious disappearances and the balloons?"

Time to come clean. I almost felt it building up.

“There’s this guy in the park,” I say and rest my journal down on the bed, right on top of the ugly tan blanket. “He’s a little older than me, and he pushes a cart with a helium tank and a spool of white ribbon and a bunch of balloons. He gives the balloons out for free, and I guess I got caught up with his story.”

“Ah,” my father says. “The one who came and brought you the green balloon at the store.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I somehow got up the courage to go get a balloon, or more like it was too late to back out because of the way the park was set up and the way he was set up. He gave me a pink balloon”—I point to the balloon—“but then he came to the store and said it was the wrong color. I can’t make sense of anything he does, but I somehow need to know.”

“And he’s cute.”

“That’s not it at all,” I say. I get where he’s going, that I need someone in my life, the best scenario being a romantic partner. “I just—”

“Look.” He picks up my journal, inspects the peace sign, and then tosses it back to the mattress. “You’ve always been artistic and creative, and I know you like to write your feelings out, but this is becoming life.” He knocks his knuckles on the journal. “Instead of writing about life, you need to get living it.”

“So what I go off to college or something and leave you to run the register? You hate doing that. And how would you eat dinner?”

“With a fork and my hand.” He belts out a raspy laugh. “Cammie, I’m good.”

“No,” I reply. “I don’t believe that.”

He sighs, and I understand that he's giving advice that I'm not taking. I'm a walking contradiction, in a forever state of wanting more, wanting gypsy travels, wanting this new pink balloon adventure. But inside, I'm a shivering comfortable coward.

"College isn't for everybody," he says at length. "But if you want to take classes, things won't change that much. Do you want to?"

I shake my head again. High school felt like the end of things for me, like I went through this horrible surgery and came out well at the end. Everything was fixed and done, so why go and reopen that wound again?

"The truth is, I don't know what I want," I say. "Something that everyone else seems to have, I guess."

He nods. "You'll figure it out," he says and stands. "I'm here if you need me." He stretches his arms to the ceiling. "Right now I have to go call a man about some Vietnam protest pins."

"Vietnam is over," I say.

"Not to our clientele."

He leaves the room and I tug my knees to my chest. I glance at my journal, and after fifty thoughts fly through my mind, I finally decide to write some of it down.

Cammié's Journal 11 April

*When in doubt, always return to the beginning, resting back on a feathery pillow of familiarity and comfort. When did all of this begin? When did life get complicated? What signpost did I miss that everyone else seems to have spotted? Maybe I didn't miss the signpost at all. Maybe it just didn't change for me, or I didn't need a new one. Right now, I'm comfortable where I am. Except I have no friends. Except I have no career goals. Except I have no upper education. Except I have no mother. Except that I follow a stranger through parks and write about him constantly.*

*The Balloon Man knew. He gave me the pink balloon—new life, new journey, new adventure—but then he changed it to green. Why. Why. Why. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't really matter. I'm not going anywhere, and I am firm on that. If I'm happy, Mr. Balloon Man, then I see no reason to change my life. There is no law in the entire universe that says I need to stop standing behind the counter at Tie-Dye Me and no law that says I have to remove my feet from the hooked roots that hold me like a resting tree. Life can move forward, Mr. Balloon Man, and I can stay put. Your pink balloon can just fly away without me. And your green one, too.*

I slam the journal closed and hop out of bed. With all my might, I lift the string from around my bedpost and squish the pink balloon between my hands. It doesn't pop. The stupid, stupid thing doesn't pop. I consider for a moment that the balloon is made of magic and dreams, but then I shake it back and remember it's just a piece of latex or plastic. Just material that inflates and can be busted with ease. I grab my writing pen from the bed, throw my hand back with the pen positioned as a dagger, and stick it deep into the pink balloon.

With a sigh of air, not a stupendous pop, the balloon is relieved of its duty.

## Chapter Five

I did the same thing to the green balloon at Tie-Dye Me. Killed it.

At the store the following day, a rainy Wednesday, I did the deed. Since, I have not written about The Balloon Man, but I cannot eradicate him from my thoughts completely. At Tie-Dye Me this afternoon, I sit inspecting my fingernails, thinking about orange nail polish, the true color of the sun—is it white yellow or orange—and dinnertime. I'm thinking that I would like something not earthy or healthy tonight. Maybe some fried mozzarella or some greasy chicken. Something that will coat the back of my mouth and the lining of my stomach.

Lizzie Fry's mother waves frantically from across the store. I suppress an eye roll, but I think she catches my moment of indecision. She extracts two UnicornTreats from her glass case and carries them over. She presents a pink and purple frosted brownie to me as a gesture of understanding, or of peace, and I take the brownie and immediately bite off a chunk. She nibbles the end of her own brownie.

"I remember you used to go to the ice cream place with Lizzie," she says.

"Yeah," I reply and take another bite before swallowing the first.

"I think that helped her get through a lot of the bad stuff," she says. "High school can be tough."

"It was," I say. "Thank God it's over."

She lets out a laugh. "I wish I could say that life gets easier, but the truth is, it gets tougher."

“So I’ve heard.” This time, I don’t suppress the eye roll but let it go. It’s a massive statement on the fundamental awfulness of life. So massive, it almost hurts. It’s a marathon of advice lately. I feel like there’s a sign on every nearby street corner announcing that I’m lost.

“I’m sorry,” she says, and guilt rises in my throat. “I know you’re going through something lately, and I know you miss Lizzie, but just know that I’m here for you, okay?”

She turns to walk away, silver glittery earrings jingling like bells over Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song,” and I try to consider what it is about her that I’m resisting right now. What I’m *fighting*. Motherly advice when she’s not my mother? Her connection to Lizzie? Something much, much deeper?

“I’m sorry, too,” I call out to her. “I’m just moody lately.” She spins back and smiles in a kind way, and I really wish she was ballsy enough to be mad at me. I deserve it. “I just thought I wanted something, but then decided I didn’t in the end.”

She lifts her brownie and makes a little cheers movement against mine. “Then move on,” she says.

“Move on,” I repeat. “Got it.”

Granted her advice is not as good as my father’s, but she tries. I continue to eat my brownie with her, until we’re finished and she walks away. Then I ring up a few customers before running out to my car and grabbing my journal. I’m not writing about him, but I let my pen dance around the subject . . . *was not what I wanted. Not what I’d hoped. Pink is a dumb color. Green is for losers. Parks are filled with bugs, bums, and bird boom boom.* Then I slam the thing closed, head to the backroom to announce to my father that I’m grabbing buckets of fried

chicken, cups of mashed potatoes, and bags of butter and biscuits. I'm out the door of Tie-Dye Me with a promise to return food immediately to my father and Mrs. Fry.

I almost make it to KFC, too. Almost.

I'd stuffed the flaccid green balloon in my pocketbook. Deep in there where I knew I wouldn't find it again. At least not until I threw the pocketbook away someday but first checked to make sure there was nothing of value sunk in the abyss. But the pink balloon is home. I don't remember throwing it into the garbage; I think I tossed it behind my bed. It's just dawning on me that I have incredibly clever ways of hiding but not destroying things that I attempt to remove from my life. So in the fading daylight, as an April day winds down in a circus of orange-tipped trees, I drive home to retrieve the pink balloon. It meets up with the green one, says a fine "how do you do," and the three of us finally set out to put an end to all this nonsense.

My instinct was right: he's in Michlin Park. It's sunset, and he seems to like it here at sunset. It's always the last park on his list, maybe because this is more of a jogger's park and the kids are gone for the day. Maybe it's a way to wind down for him, without much clientele. He's not busy, but standing on the far side of the bridge with his white cart, gazing upward at the new buds of red and orange on the trees. I wonder if the colors of the buds are the same colors the leaves change to in the fall? I could think and wonder on nature all night, but I'm here on an important mission.

He sees me coming. I'm carried forward with purpose and intent, and if he knows that somehow, he's not showing it. He's just squinting at me with mild interest as I walk the bridge, and I meet up with him in approximately the same location we met up the first time. I love it when things come full circle. A beginning and an end.

“Chamomile,” he says. “Right?”

“Cammie,” I reply. “I have something for you.” In my hand, all squished up, are the two balloons. I extend them forward and wait for him to register what they are. “I have come to return these.” I say this like I’m a proper British lady. Maybe because he’s a bit older and seems so professional and serious.

His eyes pop open. “I, um . . . don’t give refunds on free stuff.”

“Ha,” I say. “I don’t want a refund. I just don’t want these anymore. I popped them.”

He doesn’t take them. Just keeps looking at them like someone massacred his livelihood.

“Wow,” he says. “I’ve never had . . . that’s kind of crushing.”

Then I get that same feeling I had earlier with Lizzie Fry’s mom. Guilt. The Balloon Man has no idea why I’m doing this. It’s not his fault that I was attached to him, like his silly balloon string was wrapped around my wrist all the time.

“You can just toss them,” he says. “I don’t want them back. That’s not the way I work.”

“Apologies,” I say. The sun dips lower, and the world turns purple-orange like swirled candy.

“Not accepted,” he replies.

I narrow my eyes. “Not accepted?” I stick the deflated balloons into the deep pocket of my green skirt. “You know what? I don’t care. I don’t know you, and . . . what you do is stupid, anyhow.”

He nods. “Okay,” he says. “You have your reasons for doing what you did. But you don’t need to personally attack me.” With that, he tilts his head in parting and wraps his knuckles around the handle of his cart. “Good luck to you.”

With a squeak of wheels, he begins to depart.

“Wait!” I say and run after him. He keeps going, moving ahead. *Squeak. Squeak. Squeak.*

“Don’t you want to know why I did it?” Maybe explaining—just a teeny tiny portion of the true explanation—will ease some of my guilt.

“I know why you did it,” he says. “But you go ahead and tell me if you want.”

I inhale the park grass as I jog to keep up with The Balloon Man. It’s the new kind of grass smell, still water-logged from winter, but trying to grow up strong and fresh. We’re not moving over the bridge, but further into the park where the sunset stretches purple-orange fingers through the new budding trees.

“Honestly, I’m not up for an adventure or a change right now,” I say. “Or a new beginning, like the pink balloon would suggest.”

He keeps pushing the cart down the sidewalk, not looking at me. “And the green one?”

I stop, and surprisingly, he stops with me. The park is all too quiet without the squeaks from his balloon cart. “I don’t know,” I reply and gaze upward like the sunset will shoot down an answer. “I guess the green balloon . . .”

“Was your true core,” he says. “I’m going to guess you weren’t that mad at the green balloon.”

“No.” I think on this. If I’m being honest with myself, it might actually have physically hurt to destroy the green balloon. Somewhere in my heart region. Left side. Pinching, fleeting pain. “Why . . . how do you know all of this?”

He shrugs. “I told you that I don’t know.” He scratches his head. “Is that all?”

“Yeah, you’re so busy, I can see.” The park is a dead zone, which, even though it’s growing late, is sad. Parks are like outdoor museums where you can just walk around and stop and take in the beauty of something created by someone or something else. I know it quiets down at sunset, especially at this particular park, but sunset offers the best showing time for the mass of exhibits.

“Your sarcasm is unpleasant,” he says. “You should probably go back home or the store or whatever now.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

He lets out a sarcastic chuckle and a faint “wow” which I find ridiculous because he just made a big deal over my supposed sarcasm.

“What’s your problem?” I say.

“How old are you?”

“How are old are *you*?” I return.

“Old enough to know when someone is acting like a twelve-year-old.”

“You are one grumpy Balloon Man,” I say, and start following him down the sidewalk again. “Do you know that?”

He ignores me, which I somehow find amusing, and as we stroll I keep sending over glances so he knows I’m still here, still beside him on the path, a bothersome shadow. Once or twice he presses his eyes closed, which amuses me more. When we hit the loop where the sidewalk turns back toward the bridge, he pauses and offers me a long sigh. The sun is almost gone now, and his work time is over for the day.

“Calling it a day?” I say, and hop up onto a park bench that lines the path, teetering the edge of the wood with my toes.

“Get down.”

I press my toes right to the edge of the wood, arms extended like a bird in flight.

“You really are bizarre,” he says, shaking his head.

“Said the man pushing a balloon cart.”

I finally get a hint of a laugh. It comes out as an exhale of humored air, nothing more. He starts pushing the cart again, and I jump down to the sidewalk all dramatic like a cat and follow behind as we head back toward the bridge.

“Nice at night,” I say.

“I used to stay pretty late last year,” he replies. “It’s like this park is made for nighttime.”

“I agree.”

He shoots a fast smile over, but I still get the impression that he doesn’t like to talk too much or say too much.

“So if you don’t want anymore balloons, I guess I won’t be seeing you in the parks,” he says as we continue to walk. “Unless you change your mind about the pink balloon.”

“I won’t,” I say. “I mean, you said you gave me the wrong color anyhow, so the whole pink balloon thing was a huge mistake.”

He stops, just short of the bridge. “I did say that.”

But it doesn’t erase the way I felt with the pink balloon when it was first set in my hand, and I think we both know that. I can push away the adventure, but I cannot ignore its calling.

“So,” I say as he picks up again and keeps walking over the bridge. “These balloons make people feel something. Like, they’re magic.” He pauses again, midway over the bridge. “I was standing right here that night and felt something from that pink balloon. A tug . . . a call to adventure.”

“Interesting.”

“You have to know the balloons are somehow . . . that they’re somehow magic.”

He gazes upward, where the stars have saturated the darkening sky. “I don’t know,” he says. “I mean, obviously I know how they work, I just don’t know . . . how they work.”

“You don’t know at all?”

“No.” He shakes his head, almost lowering it.

“Sounds like you need your own pink balloon,” I say and rest my back against the wood rail of the bridge. The brook flows gently below me, only as loud as fairy wings. “Everything you’ve said to me and everything I’ve witnessed leads me to believe you should really understand what you do and why you do it.”

He frowns and surveys my features or my expression. Then he pushes the cart to the side of the bridge and rests his back against the other wood railing, across from me. He gazes upward again, at the stars. They’ve made cartwheels of constellations up there, dots of silver that I know won’t be quite as brilliant in the summer as they were in the winter. Summertime changes the stars. They sparkle in heat but are hard and dry silvers; they lose a bit of winter magic.

“Someone up there?” I ask as The Balloon Man continues to gaze upward.

He nods slowly. “I like space,” he says. “All the answers are up there. The stars and the moon . . . the planets. They’ve seen everything down here so they know all the answers.”

I smile. He is, in this moment, everything I thought he would be.

“Is it that important to you that I know why I give out balloons or why they make people feel a certain way?” he asks.

“Yes,” I reply. “It should be important to you, too. I mean, instead of getting all secretive and grumpy about it, why can’t you just admit that you don’t have the answers?”

“Fine,” he says after consulting the heavens. “I don’t have any answers. Does that make you happy? You’ll stop asking me stuff and wondering who I am?”

“I will,” I say, and wonder if I’m lying. No, I’m sure I’m lying. “But you have to agree that you’ll figure it all out somehow. It’s a huge thing. It has to be.” A twilight breeze plays with my hair until I tuck a long strand behind my ear. “How about you begin with why you started handing out the balloons? Like what drove you to do it? At Tie-Dye Me, you said you just know what color balloon to give people and that you understood the personalities of the people who ask for certain colors. How?”

“I don’t know,” he says and tilts his head backward. “I just do.”

Something in his expression turns pained, a tightness between his eyes, a lost twinkle in his irises. I wonder if I pushed him too far. How would I know what’s in this guy’s past? There has to be something painful there, some old knife wound he masks with this happiness he attempts to distribute. The guy has a magic wand he swishes over the land, and he doesn’t even know he has it. He doesn’t even *understand* it.

“I guess it started when I was sixteen,” he begins. “I just felt like I needed to make people happy or fix them, so I went into the garage and found this old cart my grandmother bought from a tag sale for the garden or something. I converted it into a balloon cart. I painted it

myself.” He glances at the cart. “I originally had balloons painted on it, but I thought it was too childish and unprofessional so I painted it white instead.”

“And then you stocked it with the tank and the balloons?”

He nods. A flash of blond swishes his nape. “I used my savings and bought the supplies off the net. It took me a few years to actually go out and hand off the balloons, but since then, it feels like what I’m meant to do.”

“So this is like your only job?”

“I’m taking psychology classes online,” he says. “So my other job is student.”

“Your parents give you money otherwise?”

He shakes his head. “I live with my grandmother. She . . . yeah, she gives me what I need.”

A silence falls between us. I have so, so much to write in my journal. All of this was unexpected: this was not what I came here to do. But when the universe switches things up, you have to go with it. If you don’t, you risk what might have been. You risk missing out. You risk . . . what might have happened if you hadn’t popped your pink balloon. I shake my head in frantic, lunatic gestures to remove my self-advice.

“I have to get going now,” he says.

“Okay,” I reply. “If you have to.”

If I’m promising myself right here and now that I won’t come back to the parks ever again, not to chase him or write about him or think about balloon colors and magic, then I’d prefer to rewind the last few minutes. If he’s a psychology student and he lives with his

grandmother, then he's a real guy, not The Balloon Man. And I want to remember him as The Balloon Man.

"Good luck," he says to me. "And if you ever want your pink balloon again . . . you know where to find me."

"And you'll find yourself," I remind him. "You said you would find the answers."

"Eventually."

"Eventually," I echo.

We share a smile, and while I want to feel the end of something, the conclusion, the final act, I can't help but shake from the lift-off of something else instead. The Balloon Man wraps his hands around the cart handle, which has all but disappeared in the dark of night, and with a *squeak squeak squeak*, he keeps going down the bridge, thumping over the wood. I watch him, listening to the squeaks, the crickets, the fairy waves below me, and the whispers of my heart growing louder by the second.

"Wait!" I call and dash after him. "I want . . . I want my pink balloon back."

He pauses. Nods like he was expecting it. *Hopeful* for it.

He bends down through the light of the parking lot and digs through his stock of balloons, which, up close, I realize are sorted out by color into large plastic bags. Finally, he emerges empty-handed.

"I'm out of pink," he says and grins sideways like it's some sort of sign. "I always stock well, and it's not even busy this time of year. I don't know how that happened."

"Oh."

Through the light, he glances at his SUV. “But you can follow me home,” he says. “I’ll get you a new one there. You can wait outside if you feel weird about coming in, but my grandmother is always home, so—”

“Where do you live?”

“Right here in Michlin.”

I guess that’s why Michlin Park is his last stop. God, am I really considering this? Am I really *not* considering it? I mentally drag my feet, until finally . . . “I have to bring my father dinner,” I say, surprised when the decision pours out. “I’ve really been gone too long already.”

“Understood.”

He turns to leave again, and I pull in some night air that has stalled itself around the bridge. Am I really turning this down? A chance to follow The Balloon Man home? Does my father really need fried chicken that badly? Doesn’t he expect this lateness from me by now? If I don’t do this now, I never will. Michlin Park, like some silly old fairytale, feels like it will dissolve after midnight. *All* The Balloon Man’s parks feel like they will dissolve. Maybe even the man himself.

“Wait!” I call out again, running ahead. “I’ll follow you.”

He nods, waits for me to get inside of my Jetta, and closes my door for me.

## Chapter Six

The Balloon Man's house is only a five-minute drive from Michlin Park. It was just the right amount of time: any longer, and I would have hit the brake and turned back to fried chicken and Tie-Dye Me. His SUV pulls into a driveway that slopes down in the back. The house is a smaller cape, in a cozy neighborhood lined with other small capes, and though it's dark, the house appears to be a healthy yellow with freshly painted white shutters. Off the second floor, the dormers flank a door and a little balcony, fenced in white. It's cute, but has the look of being inhabited by an older soul.

Through the porch light, I watch The Balloon Man hop out of his SUV and then head toward me. I've parked just at the edge of the driveway, where it meets the street. There are no other cars in the driveway, but inside, the house is lit up, white light pressing against shades, colorful television flashes through the front window. The Balloon Man holds up a finger as I exit the car. He enters his house, and I wait a few moments. Then he returns and gestures me inside.

"Just wanted to tell Gram that I have a visitor," he says as we walk a stone pathway to the front door.

"A visitor," I reply and let out a laugh. "You mean a bored, lonely, slightly obsessive girl that you met in the park who can't make up her mind if she wants a pink balloon or not?"

"*Slightly* obsessive?" he says and holds the front door open for me.

Inside, the living room is trimmed in outdated wood panels, with an L-shaped mango-colored couch, two mango armchairs, and an area rug patterned with palms. An older television is positioned in front of the couch and is broadcasting the news: protests, protests, protests. The

Balloon Man steers me toward the back of the house, where the scent of tomato sauce and garlic hits my nose, making me remember that I am exhaustingly hungry for hearty food. As we enter the kitchen, I spot a huge silver pot on an older peach stove. I also spot a lovely old lady, sitting at a round wood table, scooping hunks of dough out of a glass bowl and placing the dough balls on a cookie sheet.

The Balloon Man's grandmother is fair-skinned, like the man himself. Her hair is light gray and thin, her face a small wrinkled globe, and her eyes a tad squinty. She has the look of an older person who needs glasses but refuses to get them, refuses to give in to the aging process. Still, she oozes something I can only describe as motherly comfort and the sweetness of candy. She smiles at me, picks up a sheet of paper and a black marker, and scribbles something down.

She holds up the paper so I can read the words: "*We're having spaghetti. Stay?*"

"You misspelled spaghetti, Gram," The Balloon Man says.

She shakes her head and scribbles below: "*I always do.*"

I laugh, not really understanding what's going on, and then offer a reply in the negative. "I'm only here for a balloon," I say. "I couldn't possibly intrude. But thank you."

Her lips press together in a sad but accepting smile, and The Balloon Man guides me out of the kitchen, down a small hallway, and up a flight of carpeted stairs. He opens a door at the top, and with a gentle push on my back, I'm inside The Balloon Man's bedroom. I wish I could say I've journaled about this very moment, but of course I never have. How could I know I would be in his bedroom someday? Inside the four walls that encapsulated his very essence and capture his sleeping breaths?

"Told you I liked space," he says as I gaze around.

The walls are covered with the strangest pieces of artwork I have ever seen. Even if I had journaled about his room, I could never have imagined the weirdness of the decor. One drawing is of a red, cratered Mars, but Mars is surrounded by dying red roses. That one is labeled *The Mars Roses* and is situated above his bed. In another drawing, a blue, ringed Saturn floats among colorful tulips. That one is labeled *The Saturn Tulips* and is taped to the wall above an older gold-knobbed stereo. There's also *The Mercury Daisies*, *The Pluto Pansies*, and *The Sun Sunflowers*.

"Nice?" I say and run my finger over the paper edge of *The Jupiter Geraniums*.

He lets out a stream of air that I suppose is a laugh. "Mars Roses is my favorite." He gestures to the one above his bed.

"You drew these?"

"Combined effort," he replies. He sits down on the thin red comforter covering his bed. "We drew them in high school." His gaze shifts toward a dormer. "Me and my friends."

I follow his gaze as it drifts upward to space. How long have I known The Balloon Man? I mean, a few days or a few hours really, but I already know this: he is lost in space. Truly a lost soul, floating out there. The instinct of a young girl in a strange man's room tells me I should stay standing, but I rest myself down beside him, right on his bed.

"Where are your friends now?" I ask.

He lets out a stupendous sigh that fills the entire room. "Charlie is in the army," he says. "And Belly's off at Uconn."

I'm reminded, in a hurtful flash, of Lizzie Fry.

"It was the three of us in high school," he goes on. "Me and Charlie and Belly."

“Belly?”

“Her real name is Isabella,” he explains. “But we changed it so all our names would end in the same sound.”

“Oh,” I say, wondering if I would have fit in as Cammie. “Sounds like you guys were close.”

He nods and glances at his nightstand. “Anyhow, I owe you one pink balloon.”

“Wait,” I say gently. Because I truly want to hear about this. “So you guys drew all of these pictures?”

“Yeah,” he says. “Charlie did the sketches, I did the colors, and Belly did the flowers.”

“They’re beautiful,” I say, and it comes out dreamy, like I’m an obsessed fan, which of course I am. “Tell me more about them. Your friends, I mean.”

He hesitates for a moment with an unsure stare. Then, he spills.

It goes on for a while. Sitting on his bed. Like maybe he has nobody else to talk to, or for some reason trusts me or is just using me as a friendship pillow. Charlie and Belly have been his friends since grade school, friends so long, he doesn’t even remember meeting them. They were just fixtures in his life. After high school, just like with me and Lizzie Fry, they split. Charlie had a calling for the service, which didn’t surprise The Balloon Man. Belly went off to Uconn to study Economics. Belly and The Balloon Man were like brother and sister. The trio were never romantically involved with any one of the group. But a family.

As he goes on, the smell of herbs and biscuits—which I was craving like a sailor craves freaking wind—wafts up the stairs and straight into The Balloon Man’s bedroom. The warmth of the house sinks in all around me as I inspect the room while still maintaining my concentration

on his story. On a tilted white dresser rests a pile of clothing: jeans, blue sweatshirt, white t-shirts. I almost wish it wasn't his room—maybe his real room is filled with balloons and calliope music and magic wands.

“. . . and I hear from him more than anticipated,” he goes on. “But still not like it was, obviously.”

“I'm sorry,” I say. “I mean, I have a similar situation I'm going through. My best friend left for Florida State and I'm kind of left behind with her mom. She works at the store, so it's like a constant reminder.”

He nods, understanding. “You didn't want to go to college?”

“I hate school,” I say. “I always felt like an outsider and really don't like structure.”

“Understood,” he replies. “So you're just going to take over the store someday, or . . .”

“I like to do the marketing for the store,” I reply. “Coupons and fliers and stuff. But I don't think I could ever put up the displays like my father can. I'm best at register and customer service.”

“Then you should maybe study marketing or something like that.”

I lift a shoulder.

“The pink balloon,” he says at once, like the conversation reminded him.

“We can share it.”

“I don't need anything,” he replies.

“You need to find out why—”

A light flashes on and off out in the hallway and The Balloon Man holds up a finger. He opens the door to the stairway, hollers that he'll be right down for dinner, and turns back to me.

“I won’t keep you,” I say. “But before I leave, I was just wondering if I could ask you a personal question.”

“Why stop now?” he says and sits back down on the bed.

“Where are your parents?”

“Oh,” he says and runs his fingers through his hair. “My mom is up there.” He points upward, at the ceiling.

“Heaven?” I ask, but immediately wish I hadn’t, because maybe he means she’s up in the attic or something.

“Space,” he says. “Heaven if that’s what you like to believe. I believe she’s up there in space, looking down while she—”

“Floats around the planets,” I say and smile. “Walks on the moon, plays on Saturn’s rings, jumps into Jupiter’s red spot, spins around on Neptune.”

The Balloon Man finally laughs. His smile reaches his eyes, crinkling them, and he tosses back his head. It’s only in this moment that I notice that my father was right. The Balloon Man is cute.

“And your father?”

“I don’t have one,” he says, still smiling.

“I can assure you that you have a father.”

He laughs again, this time soundless. “I don’t know him,” he says, and the smile fades.

“Not a clue in the world who he is or where he is.”

“Really?”

He stands up, and I understand that my time with him is over.

“Well, maybe one or two clues,” he says. “But I don’t really want to talk about it.” He moves to the nightstand, opens the drawer and rifles through the contents, and finally emerges with a pink balloon. “I’ll blow this up when I walk you out,” he says. “My cart is still in the SUV.”

“How about this,” I say and stand to meet him. “You inflate the pink balloon, and you bring it to me when you’re ready to figure out why the balloons are magic and why you were drawn to hand them out to people.”

He stares down at me, intense.

“We’re going to share it,” I say. “I just have a feeling.”

He turns quiet and sticks his hands into the pockets of his jeans. The balloon disappears somewhere in the process.

“I always say to go on feelings,” he says finally. “So . . . we’ll do it your way.”

“You know where to find me?”

“I do.”

As we descend the staircase, he tells me about his telescope, which is outside the dormers in the little balcony I saw when I pulled in. I hadn’t noticed the telescope, but I’ll make sure to check for it when I leave. It seems so *him* now, the space thing has wrapped itself around the magic thing, so some of my earlier descriptions and assumptions about him are fading. I’m not sure if I like that, but maybe I can separate The Balloon Man from . . .

“What did you say your name was?” I ask at the foot of the stairs.

“Ripley,” he says. “Ripley Omen.”

I try to make peace with leaving behind the spaghetti and the biscuits as his grandmother appears in the doorway of the kitchen, holding up a handwritten sign that says: *Nice to meat you.*

“Gram,” The Balloon Man says, “you misspelled . . .” He sighs. “Never mind.”

I tell her it was nice to meet her too, and that I’m sorry to have intruded, to which she shakes her head with another sad but accepting smile. Then The Balloon Man and I are outside on a clear spring night, walking the path to my Jetta.

“Thanks for listening,” he says as we near my car.

“No problem,” I return. “It was interesting. It seems like you have a lot to learn about yourself.”

I disengage my alarm, and the sound of finality makes me want to stay, stay, stay here at his house. But there’s another part of me, a stronger part, that wants to go before it becomes too real. The cute yellow cape, the sweet old grandmother, the regular-guy clothes in his room, the space pictures, his friends and family. These are all this other guy. They are not The Balloon Man.

“One last thing,” I say as I rest my hand on the door handle. “*Was* the pink balloon a mistake?”

Through the light streaming from the porch, he smiles. “I’m not sure,” he says. “But I can tell you that with the way this is going, I’m guessing no.”

“With the way *what’s* going?”

“I have to get to dinner,” he says. “The spaghetti is getting cold.”

Leave me with a mystery, Mystery Man.

“See you,” I say.

“Back at you, Chamomile.”

With that, he turns to leave and walks the path, disappearing through the front door. For a few moments I stare up at his bedroom, just vaguely making out the outline of the long telescope on the balcony. It’s pointing upward to space, upward to the mother he lost. Upward to a place he thinks holds all the answers.

I wonder when I’ll see him again, *if* I’ll see him again, if he’ll return to me with a pink balloon for us to share. And just like in the beginning, what I crave more than anything else is a balloon from The Balloon Man.

## Chapter Seven

My mother called a grand total of eleven times so far this month. She never seems to call me at the store, but waits until nighttime when she knows I'm at the apartment. It always starts with ringing up my father's phone before eventually turning to my cell. I have not blocked her number, just in case of an emergency, but I removed her picture long ago. She's blond like me, so it's not like I can forget the way she looks. She's pretty, with wavy hair that swishes her shoulders and eyes the color of coconut shells. Those eyes, nowadays, are surrounded by a few cracks of age around the corners, I'm sure. She always wears something long and flowing, like Stevie Nicks, and her personality is similar to my father's. Laid back, easy, indulgent for the sake of a jingle bell life.

So I'm home now, watching her number light up on my phone, ignoring it with a feeling of gratification that rides all the way down my body and into my toenails. I'm stretched out on my bed, listening to my father unload some groceries he picked up, watching until the phone call finally heads off into voicemail land. Then I place my phone down beside me and pick up my journal. There are a ridiculous amount of entries from last night with The Balloon Man, so I turn instead to a few about my mother, with the traditional X marks everywhere. My father enters the room and I slam it shut before he sees and starts in about how forgiving my mother somehow ties in with my life's trajectory and my entrance through the blackened door of the adult world.

"Did you buy the asparagus?" I ask.

He shakes his head. He's wearing a Jimi Hendrix shirt today and the thing is wrinkled like it came out of a bucket of rags.

"Family-size bag of sour cream Lay's," he says. "On sale."

I've slipped in pretty well with his generation; it would be nice if he at least tried to assume the healthy lifestyle of mine. Potato chips, marijuana, the occasional cigarette, burgers with extra bacon when we can afford it, and all those fast-food places that make chicken chunks out of plastic. Yes, I crave these things once in a while, and once in a while is good, even *needed*, but I would really love it if he switched over, especially at his age, to green food that does not glow.

"Dad."

"I know," he says. "I know."

He sits down on the bed and glances at my phone like he knows. Of course he knows.

"I think she wants to tell you that she . . . that she's involved with someone."

My shoulders tighten. "Great," I say. "I wonder how long until she cheats on him, too."

"Let it go," he says. "She's older, everyone is older. Maybe it will be different for her this time."

I can't wrap my head around how he can forgive her, so I just let it go, but not in the way he wants me to. Really, it's just a matter of denying that she even exists at all. She found someone else . . . hooray for her. The better person—my father—is still alone, disproving that good things happen to good people.

"No journal tonight?" he asks. "Or did you do it while I was at the store?"

"I did a little journaling," I reply. "Most of it I did last night, when I . . ."

“You saw him in the park again last night?”

“Yes, and I went to his house.”

“And?”

“It’s not a romance thing, if that’s what you’re thinking.” I tuck a leg beneath me on the bed. “I just feel like the two of us are lost souls. Gypsies. And we need to do something. Find something. He says to always go on feelings, so that’s where I’m at now. I’m waiting for him to make the next move.”

“Well, I hope he does and I hope you find what you’re looking for.” He stretches his arms to the ceiling, end-of-the-day tired, as always. “Maybe you’re ready to take that step we talked about.”

“When you see me with a pink balloon,” I say, “that’s when I’ll be ready.”

\*\*\*

As it turns out, The Balloon Man does not show up. Not the next day, or the next day, or the next day, and on into April. The days have been muggy and rainy, and I wonder if he’s even gone to the parks at all. Maybe he’s inside his house thinking about his friends, or his mother in space, or his invisible father, or all the magic he possesses but does not know why. I consider that I made up the whole balloon thing, that it’s all in my mind and the balloons are not magic at all, but that does not explain why so many park-goers have had the same experience. Still, The Balloon Man backed out of our agreement for whatever reason. Now, we are both lost floating stars forevermore. This works for me in a more-comfortable-standing-on-the-edge-of-the-cliff-rather-than-jumping sort of way.

I sit in the backroom at Tie-Dye Me on a rainy April afternoon, my journal in my lap as my father removes long Tie-Dyed skirts from a cardboard box. These skirts are not all deep colors, but pastels: pink, blue, yellow. It's like an Easter skirt, which I'm just now realizing is probably because of the upcoming spring season. Newborn things, baby blues, chick yellow, little girl pinks. As I watch him and then let my eyes run over my prior journal entries, I make a strange connection. There is nothing else I can do but jot down my current thoughts before they disappear into the incense-scented air of Tie-Dye Me.



My father heads out to stock the skirts in the main part of the store, and I close my journal right there and let out a sigh. A song called “White Room” by a band called Cream comes on the store stereo, and my dad yells for me to turn it up. Lizzie Fry’s mother won’t like it, although even I have to admit it wouldn’t kill her to rock her head around until her glittery earrings start to jingle like mad crazy bells. The thought makes me laugh, so as I crank the song, I bounce my head to the beat and swish my hair around until my brain feels like melted cheddar. When the song slows a touch, I look up from the stereo and see my father standing in the doorway.

“You are your mother’s daughter,” he says and laughs his raspy smoker laugh. “Also of note, someone called Ripley is here to see you.” He tosses his thumb back as my cheeks burn in embarrassment.

“Ripley?”

“The blond kid,” he replies. “He’s holding two pink balloons.”

“The Balloon Man is here? With pink balloons?” I quickly smooth my hair, tuck the long, messy strands behind my ears.

“You look fine,” he says.

But I don’t really hear him because my brain has gone from melted cheddar to echoey fishbowl. In an effort to keep my journal from disappearing again, I close it in one of my father’s lower desk drawers, then head out to see why The Balloon Man is here. I know why he’s here, but for some reason it doesn’t matter. I’m just riding a sunbeam that he’s here to see me at all.

Out in the store, the music is still blaring, almost uncomfortably. Lizzie Fry's mom has taken cover, pretending to move treats around while hiding beneath the glass shelving of her UnicornTreats station.

"Hi!" I say over the music.

The Balloon Man cringes and waves over the ringing guitar of The Who's "Pinball Wizard," making one of the pink balloons shake and bob in the middle of the store. He gestures outside, and while I know my father hates to run the register, I note that there are not many customers due to the rainy day. He should be okay, and this is confirmed when he waves me off from where he stands behind the counter. I follow The Balloon Man out of the store, into the chilly gray drizzle of a late-April day.

"Wow," he says. "It was loud in there."

I let out a laugh as he walks down the sidewalk, seemingly with no particular path in mind. The area is normally pretty touristy and congested, but because of the weather today, there are just a few regular shoppers and maybe an older person here and there. Across the way is Johnson's General Store, a cute little shop that sells candy, cheese, candles, soaps, and fudge. It's dead over there today, so I just spy the colorful candles through the wet shop window and try to figure out a good place to stop and talk with The Balloon Man.

"Over by The Christmas Wish there's a bench," I say. "Would you like to sit there?"

He nods, his bangs not yet nearly soaked through, but covered in spots of light drizzle. If the sun were to suddenly come out, I think he'd be a spotty rainbow.

We continue on, until we reach The Christmas Wish a few stores up. They sell mainly Christmas ornaments here, but they also have Christmas decor, religious items, and stocking

stuffers. In our view from the bench, as we both sit, there's a dazzling display of silver glittering ornaments in the window of the shop. An old-fashioned Santa waves from out on the store's front steps, but The Christmas Wish is a dead-zone today, too. Even in the spring and summer, they normally have a booming business going on in there. Christmas, anytime of year, is always a favorite.

"This is called Redfield Village, right?" he says.

I reply in the affirmative. Michlin isn't too far away, but far enough that he might not be so familiar with Redfield Village. I wonder how long the smalltalk will continue, but he just jumps right into it and passes over a pink balloon.

"I brought two," he says, and I ignore that this is obvious. "So we could both have one instead of sharing one."

"Wait," I say as he attempts to tie the string to my wrist. "What took you so long?"

"Thinking on things."

He ties the string to my wrist, pulls to secure it, and sits back on the bench.

"Let me wrap yours," I say.

"I'm not wearing a pink balloon."

"Why not?" I could point out that he's carrying it anyhow. What's the difference if it's tied to his wrist? "You're The Balloon Man."

"The Balloon Man?"

"Yeah," I return, and by his expression, I can tell he's not exactly fond of the title. "That's what I've always called you."

"Wow," he says. His favorite word.

“Are you going to tell me that’s something a twelve-year-old would say?”

“I could,” he says and shakes some water out of his hair. “But you already said it, so you’re already aware.”

The sky turns from gray to pearl, and for a moment, the drizzle ebbs. The Balloon Man gazes up, another favorite of his, and notes the slight change in weather conditions. In my mind, I hop across the street and watch us from afar, two crazy blonds, sitting on a wood bench under a pearly sky, both of us holding pink balloons. Circus folk in the rain. Twin Carnival Gypsies. From my outside view, I also realize The Balloon Man is not in his uniform of jeans and white collared shirt, but wearing the blue sweatshirt I saw in his bedroom. The deep blue brings out the tropical blue-green beauty of his eyes.

“Chamomile?” he says, and I shake my head to return to the bench.

“Sorry,” I say. “I get a bit dreamy in the rain. So does this mean that you’re going to find out who you are?”

“It’s weird,” he says. “Nobody has ever really pushed me to do this. Not even myself.” He looks at his balloon, closes his eyes for a second. “The first time I realized that the balloons were . . . that they were special, was that first spring. They kicked me out of Well’s Park—a guy told me I couldn’t give out the balloons anymore—but about two weeks later I went back. That guy wasn’t there anymore, so I just tried to keep dodging anyone who looked official.”

“I didn’t know they kicked you out,” I reply. “That must have been hard for you.”

“I was drawn to the park, so I couldn’t stop going,” he goes on. “So around that time, this old lady—she reminded me of my grandmother but with glasses—asked for a balloon. It was mostly kids up until that point, and kids almost always have a color request. This lady was the

first one who didn't request a color. She, maybe on instinct, knew that I could give her what she needed. Inside my mind, I pictured a white balloon. It just popped in my mind."

"No pun intended?"

He sighs but then smiles. "So I gave her the white balloon."

He rests all the way back on the bench. Lets his head dip backward.

"What happened?" I ask.

"She came back a week later to tell me that the balloon helped her make peace with her daughter. That the white balloon . . . it spoke of peace and making amends. Her daughter was really, really sick, and . . ."

He doesn't finish. But I know.

"The balloons took on a life of their own," he says at length.

"So we're in agreement that they're magic."

Again, no response. But I know.

"Listen," I start. "I've been thinking about all of this, and it seems like you have two mysteries here. You don't know why the balloons are magic and why you were drawn to do this, and you don't know your father. In my experience, mysteries are connected."

"You have experience with mysteries?" he says, and I am blessed with another one of his rare Balloon Man smiles.

"Not really, no," I reply. "But I have a feeling here. With a quick, purposeful movement, I knock my pink balloon against his.

"So . . . what do you think the balloons are telling us?"

“It’s a call to adventure,” I reply. “I can’t explain it, but it’s how I’ve always felt. Especially when I held the pink balloon the first time.”

“Maybe.” He nods and exhales, letting something release into the air. “I have to trust their magic, even if it has to do with me.” He shifts in the bench and removes a thick envelope from his pocket. “Besides the balloons and my grandmother, this is the most important thing in my life.” He checks again to make sure it’s not raining anymore. “It’s the letter my mother left me when she died.”

He doesn’t remove the letter. The envelope is plain white with no writing on it, and I get the feeling he didn’t bring the letter to read it to me, but as evidence of something. It’s important somehow.

“You don’t have to . . .” I start.

“It’s not an easy thing,” he says. “Let’s just say my mother purposely ingested something that didn’t agree with her. But she left me this long letter about life, about how much she loved me, and about my father.”

“So you do know something about him.”

“I told you I had one or two clues.” He slips the envelope back into his pocket as the sky darkens overhead. “You told me the first day I gave you a balloon that you were intrigued by what I did with the balloons, but you don’t know the half of what makes me weird.”

“I like weird,” I say. “I drive around trying to find it every night.”

“Okay,” he says and chuckles. “So what if I told you that I have a starting point.”

I tilt my head in question.

“I’ve tried to call this place before, but I never had any leads.” He knocks the pocket of his jeans, indicating the letter. “Apparently I was the product of a one night stand.”

“Oh,” I say, and just like with his grandmother who doesn’t talk and his mother who died, I’m not really sure what to say, what to ask, or how to handle it. “So, what place?”

“The Sorrell Hotel,” he says. “That’s where I’m going to start. In the letter, my mother said that was where she met my father and spent a night with him. I was born nine months later.”

“That’s great!” I reply. “So you know where she met him, and you can go from there.”

He nods, his expression changed to something lighter. “That was the first clue, and the second clue is the only reason why I believe your theory about the connection between the balloons and my father.”

He removes the envelope from his jeans again, and to my surprise, he starts to open the flap. He pulls out the letter his mother left him, a regular-looking letter in blue ink on white-lined paper, and flips to the end. The last page has no writing, but something else instead, inked in color—a green hypnotist’s spiral with a blue eye set in the center. It is unmistakably mysterious and magic all at once.

“She copied it from a pin he wore or something,” he says. “I don’t think she even knew his name.”

“Oh my God,” I say and eye the eye on the symbol. “This is incredible. I mean, maybe this symbol is at the hotel, right? How long have you known all of this?”

“Since she left the letter when I was eight,” he replies as he folds up the letter. “And like I said, I tried to find information by phoning the hotel, but no leads. My mother stayed there in

ninety-four and the hotel doesn't seem real fancy. They don't have any computer records of my mother, and without a name, I can't find anything on my father, either."

"But you have a place to start," I remind him. "Like you said."

"I'm going to go there and see what happens, yeah," he says. "Another reason it took me a while. I didn't want to leave Gram. But I've had a long talk with her and . . . she understands."

So The Balloon Man has his adventure. As he awkwardly tries to replace the envelope while holding his pink balloon, I glance at The Christmas Wish. With the weather clearing into something that resembles a silver-gold spring day, the street is filling with people. Still mostly older people, but a few middle-aged couples. One younger couple with a toddler walk to The Christmas Wish and the little girl pats Santa on his head. The parents laugh and they all disappear inside. Way down the road, two guys turn into Tie-Dye Me.

"You better get back," The Balloon Man says. "I just wanted you to know all of this, and to say thank you. I'll let you know what I find out. I mean, you're part of the thing, right?"

We both glance at our pink balloons at the same time.

"Yeah," I say, and it comes out kind of sad.

The Balloon Man stands and offers me a handshake. When our hands touch, there is magic there, not in the sense of the mysterious hocus-pocus magic that I love and crave, but in the friendship that we just secured with our talk and our connection to the pink balloon. I'm a part of the adventure, indirectly, and I'm happy for him that he's going to do this. Happy he'll find out who he is, hoping he finds the answers.

We walk back to Tie-Dye Me slowly, with a purposeful drag, and the scent of frying onions and something sizzling and spicy drifts through the air from Heart of Habanero, a

Mexican restaurant in the village. I inhale the scent, watch our pink balloons as they stream through the air, and inwardly whisper a secret wish that The Balloon Man would never leave. All too soon, we stop at the door of Tie-Dye Me. The music does not seem so loud in there anymore, and from where I stand, I can just see my father standing behind the register, his shoulders slouched.

“Good luck,” I say to The Balloon Man.

“I’ll be back,” he says. “For all I know, this could be a dead end like last time.”

I shake my head. “You’re going to find him,” I say. “Find yourself. I just have a feeling.”

“I always say to—”

“—go on feelings,” I interrupt. “Yeah, I know.”

He smiles, turns to leave.

I’ve got my hand on the door handle of Tie-Dye Me when he spins back.

“You want to get some dinner with me?” he says. “It smells incredible around here.”

“Really?”

He nods. “We can talk about the trip,” he replies. “The Sorrell Hotel is in Connecticut, so maybe we can make up a travel plan.”

So with a stupid smile that screams a thousand yeses, and a day that has turned from spring drizzle to breaking golden sunlight, I consent to dinner with The Balloon Man. We leave our pink balloons inside Tie-Dye Me, and head down the pathway of the village to Heart of Habanero, talking of Mexican food, adventures, hotels, lost fathers, and new beginnings.

Cammié's Journal 22 April

*All day I dreamt, so I'm just writing now at nearly midnight, Saturday. Yesterday marks a turning point for me. I found a new friend. And if you can believe this, my new friend is The Balloon Man himself. He asked me to a Friday night dinner, which lasted well into the evening. We stayed talking in Heart of Habanero for a long time, surrounded by baskets of tortilla chips, bowls of salsa, and plates of burritos and guacamole. The air was scented with onions and peppers, orange light enveloped us, and cheery Mexican music made a nice change from 60's and 70's rock. It was the best night I have had in a long time, and I can only compare the feeling of having someone my own age to talk to again with the sensation of relaxing in a sparkling pool of familiar moonlight.*

*The Balloon Man likes spicy food. He does not eat sour cream with his burrito, which I found strange but oddly endearing. When he smiles, his eyes light up and become glittering oceans of tropical blue light. He likes to talk about his grandmother. He likes to talk about his friends Charlie and Belly, who have left his life but also left an indelible mark on his heart and soul. He does not possess anything of meanness or spite. He is a space man and lost star. He is almost too perfect to be real, and during dinner, I was even afraid he might pop away from existence.*

*We planned out his trip to Connecticut to The Sorrell Hotel, where he hopes to find clues about who he is. After that we laughed about some of the clientele of Tie-Dye Me, and talked more about Charlie, Belly, and Lizzie. He apologized for not learning more about her at his house that*

*night. He was preoccupied, he claimed, the entire time I was at his house. About what he did not say, but I suppose it had to do with the adventure I was pushing him toward.*

*There is also the mysterious business of the spiral symbol left behind . . . like a clue on a treasure map. The Sorrell Hotel first, the symbol second, and onward until we find the X that marks his father. I cannot imagine my father as a symbol. Maybe a gray swirl of smoke, maybe a tie-dyed musical note, maybe a lonely-hearts club sticker. But this isn't about me. This is about The Balloon Man and the adventure he's about to take, the lives he's about to join. A lost star finding his way back to a star that does not even know he is out in the universe. I almost wish my star would stick to The Balloon Man's. That our two pink balloons were magnetic.*



## Chapter Eight

My father is out at Kirk's Bar with his buddies Pete and Frank. He does this on Saturday nights, but this time it's lasting a long time so I'm left entertaining the awkward thought of my dad getting lucky. We have always been open about the topic of sex, but in this context, wondering where he is on a Saturday night, it's not resting too well with me. I'm not sure where he is or if he's okay. But just as I contemplate texting him, the door of the apartment creaks open and heavy footsteps fill the middle-of-the-night silence. With a glance at my phone to note the time as 2:16, I head into the living room. What I find there constitutes as an ungodly mess of a human.

He's crashed on the couch, spread out on his belly, arms dangling over cushions, face planted into the fabric. He's wearing jeans and a black t-shirt, but I can't see which shirt it is exactly because he's facedown drunk. From past evaluation of his shirts, I would say it's a beer shirt of some kind, but he does own a lot of t-shirts. Hesitantly, I creep up to him and tap his shoulder.

"Alive or dead?" I whisper.

"Dead," he replies.

"All right," I say. "How about we get you to bed?"

No response. It is not often that this kind of thing happens. He comes home drunk occasionally, but not the type of drunk where he's not even able to move off the couch and haul his rear to bed. For a few moments I contemplate my next move: leave him there cold, fetch a

blanket and let him wake up with a stiff neck, or get the guy into the comfort of his own bed. I choose option C.

“Dad,” I say and pull on his arm, which weighs a gazillion tons. “Let’s go.”

After a few minutes of tugging, I get him to a sitting position, and finally, to something that resembles standing. He is not vertical but sideways, not focused but saggy-eyed, not stable but sailor-ship tilting.

“Betcha have a suitcase going,” he says. “Betcha ready to go.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I say, and drape his arm over my shoulder to guide him to his room. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

When we get to his room, I click on the light so we don’t stumble, and he falls down on the bed in the same graceful manner as he had fallen onto the couch. Beside his bed are photos, which is one of the only homey things we have around here. Most of the pictures are school photos of me, but there is one of the three of us at a Grateful Dead tribute band concert taken when I was six. I’m sitting on a raggedy maroon blanket with my parents on either side of me, and I’m wearing a tie-dye shirt that is a little snug around my belly. My mother is holding a beer and smiling, wearing a long black skirt and a funky black hat. My father is looking right at me.

“Why did you do this?” I whisper to him. “How did you get home?”

“Dave the bartender’s friend,” he mutters back. “I’m going to write a song called ‘The Bartender’s Friend.’ Big hit.”

“Yeah,” I say and try to get covers around him but he’s flat on them. “Get some sleep now, okay? I’ll make you some coffee in the morning.”

I’m about ready to click off the light when he grunts.

“She call?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes,” I say.

“You answer?”

“No,” I reply. “Of course I didn’t.”

His head rises slowly, and he gazes at the family picture in Dead Head Land.

“Is that what this is about?” I ask. “You got drunk because you’re upset that she’s seeing someone new?”

“Lotta women with suitcases,” he says. “Girls and women.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, so I just nod and click off the light.

“You think it was all her fault,” he says. “That I was the perfect man for her, that I was a perfect man at all. But God, Cammie, I made mistakes.”

Through the darkness, his shadow falls back to the pillow.

“I never said you were perfect,” I reply softly. “Nobody is perfect. But nobody deserves to be cheated on, either.”

He might reply; something verbal and sad leaves him, but I don’t understand it. I don’t hear it at all.

\*\*\*

I have purchased a small little going away present for The Balloon Man. Across the village, there’s a store that sells books and magazines. It’s a small store, smells like pages and coffee, but because it’s in the village it does well, I suppose. Toward the back of the store there was a section on space, so I found this book kit with a star guide, including a map. He probably has something like this already, but I’ll take the chance. It’s the perfect gift.

We exchanged phone numbers and social media info at Heart of Habanero that night at dinner, so I quickly send over a text that I want to meet him at Michlin Park tonight, at sunset. Our set plan was that he would leave Wednesday, which is 26 April. Today is Monday, so that means in only two days, the man will depart from my life indefinitely. He could be back in a day or two, back in the parks with his cart and his colors. Or he could find his father, as I am nearly certain he will, and begin some new life. Maybe he has a family he doesn't know about out there. Maybe he will fill a hole for someone they never even knew they had. He tends to do this: gift colors, fill holes.

But then I remember he still has his grandmother here in Massachusetts, so even if he decides to push his balloon cart in some faraway park, he will still come back home at some point. He might even come to see me to say thank you for setting him on his star path. I'm not sure what will happen, but my instinct from the beginning was that an adventure awaits, one that I would be part of somehow. I'm not taking the credit for his journey or what he finds out there, but I do consider that I was the start of the balloon flight and was meant to be all along.

The Balloon Man texts back yes, that he wanted to see me before he left anyhow. He tells me to be at Michlin Park at sunset. This type of outing is the normal time for my nightly roundabouts of the land, so my father will understand the delay in dinner. He is not in good spirits after the drunken episode of Saturday night/Sunday morning. Mrs. Fry has given up trying to talk with him today, and in order to avoid any queries I've busied myself with pricing long light-up things that may or may not be sex toy related.

When the sky outside shows the first signs of a dying day, I announce to my father that I am picking up dinner—two turkey sandwiches from The Redfield Deli. He waves me off from

the backroom as though I just told him I was really going to meet The Balloon Man and probably wouldn't be back for a while. So, we're on the same page. I grab my journal, The Balloon Man's space book, and then search around for my keys at the bottom of my pocketbook. This takes another five minutes.

As I drive to Michlin Park, the sun has just begun to fill the horizon with a line of golden glow. At the red light before the park I glance at the space book, which I've wrapped in some tie-dye wrapping paper I found in the backroom of the store. This stuff isn't stocked out in the store, I don't think, but it should be. It's just that cool. As soon as I realize the light has changed to green I pull up ahead, turn into the park, and find a parking space but nearly miss a straight park between the lines because something catches my eye from the bridge.

Floating in the air, backed by an orange splatter of sunset, are two pink balloons, tied to the railing of the bridge.

As I exit the car, wondering what's going on, the balloons knock together in the faint breeze. I gaze around looking for The Ballon Man, wondering where he is, but he is no where to be found. Hesitantly, I step onto the bridge, carrying the space book in one hand, my pocketbook thrown over my shoulder. When I approach the balloons, I notice there's a slip of paper tied to one of the strings, balancing just on the railing. The paper says: *Come with me?*

I press my hand to my mouth and look around. There's only three people in the park: a couple walking in the distance and a middle-aged female jogger dressed in teal. The jogger is just making her way over the bridge and spies my balloons in curiosity, tilting her head, panting, and slowing her pace slightly as she jogs to the parking lot. As she runs into the lot, a black SUV

pulls up, and I realize that he must have been watching me from afar. He maneuvers around the jogger, parks, and steps out of the SUV.

When he approaches, I have the strange sensation of flightiness and lift-off. Like going up in a hot air balloon. New adventure, new beginning. It's the same sensation I had when I first held my pink balloon. Back then the trees were colorful buds, today they are filled with green, newborn leaves that make a sizzling sound in the breeze. The Balloon Man stops in front of me on the bridge, eyes expectant for an answer I do not yet feel ready to give.

But I knew the question was coming.

We lock eyes for a few moments, balloons dancing behind us, water dribbling by beneath us. The park becomes our private room. The two lost stars have collided inside this room—collided with fierce fiery force inside walls of green, beneath a ceiling orange and infinite. The answer swims around inside me and I push it down, down, down to where it's easier to deal with, but that's not quite what I want, either. Inside my mind I curse. Stomp it all down, let it drown. But then it violently swims to the surface and I can't fight it away any longer.

“Yes,” I whisper.

He smiles. Lets out a long, long exhale.

I smile back and then lower my head. I'm mourning something here, but I don't know what, until I look at the space book, think of the village, think of Tie-Dye Me, think of my father.

“I know it's crazy,” The Balloon Man says at length. “I know we just met, and that this is . . .”

“I've known you for two springs and summers,” I say. “If you want to get technical about it.”

We share another smile, then he moves to untie the balloons. For a moment I watch, and with a sudden thought and a craving for advice that I cannot control, my mother's face flashes through my mind. I want to talk to her, just now. I want to ask if this is the right move, if this is what I really want, if this is part of some larger plan, if I should leave my father and the store and Mrs. Fry. I want to ask her how to act around this guy: Am I the mild tulip, the thorny rose, or the happy sunflower? For a second I consider asking Mrs. Fry for advice, but it seems like that would be like a sip of water when you're craving the satisfaction of rich fruity juice.

"Wednesday at noon," he says and hands me one pink balloon. "I'll pick you up at the store. Pack for . . . pack for an undetermined length of time. I'll pay what I can."

"I have some money in my savings," I say.

"Me too," he says. "My savings is funding the trip, but I don't know how far it will get us. The Sorrell Hotel is not exactly fancy, but it's not free, either."

I nod. Who knows where we'll end up? What we'll find? And God, I get to be there when this all happens. It's a dream. It's crazy. It's everything I want but everything that leaves me terrified.

"Oh," I say, remembering. "Here's the going away gift I got for you. I mean, now I'm coming, but . . . I don't know. You give out so many free balloons. You deserve a gift for that."

"I don't do it for any reward or gift."

"I know," I say as he takes the gift. "That's why you should get one."

He rips off the wrapping paper, and his eyes light up when he sees the book, making me certain he does not have one of the same at home. I explain the book kit, tell him there's a star map, and ask him to take it along on the trip, to which he agrees.

“Thank you,” he says. He holds his pink balloon by its string, the book cradled in his other hand. “Is there anything I should know about before we leave? Anything you need?”

I shake my head. “You?”

“You should probably know that I’m up all night studying.” He takes a step backward. “I did get us separate rooms at the hotel, I mean, but . . .”

“Wait,” I say and hold up a hand. “You booked a room for me before knowing I would say yes?”

He smiles sheepishly. “I was hoping,” he says. “I took a gamble.”

We share a laugh, and the sun dips lower, chilling the area surrounding us. The couple I saw roaming the park earlier approach and cross the bridge, glancing at our balloons.

“Will you take your balloon cart?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder, watching the couple depart to the parking lot.

“You should,” I say. “Just in case.”

“Just in case what?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Just in case.”

He nods. “Text me if there’s anything you need before then.”

With a slight awkward nod and a walk to the parking lot in silent reflection, we part ways until Wednesday.

That leaves me one full day to find a way to break the news to my father.

## Chapter Nine

Tuesday night, my father and I are at the apartment, situated in different locations. We ate at the store, so tonight we're just basically here at the apartment to unwind and to sleep. He is out in the living room, watching a sitcom but not laughing, still brooding from the weekend. I put this off as long as I could. Now, I need to pack up stuff for tomorrow. In the back of my closet there's an old yellow suitcase, decorated in fake stamps from different countries. It might have been my mother's, and while I was hoping for something cooler to take along, the suitcase works. I open it on my bed, glance at the doorway toward the living room, and sigh before setting my resolve to do the deed.

Out in the living room, my father is slouched on the couch, his hand resting on his blue tie-dyed Led Zeppelin shirt. In the many years I've been with my dad, not as a full family but just the two of us, I never envisioned this scene. It is not an easy task, telling your father you're leaving for a bit, especially when you are not only his only kid, but also his employee. There is something that goes much deeper in this departure, and it's just now that I'm understanding his behavior the last few days.

"Dad?" I say.

He turns down the volume on the remote, then places it on the end table. Our TV is old. We've had it since the days my mother was around, when we lived in a townhouse on the other side of Redfield. We have always rented, and we rented the townhouse, but most of the furniture was my mother's from growing up or receiving family hand-me-downs. This is why our furniture

here at the apartment is so dumpy and sparse. What we have is the store. What my mother has is the good furniture.

“What is it, Cammie?” He pats the couch for me to sit, and I do.

“I wanted to talk to you about something.” I turn to face him, but his gaze remains on the television. “Do you remember Friday night when I went out to dinner with The Balloon Man and he said he was going on a trip to find his identity? That he had some clues about his past and his father, and I kind of pushed him to find out why he is . . . the way he is?”

“Uh-huh,” he replies as a partial grunt.

“He’s asked me to come with him on the trip. We leave tomorrow at noon.”

“Uh-huh,” he says again.

He reaches for the remote, clicks off the television, and stands. Without saying anything else, he stomps to his bedroom and slams the door.

The sound reverberates through the apartment, through my stomach. This is a man who has never been mad at me, only gave me the occasional lecture about forgiving my mother. A man who has “Make Love Not War” stickers pasted in the backroom of Tie-Dye Me. A man who listens to John Lennon’s “Imagine” on repeat when there’s any bad thing in the news.

I sit in silence for a few seconds, a sad, unsettling vibration under my skin, until a neighbor next door closes a kitchen cabinet in her apartment and the sound through the walls startles me. Then I retreat to my bedroom, stare at the yellow suitcase, and try to decide if I should text The Balloon Man that I’m not coming. That my father is holding me back . . . but why is he holding me back? Didn’t he tell me he would be okay without me if I ever wanted to make this leap? Something of the heat and anger from that thought flows in my veins, a newborn

type of body sensation, and I stomp to his bedroom with as much force as he did and bang on the door.

“Dad!” I say. “Open the door right now! I want to talk to you!”

He opens the door, stares at me.

“You told me you would be okay without me,” I remind him. “You told me it was time to grow up, time to take this step. You *told* me.”

He opens the door wider. “What I meant was that I wanted you to take some college courses because you’re ridiculously smart. I wanted you to talk to your mother, for God’s sake, and stop acting like an immature teenager about the whole thing. I did *not* mean I wanted you to go off on some trip with a strange guy who walks around handing out balloons to little kids and girls he finds attractive!”

I step backward, silent. There is no rebuttal here, nothing that springs to mind to defend myself or my actions. It’s all true: I don’t know The Balloon Man very well. We talked a few times, I went to his house for a short stay, and we had one dinner together. Still, there’s a connection between us that has been there from the first time I saw him in the park. If you believe in such things—I was the push he needed, the right person at the right time.

“You knew I was journaling about him,” I reply, soft. “You knew I was going to see him and that we were making a connection. I’m trying to do the right thing here for someone and trying to do something on my own. Isn’t that what you want me to do? How you’ve raised me?”

He lowers his head. “True, Cammie,” he says. “True.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “I love you and I love the store. I don’t want to leave you, but please understand that this might not be for long at all. You’re looking at me leaving home as some sort of metaphor, and it’s not.”

“Okay,” he says. “You’re right. I have no right to keep you here with me or at the store or push you to grow up or do anything else. You have to find these things out on your own.” He sniffs. “You’re twenty years old, and I can’t stop you. What I *can* do is make sure you’re safe and make sure you’re making the right decisions. I’d like to talk to the kid for a bit before you go. Would that be all right? Any parent would ask that.”

He’s not any parent. But because he’s being responsible for the first time in my life, I should probably give his request the green light. “Sure,” I say. “I’ll text him to let him know. But *please* don’t be hard on him, Dad. Trust my instincts that he’s a good guy, just a lost soul.”

He chuckles. “It’s like you don’t know me at all, Gypsy Girl.”

I smile up at him, and the argument ends with a hug.

So with tears streaming down my cheeks, and eyes so blurred I can barely tell the difference between my wrap-around green shirt and my long forest-print skirt, I pack my yellow suitcase, waiting for the sun to rise on Wednesday.

\*\*\*

Police investigators have nothing on my dad. He’s been in the backroom of Tie-Dye Me with The Balloon Man for nearly ten minutes, and I all but expect to hear torture shouts and squeals of pain any moment. For all I know, and I have to admit I have laughingly envisioned this, the backroom is now filled with DNA kits, notepads, spotlights, lie detectors, and even one

of those mirrors that only one person can see through. After fifteen tense minutes, my father finally emerges, and I hold my breath until I see The Balloon Man trailing behind him.

“All set,” my father says.

“I’m clear to leave?”

“Uh-huh,” my father replies. “Ripley will take good care of you.”

“Ripley?”

“That’s me,” The Balloon Man says from behind my dad.

“I know what your name is.”

The Balloon Man shifts his eyes, skeptical, then jingles some keys. “We better get going,” he says.

Nodding, I start to make the rounds, hugging Mrs. Fry goodbye and whispering that she should tend to my father as much as possible, then sniffing the incense-scented tie-dye scarves in the center of the store, before finally making my way to my dad. He does not hug me at first, just scoots me around in a little dance, passes me under his arm in our traditional dance move, and then squeezes my hand. Then I’m subjected to a hippie hug that lasts forever before lifting my yellow suitcase and waving from the glass front door, nearly tripping in my haste to say a proper lasting joyful goodbye.

“I’ll text all the time!” I say. “Don’t forget to stock the little Volkswagen buses, and remember that the village is sending out those coupons. The code is—”

“I know what to do,” my father replies from the register. “Get going, will ya?”

With a last smile, a last wave, and an unsettling but spectacular tug of adventure and newness at my chest, I’m out the door of Tie-Dye Me.

\*\*\*

On the road, we talk about my father's interrogation to break the ice. It wasn't too bad, The Balloon Man says, mostly questions about his past, his family, his intentions, and his future aspirations. What his future aspirations have to do with my safety I don't know; I can only imagine here that my father wanted a full picture before letting me go away indefinitely with someone who is a virtual stranger to the family. The Balloon Man says my father told him that one day he'll be a father and he'll understand the questioning. Parenting, supposedly, changes your overview of the world, pricks up ears and sharpens eyes.

The SUV is comfortable. It's an older make but has some amenities, like cup holders, a good radio, and a multitude of cool buttons. I ask The Balloon Man where he got the car, and he says it was a sixteenth birthday present, purchased with some of the money left behind after his grandfather died. His grandmother had money in the savings, they needed a car for him as she was aging, and someone in the family had this for sale. So this is what he ended up with. It worked out well, he says, because he can haul his balloon cart around with ease.

This type of smalltalk goes on as we drive down highway 91 toward Connecticut. He's a slow, careful driver, and the day is bright and blue with only a passing cloud here and there to break up the slideshow of a lovely spring afternoon. I think of my journal, in my suitcase like a stowaway, and what I will write in my room at The Sorrell Hotel tonight. I wonder how much we will find, and what The Balloon Man even hopes to achieve on this first day of our pink balloon adventure.

“Are you nervous?” I ask, and realize from his expression, which has changed from bright to cloudy, that it might have been too soon to get into the specifics of the trip. Probably should have asked favorite books or TV shows.

“It took me almost twenty-three years to do this,” he replies. “I couldn’t even tell you why I’m doing it now, other than—”

“Some crazy girl made you.”

“You said it, not me,” he replies. “And you didn’t make me. I mean, I *blame* you, but I mean that in the best possible way.”

“Can I ask you a personal question?”

“You always do,” he says and slips into the left lane.

“Did Charlie and Belly know about the magic balloons?”

“Didn’t we talk about that?” He pulls back into the right lane after passing a gold car. Gold cars always go slow. “No, they left before I really headed out with the balloon cart, and I never told them about it. That’s why I don’t do interviews, even though I’ve been asked three times.”

“For like the news?”

“Yeah,” he responds. “They’ve asked a few times to do a report about me for the nightly news, and once for a paper close to Boston.”

I had no idea he’d been up that far. “So you don’t want anyone to know you do it? That’s what you mean?”

He nods.

“And Gram?”

“Gram,” he says and looks as though he misses her already, “was surprised when I told her that the balloons seemed to speak to people. But yeah, she definitely knows what I do day to day.”

“And there was nothing else she knew about your dad?”

“No. She couldn’t know, because my mom didn’t know.”

We have little to go on, even if I’ve pretended that pieces were in place. When you look at the evidence, we have the name of a hotel and a symbol for something that might be nothing more than a drawing some random dude in a million enjoyed. When I first contemplated the adventure, it seemed like there were so many clues, and I did make myself believe, or entertained the instinct, that The Balloon Man would be gone for a while, finding his identity with ease. The truth is, looking at it all now, we’ll be lucky to find anything at all. But I have to stay hopeful for the both of us.

“So our plan as two is the same as your plan as one?” I ask. “This first night, we’re going to interview the staff and check the hotel inside and out?”

He nods. “Step one,” he replies. “Although I’m not expecting too much. The biggest clue we have is the green spiral symbol, so we have to interview and see if anyone recognizes it.”

“It’s possible that we can even ask who worked at the hotel in the nineties,” I say.

“Speaking of the nineties, how about some music?”

He reaches to turn on the radio.

“Ha,” I say. “I know nothing of this nineties music you speak of. My musical library only goes as far as seventy-nine.”

He laughs.

“Is this your favorite music?”

“Nineties alternative and rap,” he says.

“Really?” I can’t help but laugh, fall forward in the seat. “You’re The Balloon Man. You give out balloons to little kids. You don’t like alternative and rap.”

“You’re saying I can’t be a little edgy?”

“No.” I laugh. “No, no you really can’t.”

He responds by cranking the music, which is some echoey, guitar-heavy song about someone being a creep, and we carry on down the highway toward our destination.

## Chapter Ten

The Sorrell Hotel is a two-story building in northwest Connecticut. The name of the hotel is presented on a diamond shaped sign that hovers over the hotel and is visible way down the street. The top floors are connected by long private balconies and the front entrance of the hotel is decorated with white columns, making the place grand but not luxurious. It has a bit of oldness to it, maybe saw its heyday in the sixties or seventies, but it is not rundown or unpleasant in any way. Still, it does not have the appearance of a hotel in which two people would share a romantic night and then part ways, not even knowing each other's names. It is normal, not mysterious.

As we pull into the parking lot, I'm reminded, with a glance at The Balloon Man's loveliness, that this was the place he was conceived. He turns down the radio and I mention, playfully to break the tension, that I actually enjoyed the music he listens to. My father has stated on more than one occasion that any band formed after the seventies is not making true music. There is a sticker in the backroom of Tie-Dye Me that announces our one rule of the house: No Disco. So, even though The Balloon Man does not listen to eighties music or disco, I'm still in jeopardy of breaking some rule of my father's when it comes to musical selections. But I wasn't lying. I did enjoy the nineties music.

Beside us in the parking lot are at least two dozen motorcycles, some with bikers boarding and starting up with a roar and rumble. The Balloon Man glances at this, and I determine that some sort of biker's rally or special biker's ride is going on this week around here. A few bikes depart the parking lot and pull onto the main road, taking off with noisy engines.

“We get a lot of bikers in the store,” I say. “They look intimidating with all the leather and hair, but most of them are actually very nice people.”

“That’s fine,” he replies, and I sense the nervous vibe coming from him is not related to the bikers but to the hotel. “You want to come in with me to the lobby?”

I nod and hop out of the SUV, stretching my legs beneath my long skirt to relieve some of the cramping from sitting for so long. The Balloon Man waits for me, then we head toward the columns to a lobby lit up in gold. Through the glass doors, the place is much more sophisticated than anticipated. There are two staircases that curve up to the second floor, a centralized bouquet of flowers, an overhead skylight, and freshly vacuumed carpeting in a green and red diamond pattern. Toward the back of the lobby are two closed doors, white, with ornate gold etchings. We carry on to the front desk, where a dark-skinned bald man waits with a be-our-guest sort of grin.

“Checking in for Omen,” The Balloon Man says. “Two rooms.”

As the clerk takes The Balloon Man’s information and sets us up with room cards, I inspect the area for clues. There are no symbols I can see, nor anything that relates directly to the symbol we’re looking for, but I do pick up some brochures about attractions in the area. In this part of Connecticut, there’s a nearby railroad museum, hiking trails, something called The Big Daisy Flower Barn, specialty stores, and state parks. This makes me wonder what The Balloon Man’s mother was even doing around here. I make a mental note to ask later.

The Balloon Man finishes up at check-in, and we depart from the lobby. He makes a few comments about the hotel, mainly that it needs some updating but is okay, and we head off to find our rooms, numbers 35 and 36. These are downstairs, according to the man at check-in, at the far corner of the hotel. I was kind of hoping for an upstairs room, but I guess it doesn’t

matter: a hotel room is a hotel room. We part ways to get situated, and I find myself alone in a room, holding a yellow suitcase, my pocketbook, brochures, and a room card.

The room isn't bad, but like the rest of The Sorrell Hotel, it needs some updating. The back windows are heavily draped in maroon, while the comforter on the bed is a matching maroon and green, set in a diamond pattern like the lobby carpet and the hotel sign outside. There's a television inside what looks like a dresser or armoire, and a bathroom that is just to my left, with the normal bathroom stuff. The room smells fresh and clean, but it's a bit dim from the heavy drapes. All in all, it will serve its purpose.

I set up my suitcase on the bed, opening it to examine the contents and take out my journal. I sit down on the bed, and while I know I really don't have much time to spend jotting down my thoughts, going without writing for too long leaves my spirit somehow crippled. I'm a crawling ant until I can write and get my spirit flying like a butterfly again.

---

*Cammié's Journal 26 April*

---

*Part I of my Pink Balloon Adventure.*

*The Sorrell Hotel. Diamonds. Reds. Greens. Fresh Air. Brochures. Past Mysteries.*

*How can I sleep in this room, knowing this might be the very bed where The Balloon Man was brought to earth? His mother walked these halls before her death, before her pregnancy, before tragedy. A man once footed the same pieces of carpet . . . a man who may have resembled The Balloon Man in magic and mystery. How can I put these pieces together with precious few clues?*

I pause in the narrative to recall how I was conceived. When my parents were dating, my father lived over a pool hall with the owner of the place, a guy named Lou who needed a roommate. The story of my conception varies, depending on who tells the story. My father says they were high, my mother says spectacularly drunk, so I say they were both. But whatever the case, they both agree that I was conceived in that little apartment over the pool hall, music streaming below, the sound of pool sticks hitting cue balls, the smell of cigarette smoke and marijuana in the air. Given that I was brought into the world while two people were flying through space and colors, my personality makes so much sense.

*Tonight begins Part I of my adventure as the pink balloon starts its lift-off. The Balloon Man will sleep in the room beside me, a wall separating us, but otherwise, together as kindred spirits.*

*What I know is that the man is a fatherless son, a lost star, a gypsy, and I am his partner. Our quest sealed by—*

There's a knock on my room door, startling me. The pen shakes and I close the journal and run to the door, shouting out "Who is it?" and hoping it's my partner. He calls back to confirm and I open the door.

"Are you busy?" he says.

He glances at my journal and the open suitcase on the bed. It just now dawns on me that I take too long when I journal. I think out every word, making the process longer than is necessary. He was probably wondering where I was, because he doesn't know yet that I occasionally go MIA.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I had to get down some of my thoughts. It's the only way I can make sense of myself sometimes. I'm so scatterbrained that at times I think I'm going nuts."

"It's okay," he says. "Did you want to see my room and talk about our first move? I was thinking we could go to the lounge and start interviewing."

"The lounge?"

He gestures for me to grab my room card, and I pick that up plus the brochures, and follow him to his room. It's just beside mine, but the very last room on the bottom floor of the hotel. His room is the same design, with one centralized big bed and all the dimness, but it has a different energy. More energy. I situate myself on the bed, and he ruffles around in a black bag he has on the dresser before returning with the envelope I recognize as the one that contains the letter from his mother.

"You brought it?"

“Just in case we needed it,” he says. “So yeah, the lounge is in the lobby. It says that on the hotel map.”

“Oh,” I say, remembering. “I bet it’s beyond those white and gold doors, toward the back.” I scratch my head. “Do you think . . .”

“That’s where they met,” he says. “In the lounge. Has to be.”

I nod in agreement. Two strangers would have met in the lounge. Or at least, it’s the most likely scenario. I wonder how he feels in this moment, retracing their steps.

“I had an idea,” I say with hesitancy. “I mean, let’s go further back and try to find out why she was here at the hotel in the first place.” I set down the brochures. “Maybe something she did is important. Something in the area.”

He glances at the brochures and the letter, then shuffles through the papers. I know I shouldn’t be peeking at his personal letter, but it’s hard not to. I catch a few sentences like “sorry that I was such a weak woman” and “life will be cruel to you too” before he moves the papers on and on.

“There’s nothing in here that says what she was doing at the hotel,” he says finally. “But let’s assume it had to do with business or pleasure. And since she wasn’t much of a woman for going out and finding fun, let’s focus on business.”

“What did she do?”

He pauses, searches the air for answers. “She had a business degree,” he says finally. “Um, she worked at a property management place for a while after college, from what Gram has told me, but then she worked as manager of a clothes store just outside of Boston.”

“There’s some specialty stores in the area.” I knock my knuckles down on the brochure with the stores. “Maybe she was here to look for new clothes for the store or check out fashions? I know my father checks the inventory of similar stores.”

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s assume she was here for that reason, then.” He thinks on this, but I think we both realize that even though this might be the reason she was in the area, it does little to help us with our goal. “You want to head to the lounge?”

“Let’s get this party started.”

Outside in the parking lot, a few bikers sit idly on their bikes while sipping Dunkin Donuts coffees. We walk back to the lobby, where sure enough, through the white and gold doors is a lounge, lit in the similar gold lighting of the main lobby. In the corner is a small bar area with a TV broadcasting baseball, and I worry for a second that I’ll be carded. But then I see a couple with two kids near the window in the main area and I exhale in relief. How awful would it be to be carded when in the company of an older, legal guy?

We sit down near the kids and find a few menus on the table. The lounge does not serve too much in the way of healthy food, but they have some bar favorites like wings, rings, and sliders. A waiter with a ridiculously high man bun comes up to the table, and The Balloon Man orders a water and a plate of nachos. I ask for a ginger ale, hoping that quenches my thirst while making me look like someone who might normally enjoy a sophisticated mixed drink.

“We can share the nachos,” The Balloon Man says after the waiter departs. “Or would you rather—”

“The nachos sound good,” I reply. “We like spicy food, right?”

“We do,” he says and smiles.

I want to tell him that his smile is a lit candle, the yellow in a rainbow, the diamond shimmer on sunlit water, but I don't. I'm not sure how that would sound aloud. Thoughts are best left in private print. I'll note the details of The Balloon Man's smile in my journal later, and I will also note that I'm not sure how I'm feeling in this moment. Something feels changing.

"So would you like to start by interviewing the waiter?" I ask.

The Balloon Man nods, puts the menu back in place. "What do we ask?"

I'm just thinking on it when the waiter returns with water and my ginger ale, which is in a tall pretty glass and adorned with a stemmed cherry. I guess I do look like a kid trying to order a fancy drink. He sets the drinks down, mumbles a "here you go" and turns to walk away.

"Excuse me!" I say. "Can we ask you a few questions?"

The waiter pulls back, like someone just shined a flashlight in his eyes, and then scans the area. There is not much for him to do right now; the lounge is not nearly full.

"We were wondering how long you've worked here?"

"Since February," he says and comes back to our table. "Why?"

"Would you happen to know if anyone at the hotel has been here since the nineties? Like the owner of the place or something?"

His eyes shift right, his man bun tilts. "I think the hotel was put under new management in two-thousand-ten," he says finally. "My boss has been here since around then, I think. I could ask her. Why?" he asks again.

"We're just looking for something," I respond. "Could we talk to your boss?"

His eyes narrow in.

“Not to complain or anything. We’re just searching for something from around the nineties and we had to start somewhere.”

He nods, still looking unsure, and says he’ll go find his boss. When he leaves, The Balloon Man looks in awe of my interviewing skills. It gives me a little lift that I’ve impressed the man I’ve for so long been impressed with. I take a sip of ginger ale and shiver at the sweet sharpness.

“I knew I took you along for a reason,” he says. “I couldn’t have handled it so well.”

“I try to look around the straight lines.”

“I know you do,” he says back.

So we sip beverages until a woman appears from a side room near the bar. She has big, feathery hair in an eighties style and is wearing a Hillary Clinton type of red pant-suit. She heads for our table, and since I’ve taken the lead on the interviewing process, I decide to keep going.

“Can I help you with something?” she says, all smiles.

I ask how long she’s worked here, if she knows anyone who has worked here since the nineties, and all of the other questions that pertain to our quest. She is not helpful at all, just reiterates what Man Bun said, but does pause when I ask for the name of the original hotel owner.

“He died around twenty-twelve, I believe,” she says. “The best I could tell you is that his son grew up at the hotel and always had a special connection to it. You could contact him.” She holds her chin in thought. “Blakeley,” she says, and spells it out. “There are old papers around with that name. I believe both the father and son were called Robert.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “One last thing, if that’s okay. Do you remember any symbols around here like a swirly green spiral with a blue eye in the center?”

She shakes her head, shrugging.

We thank her again and she’s off toward the bar, noting that there are two uncleared place settings and probably getting ready to holler at someone.

“Robert Blakeley,” I say. “Ring any bells?”

“None,” The Balloon Man says back.

“Well, we can search for the name on the internet and try to contact him.”

Man Bun returns with our nachos—a huge plate of chips, melted multi-colored cheese, mashed beans, glistening meat, and veggies. We dig in, and I can’t help but notice the downcast expression of my Balloon Man.

“This is a dead end,” he says out of nowhere.

“Negativity does not win races,” I tell him, crunching on a chip. “We have a clue already, and that’s something.”

He nods, pulls up a nacho and a string of cheese.

“Tell me something,” I say. “What would make a person decide to have a one night stand?”

“Loneliness,” he responds, gazing toward the window while he chews. “Fun without strings, drunkenness, proving a point to someone, retribution.”

“Do any of those apply to your mother?”

I hope he sees what I’m getting at here. Knowing her reasons for staying at the hotel *and* her state of mind at the time might be important.

“My memories of her are vague,” he replies. “I couldn’t possibly know why she did what she did before I was born. But if I had to guess, I would say she was lonely. She always had a sense of loneliness and . . . sadness.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, noting how he hit the word *sadness*. “Do you think . . .”

“I remember her as the type of person who was quiet but diligent. Like one of those midwestern types who don’t talk much but get their jobs done. She took care of me like I was an orphan and she ran the orphanage. She never smiled.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, suddenly understanding why this guy first presented himself to me as a grumpy, lost soul with little humor in his heart. A guy who was probably out there making other people happy to appease or light something inside of himself. A guy who needs a balloon of his own. “Did you laugh at all as a family?”

“I laughed when I watched cartoons,” he replies and moves the platter of nachos toward me like he’s had enough though he barely ate. “And on my birthdays. Every year she got me a clown.”

“That was nice of her,” I say, though I suppose by his tone that it wasn’t nice. “You enjoyed the clown?”

“It was substitute happiness,” he replies. “Some guy called Bar Bar she brought in yearly because she was incapable of dancing or laughing or even smiling.” He stands up. “I’m going back to my room now.”

He throws down a twenty-dollar bill, and is gone.

## Chapter Eleven

The sunset over The Sorrell Hotel is syrupy, not like the sunset in Michlin or even Redfield. Through the window in the back of my room, I watch a brownish goo fall over the sky, slow, morbid. Then I turn back to my journaling and contemplate going over to see if The Balloon Man is okay. Instinct tells me he needs time alone, and that maybe digging up all of this stuff is not good for him. He's had his grandmother, Charlie, and Belly over the years to keep his spirits high, but now he's faced with his past with no safety net beneath him. I could be the net if only I knew how.

I set my journal down on the bed and pull some hair stuff out of my suitcase, hoping to take a quick shower because I'm bored. I brought along my cheap shampoo and my bandanas, my blue brush and my blow dryer, even though I rarely use that. I've just about gathered everything up when my phone dings in a text message. I've messaged my father a thousand times by now at least, but it would not surprise me if he texted for some stupid reason, like his toenail looks strange or he's sad because we live in an apartment and can't make a garden. But when I pull up my phone, I see that it is not my father who texted—it's Lizzie Fry.

Okay, so new development. The girl has decided to text me back after who knows how long of blowing me off. The text simply reads: *Sorry, Cams! I've been SO busy! How's it going?* She does not close the text with an apple, signifying that she has outgrown such things. I think on the message for a moment, wondering how to respond. Should I? I mean, how busy

could she have been? It takes all of five seconds to text someone unless you're a great-great grandmother or something. But I give in, if only out of curiosity.

*Going okay. Away right now in Connecticut.* I don't post an apple.

It is common knowledge that I don't often travel, so this has to pique her interest. Sure enough . . .

*Why in Conn?*

I text back: *Traveling with a guy I met in the park. Long story. Tell you another day.*

And that is all she's getting. I pick up my things, ignore her response of *What guy, Cams??* and hop in the shower, strangely satisfied.

\*\*\*

It's nearly eight-thirty when I finally decide to head next door. My hair is still slightly damp and I'm wearing my nightclothes—fluffy PJ bottoms with flowers all over them and a white tank. I'm also barefoot but it's right next door. Barefoot doesn't bother me, anyhow.

I knock on The Balloon Man's door, dodging the eyes of some of the bikers who are loitering in the parking lot, and wait for him to pull the door open. It's important to gauge his expression so I know whether he's okay now or I should wait until morning, even though we did have plans to interview more people tonight.

"You're dressed for bed?" he says and does a once over in the doorway.

"I can change if you wanted to do something else."

He lets me inside, where I notice he has a laptop set up on the bed.

“Doing schoolwork,” he says, watching me. “But I was just going to close that out and come see you. I have some news.” We situate ourselves down on his bed, and he closes the laptop. “I found Robert Blakeley and was able to call him.”

I sit forward, jaw dropped all stupid. “How?”

“He owns a locksmithing business in a town called Torrington here in Connecticut, so his contact info was right on the net.”

“Did he know anything?”

“I told him a little of my story, and maybe because it was about the hotel, he was really interested,” he replies. “He’s coming over in the morning to talk to us.”

“Oh my God!”

“Don’t get excited,” he says, smiling, which I’m glad to see. “This could be another dead end.”

He goes on to tell me that check-out is at eleven, but the rooms are available as of now if we still need them. Robert Blakeley is coming at nine in the morning, so we should try to wake up early, eat breakfast, and be ready for his interview at that time. I try to keep The Balloon Man in good spirits, try to keep him positive, but this latest development has actually done the heavy lifting for me—he’s bright and gleaming.

“So how about we go for a little tour around the hotel?” he says. “See what we can find in the lobby, walk where he walked, search for anymore clues.” He knocks my shoulder, and outside of our handshake, this is our first real contact. “Up for the adventure?”

“It’s why I came along,” I reply and hop off his bed.

\*\*\*

We walk around The Sorrell Hotel for a while, inspecting the lobby for clues like Sherlock Holmes with a trusty sidekick, combing the outdoor walkways that connect the lower rooms, even taking the curved staircases up to the second floor to walk that hallway. In my mind, they were up here, on this floor. In January, when The Balloon Man says they met, I bet the choice of rooms was open, and who wouldn't want to be upstairs with a balcony? I imagine his mother and father talking on a balcony, with a bright January moon above, making some kind of lost, lonely connection, and turning in for the night together. I wonder if The Balloon Man has the same love story running through his thoughts.

Nothing really pops up in our investigation, not the swirly symbol or anything else, but I'm guessing The Balloon Man didn't really think that would happen anyhow. I think he really just wanted to walk where they walked and take a time machine back to that night. And I'm pulled into the story without force, searching for something but I don't know what, just happy to be out and about and existing somewhere besides Tie-Dye Me, but missing it still. The Balloon Man announces that he wants a bite to eat, and we head back to the lounge, where it's busy. Men shout across the bar, couples sit sharing drinks and midnight snacks, and there's pop music pumping overhead.

"What a difference," I say as we sit at the same table.

"I wanted to apologize," he says and hands me a menu. "Get what you'd like. I'm sorry I ruined the nachos before. I was an idiot."

"No, no," I return. "I can't imagine what you're going through and what this is bringing up."

“I went into this with the attitude that I wasn’t going to let it all get to me,” he says. “Not her depression or her stupid letter. I went into this thinking only about finding my father. But I just can’t stop thinking about *her*.”

I place the menu down on the table, making a decision on some quesadillas, and then reach across to him. Gently, I rest my hand on his wrist. “It’s okay,” I say. “You’ve been through a lot, right?”

He closes his eyes, and I can’t tell if it’s my touch he’s responding to or if he’s upset about his life or his mom or what. I also have that same feeling I had earlier when we were in the lounge. That something is changing.

“Thanks for coming with me,” he says. “You being here, even though we’re really getting closed doors like I knew we would, is making it all a lot easier.”

I smile, and we order quesadillas and ginger ale, water and wings. Man Bun is gone for the day, and in his place is a cheery waitress with slick brown hair. She notes our order and disappears through the door by the bar.

“So do you normally drink?” I ask, wondering why he hasn’t ordered anything riskier than a water.

“Sometimes,” he says, shrugging. “I’ll have some wine with Gram on special occasions, or sometimes I drink a little something heavier when I go out with . . . people. I’m not a heavy drinker though, no.”

“People?” I ask. We’ve already established that Charlie and Belly, his only close friends, are gone. So that leaves me with only one jarring thought, something I should have thought about

sooner. “You mean you have a . . .” I pause, swallow the word. “I didn’t know. I hope she’s not upset that I went with you here. But if she’s upset, then I’ll make sure to—”

“Hey,” he says and holds up a hand to stop me. “I don’t have a girlfriend right now. In the past I did, but now I’m . . . I don’t have a girlfriend right now.”

“Oh,” I say. “So when did you guys break up?”

“Another one of Chamomile’s famous personal questions,” he says.

“You love my personal questions.”

“I think maybe I do,” he replies, smiling. “We broke up last winter after dating about a year. And before you ask why, it was because she liked another guy.”

“Oh my God,” I say. “I *hate* cheaters.”

“She didn’t actually cheat,” he replies. “She started to like this guy at her job, and after about three weeks of dealing with it, I told her to make a choice. She said she couldn’t, so I said I’ll make it real easy for you. And that was that.”

The waitress brings over our water and my little-kid ginger ale.

“Her name was Lacey,” he says as I open my mouth to ask.

“God,” I say and sip my drink. “I’m so, so sorry that happened to you.”

“Yeah,” he says. “It wasn’t my best month, but what are you going to do?”

After that we talk about Lacey, what she looked like, where they met (through a neighbor at a neighborhood picnic), and how he dealt with the breakup. Then the conversation turns to my boyfriends, which I have not really had, and the fact that I’m picky. I’ve been asked out twice, once was to the prom, to which I accepted just to go and have the experience. His name was Marcello and he was Italian with olive skin and brown eyes about the same dark shade as mine.

He was attractive, or at least most girls thought so, but he hummed to himself all the time while slapping his thigh to the rhythm and I found that irritating. His diet also consisted only of French toast and Snickers bars, which was a turn-off. We stayed together for a little while after the prom, until I finally told him that we weren't each other's type, to which he mumbled that I was weird anyhow and took off, slapping his thigh. And, as The Balloon Man said of his own failed relationship, that was that.

The waitress brings out our food—chicken quesadillas with salsa and sour cream for me, spicy wings with dipping sauce for The Balloon Man—and we eat while continuing to talk about our high school experiences. He makes a few jokes about him being a late bloomer, and I can sort of identify with that. My appearance has changed a bit since high school, although not as drastic as his transition. He says he just grew into his face recently, and for a while, suffered with those pale bottom eyelids that make people look like a sick fish. I laugh at that.

After dinner, we stroll to our rooms, side by side. The hotel is quiet with only the intermittent sounds of cars passing on the main road and clunks of ice from a faraway ice machine. The Sorrell Hotel sign lights up the area with green florescence, and I think maybe I've never been so happy, I just don't know all the reasons why. We pause by my room door and I extract my card. The Balloon Man gazes down on me, and I note the difference in height, at least six inches.

“Come in to talk?” I ask.

He lets out a pained little exhale. “I have to do schoolwork.”

“So studious,” I say and my shoulders drop. “How about just for a little while?” I give him my best pleading grin, hoping it doesn't look creepy. “Please?”

And with not much more persuasion, The Balloon Man follows behind me, into my room.



*The Balloon Man left my room just after midnight. We spoke of tomorrow's hopes, what our Robert Blakeley clue might mean, where it might lead us and what we might do if it does not lead to anything at all. The Balloon Man seems to soar up and down in spirits, catching air at times with good news, sinking back down easily when we hit some turbulence. There is nothing else here at the hotel to help us. Mr. Robert Blakeley of Torrington, Connecticut? You are our last hope.*



## Chapter Twelve

Breakfast is provided by The Sorrell Hotel and set up in the lobby on long wooden tables decorated with spring flowers and fake ivy. The Balloon Man and I took every selection with us into the lounge, where we sat in a different location than yesterday, closer to the bar. There were bagels with cream cheese and donuts and cranberry-orange muffins and waffles and cereal and something called a scone. The Balloon Man is a coffee drinker while I like the fruity freshness of juice and chose little jeweled glasses of orange, grape, grapefruit, apple, and cranberry. I told The Balloon Man I would be right over for our meeting with Robert Blakeley. I have to pee.

We are not morning people, The Balloon Man and I, so we both rest back on his bed waiting for Mr. Blakeley. The drapes are partially open of my doing and diamonds of light fall into the room, onto the carpet, playing a game of match-up with the existing diamond pattern. The nervous web in the air is touchable, hanging over us as the moments tick on.

“I texted Gram real quick,” The Balloon Man says, and his voice is kind of quivery. “She’s missing me already, but she’s not a fast typer, so I didn’t get much more than that.”

“Can you call her?”

“Uh, no,” he says. “She doesn’t . . . you were there. You met her.”

I roll over on the bed to face him. “Another personal question coming,” I say.

“I know,” he says. “She has selective mutism. Have you heard of that?”

I shake my head.

“She *can* talk, she just doesn’t,” he explains. “Shortly after my mother died, Gram had some mouth surgery, and for a few days, she had trouble talking. There were some complications, but after it was to the point where she should have been okay, she stayed not talking. My aunt finally took her to a doctor, who sent us to a psychologist when he couldn’t find anything physically wrong. The combination of the surgery and my mother’s death put her in some state of not talking, and she never improved.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Is that why you’re studying psychology? To try to help her?”

“One of the reasons, probably,” he says. “That and my mother . . . it’s obvious to me now as an adult that she had undiagnosed depression. I want to help people through things like that. Save lives if I can.”

“That doesn’t surprise me about you,” I say. I let out a laugh, not of humor but of connection. “You really have an interesting life.”

We share a smile across the mattress, but the smile is soon broken by a sound we simultaneously want to hear and are dreading: a knock on the hotel room door. The Balloon Man bolts up, smoothes his jeans and moves to open the door.

Robert Blakeley, standing in the doorway and bobbing up and down to see inside the room, greets The Balloon Man with a hard up and down handshake. He is not as old as I imagined him, probably in his thirties. I suppose if he was a kid in the nineties, he wouldn’t be much more than forty, but I was still somehow expecting someone old. He is almost comical looking, big long nose, huge ears, an overly oval face, and thinning brown hair. He walks into the room with a bounce in his step, smiling as he takes in the drapery and the bed.

“Not much has changed,” he says. “Not that I expected it in this economy. People always complain when a hotel is not updated, but think of it, right? How much is it to update one room of your house never mind an entire place, right?”

The Balloon Man nods, to be nice, I suppose. I’m sure him and I don’t know much about hotel maintenance or any maintenance for that matter.

“So, you say you’re looking for a man who stayed at the hotel in the nineties? Your father you said, right?”

The Balloon Man nods again, sits on the edge of the mattress. “This would have been January of ninety-four. The woman he would have stayed with that night was on the taller side and thin, with dark blond hair that was really straight. I know it’s a long shot, but I had to ask.”

“You got me,” Robert replies, still visually inspecting the room.

I get the feeling, watching his behavior, that the story intrigued him but he is more here for an excuse to look at the inside of the hotel and relive his childhood.

“Her name was Olivia Omen, double Os. Does that sound familiar at all? Do you have any records left maybe?” The Balloon Man is really searching here. I give him credit for his tenacity.

“My father was not computer savvy,” Robert says and runs his hand over the television. “We had paper receipts for a long time, but they got thrown out when we decided we had to sell the hotel. There was no reason to keep them, right?”

“No,” I say, mostly just to make my voice heard in the conversation. I nudge The Balloon Man’s arm. “Ask him about the symbol.”

“Oh,” The Balloon Man says and stands from the mattress. He moves to his black bag and removes the envelope and the letter. “My mother traced a symbol from a pin my father was wearing that night. Does this symbol look familiar to you at all?”

Robert glances up at the paper, half paying attention as he checks the firmness of the mattress, but then he stops pushing the mattress mid pat. His jaw drops.

“You’ve seen it?” The Balloon Man says, and his expression betrays both excitement and nerves, like when a little kid spots Santa.

Robert points to the symbol and then starts shaking his head, smiling like some kind of mad man. If he knows something, I wish he would say what it is. My heart is racing to the point of lightheadedness.

“You say your father—or whoever you think your father is—was wearing this pin?”

“Yes,” I say back, even though the question was not addressed toward me. “What do you know about it. Please tell us.”

“Well that’s a symbol,” Robert says, eyes gleaming. “The actual pin was really something. It had a shimmering quality, like old glass. I would bet they had it custom made!”

“*Who* had it custom made?” I’m ready to fall off the bed.

“That there is a symbol for Marnimer’s Troupe.”

The Balloon Man and I exchange a glance. It’s the first time our eyes have met since Robert’s arrival.

“Long story,” Robert says. “Let me sit.” He situates himself at the end of the bed. “When I was young, Marnimer’s Troupe would come by the hotel every few years or so, mostly in the wintertime when they weren’t traveling abroad. Down time for them, right? I was obsessed—

*obsessed!*—with them as a kid. I would constantly follow the members around the halls upstairs, into the lobby, wherever they went. Most of their conversations were secretive, but I did pick up enough to understand what the group was all about.”

“Was it like a secret society of some kind?” I ask.

“Yes and no,” Robert replies. “Marnimer’s Troupe was a secret group of underground magicians.”

I try to meet The Balloon Man’s eyes, because this is incredible news, but I find that he’s not looking at me, not looking at Robert, just gazing down at the letter still in his hand.

“But here’s the part you might not believe,” Robert goes on. “The magicians were not regular old performing type magicians. They traveled around to affluent places performing for affluent people, hidden underground because they were true magic men and women.”

“True magic men and women?” I ask. “As in . . .”

“It all started with a man called Winston the Great,” Robert says. “He was a famous magician in the early nineteen-hundreds, *terrible* magician in the hocus pocus sense, but he is mostly known for his son Marnimer, who had some kind of healing ability. They traveled around the country as an act of two, going under the disguise of magic act, but really, people were paying money for Marnimer’s healing ability. Marnimer’s Troupe was born of that, each member with his or her own unique magic ability, from what I have overheard and researched. In fact, somebody in his family just purchased the house Winston the Great and Marnimer lived in and put some information on the internet. You can search for it yourself, if you’d like.”

“I *would* like,” I say. “Can you tell us any more? Did you have to be a member to wear a pin? Do you remember if any of the members looked like my friend?”

Robert surveys The Balloon Man, who has finally looked up from his mother's letter and his father's secret symbol. "Hmmm," he says. "My memory of all the men is only so-so now. There were both men and women, almost always in costume, and quite frankly, some it was hard to tell if they were men or women. One or two similar faces spring to mind, but I couldn't tell you for sure." He points a finger at me. "And yes, Miss, you had to be a member to wear the pin. The pins, as I said, were most likely custom made and very rare."

With The Balloon Man's abilities, I'm sure his father was a member of Marnimer's Troupe. I'm equally sure his father had a very unique magical ability of some kind, maybe similar to what The Balloon Man does with the balloons. I thank Robert for confirming the pin belonged to The Balloon Man's father and move to comfort The Balloon Man, running a hand over his shoulder. I'm not certain why he needs comforting, because this is good news. We have incredible information, and it wasn't too far off from what I suspected all along. The Balloon Man's balloons are magic. His father was a true magic man.

"The young man who purchased Marnimer's house is called Conner," Robert says, standing from the bed. "The house is in Coven Hill, which is quite a trek from here, on the other side of the state. Quieter part than even here in these parts, right? You'll find the information by searching for The Brightwick Inn. If you're going to search for more to go on, that would be the place to start."

"This place is an inn?" I ask. "Like we can stay there?"

Robert lets out a whooping laugh. "You won't be able to get reservations! The inn is . . . *unique*. It books up months in advance, right?"

“I don’t know,” I say. “But whatever the case, I’d like to go there and see what this Conner person knows about Marnimer’s Troupe.”

“He probably knows a lot,” Robert says. “Maybe could even tell you where the troupe is nowadays.” He looks around the room once more. “I wish you luck. Marnimer’s Troupe was a huge part of my childhood.”

Without much response from The Balloon Man, and possibly realizing that this information was too hard to swallow, Robert moves toward the door. He opens his mouth, presumably to say goodbye, but The Balloon Man steps closer to him.

“How is this inn unique?” he asks.

Robert places his hand on the doorknob. “The rooms, supposedly, are enchanted. Each room is associated with a certain feeling or emotion . . . it was something Winston the Great and Marnimer did to the place when the house was theirs.” He searches The Balloon Man’s eyes for belief, and I think he gets it. “The inn has been described as an emotion funhouse.”

“How is it I’ve never heard of such a place?” I ask, joining them by the door.

“They don’t have much need for advertising, probably,” Robert replies. “The Brightwick Inn sells itself. They’re constantly booked, and they’ve even been on a television show about ghost hunting, right? One of the rooms makes people feel creepy.” He pauses theatrically. “But not all of the rooms are like that. One of them makes you feel like you’re on a relaxing ship at sea, one of them is decorated in flowers and makes you happy, and one of them makes you feel like you’re in love. Winter Romance they call that room. It’s decorated in roses, right?”

“Wow,” is all I get out. “I would love to see that place.”

“Good luck,” Robert says and opens the hotel room door. “Like I said, they are always booked. You can always try to go there and try to talk to Conner, though, or at least look the place up on the internet. The website has many articles and testimonials.”

“We will,” I say. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“Not a problem,” he says and looks up at The Sorrell Hotel sign. “I miss this place. Glad I can get back to see it, right? Even if just for a few minutes. Take care now.”

When he leaves, stepping into the parking lot toward a black truck that reads: Blakeley Locksmith Service, The Balloon Man closes the door. He sits down on the bed, crushes the letter from his mother to his forehead, and makes the grand announcement that he’s going back home to Gram.

## Chapter Thirteen

“What do you mean you’re going back home to Gram?” I ask and sit beside The Balloon Man on the hotel bed. “We’ve just found out that your father was a true magic man—which makes *so* much sense—and that someone out there might know where he is at this very moment! How could you want to—”

“I just do,” The Balloon Man returns. “So go pack up for check-out at eleven.” He stands from the bed, folds his mother’s letter back into the envelope, and places it in his black bag.

“I didn’t come with you on this trip to quit when we’re nearly at the finish line,” I tell him. “I didn’t pack my suitcase and leave my dad just for one night at The Sorrell Hotel. It was fun, but—”

“I found him, didn’t I?” The Balloon Man interrupts, pacing the carpet. “That’s what we came to do. I needed to find out who he was, and really? He might be dead now for all we know. Or maybe he isn’t in that magic traveling group anymore, or maybe he stole that pin to impress my mother or something.”

“Come on,” I say and stand from the bed. “We knew all along that the balloons were somehow magic, the symbol was unique, and that we were probably going to end up in this very scenario. All we have to do now is find this Conner person who knows about the troupe and ask where to find your father so you can meet—” This time I stop *myself*, understanding. I move

closer to The Balloon Man, and make him stop his pacing, right in front of the bed. “You’re afraid to meet him.”

He shakes his head.

“Yes you are.”

“Go pack.”

“No.”

“Chamomile,” he says and stands me down. “Go and pack your stuff.”

He isn’t scary. That is not his nature. But he is firm.

“All right,” I whisper and step back. “Okay.” I turn for the door, already missing this stupid hotel and even missing *him*. Maybe all he wanted me around for was to help him do this, and then that was it. That was that. And maybe that’s what I expected what would become of . . . us. It just seems like now some kind of foundation has been laid. Some kind of story is in the works. And I’m not going to let that just fizzle into stardust because he’s afraid of meeting his father and won’t admit it.

“I would have been there for you when you found him,” I say from the room door. “I didn’t just come along for my own curiosity.”

“Why *did* you come with me?” he asks and walks closer.

“To help you find your father,” I say, looking up at him in earnest.

“And because the pink balloon told you you were going on an adventure,” he says.

“That’s what you thought.”

“But I also wanted to help you find your father.”

He lowers his head, and I'm not sure where this line of questioning is going. All I know is that instincts tell me he's terrified to meet his dad, so that's what I focus on.

"Hey," I say. "I'll be there with you. When you find him. When *we* find him. Yes, I came for the adventure, but I also came to be with you when we found out who you were and why the balloons do what they do. I've been interested in this for two whole years."

"Interested in the *balloons* for two whole years," he says.

I nod.

"I guess that's proof that I gave you the wrong balloon the first time," he tells me.

"You said it wasn't the wrong color," I return, confused. "Was the pink balloon right or wrong?"

"Both." He sighs. "I gave you the right color, but it wasn't what you needed from the balloon, it was what *I* needed."

"I don't understand," I say. "You mean the adventure, right?"

He steps closer, lifts his hand, and reaches out to me. I feel myself tense, hard like a beach pebble waiting for beautiful water to make contact. His fingers land on a strand of my hair, and something tight inside of me releases itself. Something lets go that has been wound up since I first hit my teen years.

His fingers run the length of my hair, light like a tumbling feather.

"I saw you in the parks for two years," he says, soft. "The first few times I thought you just liked writing in the park, but then I realized you were always looking at me. You would turn away when I glanced up. Do you remember?"

“That’s because I was writing about you,” I admit. “I was writing about you constantly. The mysterious Balloon Man in the park.”

“The Balloon Man,” he repeats. “That’s how you see me.” His fingers slip from my hair and he takes a step backward. A sad ghost rises up in his eyes.

“Listen,” I say. “I don’t know what’s happening here, but I do know that you and I have to follow through with this. That’s why we were put together. We’re the same type of people, and only together does this journey make any sense. Let’s finish it up, okay? Let’s find your father.”

His shoulders sink and he heads for the bed, dropping down with his forehead in his hands. “You’re right,” he mumbles. “What you said before. I’m kind of afraid to . . . he doesn’t know I exist. He might not even want me. I mean, maybe he has another family. Maybe I would just disrupt his entire life. And that doesn’t even cover the crazy magic stuff that I really don’t understand.”

I kneel in front of the mattress and take his hands in mine. He lets me do it, so I hold on and squeeze. Before, I didn’t know how to be his safety net, but I’m learning. God, I am learning.

“I’ll be there,” I say. “If he doesn’t want you, or if he welcomes you with open arms. Either way, I came along to be with you.” I stand, taking him up with me. “Now, Mr. Balloon Man, pack up for check-out. We leave for The Brightwick Inn in one hour.”

\*\*\*

Robert Blakeley was not lying that this trip is a long trek. And we went blindly, because of the circumstances, not even checking the website or any other information. I punched The Brightwick Inn into the GPS, and we’re following the directions, moving like a blue bullet

through the roads of Connecticut. The inn is intriguing, and I am so yearning to write about everything in my journal. I think about risking it now, taking it out while The Balloon Man drives, but then I think maybe it's a private thing and I just can't have him around when I write. Especially because it's always about him.

The changing thing that was changing has changed into whatever it was going to change into. I acknowledge it now. I still can't put everything into a perfect package, can't inspect it, can't analyze it with the tools I possess in my emotion cabinet right now. The Balloon Man reached out to me at The Sorrell Hotel, he touched me, and he professed something to me. While I'm still confused on some aspects, I'm making sense of this . . . relationship. Clearly he feels something more for me than just travel buddy.

So I'm again thrust into some stupid thoughts about my mom. A craving for her advice. What do I do? How do I know how I feel? What am I to him? What is any woman to any man? I close my eyes as the SUV rumbles on, and I pretend to call her, just to hear her voice and imagine what she would say. But she's so long gone now that I can't hear what she's saying, not her tone, not the timbre of her voice, not the way she would make me feel.

"You're awfully quiet over there," The Balloon Man says. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," I return, and open my eyes to the glitter of midday sunlight. "I was just thinking about my mother."

He nods, turns down the radio. "Personal question coming," he says. "How come you don't talk much about your mother?"

So the next ten minutes fill in with my backstory, how my mother cheated on my father, how she's a monster, how she is out of my life but tries to butt her way back in on days ending in

Y. Saying everything out loud is therapeutic, and even though Lizzie Fry knew all of this and understood because her parents were split, I never felt she was an impartial jury. Maybe because she knew my dad, or maybe because she *had* to take my side as the best friend.

“So you won’t talk to her at all, because of something she did to your father years ago,”

The Balloon Man says.

I point to a road sign. “You need to get onto forty-four,” I say. “And yeah, I don’t talk to her because she ruined the family.”

“But how did she ruin the family if she still talks to you and your father? I mean—”

“She just did,” I say. “Obviously.”

“I’m not saying what she did was right,” he goes on. “But it sounds like they had an open relationship.”

“Just because two people aren’t married, it doesn’t mean they can cheat.”

“You’re misunderstanding,” he replies. “I’m just saying, some people would give a lot to have their mother back, you know?”

At this I fall silent. I know he lost his mother and that since my mother is still alive, I should be in contact with her, no matter what kind of monster she is or was. I just nod to let him know I get his meaning, although I’m still kind of seeing red that he is not on my side. Maybe this is why he thinks of me as juvenile sometimes, or at least he did when we first talked. It could be this battle was my teenager battle, like my dad always says. I have never faced my mother as a grown person.

He turns the radio back up and I take the time to call my father, hoping he doesn’t catch the uproar of nineties hip-hop music in the background. Things at Tie-Dye Me are okay, or so he

says, and I let him know that The Balloon Man and I are off on a different path right now, nearly at our destination of The Brightwick Inn. He is curious about the clue, but I don't give him too much information. The Balloon Man might not want too many people to know the specifics of our journey.

We reach Coven Hill at nearly one o'clock. It's the quintessential New England town, old colonials, baskets on porches, deer statues, evergreens, and a scent in the air reminiscent of sun-soaked wood and flowers. I navigate from my phone as The Balloon Man drives through town, until we finally reach Church Street, a main road. I tell him we're looking for number twenty-seven, and with a gasp, I look up and realize we are already *at* number twenty-seven. And it's gorgeous.

Before us on the corner of the main road is a grand Victorian house, enormous with muted gray paint and triangular roofs. The front porch is wide and open like a boat deck, and the windows are edged in lacy moldings. The round uppermost window is gated as though it's a little jail cell, but it emits something of a lost era of romance. Or like Rapunzel in a tower. The lower windows are welcoming and curtained in white, and a wood sign in front of the inn reads: The Brightwick Inn, Parking in Rear.

"It looks like a dollhouse," I say.

"I was just thinking the same thing," The Balloon Man returns, turning into the back of the house.

"Can we *please* stay here for the night?" I squeal. "Please?"

He chuckles. “We’re here to talk to this Conner person, remember? Besides, there’s no vacancy.” He finds a parking space, kills the engine, and sits back. “How about we just skip this and go out for some lunch?”

“Oh no,” I say. “We ate a big breakfast; we don’t need anymore food.” I pick my pocketbook up from the floor. “We’re going in, and we’re going in right now.”

He grumbles incomprehensibly, which for some reason I find cute, and we exit the SUV. Again, it’s nice to stretch my legs after sitting for so long. I pull in some spring air, letting it float through me in uplifting warm waves, until I’m ready for this next stage of the adventure. Something tells me that my Balloon Man will need me now more than ever.

His terror seems at odds with the beautiful day and the Victorian house setting, but it’s there. I can sense it like there’s a storm of wind beside me. I reach down and grab his hand as we walk toward the front of the inn. He glances at me and then squeezes my hand, and I think maybe I might just fly away into the blue whispers of the sky. But then I remind myself that I am here on a mission, here to help him, here to be a safety net, here for an adventure that we are supposed to share. No matter what else is happening between us, I am first and foremost his worry stone, hold me for comfort.

The front steps up to the inn are lined with ornate iron railings. The open porch is adorned with magenta flowers, white rocking chairs, and piles of twigs wrapped in different colored ribbons. I think I might consider losing my pinkie finger or some similarly pointless body part for just one night staying here. If the outside is this incredible, what does it look like on the inside?

The Balloon Man releases my hand to open the door for me, but just as soon as we step inside he grabs hold again. I'm vaguely aware of his pressure because I'm looking around, taking in the surroundings, inhaling some sweet scent of sugar and cookies. The foyer dissolves into a lobby area, which holds a long wood desk. Beside the desk is a white fireplace with etchings that look like lions. A girl stands behind the desk, and she can't be older than me. She's petite with brown hair laced with gold as though she has it professionally highlighted.

"Hello!" she says brightly, and I am reminded of high school cheerleaders or the new cast of Lizzie Fry's college friends. "Welcome to The Brightwick Inn! Can I help you?"

The Balloon Man grasps my hand with unrelenting pressure, and we move forward, toward the desk. "We're looking for Conner," he says.

"Conner?" she says back, and I wonder if maybe Conner is her father. "Um, okay," she returns. "I'll go get him for you. What is this concerning?"

We exchange a glance.

"We had some questions about the inn," I say. "We were told he could answer them."

"Okay," she says. "Not a problem. You can relax in the sitting room if you'd like." She gestures outside of the lobby, hooks her finger like we have to turn left. "There's some refreshments for guests."

Before I can explain that we're not guests, she's off.

The Balloon Man, relieved the nerves of this first interaction, finally takes in the lobby. There are three phones on the desk, one flashing in red, and two books that say "Reservations." There are also a few brochures for the inn with tag lines and testimonials typed on the front:

*Sometimes houses are haunted by things other than ghosts . . . and Winter Romance felt like our own personal love nest—we will be back and Best Kept Secret in New England!*

“Must be a busy place, huh?” he says.

“Yeah,” I whisper back sadly.

“Hey,” he says and swings our held hands like we’re kids. “I’ll take you back here someday, okay?”

“Someday,” I say back and playfully roll my eyes.

He smiles down at me, and I’m glad to see the crisp blue of his eyes has returned, no longer clouded over with tension. “Someday,” he says. “But you have to promise to learn my name. My *real* name.”

“I know your name.”

We head for the sitting room, a round room with bookshelves and glass cases of decorative teacups. Plates are set up on a shiny wood coffee table, each one holding neat lines of cookies: square sugar cookies, round frosted cookies, flower-shaped molasses cookies, and chocolate chip cookies. Beside a rose-colored vintage couch is a smaller table offering coffee, tea, cream, and sugar. There’s even a basket filled with little plastic bags of colored popcorn.

“I might be in heaven,” I say.

“Feels like hell to me.”

“Negativity does not—”

“Win races,” he finishes. “I know.”

So we sit and eat the provided snacks, my Balloon Man nervously munching the edges of a sugar cookie, and me shoveling pink popcorn into my mouth. It’s definitely a flavor, maybe

strawberry, though I have no idea how strawberry popcorn is achieved. Then I reach for a cookie, not really making up my mind between the frosted cookie and the chocolate chip cookie, but The Balloon Man shifts on the couch, blocking me. He watches over his shoulder, laughing, as I try to maneuver around him.

“I need a cookie,” I say and try to reach over him but he dodges me with his shoulder.

“This is not nice.” I appreciate that he’s breaking the tension, but I want a cookie.

“I believe it was you who said we ate a big breakfast,” he says.

“Funny,” I reply. “Let me have a cookie.”

“No,” he says and spreads his arms wide so I can’t get around him.

“You realize I could just stand up and get the cookie.”

“Try,” he says.

This does not go well and ends in something that resembles a wrestling match but not set in a ring, set in somebody’s fancy Victorian mansion on top of a rose-colored antique couch. I twist around him, bend around him, and even try jumping like it’s a basketball game, but to no avail. When the sound of a male clearing their throat finally echoes through the sitting room, The Balloon Man’s arms are around my waist and I’m holding a crumbling chocolate chip cookie between two fingers.

“I’m Conner,” the new arrival says. “Sorry I took so long.”

The Balloon Man and I stand at attention, swooshing cookie crumbs off of us while the empty plastic bag that contained my strawberry popcorn floats in the air and lands on the polished wood floor.

“I’m so sorry,” I say and finally take in the man called Conner. Or should I say the teenager?

He is not more than seventeen. In fact, he is probably the same age as the check-in girl in the lobby. His dark brown hair is styled in some leftover flip cut from the early 00s, kind of edgy. He’s wearing a loose black sweat jacket and jeans, and his posture is slouched, like those angry kids in high school who are too rebellious to even stand erect in society.

“I was doing homework,” he says. “But I have a minute to talk about the inn.”

He moves to a gray armchair across from the couch, and gestures for us to sit back down.

“How old are you?” I ask, sitting.

“Seventeen,” he says back. “Is that a problem?”

The Balloon Man quickly apologizes for my rude greeting, and I have no choice but to apologize as well. Then we exchange a proper greeting and Conner tosses back his hair, getting comfortable in the chair.

“So you own this inn?” I ask. “Not to be rude, I just pictured the owner a little . . . older.”

“Robert did say a young man,” The Balloon Man reminds me.

“Yeah, but not a *teenager*.”

Conner clears his throat again. “I own it,” he says. “Well, my father owns it and so do three of my friends and their parents. We run the place. Our parents are just the funding.”

“So you’re saying four teenagers run this inn?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he says back. “Is that a problem?”

I shake my head. I’ve offended this kid twice already. Maybe three times. Would I have disrespected him so much if he were older than me?

“So what can I help you with?” he says. “I assume you want to know about the rooms?”

“No,” The Balloon Man says. “Well yeah, I’m sure the rooms are interesting. But I’m wondering what you know about Marnimer’s Troupe.”

At this, Conner sits forward. “Where did you hear that name?”

“We were told to find you by someone called Robert Blakeley from The Sorrell Hotel, who used to know about the troupe when he was small,” he replies. “He didn’t have much recent information, though, so we were wondering if you could fill us in. It’s important,” The Balloon Man adds. “I think my father might have been a member.”

He goes on to tell his story from the beginning while Conner sits in true interest. When he gets to the part about the green spiral symbol with the centralized blue eye, and his father wearing the pin, Conner puts a hand up to stop him.

“I know the pin,” he says. “I know what it looks like and how rare it is.” He stands up from the chair. “Come with me,” he says. “There are some things you need to see.”

## Chapter Fourteen

Already I feel as though I'm in some secret club. Conner maneuvers around the inn, strategically missing the lobby and the grand staircase I assume leads to the guest rooms. We walk past an enormous kitchen, where even though a teenage girl with dark hair scurries around with a metal spoon in her hand, we go undetected. We shuffle down halls, sneak around corners, and pass huge windows constructed of wavy glass that shakes the scenery outside.

"I know this place like the back of my hand," Conner says as we come to a white door in the back of the inn. "And I'm a master at sneaking around."

He pulls the white door open, exposing an older wooden staircase. We descend with Conner taking up the rear, until we come to a basement room lit only with a dim lightbulb screwed into the ceiling. There is one bed, centralized, covered in a white sheet. Conner keeps going to a back room with an old metal furnace. The room is small and shadowy, set in the back of the basement. It smells like damp earth.

"Okay," The Balloon Man says, finally speaking as I grab hold of his elbow. "What are we doing here?"

"You don't see anything interesting in this room?" Conner asks.

"A furnace?" The Balloon Man says.

"Look harder."

I've got one foot stuck out and ready to bolt when The Balloon Man moves toward something I did not notice when we first stepped into the room: a square wood cut-out in the floor.

“What is this?” The Balloon Man says.

Conner bends over, grasps a round metal handle, and yanks. With a creaking sound that echoes around the room and through my chest, the trapdoor opens. Inside of the hole in the floor, there is nothing but blackness. A dark, endless pit. It is just now that I realize we know nothing about this kid, nothing about this inn, and nobody knows we’re down in the basement, inches away from wherever dead bodies are probably stored or captives are held for torture and fun. But The Balloon Man seems to go along with the proceedings, curiously gazing down into the black abyss of the trapdoor.

“This was where it all came together for me,” Conner says. He pulls an older iPhone from the pocket of his jeans and accesses the flashlight, shining it down into the hole. “This is where Marnimer spent most of his time, and where the symbol was born, according to records and my own . . . my own thoughts.”

As Conner shines the flashlight downward, I see that the hole is not quite as vast or deep as I first thought. It’s basically a closet-sized hole in the floor, a place where a person might go if there were a tornado or some bomb scare in earlier times. I also see, as Conner shifts the light around, an image painted onto the wall. It’s a green swirl with a blue eye set just in the center. The paint has faded around the edges, but there is no mistaking that it’s the symbol.

“If you go down into this room,” Conner says, “all of your feelings and emotions are erased. Marnimer was a healer, and he spent a lot of time in here, perfecting his gift. I guess it retained that healing power,” he adds. “I’m the one who found this room, and I spend most of my time down here.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Because life sucks and you need somewhere to go to forget about everything once in a while,” he replies. “This room takes away all of my problems. I just disappear down here and work on my writing. I can focus down here.”

“You write?” I say. “I do too. I journal.”

He nods, half-smiles at our shared interest, and gestures for us to go down into the Trapdoor Room. At first I hesitate, worried that we’ll get locked down there, but something takes over, and when The Balloon Man drops down into the hole, grabbing the edges of the floor to balance himself, I move forward. When he’s situated he reaches up, and I grab his hand. Carefully, and with some shifting of my body, I sink into the hole in the floor. The dim basement dissolves from my view and memory, and as soon as I’m situated with my back against the wall in the Trapdoor Room, I lose any fear or trepidation. I lose *everything*.

Just like Conner said, every emotion is gone. Every *bad* emotion. I’m not scared of being in a hole in a strange basement, I no longer miss my father, I no longer hate my mother and Lizzie, and I don’t struggle with not understanding my life or wanting *more* from my life. I’m just here, in this moment, zen. Maybe this is who I truly am, without the rocks of life coming at me with their sharp edges. Maybe this is how I’m supposed to feel all the time. I just *am*.

Across from me, The Balloon Man sits with his back against the opposite wall. Our shoes are touching, there is no other way to sit down here without this happening, and we both glance around, taking in the surroundings. Above, Conner sits at the edge of the door with his feet dangling just above us, so all I see are the filthy bottoms of his sneakers. Then I close my eyes and begin to fully appreciate the magic of this room.

After what feels like forever—and maybe it is—I open my eyes. There was something therapeutic in the escape, just like Conner said. I'm not into the mentality that the world sucks, even though it would be easy to see it that way, but after removing all of my emotions, I understand that maybe emotions get tangled up because of everyday life. Emotions are roots that can strangle and hold and yank you down. Still, even bad emotions are emotions, and without them, something feels . . . empty.

The Balloon Man, still across from me, is expressionless. He finally reaches out to the wall and rests his hand against the swirly symbol, covering it with his palm as though making it a part of him. He stays that way for a few moments, until turning back to me and meeting my gaze. We sit staring at each other for so long that I forget where we are in time and space until Conner clears his throat from above. He gestures that it's time to come up, and sadly, The Balloon Man and I crawl out of our hole of solitude.

“You had to experience it for yourselves,” Conner says, closing the trapdoor. “Or else none of what I tell you will be believable.”

“It was incredible,” I say. The emotions flood back, and I feel like me again, though changed in a way I can't understand. What I just experienced was not real, not in the world I currently live and play in. But it happened. The trapdoor was literally my passage into a completely different world of possibilities.

“So the symbol is Marnimer's,” The Balloon Man says. “He made it.”

Conner nods. I sense something has also changed with my Balloon Man, and maybe Conner understood this better than I did. The Balloon Man needed proof. He needed to experience the world he was a part of before learning of its history. Now, all we need to do is

figure out how his father became involved in this world and how to find the man. I want to just come out and ask Conner all these questions, but the kid is doing it all his way. Which is proving to be the *right* way.

We leave the Trapdoor Room and come out to the main room lit by the lightbulb. Conner settles himself on an old wood chair in the corner while The Balloon Man and I sit on the edge of the bed on top of the white sheet. A cold dampness creeps up my arms, and I hug myself to stay warm.

“My father and I moved to Church Street when I was in middle school,” Conner says. “Shortly after my mother disappeared. I guess my father wanted to be close to where she was from, or maybe he thought she ended up here somewhere and we’d find her. We never did.”

“I’m so sorry,” I say, and the cold penetrates deeper into my skin.

Conner shrugs and sits back in the chair, knocking his head against the wall behind him. “I found out only a year or so ago that I’m a descendent of Winston the Great and his son Marnimer. All the men in the family have a specific type of ability. Winston could change emotions into touchable things, which is why the inn is the way it is. He transformed emotions—love, happiness, whatever—into wallpaper, which is why the rooms make people feel a certain way.”

“Wow,” I say. “So the troupe . . .”

“They all have a specific ability, too,” Conner says. “In order to be a member, you would need to be a true magic person. Then, you would get a pin and join the troupe across the country or wherever they were headed.”

“Do you have an ability?” The Balloon Man asks. “As a descendant of the magic men?”

Conner flips back his hair and leans forward. “I can find lost things,” he says. “If you lost something important, I have a mental time machine in my mind that I can use to go back and find it. All I would need to do is hold your hands while you think back on the item and the time you lost it.”

“That’s incredible,” I say and turn to The Balloon Man. “Tell Conner what you can do.”

“I give out balloons in the park,” he tells Conner. “The balloons . . . I guess they speak to people. They give advice or point them in a certain direction or make them feel a certain way.”

Conner does not even raise an eyebrow at this. “So it’s safe to say that you’re either a descendant of Winston the Great like me, or you come from some other magic line.”

The Balloon Man shrugs.

“You know the troupe?” I ask. “I mean, does anybody in the troupe have a balloon act or \_\_\_”

“They’re not *acts*,” Conner says and squeezes his eyes shut. “The people in the troupe have sacrificed their entire lives to go out and help people through their gifts. If I wasn’t still in school and living with my father, I would be out there with them, using my ability to help people. You give up your life for this. It’s not some fun magic show.”

“I didn’t mean it that way,” I say and shake my head. “I’m sorry. I’m just trying to understand this.”

Conner glances at The Balloon Man, who really should be the one asking all these questions about his father’s background. “So your father is in the troupe.”

The Balloon Man’s eyes travel toward the Trapdoor Room, as though he wishes he was back there. “I would guess,” he replies finally. “If you’re saying that whoever wears this pin is

definitely in the troupe, and the last person we spoke to also confirmed that the members of the troupe wear the symbol. But that doesn't help me right now in this moment. It doesn't help me find him." He pauses. "Or find *myself*."

Conner smiles. It might be the first genuine smile he's given us. "I understand, man," he says. "I've been there, not knowing who I was and then being tossed into this fucking mess of a family with this gift and this tug in my gut to go out and help people. You and I could be related."

"Wait," I say. "If you were related to someone else in the troupe, wouldn't you know?"

"I'm related to Alastair Fairlane," Conner says. "He's my great uncle, but he's much too old to be the man you're looking for. Plus, he really didn't start going out with the troupe until recently when they came around, and he doesn't travel long because he's elderly."

"So nobody else in the troupe is a descendent of Winston the Great," I say. "We can confirm that, right?"

Conner nods. "Yeah," he says. "I guess you're right. At this point, everyone else is from outside families." He scratches his head. "There's one guy who could be your dad," he says, addressing The Balloon Man. "He's about . . . I would say late forties or fifty or so. Blond hair like you, if I remember him right, and very tall."

The Balloon Man presses his lips together and nods. "Name?"

Conner smiles again. "Finn," he says. "Finnabar McAllister."

The Balloon Man nods again, and I reach over and grab his hand. It's cold to the touch.

"Anything else you can tell us?" I ask. "Does he have a family? What's his ability? Where's the troupe now?"

“The troupe was in San Francisco last I heard,” Conner replies. “But they were coming back to the east coast soon to drop off my uncle and then go to New York. They’re in New York a lot.” Footsteps pass by overhead, making us all glance up and remember there are other people at the inn. “No, Finn doesn’t have a family. If it’s the right guy, then he’s a bachelor, like most of the men in the troupe. The women are single, too, except there’s one couple in the troupe. Um . . . Native American couple, I think. They use weather to make future predictions or something.”

“Wow,” I say. “I would love to meet all of these people. So Finn is . . .”

“I don’t want to get that far,” Conner replies. “Just in case it’s not the right guy. Plus, you should probably learn about his ability on your own.” He turns to The Balloon Man. “I’ll call the troupe’s handler and ask where they are now. Maybe you two can meet up with them when they reach the east coast.”

We get a little more information after that. The troupe tours the states in trailers nowadays, they stop at predetermined venues, and they are completely underground. The stops they make are dependent on history—from the 1920s, they have established certain locations around America, some sites even born of the Prohibition era. They sometimes travel overseas. For most in the troupe, they are following a calling, helping people with their gift. Conner met the troupe recently through his great uncle Alastair and was welcomed immediately because of his ability and his background. He is really the last descendant of Winston the Great and his son Marnimer, which raises him to rock star status within the troupe.

“So what room are you guys staying in?” Conner asks when all questions about the troupe and Finn have been exhausted.

“We don’t have a room,” The Balloon Man replies. “But we’ll find something around town for now so we can stay in touch.”

“Oh,” Conner says. “I thought you were staying here.”

“I’d love to,” I say. “But we didn’t realize how booked up you guys are.”

Conner’s eyes shift right. Then he puffs out some air. “Come on,” he says, standing. “I’ll see what I can do for you. It’s *my* inn, after all.”

I turn to The Balloon Man, my jaw dropped in excitement, but he just rolls his eyes and gives me a smile like he’s kind of excited too.

Upstairs, Conner takes us back to the lobby, where the teenage girl with the highlights is just hanging up from a phone call, jotting something down in the reservation log.

“Disappeared again,” she says when she sees Conner. She smiles up at him and her eyes betray a flicker of something that was once gold that time has turned dim. Absently, she fingers a necklace around her neck, a little red treasure chest with a keyhole.

Conner gives her a shrug in response, then moves closer to the desk. “Mr. and Mrs. Fontana booked for tonight?” he asks.

“It’s Thursday,” she says and flips back a few pages in the reservation log. “So yeah.” She taps her finger down on the page. “They’re booked. Why?”

“Call Zach and ask him to cancel them. I need the room for important guests.” He spins back to us. “The Fontanas have been here plenty of times,” he says. “My friend Zach, the other co-owner of the inn, knows them through his dad. They can come back another time.”

“You sure?” The Balloon says.

When Conner nods to confirm, The Balloon Man reaches out and extends a hand. Conner shakes it.

“Thank you,” I say. “I wanted to stay here so badly.” I think on the rooms: one that supposedly makes you happy, one that creeps you out, one that is peaceful, and one called Winter Romance. “So what room are we staying in?”

Conner smiles. And without him saying a word, I know, unequivocally, what room fate will give me and The Balloon Man.

## Chapter Fifteen

Conner does not see us to our room but leaves the task to Chandry, the lobby girl with the highlights. Winter Romance is on the third floor, so after going outside to retrieve our luggage, we have to climb not only the main staircase but a smaller metal one as well. Chandry is a gracious host, all smiles, and tells us about the inn as we near a cute arched door with metal swirls set into the wood. Dinner is at six in the downstairs dining room, she says. The garden outside is open to guests, she says. Leah the chef always has free refreshments in the sitting room, she says. Take advantage of the amenities, she says. The inn is your home for the duration.

After jingling some silver keys and removing one from a circular ring, Chandry unlocks the door. She hands the key to The Balloon Man, who is closest to her. I'm back a few inches. Or a few feet. As soon as the door swings open, the scent of roses and something sweet as chocolate washes over me and lifts me as though I'm levitating on the floral scent and the sound of the jingling keys. As I dreamily cross the threshold, I see nothing but red until I can pull back and focus on the details.

The bedding is a rich ivory, shot through with little red roses. The room is richly antique and lit in gold-red; it's like stepping into an old romantic sunset, a golden moment frozen in time. Wood shelving, lined with ivy and red roses, is set onto the back wall. Around the room, artwork of angels, hearts, and roses decorate the walls. I even spot the little jail cell window I saw from the front of the inn and realize it is much less ominous inside the room itself. The decor is breathtaking—but the highlight of the room is the wallpaper.

It's old-fashioned and faded, but otherwise well-preserved, as though the innkeepers tend to it often. Like the bedding, the wallpaper is ivory, but the red roses are much bigger on the wallpaper and the petals are lightly dusted with snow. It has almost a 3-D effect, realistic, as though you could touch the wallpaper and come away with a cold hand or even a thorn in your palm. Thinking of such contact, my body chills, and I suddenly feel as though I've been set in the middle of a swirling snowstorm.

"Welcome to Winter Romance," Chandry says. "You'll find a private bathroom to the left and a private balcony to your right."

Shaking from this peculiar sense of coldness, I rest my suitcase on a highly-glossed wood floor and follow Chandry's outstretched hand. Beyond the bed, French doors lead to an iron balcony. It seems like the balcony would overlook the back parking lot and maybe the garden, which I haven't seen in full yet. Near the French doors are huge gold vases filled with red roses, making a trail to the balcony. I haven't even shifted my eyes for a second to The Balloon Man. As soon as I walked into Winter Romance, I had the instinct not to.

"The room is a little cold," I say. "I'm not complaining, I'm just . . . curious."

Chandry smiles. "Some people find it cold, and some people find it fiery hot." She lets out a girly giggle. "We're really not sure why people have different reactions, but we think it might have to do with why you're in the room and who you're staying with."

From the doorway, a male clears his throat, and I look up to see Conner. He doesn't come in, just stands outside the room, making sure The Balloon Man and I are settled and that Chandry has given us what we'll need for the night. When Chandry spots Conner in the doorway, she

grasps the treasure chest necklace around her neck and averts her gaze, focusing on one of the gold vases. She lets out a breath.

“If you need anything at all, just come down to the lobby and I’ll take care of it,” she says, her words rushed. “And if you’d like, you can fill out our room journal with the experience of your stay.” She points to a brown leather journal on top of the ivy-covered shelf. “I hope you have a nice stay. See you at dinner.” She exits the room, not even looking at Conner, just swishing by him in a rush.

When she’s gone, Conner steps into the room. “Can’t be in here together,” he mumbles, closing the door.

“You gave her the treasure chest necklace?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Not going to even ask how you knew that.” He steps closer. “We used to date,” he says. “It’s a long story.”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” I say.

“It worked out fine,” he replies. “It’s just that my lifestyle would make it hard for us to keep going, so I called it off. Broke both of us, but it had to be done. We started off as best friends, and that’s how we stayed.”

“Except you can’t be in a romantic room together.”

“Hm,” Conner says. “It’s funny that you seem to be having the same problem.”

It’s not like I hadn’t noticed the problem. The Balloon Man hasn’t said a word, my back is to him, and I haven’t looked at him once since entering the room.

“Thought you two were already a couple,” Conner says. “But I guess I was wrong.”

An awkward silence falls, until Conner clears his throat again.

“So they’re in Pennsylvania,” he says to me or to The Balloon Man, I can’t really tell who he’s addressing because my head is down. “They’re on the way back to the east coast to drop off Uncle Alastair, but they’re making one stop before that, which is where you might be able to meet up with them. There’s a venue nearby called The Velvet, and they’ll be there Saturday night. You guys can stay here until then so we can hang out. I can show you Winston the Great’s secret outdoor house, and I can tell you more about the troupe and the history. Or you can take off in the morning and just head back to Connecticut on Saturday. It’s up to you.”

“How long do we have the room?” The Balloon Man asks.

“Here’s the deal.” Conner steps closer, so even though I’m not looking up, I can feel his presence just beside me, near the bed. “I can keep you guys in this room until Sunday, because the Fontanas originally had it Thursday through Sunday. But then we have the room booked for new guests, and I can’t cancel that or else it would look horrible for the inn. What I can do, if you need a place to stay in the area while you figure this all out, is give you either the basement room near the trapdoor or Winston’s secret outside house. Both of those areas are designated as emergency rooms in case we overbook.”

“We’ll do that then,” The Balloon Man says. “We’ll stay until Sunday, assuming I find him Saturday night.”

“Good luck,” Conner says. “With um, everything.”

When I glance up, Conner’s eyes are moving around the room, taking in the roses and the artwork. “Chandry put those shelves up,” he says and spins away from the shelves as though they’re poisoned. “When you guys are settled, I’ll tell you all about how we started up the inn.” He moves to the door, opens it, and is gone.

For a few seconds, I pretend that I'm doing anything but acknowledging that I'm in the room alone with The Balloon Man. I run my hand along the shelf, rub the fake ivy between my fingers, and play around in my open suitcase. A few random thoughts go through my mind, like how did I end up here, and how did my obsession with this guy in the park lead to me staying in an enchanted inn. I remember, too, my days of sticking my feet in the water near the park, and in this moment I really miss the simplicity of my life at the parks and at Tie-Dye Me. My pink balloon led me to an adventure, a *shared* adventure, and now, there is no turning back. I have to face this next big thing.

With my shoulders erect and a deep inhale of relaxing air, I lift my eyes to find him. He's sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at me and my open suitcase. As soon as our eyes make contact, a cold, cold wind rushes through me, nearly knocking me to the floor. I have never in my life experienced this type of chill. It's more powerful than the gust of a thousand winter winds, and reminiscent of the peculiar coldness I felt when I gazed on the winter rose wallpaper. It's so powerful that I cannot stand to look at him.

"I'll sleep on the floor," he says. "Tonight. I'll sleep on the floor."

From my suitcase, I find a white wraparound sweater and extract it.

"Hey," he says and shifts down the bed so he's close to me, "are you okay?"

"I'm cold," I say and wrap the sweater around my body. "Freezing." I drop down beside him on the bed, shivering. "Are you cold too?"

"No," he says. "Chamomile, I'm not cold at all."

"My name is Cammie," I say through chattering teeth. "You can call me that."

"You want to talk about names?" he says. "What's mine?"

“I know your name.”

“I don’t think you do,” he says. “Or at least you pretend not to because that’s not the person you want to be in this room with.”

“That’s not true,” I whisper. “I want to be with you.”

We lock eyes, and I feel the weight of his arm as it wraps around my shoulder, the heat radiating from his body as he tugs me closer to keep me warm. For a second, I let myself melt into him, closing my eyes and resting against his warmth, finding his essence, inhaling his sunshine scent, understanding what he means to me. Finally understanding. It all makes sense now. This is exactly how I felt when I first held my pink balloon.

“The pink balloon didn’t mean a new adventure,” I whisper. “It meant a new romance. I felt it when I held it on the bridge.”

“I was hoping you would.” The words sift through my hair. “I went back to give you the green balloon because it didn’t seem like you felt it too. I thought I was wrong, even though I really, really wanted you to have that pink balloon.” He rubs my shoulder. “I tried to tell you so many times.”

Something inside of me is still fighting this, and I don’t know why. The intensity, the coldness, the rough, rough collision of our two stars. This was supposed to be my adventure, my way to help him find himself, to discover what the balloons meant and why they did what they did. But I have misinterpreted the entire thing. And I really knew it all from the beginning.

“You didn’t seem like this was the way you were feeling,” I say. “You didn’t even seem like you *liked* me at the park.”

He sighs. “I didn’t really know you yet, and I had my guard up at first, like anyone would. But I can’t . . . I can’t deny the message the pink balloon sent. I know that now.”

My eyes rise to meet his, and I’m still struggling against the winter iciness of the room, fighting the urge to kiss him, to surrender to whatever this is between us. I’m a whisper away from kissing him when I jump from the bed, grab my journal from my suitcase, and dash for the door. Without an explanation, not to The Balloon Man and not to myself, I’m out the door of Winter Romance, running down the staircases, until I’m out the front door of The Brightwick Inn.

\*\*\*

I find myself in a Victorian garden, outside of the inn. Chandry mentioned the garden, but I had no idea it would be this dazzling, this colorful, this breathtaking. There are brick paths that weave in and out of the greenery, some leading to pebbled rock gardens, some leading to little hideaways with round stone tables and chairs, some leading to fairy herb gardens, and some leading to spherical tulip gardens set among water fountains. The path I’m on now has led me toward the far back of the gardens, where a stone wall marks the end of the show and the property line. The stone wall runs along cascades of shrubbery and purple lilac trees with the bluest blue spring sky above. When I hop up and situated myself on the wall, I notice that the brick path makes a huge X in the near distance.

I open my journal and it feels like coming home. This is how I make sense of life, and God, life does not make sense right now.

---

*Cammie's Journal 27 April*

---

*Part Two of the Pink Balloon Adventure*

*The Brightwick Inn, Enchanted and Endearing.*

*Basement rooms that dissolve all tears and fears.*

*Trapdoors that eat emotions.*

*Cold gold rooms of red and romance.*

*Pink Balloons that show their true colors.*

*Kisses stolen by fright.*

*What do you do when this was everything you wanted in the world but not what you expected at all. Or maybe you knew it. You knew it all. You knew it all along.*

*The Balloon Man is more than magic and mystery. Following him on this journey, I wanted him to be made of nothing more than magic sand and fairytale dust. I wanted his balloons not his kisses. I wanted his colors not his romance. But now I realize the two were intertwined from the beginning. From the first day I saw him, I was in love.*

*Who believes in those things?*

As I continue to write and question, a bird chirps overhead, cutting through the silence of the garden. A beam of sunshine slants through the X path in front of me, ending on a long purple branch of lilac. And I realize I have done nothing but write questions in my journal. I'm so lost that I am asking blank pages for some kind of answer. I worry that I'm overcomplicating things, and realize I need someone to talk to. Someone who is not paper and can answer back. Someone who is female, preferably, because my father would tell me to come home right away if he knew I was in love with my adventure mate. But my father already knew that, of course. Silly, silly me.

When I pull my phone from the deep pocket of my skirt, hardly believing I'm even contemplating calling my mother, I see a text. It's from Lizzie. God, what is happening with her? The text says: *ANYNEWS???* and I realize I left her hanging on purpose earlier. Taking this as some kind of sign that I was *not* supposed to call my mother but turn to a different female for advice on guys, I text her back: *Still in CT with this guy. Think I might be falling for him . . . what do I do?* I don't think she'll text right back, but she does: *Tell him?* But it's more complicated than that. I send back a text that says: *Maybe* and wait for her response, crossing my legs to get more comfortable on the stone wall.

After a few moments, Lizzie texts back that she thinks I should tell him, and that she's happy for me. She texts that she'll be home mid-May, and that when she gets home, we'll go out to The Redfield Ice Cream House. I envision us eating summer sundaes with a roaring sun above, tanning our legs and arms and melting our ice cream to soup. I think about telling her all about this trip and what The Balloon Man meant to me. For a minute, it feels like I'm safely home, back in high school with Lizzie. And then I remember that I'm not.

Lizzie did a good job with my queries, but when we finally end our texts, my takeaway is that I'm still a bit lost and that I need to face whatever the block is in order to remove it. For a few quiet moments, I sit with my eyes closed, listening to birds in the distance, the quiet hum of the earth, the faint movement of branches. I wish I could stay in this secluded part of the Victorian garden forever, my own little hideaway, where I can be at peace with nature and myself, as I always tried to be in Redfield. It was easier then, though I thought I wanted more than parks, more than Tie-Dye Me, more than Redfield Village, more than my secure life.

At last I jump down from the wall and make my way back. I'm not sure what I'm going to do when I get back to Winter Romance, but as I ponder this, walking through the lobby, Chandry hollers my name. She announces that I'm to retrieve a room key, because my roommate has decided to go "out" for a while. When I take the key from her, not really paying attention, I drop it on the shiny wood floor, just in front of the fireplace. Then I apologize and head up the staircases, only to find that Winter Romance is indeed empty.

His black bag is still here, set just on the floor by one of the gold vases. I wander over to the little jail cell window, gazing down at the road, wondering where he went and when he will be back. What's going to happen to us when he returns? The clock on my cell reads 4:17, so I sit on the bed with my journal open, reading a few passages from late March and early April, then closing it and resting back on the bed.

It's after five o'clock when I hear a key in the door and the turn of the doorknob. The Balloon Man steps into the room, notes that I'm resting on the bed on top of the comforter, and then sinks the room key into the pocket of his jeans. He doesn't say anything to me, just drops

down on the bottom of the bed and stares at the door. I wish there was a television in here, a radio, anything to break the silence.

“Where were you?” I say after at least five minutes has passed. I can’t stand the awkwardness anymore.

“At the town center,” he replies. “Handing out balloons.”

I gasp and sit up, taking with me the web of coldness that has enclosed me since his arrival. It is not nearly as cold as it was before, but I still feel the chilled bites in my skin. “You were giving out balloons? I wanted to come.”

He shrugs. “It’s a me thing,” he says. “I have to do it alone.”

“What made you do it?” I ask.

“What always makes me do it?”

Without looking at me still, he explains that he spoke with Conner, learned where the town center was exactly, and went off to do what he does. He did well. Once people found out the balloons were free, word of mouth sent dozens of balloon lovers to his cart. I always wonder why nobody else is as enchanted by what he does as I am. Doesn’t anyone else see the magic in what he does, not just the magic in the balloons, but that he is so drawn to giving these to strangers? Isn’t that the real magic?

“Almost time for dinner,” he says. “If you want to sit at a different table from me, that’s fine.”

“You misunderstood what happened before.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he replies and stands from the bed. “I’m going to wash up.”

“Don’t you want to know where I went?”

He shrugs again. “My best guess is that you went to the garden, found some quiet, green place, and wrote in your journal.”

“Yeah,” I say back. “I always journal about you. You know that.”

He sifts through his black bag and pulls out a neatly folded gray button-down shirt for dinner. “When you want to finally tell me how you feel instead of writing it down in some journal, you let me know, okay?”

He makes eye contact finally, staring at me until I wrap my arms around myself to combat the chill. Then he carries the gray shirt to the bathroom, and closes the door.

## Chapter Sixteen

The Balloon Man and I make polite conversation during dinner. It would be impossible not to comment on the food or the rich lighting in the dining room. Chef Leah—a teenager—made up dishes of braised pork chops, Brussels sprouts with cranberries, and sweet potatoes with honey butter. We also have a basket of bread and had an appetizer of baked brie and cauliflower and herb flatbreads. Nobody has yet mentioned the price of the inn, how much it is going to cost us to stay here at least until Sunday, but by the amount of food provided and the amenities, it's a safe bet that our budget will be blown by the end of the weekend. Maybe by the end of tonight.

When we're not in Winter Romance, The Balloon Man and I can look at each other. Our conversations are cardboard cut-outs of previous conversations or commentaries on the inn, and his posture is stiff, but we can at least pretend that we're still nothing more than friends on a journey together. If this is how it has to stay right now until I can spit out my feelings like he did for me, then this is how it has to stay. It's simple. Easy.

We discuss how awesome the food is and wonder what's for dessert as we near the end of our plates. I only have a few bites of pork chop left, while The Balloon Man seems to be having difficulty getting the last of his Brussels sprouts down.

"They're good for you," I say, to which he makes a face. "And she's made them pretty delicious, right?"

“If you say so.” He cuts a small corner off one of the sprouts and puts it in his mouth, chewing like it’s a piece of stick.

I laugh at him, which breaks the tension and reminds me how much I miss the way it was before Winter Romance. Things are best when they are not complicated, but I’m also understanding that not taking the next step might mean missing out on something as perfect and precious as The Balloon Man.

When we finish our meals, except for the few Brussels sprouts left on The Balloon Man’s plate, our dinner dishes are cleared. A few couples sit chatting around us, mostly middle-aged men and women clothed in suits and cocktail dresses. Conner enters the dining room, spots us, and maneuvers around the dining couples toward our table.

“Hey,” The Balloon Man says when he sees Conner, smiling like they’re long-lost friends. “Sit with us?”

“I wanted to wait until you were done with dinner,” Conner says and pulls a chair over from a nearby table. “I thought maybe you guys wanted to go out to the gardens?”

“I was out there earlier,” I say. “It was gorgeous. I was way in the back, near the wall, writing in my journal.”

“Way back there?” Conner says. “I normally hide in the rock garden, but the stone wall works for privacy too. Chandry is the only one who knows my secret hiding place. Well, one of my secret hiding places around here. You can get to the rock garden through the Midnight Rendezvous room on the first floor. There’s a hidden door down there.” He reaches into our bread basket and pulls out a piece, ripping off a chunk with his teeth. “I write in the rock garden.”

“What do you write about?” I ask.

“I’m writing a novel about a time-traveling treasure hunter.”

“Oh,” I say and laugh. “That explains the treasure chest you gave Chandry.”

“She inspired the love interest.”

We talk more about writing as dessert comes out—a raspberry tart with a sugary glaze—and The Balloon Man listens to our conversation with polite interest. After dessert Conner announces that he’ll take us on a tour of the gardens so The Balloon Man can see them, and he’ll also take us to Winston’s secret house, which I can’t wait to see. There’s this whole world of secret magic I was hoping I’d enter, and little by little, it is presenting itself to me.

Outside, the gardens are magnificent under the spring moon. There’s a hint of cool nighttime breeze, and as we stroll the gardens, showing The Balloon Man the herbs, tulips, and fountains, I wrap my arms around myself but still welcome the fresh air. The front gardens are lined with lantern lights, winding their way through the greenery, but as we tour further, the lights fade away. Conner leads the way to the far back of the gardens, where the stone wall I sat journaling on earlier is marbled in silver moonlight.

“This is where the property ends,” Conner says, standing right in the center of the brick X. “We really had a lot of work to do to get the garden to this point. The first year, it was in ruins, but we worked hard to get it back into shape. We went with the already existing themes.”

“It’s great,” The Balloon Man says. “It’s dark enough back here to get a look at the sky.”

“He likes stargazing,” I tell Conner as The Balloon Man’s eyes move heavenward.

“Really?” Conner says and his eyes shift in thought. “That’s interesting,” he says. “Very interesting.”

We stand in silence for a while as The Balloon Man takes in the sky overhead. He always looks as though he's counting the stars, so intent on the patterns they make or in awe of how many are up there. He moves toward the stone wall, leans his back against it, and gazes upward, lost in the flickering maze of starlight. Conner finally clears his throat to signal we've been in the garden too long or he's growing bored or he wants to continue our tour of the grounds. My heart is jumping in excitement to see this secret outdoor house that belonged to Winston the Great.

We head onward, exit the night gardens, and come to the parking lot in the back of the inn. We keep moving through the lot into a wooded area that is fenced off from inn patrons. Conner unlatches an iron lock and we pass through, treading along a dirt path that winds through tall drooping trees and fat bushes. When the light from the inn and parking lot fades away, the darkness threatens to engulf us until three dots of light appear just ahead. Conner, leading the way, spins to tell us that we have reached our destination.

When I see what's before me, I have to stifle a gasp and keep myself from grabbing hold of The Balloon Man's arm in elation. Winston the Great's secret house is not really a house at all, but a curved gypsy wagon with wooden wheels. The three lights are actually colored lanterns, set just on the front frame of the old wagon, near the red door. There are three metal steps to enter the gypsy wagon, and we follow Conner up, waiting for him to unlock the door. When we enter, I can no longer control it—I gasp like a drama queen. All around are old-fashioned circus posters of Winston the Great and Marnimer—two circus men in top hats—and there's even a poster, perhaps from the fifties or sixties by the richer unfaded print, announcing Marnimer's Troupe. There's a full-sized bed pushed to one corner, with a dark wood chest at the foot, and all around

are tables loaded with magic props: top hats, colored scarves, round mirrors, huge gold rings, dice, silver hoops, playing cards. It's like walking into a magic shop.

"Wow," The Balloon Man says as Conner closes the door, leaving the chilly air behind. "This is incredible."

"Welcome to our world," Conner says. "If your father really is Finn, then you're probably a step ahead of him now with the history of Winston the Great and Marnimer's Troupe."

"So this is where he learned magic tricks?" I ask, fingering the colored scarves. I wish I could wrap the green one around my head and dance around this gypsy caravan. If it was just me and The Balloon Man, I would probably be doing that right now.

"This was like his experiment and invention room," Conner replies. He sits down on the wood chest. "This is where we figured out the secret of the inn." He gestures toward a long black box on the table I'm standing near. "Open that up."

I pull the box open to find four colored balls—blue, yellow, black, and red. The balls are metal, but as I lift them, they're light as feathers.

"The wallpaper swatches were inside of those," Conner says. "If you run your hand along the center, you'll feel a little edge where you can open them. We found the wallpaper inside."

Conner motions that I should open the yellow ball, so I move my thumb around until I feel the edge. Then I pop the ball open like it's one of those plastic balls from a toy machine at a store. But inside of these balls, there's no toy. Inside, there's a swatch of yellow wallpaper patterned with daisies. The moment I place the swatch in my palm, the edges of the wallpaper glow like radiant sunshine. I look to Conner, who smiles in response, then to The Balloon Man

who is gazing on with eyes wide open. My insides burst with happiness and light, just as radiant and glowing as the wallpaper.

“My God,” I say and palm my heart. “I feel . . . so happy!”

Conner shakes his head, smiling at my reaction. “This is the wallpaper up in the Summer Garden room,” he says. “You can try the rest of them too.”

So The Balloon Man and I pass around the balls, opening each to expose the wallpaper swatch inside. The blue ball holds a swatch of navy and white wallpaper Conner says is from the Dreaming of the Sea room. This wallpaper swatch seems to move in swirls in my palm, like a mini whirlpool. I’m at once drifting in an ocean and peaceful, relaxed and free. The Balloon Man confirms that he feels the same, and we move to the black ball next, giggling like little kids. But the black ball, when popped open, is empty.

“Winston never finished Midnight Rendezvous,” Conner says with an air of mourning. “We named it that because it’s dark and there’s secret doors and stuff, but who knows what he intended on naming it or what its emotion was supposed to be? Winston died in there, so that’s why people feel sad or creeped out in the room. Midnight Rendezvous is most often booked by ghost hunters.” He pauses. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m going on and on about my family when you haven’t had a chance yet to meet yours.”

The Balloon Man shakes his head, still holding the swatch of winter rose wallpaper from Winter Romance. “I’m just trying to make sense of it all,” he says. “How is all of this possible?”

“People are born with certain gifts,” Conner replies. “Some people are good at music or drawing or science. We’re just good at magic.”

The Balloon Man nods, but his eyes betray what's going on inside, the current of questions he still has, the denial of what has always been right in front of him.

“It took me a long time to make sense of it all too,” Conner tells him. “It’s not just the magic, and I think that’s what the trouble was in the beginning with me. It’s more about a gift of helping people through something most people don’t understand. Something most people question.”

“Most people question it,” I interject. “But I don’t.”

“Chandry didn’t either,” Conner says. “She understood it, even when it meant that we couldn’t be together.” He shrugs. “I guess you can look around a bit and then we’ll head back.”

While Conner plays with the set of silver hoops, looping them together and pulling them apart, The Balloon Man and I inspect Winston’s wagon. The playing cards are normal, ordinary playing cards, worn with age, and so are the dice. When Conner isn’t looking, I wrap the green scarf around my head and tie it in the back, until The Balloon Man shakes his head like I’m not supposed to be goofing around with these museum quality artifacts. But Conner is playing with the stuff, so I continue on with the scarf, and when Conner finally glances up from the silver hoops, he laughs.

When everything is back in place—the silver hoops, the green scarf, and a set of red cups The Balloon Man found—we leave the wagon behind. The temperature has dipped even lower, but the sky is putting on a show tonight, and while we walk, The Balloon Man stares upward, nearly smashing into tree trunks and the fence that leads back to the parking lot. Conner says he’ll meet us around one-thirty tomorrow, after school is out and the other guests have checked out for the day, so he can show us *Dreaming of the Sea*, *Midnight Rendezvous*, and *Summer*

Garden. We part ways in the lobby, and The Balloon Man and I head up to Winter Romance, not speaking.

When we enter our room, The Balloon Man moves to his black bag and sifts through it, so I do the same and pretend I'm searching through my yellow suitcase. In here I find some nightclothes, but I also think maybe some clothes will need washing soon, so I make a mental note to ask Conner about washing machines at the inn. As I'm thinking this, The Balloon Man disappears to the balcony, closing the door behind him. I stare at the closed door for a moment, nursing a stupendous sting inside my chest. Then I sit on the bottom of the bed, thinking.

The room seems to sense my emotion, and the temperature sinks to freezing, to the point where I'm wondering if I can even spend the night in here. It would be warmer out in the SUV, and I seriously consider sleeping out there and letting The Balloon Man have this luxurious bed. My limbs grow icy, and when I let my fingers glide along my wrist, the coldness of my fingertips penetrates the skin until I feel the ice down in my bones. When I let my eyes fall on the wallpaper, I swear the winter roses are drooping beneath the weight of snow dust, but maybe it just looks that way because my vision is blurry through tears.

*I followed him*, I think, staring at the closed French doors that lead to the balcony. *On this journey. And I have to keep going.* And while everything inside of me wants to grab my journal and run, I stand from the bed, wipe my eyes, and extend my arms outward to push away the cold. Then I walk to the French doors and open them to find him standing on the metal balcony, holding the star book I gave him, gazing at the star speckled sky. I shut the doors behind me, and he closes the book, resting it down on the floor of the balcony. He doesn't turn to me, just keeps looking at the sky.

“I sometimes think what if they were all gold,” I say and move behind him.

“I sometimes think what if they were closer,” he replies. “So close you could touch them.” He exhales. “I was just talking to my mom.”

“About what?”

He shrugs, still not turning to face me. “I think she wanted me to find him and knew it would end up this way someday. I think she knew exactly who he was and who I was going to be.”

“She left the symbol,” I say. “So I’m sure she wanted you to find him and knew it was possible.”

He nods. “And I apologized to her for being so mad about what she did. Lately she seems so much closer, even though I’m technically moving farther away from Gram, farther away from my mom as my only parent.” He rubs his forehead. “All of this stuff is coming at me, and I should be scared, and I am. But I also feel like . . . these are things I’ve always known.”

I walk closer and wrap my arms around him from behind. I rest my cheek to his back and hold him, because this is the only way to comfort him without having to look into his eyes. He’s still wearing his gray shirt from dinner, and the scent stuck to him is sweet like our dessert in the dining room and fresh like the outside air of the garden. The mixture of scents is intoxicating. The smell of *him* is intoxicating.

“I’m sorry for what’s happening between us since we came here,” I whisper against his back. “I’m so sorry. I’m just . . . I’ve never felt this way before and I’m scared. I can’t make sense of any of it. Usually I have my dad to help me with things, but this is . . . I just feel so alone.”

He gazes up at the sky again. Around us, crickets chirp a slow melody and the moon watches down, a big silver eye. In the garden, the lanterns flicker as a faint breeze moves branches through light. Fairy shadows dance over the paths.

“Just tell me if you have feelings for me,” The Balloon Man says finally. “Yes or no.”

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Feelings like you’re helping a friend with something, feelings like you’re falling for me, or feelings like you’re chasing magic?”

“All,” I reply.

“Can’t it be just me?”

“It’s always been just you,” I say. “It’s been just you for two whole years.”

“No,” he says and turns to face me. “It’s been The Balloon Man for two whole years.”

“What’s the difference?”

He leans in, and with a soft, feathery pressure, he kisses my temple. “There’s a big difference,” he whispers.

He scoops up the star book, then walks past me, opens the French doors, and disappears inside Winter Romance.

## Chapter Seventeen

After sitting on the metal floor of the balcony for at least an hour, I go back inside Winter Romance to find The Balloon Man in front of his laptop, working on an essay. He doesn't say anything to me, so I slip past him, retrieve my nightclothes, and head to the bathroom. He's still in the same place when I return, and since I am not nearly ready to sleep, I decide it's probably best to listen to some music or call my father. When I get into bed and squirm under the covers, he glances at me.

"Do you want me to get settled on the floor?" he asks.

"It's much too cold and hard on the floor," I reply. "We can either sleep head to feet or you can sleep on top of the blankets."

He thanks me and nods, then situates himself beside me, on top of the covers. From here, resting upright against the pillow, I can see his laptop and the paper he's working on, something about identifying the genes responsible for anxiety and depressive disorders in order to find easier ways for diagnosis and treatment. I don't want to interrupt him, so I text my father a goodnight and then listen to some music while The Balloon Man types away.

An hour later I'm bored and wondering how long he'll be doing his paper. I toss my phone and headphones onto the bed and sit up fully, drumming my fingers until he glances behind his shoulder at me.

"Talk for a bit?" I ask. "Like we did at The Sorrell Hotel?"

"This has to be six to eight pages," he replies. "And I'm only on five."

“Close enough, right?”

He lets out a laugh of air, like he’s probably used to my irreverence by now. The truth is, I admire his dedication to schoolwork and psychology. I’m just not sure I want to go through all of that school stuff again, so I pretend it’s pointless when I know it’s the most important thing I could be doing with myself right now. I pretend a lot of things; some of them are pretty pretends and some are ugly.

He spins in the bed, and I’m wondering if he’s finally going to give in and take a break when my phone lights up in a call. I pick the phone up from the bed, but it’s too late. He’s seen.

“You going to answer that?” he says as I cup my phone.

I shake my head.

“Maybe it’s important.”

“She always calls around the beginning of the month,” I say. “It’s almost May, right?”

I feel the urgency as though it’s burning right through my palm. If ever I was going to answer her call, it’s now. Tonight.

When I was sitting outside on the balcony, I thought about her. I remembered The Balloon Man gazing up on a sea of stars and talking to his dead mom, and I also thought about Conner, whose mother has disappeared. Both of these guys are irreparably fractured by the loss. And here I am in a world where my mother exists and is living and breathing and *wanting* to talk to me. And me . . . I’m wanting to talk to her, too.

“Hey,” The Balloon Man says as the call directs to voicemail. “It’s time.”

“How do you know?” I ask. “How could you possibly know what’s inside of me?”

“Because if I had a white balloon to give to you right now, I would,” he replies. “In fact, it’s everything I have in me not to go outside, pull out my cart, and inflate one for you. You remember what the white balloon means, don’t you?”

“Peace,” I say. “Making amends before it’s too late.”

“It’s not too late,” he says, and, probably catching my worried expression, he says, “And it’s not a situation like something bad will happen to her like with my first white balloon interaction. It’s just time to make peace. You know this.”

“I do?”

He nods. And that’s when I realize that we’re looking at each other. For the first time in this room. And I’m not cold or frightened or any of those things. I’m just feeling love, as sweet as these million roses around us and as beautiful as all this snow and as romantic as the balcony and as rich as the gold-red lighting. It’s as magical as everything I have experienced so far on this journey. *More* magical.

With shaking limbs, I stand from the bed, grasping my phone. The Balloon Man smiles to encourage me, and I pull in some air, set myself upright, and head outside to the balcony, closing the door behind me. The moon has shifted to the right of the sky, but its powerful silver light still floods the gardens and the parking lot. I hit my phone button, scroll down to Mom, and envision a white balloon of peace floating in the space between my thirteen-year-old self and myself now. The Balloon Man was right. It’s time.

“Hello?” my mother says. “Cammie?”

“Hi.” The word is faint, barely audible. “Hi, Mom.”

“Oh my God,” she says. “Cammie, is it you? Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, stronger. “Yeah, everything is fine. You called?”

She pauses, and I realize how stupid that sounded. I half expect her to say yeah, she’s called for the last seven years. But she just makes a sniffing noise and carries on.

“I can’t believe . . . it doesn’t matter,” she says. “You’re here now. How are you, baby girl?”

And that’s when I break down. I sink to the metal floor of the balcony in my white tank and fluffy PJ bottoms, sobbing. I twist the phone so she can’t hear, but I think it’s pretty obvious from my lack of response and whatever far-off sobs she can discern through the phone. It takes me a few moments to pull myself together, swiping away tears and gasping in breaths.

“I’m here,” I say shakily.

“Good good good,” she says. “It’s okay, baby girl. I’m feeling the same way.” She pauses, snuffles. “Your father says you’re away on a trip with some boy?” I can hear the smile through the phone. “Or I guess I should say some *man*. How is that going?”

“Fine,” I say. “Everything is fine.” I hesitate, wonder where to go next. Thankfully, she takes over.

“I was calling because I wanted to talk to you of course,” she says. “God, I’ve missed you so, so much. But before we get into all that, I wanted to let you know that I’m . . . I’m getting married. I wanted you to be in the wedding in September as my Maid of Honor. Could you do that for me?”

“Getting *married*?” I stand up, ready to smash the balcony to metal bits. “What do you mean?”

So while I lean against the railing in a rage so strong its vibrations seem to shake the moon above, she explains that she met an accountant named Joel and fell in love. It was a fast, meant-to-be thing, which shocks me because it's my mother, and I always felt she was incapable of this type of love. But then I remember that she fell in love that way with my dad, too. And maybe in love with whatever guy she cheated on my father with in the vacant house.

"Cammie, say something," she says. "I understand that this is surprising news, so let me know any questions you have. Please, please don't hang up on me."

Yes, I was just thinking about doing that. But if I've learned anything over the last few days it's that I have to face certain things in order to move past them or make sense of them. My journal is a good listener, but only when I speak my thoughts aloud in the real world do I get any advice or help.

"Why?" I ask. "Why not . . . Dad?"

She sighs. "Cammie, I knew you would ask this, and the best I can tell you is that I loved your father, but we had different life goals."

"And you have the same goals as this . . . *accountant*?"

"I loved your father's loyalty to the store and his determination to run a business by himself," she says. "But in the end, there were issues that we just couldn't get past. He wanted the store, and all the losses that came with that on bad months, and I wanted a career. I wanted stability."

"You did?"

For a while, I listen to her life story. Things I didn't know, couldn't possibly have understood when I was thirteen. My mother, as it turns out, is no longer the flighty drug-head

young woman that I grew up with. Around my teen years, she grew up herself, and wanted more out of life than my father was able to give her. They had different goals, which presented itself as a stupendous wedge between them. As time went on, the only thing they had in common was me, and my mother found herself so distant from my father that when she slept with the man in the vacant house, she didn't even acknowledge it as cheating. Her and my father, at that point, were already past repair.

I cry during the conversation. I cry a lot. Because she's happy with this guy now, because she is not the woman I thought I despised, because she is not the monster I imagined, because she really, really loves me and misses me. And I really, really love her and miss her too. When I get back, she says, I can meet Joel and we can shop for wedding dresses. She thinks a deep autumn purple will work for a September wedding and will match my complexion. We can also taste some wedding cakes and pick out a flavor. She wants me to be a big part of the wedding.

"So you can bring this mystery man to the wedding," she says.

The lights close down in the garden and in the back of the lot, leaving just one post beaming for anyone coming back to the inn late. I imagine it must be midnight.

"I would love to," I say. "If . . ."

"What's the matter?" she asks.

I rest my back against the railing. "I've been having a hard time telling him how I feel," I admit. "I think I might . . . I mean, he's everything in the world."

"All right," she says and laughs. "First of all, it's not healthy to make any man your 'everything in the world.' And second of all, do you know how he feels about you?"

“He has feelings for me,” I tell her. “But he keeps telling me that he thinks I’m not falling for him, but for the person I went on the trip with . . . the magic man.”

It takes another ten minutes to explain The Balloon Man’s background, and when I’m finished, I’m not sure she believes a word of what I’ve told her.

“So you were journaling about all of this and got sucked into it,” she says. “Then you followed him to find out why these balloons are supposedly magic?”

“That about sums it up,” I return. “So what do I do?”

“It sounds more like you’re having a hard time finding *yourself*, and that has little to do with this Balloon Man. Once you understand what you want from this trip with him, then you’ll be able to make sense of how you feel.”

“Find myself?” I ask.

“You said you were journaling about him all the time, following him around because of these balloons,” she says. “In the meantime, and I think your father mentioned this too, you were struggling with Lizzie being gone and with not knowing what you wanted to do with yourself. I’ve been in this same place, baby girl, stuck somewhere and not knowing which way to turn next. Work on Cammie first, okay? Promise me that?”

“Yes,” I reply. “So you’re saying I need to figure out why I really wanted to go on this trip?”

“That’s all it is,” she says. “What is Cammie looking for?”

I think on that for a minute, gazing at the moon, thinking how badly I wanted to help The Balloon Man when inside maybe I was screaming for some direction of my own. *Work on myself first*. That is not something I have ever done. It’s always been about helping my father at Tie-Dye

Me, or helping Lizzie through her problems while we sat at the ice cream house, or helping The Balloon Man find his father out in the world. What *I* really want does not come that simple. My father had a goal—the store. Lizzie had a goal—friends and college. The Balloon Man has a goal—find his identity. What do *I* want?

“I’m going to get off now, Mom,” I say. “But we’ll stay in touch.”

“I could talk to you all night.”

“I know,” I say and laugh. “But I have to get back inside the inn now. It’s getting cold.”

“All right,” she says. “Please, please stay in touch. Call me whenever, okay?”

“I will,” I say. “I promise.”

When I hang up, I hold the phone close to me, where it seems to fill in some missing space inside my chest. My mother. I talked to my mother. It seems so simple now, and I wonder why anyone would go so long without speaking to someone when all it takes is a “Hi, Mom” to make all the bad memories dissolve.

Back in the room, The Balloon Man is still working on his paper. He glances up at me, then hits return on the keyboard and smiles.

“Finished,” he says. “I just have to fill in some information on resources. So?”

I move to the bed and sit down beside him. “It went really well.” I explain what happened, that she’s getting married and that I can’t believe how much we connected now that I’m older and not as angry. Mostly, I tell him how much that anger has shifted to wasted years, things left unsaid, and presumptions I made about her. Then I tell him what she said about me finding myself, which I think he understands much better than I do.

“So we’re both finding ourselves on the trip,” he says and punches my shoulder.

“Our pink balloons were right,” I say. “About more than just romance.”

“Romance can be an adventure,” he says and smiles.

Yes, I suppose it could. Romance is definitely an adventure. The pink balloon was right about all of it. “So what color balloon would you give me now?” I ask him. I toss back my head and hair so he can examine me.

He smiles again, only this time, it’s lit with a hint of playfulness. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Excuse me?”

“I can’t tell you what color I would give you now.”

“Happy yellow?” I ask.

He shakes his head.

“Pink for a new adventure? Pink romance?”

“Been there, done that.”

“Sad blue?” I scratch my head.

“Nope.”

“Then what?”

He reaches out, rests his fingers on my bare shoulder, and glides his hand down my arm.

“A Balloon Man has his secrets,” he says, swirling his fingers against my wrist. “Even from girls who follow him around for years and claim to know all there is to know about him.”

He stands from the bed, grabs a toothbrush, some sweats and a blue T-shirt out of his bag, and heads for the bathroom. When he finally returns, I want to tell him that I know what color balloon he would give me now. It’s not white or yellow or pink or blue. It’s the color of this room, and I am just about ready for him to give it to me.

## Chapter Eighteen

The morning dawns blue and bright. The Balloon Man is beside me when I wake up, and even though I'm snuggled against him, he's asleep on top of the covers and probably suffering from cramped muscles and chill. I move the comforter so that it's on top of him, then watch him sleep for a few moments, lost in the vision. A spray of morning sun shines through the little jail cell window, illuminating the glossy blond of his hair and the perfect curves of his profile. He is more gorgeous in this moment than I have ever realized.

When he finally opens his eyes, I'm gazing down on him. He pulls the comforter around him, and I wonder if maybe he's going to fall back asleep when he smiles up at me.

"Another nice day," he whispers.

"Yes," I reply. "One more day to go until you meet your dad."

His eyes close. "Maybe," he says. "Hopefully."

"You said you weren't scared."

"No," he says and opens his eyes, squinting against the sun. "I said I was scared but accepting. All of this might be for nothing if he doesn't want me or even *believe* me."

I've thought about all of that, but didn't say much to him about my suspicions. There might be DNA testing involved, things you see on television, to prove The Balloon Man is Finn's son. He might not even remember The Balloon Man's mother or their shared night of passion. That was twenty-three years ago, and who knows how many people the troupe meet in their journeys across America or even overseas?

A robin sings a happy little song outside, and I stretch my arms to the ceiling. The Balloon Man reaches out and pokes at my belly, and I laugh, shrinking down so he can't reach me.

“A good day for a trip to the town center,” he says when I stop laughing. “What do you think, Chamomile?”

“With the balloon cart?”

He nods. “Come with me?”

I hop up on my knees, shaking the bed. “Really? Oh really really?” I keep hopping up and down until he looks slightly nauseated. “You said that was an alone thing.”

He shrugs. “We’ll give it a shot,” he says. “Go get showered. Then we’ll eat breakfast and head out until lunchtime.”

Singing a song happier than the robin’s outside, I gather up my clothes and get ready for a morning in the park with The Balloon Man. Going out with him is something I never even imagined; I was always the onlooker, not the participant. It took forever just to ask for a balloon. But as I shower and the hot water rushes over my hair and chest, all I can think about is that I was part of this magic journey from the beginning. I was the girl journaling in the park, nobody else. Everyone else got their balloons and split, and aside from the news people who wanted to interview The Balloon Man, nobody else understood the uniqueness and the importance.

After a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, juice and coffee, The Balloon Man and I hop into the SUV and drive to Coven Hill’s town center. When we pull up, it reminds me of Redfield Village, only the stores line the street outside of the town center—they’re not all packed into one area like the village. It seems instead of sidewalks, townspeople use the town center to navigate

the area and move in and out of shops. The Balloon Man finds a parking space along the main road, and I help him pull the balloon cart out of the back of the SUV.

The town center is oval and grassy with stone pathways that wind around the outer edge. Centralized is an enormous white gazebo surrounded by wood benches in a circular pattern. There's a stone memorial with American flags at the foot, and lantern lights scattered among the thick tree trunks. If I didn't love Redfield so much, I would say this is a town I would want to live in someday.

The Balloon Man pushes his cart through the spring sunshine while I let my hand glide along the white wood, hardly believing I'm so close and touching the thing. For so long, it was a mystery, something that had an unearthly quality, untouchable. As we stroll, The Balloon Man keeps shifting his eyes around, expectant for customers. It's early Friday morning, so most of the people around are elderly, but there are a few thirty-somethings scurrying in and out of the coffee house, probably on their way to work.

"We could stay at the end of a path so people can see us," I say. In other parks, I think they probably know The Balloon Man, but we have to introduce ourselves to the Coven Hill crowd this morning. We tied one red balloon to the cart so people get the idea we're peddling balloons, but I feel like if we're moving, people might be afraid to run up.

"People are drawn to movement," The Balloon Man says. "If I see someone interested, I slow and wait."

"Okay," I say. "I was just thinking it might be easier for people if you were stationary."

We keep going, and I wonder if I messed up his process or he's angry at me for giving advice like a backseat driver, but maybe he listened to the advice, because the pace is a wee bit

more relaxed now. In only a few minutes, a curly-haired redhead woman in her mid-twenties, pushing a baby stroller, approaches from our side. I wait for her arrival, smiling.

“Don’t smile,” The Balloon Man whispers.

“But . . .”

“It’s a professional thing,” he says. “We’re professionals.”

“But it’s *balloons*.”

He replies with a shake of his head, so slight only I can perceive the motion as the redhead stops the same time we do on the path, just approaching the circled gazebo area.

“How much for a balloon?” she asks.

Her baby is around two and wearing a lacy pink dress. The baby shares her red hair, though it’s not as curly as the mother’s. I want to scream out that the balloons are free and magic, and never before in my life have I had to physically and literally bite my tongue to keep my words from spilling out into the air.

“No charge,” The Balloon Man says.

He doesn’t ask her for a color, but pauses for the request.

“You mean they’re free?” the redhead says. “Are you working for a company?”

“No,” The Balloon Man responds.

“Okay,” she says. “Do you have only red?”

“He has every color,” I cut in. I can’t stop myself.

“I’ll take pink for Ciara, then,” she says, smiling down at her baby.

The Balloon Man goes to work on her order, then helps her tie the balloon to the stroller.

The baby looks up at the balloon and the motion, but otherwise, does not seem to care.

“Do you want one?” I ask her.

“I’m okay,” she says. She rests her hands on the handles of the stroller, ready to head off, but then halts. “Maybe I’ll take one,” she says. “If that would be okay.”

The Balloon Man nods, waits for the color request.

“He can choose a color for you,” I say. “You’ll be happy with what he picks for you, trust me.”

She says that would be all right, and The Balloon Man again gives me a scolding head shake so slight only I can see it. He turns back to the redhead and gazes not at her but *through* her, as though he’s reading an aura around her frame. Then he bends over for the bag of yellow balloons, inflates one, ties the string, and loops the bottom for the redhead. She holds the string for a moment, staring up at the balloon with a distant smile. Her baby makes a fussy sound and she hands her a baby cup filled with juice.

“Thank you,” she says to us.

“Good luck,” The Balloon Man says. “The day will get sunnier, okay?”

“Thanks,” she whispers. She strolls away with her baby and her balloons, taking with her a mildly confused expression, but at least she’s still smiling.

The Balloon Man keeps moving toward the gazebo, then stops just in front. “You can’t explain them to people,” he says. “You can’t tell them I can choose the color for them.”

“But that’s part of the magic,” I tell him. “What if there are people out there who need you to choose for them? That don’t know you have a gift for choosing the right color and understanding their needs and emotions?”

He doesn't reply, just gazes out over the benches and the sunlit tops of the trees around us.

"I'm sorry," I say after a while. "This is your thing, and you have your routine in place already. It's just that I've been on the outside, and I've studied the way you do this for two years now. I was just trying to help, trying to let you see the true magic in what you do."

"I don't understand it," he says, and his fingers slide up the length of the red balloon string. "I couldn't tell you if it's the colors or the balloons or *me*, really. But I could tell you that the woman who took the yellow balloon really, really needed to be happy today. Maybe she had a fight with her husband or maybe she had some unexpected bill or house repair. Maybe her pet is sick. She just needed something happy."

"The yellow balloon made her feel happy," I say. "I'm sure it made her feel happy."

"Balloons can't fix all the problems in life."

"Maybe *your* balloons can." I rest my hand on his shoulder. "Or at least they can make someone happy just for a moment. I always say that if something makes you happy even for just a moment, it was worth it."

He nods, accepting the advice. "You are really, really incredible," he says.

"And here I always thought that about you."

He smiles, touches my chin.

And with that The Balloon Man's procedure changes. We are stationary, parked in front of the gazebo, where people pass by regularly. Our customers are mostly moms with toddlers, but we do have a few grandparents stroll by asking for a balloon for their grandchildren. We even have one request for a balloon animal, which The Balloon Man does not offer. After the request,

we share a laugh. He says he has been asked for a balloon animal at least a dozen times in the past.

Some people have color requests this morning, but to any who pause just a second, I offer The Balloon Man's services for color choice. They walk away mended. I can tell by their steps.

"Mostly they walk away happy," I tell The Balloon Man as the sun warms our arms and faces. "But I remember a few times seeing them walk away sad."

"In that case, I'm thinking the balloon is an answer," he explains. "Something they didn't want to know or didn't want to face. That's just a guess."

"Probably right."

"Ready to pack it in?" he asks. "It's almost time for lunch at the inn, and Conner should be home from school soon to take us on our tour."

"I like him," I say. "He really seems to love the inn and really seems to care about you finding your dad."

The Balloon Man shrugs. "I think he's been in the same place," he replies. "No mother, a gift he didn't understand." He starts pushing the cart. "I guess he's hoping the puzzle comes together for me."

"It's already coming together," I say as we foot the path. "Every day a little more."

"One last piece," he says.

"One last piece," I echo.

We leave Coven Hill town center behind, the midday sun casting a shadow on the sidewalk in front of us: the silhouettes of The Balloon Man, the floating balloon, and me.

## Chapter Nineteen

After a lunch of fettuccini Alfredo, breadsticks, and Caesar salads, The Balloon Man and I head out to the garden. We part ways in the center, with him jogging off toward the stone wall in the back to text his grandmother and check in with his aunt, and me wandering around until I'm content with the fairy gardens. Beside a stone fairy blowing a rainbow bubble, I call my father. He has already texted me fifteen times this morning about the phone call with my mom, but because I was busy in the town center, I just sent a quick "talk later" text, which made him even more aggressive with the texts. Now, as I wait for him to pick up his phone, I'm experiencing a dropping sensation in my stomach. Never have I felt so frightened of this hippie man I love so dearly.

"What the hell is going on?" he says in lieu of a proper greeting.

"I'm sorry," I say. "Dad, I was doing something important this morning."

"You called her?" He is shouting. "You talked to her and then just left me hanging about the why, when, how—"

"Calm down," I say, then go on to explain what happened last night.

"She called right after," he says. "Woke me out of a deep sleep and I thought something was wrong, because the woman was in tears and kept saying your name."

"Oh good," I say. "I mean, good that she was happy about what happened. Aren't you happy?"

“Of course,” he replies, and I hear the Steve Miller Band playing over the stereo at Tie-Dye Me. “I just would have liked to have been there or at least part of the decision.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again. “The Balloon Man said it was time, and he was right.”

“That’s great,” he says and I catch some sarcasm. “It’s great that he’s getting you to do things I’ve been trying to get you to do for years. Just great.”

“Stop it, Dad,” I say. “Anyhow, we’re staying here until tomorrow night and then heading to a place called The Velvet, where we’re supposed to find his father. We don’t have much information yet, but we’re talking to Conner today about what to do and all that.” I swirl my finger around the grass. “Dad, how are you about Mom getting married?”

“I’m great, Gypsy Girl. I’m wonderful about the whole thing.”

“You don’t sound wonderful at all,” I reply. “In fact, you don’t sound like my dad, but like some angry guy I don’t recognize.”

“I’m fine.”

“Maybe you can give me a word other than fine or great or wonderful then?” I ask.

“Those are all good words,” he says. “I have a customer, so I need to get off now.”

“I miss you,” I say, and hold the phone close to my ear. “And I miss the store.”

“We all miss you too,” he says.

And without a good-bye, he is gone.

\*\*\*

The Balloon Man and I meet up with Conner in the lobby to begin our tour of the inn. All the rooms are empty, Conner says, and expecting Friday nights guests after three, so we have to hurry. Chandry’s mother is cleaning out the rooms, sweeping hallways, and running by with

balled-up bedding in her hands. It's odd to see what happens in a hotel after check-out, but it seems as though they have a good system down. Conner explains that all four owners have different strengths, with Chandry doing best with lobby and customer service, Leah excelling with kitchen duty, and Zach rocking the business end. Since Conner is a writer, he does all the marketing, brochures, website upkeep, and the inn's blog.

“So what will you guys do in the fall when you go off to college?” I ask as we near the doorway of Dreaming of the Sea.

“Chandry and Leah are both doing classes close by, but Zach's father has been pressuring him to do business school since Zach came out of the womb, pretty much. I'm not sure yet if I'm going to join the troupe or stay at the inn, but I really wanted a writing degree somehow.”

“You could do online classes like I do,” The Balloon Man says.

“The troupe's handler bans technology,” Conner replies, frowning. “But I might be able to arrange something with her if it's education related.”

Standing in the doorway, they discuss online college while I enter Dreaming of the Sea. As I gaze on the navy and white wallpaper, my muscles loosen and turn weightless, my breaths deepen, and my entire body feels as though I'm drifting in the sea, peaceful. It even *smells* like the ocean in here, fresh and salty. I close my eyes and envision a watery world of mermaids and oysters and colorful fish. Blasts of ocean sunsets and sandy shores. When I open my eyes, Conner and The Balloon Man are in the room, staring around at the decor. It's all miniature ships and ship wheels and anchors and ocean art.

“Chandry picked out the anchor,” Conner says, and I wonder how many times a day he says her name. “She found a lot of stuff at antique stores for cheap. We ran a carnival at school to

raise money. We gave the principal the first room at the inn in exchange for letting us run it . . .”

He goes on as I sink deeper and deeper into the sea.

After Dreaming of the Sea, we head over to Summer Garden, the happy room. The yellow wallpaper with daisies makes me think of my father and my childhood and sticking my feet in the water at the park and dancing around Tie-Dye Me and Lizzie at the Redfield Ice Cream House and even my mother. Just like when inside Winter Romance, I think of The Balloon Man too, a vision of something so sweet I fail to understand how he could be real. As I think on all of this it's as though all the yellow of the sun has settled inside my chest and is heating me from the inside. All the colors of my life blend to one happy memory, nearly levitating me on the rays of content.

Midnight Rendezvous is different. So different, that it doesn't even seem as though it fits in The Brightwick Inn. It's a downstairs room behind the sitting room, hidden by a sliding wood door. The room is in a dark corner of the house, and the overall feeling inside is that something is going to pop out at me and scream "Boo!" There are at least three secret hideaways in here: a backdoor that blends into the wall but leads to the back gardens, a bookcase that actually does spin to reveal the bathroom, and a small hole that leads to a closet-sized room similar to the Trapdoor Room in the basement. The wallpaper is dark and the presence in the room is uninviting.

"Favorite?" Conner asks as we leave Midnight Rendezvous behind.

"Not that one," I say and laugh. "Probably Dreaming of the Sea."

"That's Chandry's favorite too," he says. "That and Winter Romance, but everyone likes that one."

We stop in the sitting room, where Leah has put out refreshments for the new crowd arriving this afternoon. Conner sneaks a piece of cranberry bread, and while chewing, he goes on about the inn, though I think we now know more about the history than some of the owners. The Balloon Man sits on the rose-colored couch while I inspect the popcorn offerings. Today Leah has put out lime green.

“So tomorrow . . .” The Balloon Man says.

“Okay,” Conner says and brushes some crumbs off his black sweat jacket. “So you’re going into The Velvet without anyone knowing who you are. Anyone who goes to meet the troupe has to follow a procedure.” He sits down on the gray armchair like he did when we met him. “You’re going to look for a tall, dark woman dressed in red. You’ll know her when you see her. Then you’re going to ask her if the circus is in town.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I say.

Conner shakes his head, serious. “She’ll then take you to meet the troupe. I’ve never been to The Velvet, but most of these places have downstairs or backroom areas for the troupe to meet customers in private. The troupe and their customers also mingle, dance, and drink at the venues. Think of it as an underground nightclub environment.”

“Wow,” The Balloon Man says. “So then what do we do?”

“The Woman in Red will escort you, so just follow her lead. She’s their handler and part of the troupe, like their master of ceremonies. Tell her, once in private, that you’re meeting with Finn. That’s as far as I can take you.”

“All right,” The Balloon Man says. “Thanks. I appreciate everything you’ve done for us.”

Conner nods. “We’ll go over everything again tomorrow before you leave. You’ll be heading out around midnight.”

“That late?” I say.

“Yeah, and dress appropriately,” he returns. “It’s a nightclub.”

I tell him I don’t know if I have anything appropriate for a nightclub environment, that most of my wardrobe consists of long green skirts, wrap-around shirts and sweaters, headbands, and tie-dyes. He says maybe Chandry has something and that he’ll talk to her. We thank him again, and then part ways back to Winter Romance.

Maybe because of the talk with Conner, The Balloon Man is somewhat distant, just flipping through his star book and checking his class announcements on his laptop. Inside the rose-covered walls of Winter Romance, all I think about is how much I am falling for him, how gorgeous he is, how tropical blue his eyes are, and how much I want to wrap my arms around him. For that reason, and because I can’t stand not being close to him, I decide to head outside on the balcony to spend some time with my journal. It’s been a long time since I’ve written, or at least it feels like a long time.

Out on the balcony, with the scent of new flowers in the air and the warmth of the sun beating down on the metal, I open my journal. The effects of Winter Romance are still with me, it seems, as I write about my favorite subject. I set my music to my playlist of Tie-Dye Me songs, missing the store and missing my dad, and jot down all my thoughts about The Balloon Man. I notice, though, as I sit writing, that the poetry of him has left me and the words form more of a story. Something fiction has turned non-fiction, which leaves the dreamy writer in me set too far

down on earth. I place the journal on the floor of the balcony and cross my legs, letting my skirt fall around my calves.

“Getting high out here?” The Balloon says from behind me, and I gasp.

“I didn’t hear you come out.”

He sits down beside me and listens to my music, which is now on Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit.”

“I miss my music,” I say. “Not that I don’t like yours.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“I think I owe you that,” I say and laugh.

“Are you . . . into drugs?”

At that I fall into hysterics, which probably doesn’t help prove my lack of highness to The Balloon Man. “I’ve been high,” I say. “Not in this moment, but yeah. My father and I did it a lot when I was in high school. Not so much anymore.” I can’t help but slap his wrist. “And that’s a stereotype. Just because I dress in tie-dyes and listen to this music doesn’t mean I—”

“But you just said it did.” He punches my arm, like he always does, and we laugh together, in the sunshine. Until he spots my open journal.

“You’re still calling me The Balloon Man?”

“That’s private!” I say and slam the journal closed.

“I couldn’t help but see it,” he says. “It was wide open in front of me.”

I hug the journal to my chest and don’t look at him. I don’t know how much he read.

He stands up. “I’m going to wash up for dinner.”

“Fine,” I say. “Whatever.”

“You’re getting upset with me because after everything we’ve been through, you still don’t know my name?”

“I know your name!”

He shakes his head, like he always does, and I’m sick of this same argument with him about his stupid, stupid name.

“I thought with what happened with your mother, maybe you’d start seeing people for who they really were,” he says. “Not the made-up fairytales.”

“The Balloon Man isn’t a made-up fairytale,” I say. “If you believed that, we wouldn’t be visiting a magic troupe tomorrow night.”

“Fair enough,” he replies. “But there’s more to me than just The Balloon Man, and it would be nice if you met him.”

“Just because you’re a psychology student doesn’t mean you can try to analyze everything about me.” I turn my back to him and watch the garden, where a family of robins is visiting a bird bath near the tulip garden.

Then, with Eric Clapton’s “Cocaine” playing unhelpfully, The Balloon Man leaves the balcony, and me, behind.

\*\*\*

We eat another dinner in frosty conversation. The Friday night guests at the inn are a touch louder than the group the night before, with the exception of one lone creepy guy shrunk in the corner by himself who I assume came to spend the night in Midnight Rendezvous. Leah has put together a feast of pecan-crusting chicken, minted peas, and baked potatoes stuffed with cheddar cheese and crisp bacon. When we’re finished eating, Chandry and Leah come out of the

kitchen to sit with us. Leah is simply beautiful. Her hair is raven and thick, and her complexion is light coffee; she's obviously of Spanish descent. I give her my compliments on the dinner, and her cheeks glow like she has no idea she's that good of a chef.

For a while, we talk to Chandry and Leah about the inn. Chandry tells me she has a black dress for me to wear tomorrow, and that our sizes are the same. Truthfully, I think I might be a tad bigger than her in the waist and chest, but she politely does not acknowledge the discrepancy. I don't consider myself too overweight, but even though I eat healthy when I can, my occasional chocolate splurges and something fiendish in my genes makes me a tad curvy. I cover it up well with the long skirts, layers of clothes, and bulky sweaters, but it's there.

When we finish Leah's dessert of chocolate mousse, whipped creme, and strawberries, we all part ways with a promise to meet up again tomorrow afternoon. Both Chandry and Leah are pleasant, and as I climb the staircases with The Balloon Man, we discuss how much we like all of the inn's owners, even though we haven't yet met Zach. Conner's opinion of Zach seems to vary: he's either a good friend since middle school or he's an overbearing pain in the something. I guess anytime you go into business with friends, this type of thing happens, even if they are a bit younger than the average inn-owner.

When we enter Winter Romance, I move to the bed and drop down. The Balloon Man does his usual rummaging through his black bag, and I have yet to determine if this is a nervous habit or he's really searching for something important in there. He comes up empty, but soon locates his laptop on the bed and goes to work with school stuff, which is irritating me. I listen to music for a while, but I soon grow bored. More frustrating than the boredom and the constant schoolwork he does is the fact that our argument from earlier is still out there.

As it rounds ten o'clock, he slams the laptop closed and tosses his head back like he's had enough of school. I can't imagine how hard it must be for him to concentrate when he's going to find his father tomorrow.

"Talk?" I ask. "Or are you still mad at me?"

He shakes his head. "I'm never mad at you. I'm just tense right now."

"I understand." I move up the bed so I'm closer to him. "I wanted to tell you that I had a great day today. I mean, not the fighting, obviously, but the town center and the balloons. It was a dream come true for me."

He gives me a half-smile in response, nodding and staring at the wallpaper near the arched doorway. "It just felt right to have you become a part of it," he says. "When I think of the balloons now, I think of you. We're a team."

I can't help but smile at that. "Really?"

"Really," he says back.

I watch him stare at the wallpaper, wondering if the effects of this room have softened the edges of our argument on the balcony. "Can I ask you something?"

"I think we've established that you can."

"How does this room make you feel?"

He squints at the question, then turns away from me. "I don't really want to answer that."

In the beginning, the room made me feel cold, but it did not seem to cause that unsettling temperature problem with him. Since then I think I understand that I have accepted my feelings for him, so they don't strangle me anymore. They don't make me icy and afraid. And while I do know that he has feelings for me, I don't know how he feels inside of Winter Romance.

“Just tell me,” I say. “Just put it out there.”

“Yeah?” he says, turning back to me. “You’re sure?”

I want to tell him that I have accepted what is between us, that I would gladly accept his red balloon, that I will match whatever feelings he has inside of Winter Romance, but before I can explain, he leans in and his lips are against mine.

The kiss does not entirely take me by surprise, but the intensity of it does. It’s like the breezes have built to winds and the winds have built to a roar—I can almost hear the swishing and the growling inside my ears as his mouth moves with mine. All the magic I have felt from the beginning ends up here, in this moment, in this beautiful kiss. It’s the collision of stars I have always imagined, and I fully understand it wasn’t just his magic I craved all along. It was him.

I lose all sense of time as the kiss becomes a dance, a fast-moving choreography. When we finally break apart I’m left wanting more, more than I should want, maybe an entire field of kisses, maybe an entire park of red balloons.

“That’s how the room makes me feel,” he says.

“Me too.” My words are feathers. “I think I’m falling for you.”

“For me.”

I shake my head. “Don’t do this now. Not now.”

He kisses me again, hard. “What’s my real name?” he whispers.

“I know your stupid name,” I say back.

“What is it then?”

There’s a part of me boiling that he questions this, and I reach across and cup his cheek, so he has to look right at me. He has to acknowledge the anger in my eyes.

“Tell me,” he says.

I pause, thinking. “Riley,” I say at last.

His jaw drops fully. Then he lets out a harsh laugh of amazement. “Really?” he says.

“*Really?*”

He leaves the bed with such abruptness that the mattress springs and shakes, and his laptop, near the bottom, almost falls off the edge. He grabs the room key from the shelf, tosses back a look of mixed fury and disbelief, and leaves Winter Romance, slamming the door behind him.

The sound of the slamming door takes me back to another time and place, when my father was angry at me about leaving on this trip. Just like then, I hear the slam but register it more in my gut, a sound that moves through my entire body like a jolt of immeasurable pain. I was angry right back at my father, but I know that in this moment, with The Balloon Man, it’s all on me. That makes it hurt with so much more intensity. So much, that I fall back to the pillow and slam my head against the bed frame, tears mucking up my vision. How is it that I’ve made two passive, loving, incredible men so *mad* at me?

I think on all of this, wondering where I went so wrong, until I remember The Balloon Man’s speech about not making up fairytales but seeing things for what they truly are. This makes me realize that The Balloon Man was perfect, but perhaps this other guy is not. This other guy struggles with his past, feels resentment toward his dead mother, fights loneliness because his best friends went away, and does not fully understand who he is and why he does what he does. He was right, I need to know him—Ripley.

As I stand from the bed, I inspect the room, hoping Ripley didn't take his car keys. He didn't—I see them tossed inside the front of his black bag—so I exit Winter Romance on a hunt. He's not downstairs in the lobby, not in the sitting room, and not in the dining room, but those were just my passing guesses because I know where he is. I run out of the inn, foot the lighted paths of the gardens, and find him standing beneath the silver streams of the full moon, against the stone wall. He does not acknowledge my presence, just stands with his back turned to me, but I know he heard me approach the back of the gardens.

With careful steps, I come up behind him and wrap my arms around his middle.

“I know everything about you,” I whisper up in his ear. “I know that your name is Ripley. Ripley Omen. I know that the most important person in the world to you is your grandmother. I know that your best friends are Charlie and Belly and you miss them every day. I know that you like 90's music and spicy food. I know that you don't have a favorite color because you like all the colors. I know that you pace when you're nervous. Mostly, I know that you love me.”

He spins inside my grasp and stares down at me.

“And you?” he says.

“I love you,” I say. “I think I have from the beginning.”

He wraps his arms around me, lifting me, settling me on the stone wall and kissing me madly. I toss my head back, inviting him, and he sinks his lips to my neck. Beneath the moon, with the scent of spring flowers heavy in the air, I wrap my legs around him. He hikes up my skirt, tugs my waist to him.

When it happens, I stare up at the stars, noting that they're washed out from the intensity of the moon. Still I try to count them, try to focus on their glitter, because Lizzie told me that this

hurts. It does, and I squeeze his arms, until it doesn't hurt anymore and I'm more focussed on the smell of him and the smell of the garden, all the motion in the moonlight. It ends with him biting into my hair, and the moon slips behind a cloud.

Cammié's Journal 29 April

*Ripley in the garden. Full Moon. Scent of lilacs and tulips.*

*Love Shadows.*

*That is all.*

## Chapter Twenty

When I wake up, Ripley is beside me in the bed, cocooned in the covers. Outside of the little jail cell window, the sky is gray and dreary, like someone turned the lights of spring off for the day. When I flip over and read my cell, I realize we've overslept and missed breakfast. I'm wondering if I should just let Ripley sleep or wake him when his eyes flutter open, probably because I was moving around beside him in the bed.

"It's almost ten," I say. "And it's yucky out today."

He exhales, pulls the covers up to his neck. "Saturday would have been busy in the center," he says groggily.

It's actually good that we overslept because we won't be tired tonight when we have to head out to The Velvet at midnight, although both of us are up all night normally anyhow. Last night my insomnia was worse than ever—the last time I looked at the clock it was past four a.m. The night kept replaying itself in my mind, like a stuck movie.

Ripley's eyes sink shut again, until a faint knock on the room door makes both of us bolt up in bed. Ripley is shirtless but he hops out of bed and pulls on a t-shirt.

When he opens the room door, Conner is standing in the doorway.

"You guys all right up here?" Conner says. "You didn't come down for breakfast." He glances into the room, where I'm nestled under the covers. I'm wearing my nightclothes, but it's still a little awkward. "Sorry," he says.

“It’s okay,” Ripley tells him. “We’ll be down in about a half-hour. Maybe Leah can whip up something for us?”

“Not a problem,” Conner replies. “I just wanted to tell you that they’re here. In Connecticut. They got in around dawn and are resting up for tonight.”

Ripley rubs at his eyes. “Wow,” he says. “So close.”

“Yeah,” Conner replies. “So Chandry has a dress for Cammie, and . . .”

Conner goes on and on, I guess not understanding that we just woke up and need a bit of time before we can comprehend things or even function. Finally he heads out, and Ripley closes the door before moving to his black bag and pulling out some clothes for the day. He doesn’t say much to me, just offers a quick smile and heads into the bathroom. While the shower runs, I think about last night again. There are a few things I need to ask him, but I don’t know how to bring it all up. Sex is a weird thing. It’s so intimate, yet so hard to talk about when not in the actual moment.

Ripley comes out of the bathroom fifteen minutes later, the bottom strands of his hair still wet. He rushes past me and I catch a whiff of toothpaste and manly deodorant. They say on TV that men’s deodorant smells different depending on brand, but to me, it all smells the same.

“Ripley?” I say from the bed. “Is everything okay?”

He does a noncommittal nod-shrug as he fishes through his bag for some invisible item.

“You seem weird.”

He sighs and comes to the bed, sitting down on the edge. “I’m nervous about tonight,” he says. “So just ignore me today, okay?”

“Kind of hard to do that,” I say. “I mean, after last night. Where do we go next?”

He leans over and kisses my temple. “Same place we were going before.” He starts to stand, but then sits back down. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I say, and realize that I’m really not okay. “You just seem different today.”

“I just . . .” He rubs his forehead. “I wish you would have told me.”

“I thought you knew. We discussed that I didn’t have any serious boyfriends.”

“True,” he says. “It’s just that if I knew, I would have tried to make it a bit more special for you.”

“Special?” I say, and let out a laugh. “My first time was in a garden under a full moon with a guy I’ve been nuts about for two years. I don’t know if it could get more special than that.”

He laughs with me, which breaks up the wall of tension between us. Then he stands from the bed, but I have one more important thing to discuss with him. It’s something my father made me promise, and last night, I failed on that promise.

“Ripley?” I say as he opens his laptop. “Were we careful?”

“You’re okay,” he says back, looking at the laptop.

I think I have an idea what he means, but I’m not sure so I figure I’ll have to ask my mom or Lizzie about that one. Still, I feel more relaxed, so while he checks his school stuff, I gather my clothes for the day and hop to the bathroom to shower.

\*\*\*

While waiting for something important to happen, the hours seem to move much more slowly than they do on a regular day. I spend some time in the afternoon with Chandry and Leah in their private back room at the inn, where they have picked out a dress for me. It’s black and

shorter than I'm used to, but the arms are fashionably slashed and sliced, reminding me of my usual raggedy layers. I like both Chandry and Leah, and we swapped social media info and numbers so we can text and keep in touch when this is all over. Chandry talks about Conner as much as he talks about her, so I make a mental note to figure out how to get these two back together when they are so obviously in love.

Ripley has spent the afternoon with Conner, roaming the gardens amid the drizzle, or maybe even leaving the grounds because Conner was complaining that since he doesn't have a car, he is mostly stuck at the inn. The weather is not improving, and as dinnertime rolls around, rain knocks against the windows in Winter Romance and tings against the metal of the balcony. My black dress is set up on the bed and I'm just smoothing it when Ripley finally returns, hair soaked, clothes splattered with raindrops.

"Where were you?" I ask as he closes the door of Winter Romance.

"The Coven Hill Trails with Conner."

"Trails?"

"We were hiking and talking," he says and shakes out his hair, spraying water everywhere. "Until the rain got too heavy and we had to come back."

He moves toward me and wraps his arms around my belly, kissing my neck from behind.

"You're soaking wet," I say, laughing.

"I thought about you all day," he says, ignoring me. "Which really helped get my mind off tonight. Plus Conner talked to me about when he found out about his family and how he got through it. He's like the little brother I never had."

“I’m happy for you,” I say and spin around to hug him, chest to chest. “That you found a friend and you’re going to find a father.”

“And a girl,” he says and kisses me. “In this moment of being the most scared I’ve ever been in my life, I’m also the happiest.”

So instead of going to dinner at six o’clock, Ripley and I stay in.

\*\*\*

At ten o’clock, Conner brings up some food: bowls of potato-bacon soup, rolls, and two slices of chocolate spice cake. As it turns out, Ripley is not hungry, and as I scurry around the room gathering undergarments for my shower, I notice that Ripley is actually, to quote a song my father plays, a whiter shade of pale. I smooth his hair while Conner stands helplessly in the corner, then, with nothing left to do but get through this, I grab my black dress and head for the shower.

It takes me a ridiculously long time to get ready, mainly because I never really style my hair, but when I finally head out of the bathroom, the rain is still hammering the windows and roof. Ripley and Conner are talking by the bed, not facing me, but when I announce my presence by asking them to confirm that I won’t be carded at The Velvet, they turn around. Both of them don’t respond, just stare at me as though they have never seen me before, like I’m some apparition at the inn.

“What’s wrong?” I say.

“You look . . . amazing,” Ripley replies.

His eyes trail my body, taking in the short black dress, and he coughs. He actually coughs.

“You realize you’re not supposed to be ogling girls like that, right?”

“I fully understand,” he says. “I’m a modern guy, but there is no way I can’t notice how sexy you look tonight.”

“Guess that’s my cue to leave,” Conner says.

I won’t pretend that I didn’t notice Conner checking me out too, and I give him a visual scolding that he seems to find funny. I did not dress this way for guys to check out my goods, which I’m not even sure I’m carrying, but I guess it’s okay to laugh here. One of these guys is presumably my boyfriend and the other is enough of an outsider for me to consider that maybe I *am* sexy.

“So?” I ask, hoping they’ll remember my question about ID.

“Oh,” Conner says from near the door. “It’s a restaurant on the main floor. The Velvet is the underground venue, so once you talk to the Woman in Red, you should be okay to move forward. If you have any problems, just namedrop. Tell them you’re a personal friend of Conner Kaplan and Alastair Fairlane.”

“Okay,” I say. “Any last words of wisdom?”

Conner nods. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m pretty sure Finn is the guy you want, based on all the evidence. Unless there’s some guy who left the troupe and fits the description better—which I really don’t think there was—I think you guys are going to be right on the mark with him. My advice is to take it all slow. You’re going into a world that you probably can’t even imagine, so it’s going to shake you up. It completely changed me, and if you don’t believe that, ask Chandry how I was before.”

Ripley and I nod in gentle understanding, and Conner shakes his hand one last time before tipping an invisible hat to me and leaving.

Ripley is dressed in his fancy gray button-down shirt, and his hair is neatly combed, still a bit long around his nape, but it fits him in the way that some hairstyles do—like someone was just born with their hair a certain way. I ask him if he’s ready and offer my hand which he takes before dropping to the bed and staying put. He doesn’t move until I physically tug his hand and pry him from the bed, then he gathers his car keys, the room key, and a page from his mother’s letter. We’re off.

\*\*\*

I’m not used to a short type of dress, and while we drive and the windshield wipers scoot back and forth, I keep tugging the thing down to my knees. Ripley doesn’t notice because he’s absorbed in the music, absorbed in navigating to The Velvet, absorbed in battling the downpour as we drive. I have the instinct not to talk just now, that it really wouldn’t matter because he wouldn’t hear me anyhow. So I just keep tugging my dress and listening to the wipers move against the beat of whatever hip-hop song is playing.

After forty minutes—ten minutes longer than we thought it would take from our earlier study of the directions—we reach Sirgot Street. I recognize the name as the home of The Velvet, but we’re looking for the outside restaurant, which Ripley and Conner researched to be a place called Brandywine. The SUV slows as we approach a large stone building with a side parking lot. Through the rain-soaked windshield, I make out a burgundy sign that announces the name of the restaurant. We pull into the parking lot and Ripley parks. He kills the engine.

“I’m not sure I’m going to do this,” he says as the rain claps against the windshield.

He's serious. It's not a joking statement, not a plea for me to push him. The words were strong, assured. He's not sure he's going to go through with it.

I turn the radio down and let him think it out, because right now he does not need my positive talk or my guidance. He needs to find the strength inside of himself.

"He doesn't know I exist," he says and tosses his head back. "He's in there right now, not expecting that his world is going to change in a few minutes. Maybe sometimes people should just leave things as they are."

"Then you'll go the rest of your life wishing you had walked through those doors tonight," I say gently. "And he'll miss out on meeting the wonderful guy that is his son."

"What's that saying?" He turns to me, questioning. "What you don't know can't hurt you?"

"It's: What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," I reply.

"No, I'm pretty sure it's the other one."

"They're both sayings," I say and pick up my pocketbook and an umbrella we borrowed from the inn. "Come on, Ripley." I open the door. "I'm going in and you're going to have to make a decision to follow me or not."

I step out into the rain and open the umbrella, a huge black covering from the ongoing downpour. It takes a moment, but probably because he's taking pity on me standing in the rain in my dress with my hair styled and combed for once, he finally exits the SUV and locks it.

Huddled beneath the umbrella and rushing, we step to the front door of Brandywine and enter.

It's after midnight, so I was expecting the restaurant to be a ghost town, but there are still tables full and waitstaff moving about the sections. The walls are all stone and the color scheme

is burgundy like the sign outside, with burgundy drapery, tablecloths, and candles. It smells like wine and seafood, a mixture I connect with affluence. As I pull it all in, listening to a jazzy composition from a three-piece band situated on a stage, I realize that people are probably here at this hour for the live entertainment.

“Fancy place,” I say. I don’t get a response but I was not expecting one.

We’re supposed to be looking for the Woman in Red, and like Conner said, I know her when I see her. She’s like a blinking carnival light in an otherwise sophisticated atmosphere, sitting at the end of a long bar near the back of the restaurant. She’s a dark-skinned woman, African American I would guess, with cropped ebony hair and a lengthy body. Her legs are crossed and her chin is lifted. She’s dressed in an old-fashioned red dress, triangle neckline, stripes on the bottom, polka-dots on the top, little bow on the chest. She’s holding a maroon mixed drink.

“There she is,” I say, pointing, although his eyes are already focused on her.

Tugging Ripley onward, we move through Brandywine as the audience breaks into applause from the previous jazzy song choice. The music starts up again, some monstrously loud horn-laden song, as we approach her. She turns to us, eyebrows raised, and Ripley does not say a word. He just stands there, looking at her.

“Excuse me,” he says finally, although we clearly have her attention already. “Is the . . . circus in town?” He squeaks the words out almost embarrassingly.

The Woman in Red surveys us, reading us in a way that feels almost medical, from the inside out, like an X-ray. “Indeed it is,” she says at last, as though we passed some kind of test. “Follow me, please.” She guides us back through Brandywine, past the cymbal crashes and drum

beats, into the stone-walled lobby. Then she turns right, leading us down a hallway and to a wood door.

She opens the door to expose a rickety wooden staircase, and suddenly, the world glows purple. The music turns techno and carnival-like, with deep-gut bass and creepy organs. Misty smoke rises up the staircase and swirls at our feet. The Woman in Red leads us down into the mist and smoke, and we pause at the bottom, just in front of a flashing purple sign that says in script writing: *The Velvet*.

“Who can I direct you toward?” the Woman in Red says over the techno music.

“Finn!” I yell back.

She nods, motions for us to wait by the sign, and disappears behind a stone wall.

Brandywine upstairs was stone-walled and sectioned, and in The Velvet underground, the architecture is echoed, but the sections are more abundant and pronounced. It’s a cavernous environment, closed-in and claustrophobic, with smoke that twists and dances through the purple lighting. I grab Ripley’s hand and squeeze, shaking out my umbrella and leaning it against the wall, near some other umbrellas. Then I hold my pocketbook close and wait.

In a few minutes, the Woman in Red returns. She crooks her finger for us to come with her, and we move through the cave-like rooms, passing other sections and glimpsing the show inside. It’s hard to see through the smoke, but one of the largest stony sections contains men and women, all of them nearly naked, sipping drinks and dancing. A smaller room appears to be filled with mirrors, and yet another is darkened but holds at least three people, one of them veiled. The last room we pass contains a total of five people, all of them with arms raised to the

ceiling. Ripley and I exchange a glance, and as we near the final stone section in the underground, the Woman in Red extends her hand signaling that this is our waiting room.

“Finnabar will be right with you,” she says. “May I have your fee?”

Her extended hand turns to an extended palm.

“A fee?” Ripley says. Conner did not mention this.

“I understand that you’re new,” she replies, “but Finnabar does require a fee for his services.”

“How much?” I ask and open my pocketbook, ready to pull out my wallet.

“Five,” she replies.

“Five dollars?” I ask, opening my wallet.

“Five *thousand*,” she says.

I stick my wallet back into my pocketbook.

“You can discuss this with him,” she says, watching me. “Maybe you can work out a deal for services.”

With that, she leaves us behind, disappearing through the purple haze.

“Conner didn’t say . . .”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ripley says as we enter the room. “We’re not here for services anyhow.”

Inside the room is a circular table painted in purple and covered in yellow stars. There are three chairs set up, two behind the table and one in front, so Ripley and I move to the two chairs and sit. I rest my elbows on the table and glance around, wondering where the light source is and then finding two lightbulbs through the smoke, one white and one purple. Ripley’s leg is

bouncing and his fists are clenched on the table, his knuckles white as January snowfall. I rub his hand, but I don't even think he can feel it.

“You're doing great,” I tell him. “It's going to be okay.”

He nods as I continue the pep talk, until two minutes later when a man appears through the curved stone doorway.

The first thing I notice is that Finnabar's left eye is painted over in a huge silver star. He's dressed in dark pants, high boots, and a long purple cape. He is a tall, stately presence, and the top hat he's wearing, purple and covered in yellow stars, adds to the height so he's nearly touching the ceiling. He swooshes his cape through the smoke, revealing a purple sequined shirt and the swirly symbol pin, and then closes the cape around him dramatically.

“I am Finnabar of the Stars!” he says and opens his arms. “Welcome to my show.”

The carnival-techno music thumps through the stone walls, and Finnabar lifts a purple suitcase and places it on the table. The suitcase is similar to mine, but it's covered in yellow stars, matching the table and I suppose his show theme. As Finn settles himself into the chair across from us, I study his features. There is no doubt that this is Ripley's father. While his facial structure is more oval and etched, and his movements more tight and confident, the eyes and hair match perfectly. His eyes are the same tropical blue-green, his hair the same sweeping blond. His eyes are even slightly fish-like around the rims, and I remember Ripley once mentioning his eyes were like that when he was younger.

“I see this is the first time you have attended my show,” he says and places both palms on the table in front of us. “Who can I thank for the recommendation?”

Ripley doesn't reply. He just sits staring at the man who is in all likelihood his father, probably making the same connections I just made, the same connections Conner made.

"All right," Finnabar says. "I sense you are nervous for your first visit. This is common and not to be feared!" He slides the suitcase toward him. "How about we begin with two Stars of Relaxation." He opens the latches on the suitcase.

"Stars of Relaxation?" I ask.

Finn glances up at my vocalization. He smiles at my bravery, and when the smile reaches his eyes, crinkling them in warmth, I am forcibly reminded of Ripley's rare big smiles. Inside, I know for sure now. There is no test that could ever prove the match more accurately than that smile just did.

"Every star, every planet, every moon, every galaxy . . . they bring something to us on earth," Finnabar says. "We are all connected in this vast universe. All different bodies, made up of the same elements, the same dust. I offer you the Stars of Relaxation as a starting point and a greeting."

When he opens the suitcase fully, I gasp. Inside are hundreds of crystal stars, in all sizes and all colors, sectioned off in plastic bags. The set-up is exactly the way Ripley has organized his colored balloons. It's essentially the same act, only instead of balloons, Finn is using crystal stars. Finnabar extracts two blue sapphire stars and hands them over. Ripley takes his and holds it in both hands, gazing down. I inspect mine through touch, moving my fingers along the smooth center and up to the curved star edges.

At this point, I feel like Ripley should probably tell Finnabar of the Stars the real reason he is here. If Finn doesn't believe him, we might have to pay a fee for the services rendered so

far, or maybe Finn will think we're lying to get *out* of paying the high fee we obviously did not have when asked by the Woman in Red. I nudge Ripley's elbow as Finnabar watches us.

"I am still sensing some anxiousness," Finnabar says. "Hold your stars and think on them. *Feel* them in your grasp, understand what it means to be connected to the stars. Understand that nothing can hurt you."

"We're not here for the stars," Ripley whispers. It is barely audible over the distant music.

"Oh no?" Finnabar says.

Ripley takes a breath. He closes his eyes, then reaches into the pocket of his jeans and pulls out one single slip of paper from his mother's letter—the page with the swirly symbol. With his hand trembling, he places the paper down on the table in front of Finnabar.

"Do you remember a woman named Olivia Omen?" Ripley says, and his voice is a touch more confident, a touch louder.

Finnabar stares down at the paper, then his eyes jump back to Ripley, studying him.

"Ripley?" he says at last.

"You know my name?"

"Of course I know your name," Finnabar says and smiles. "I *named* you."

Chapter Twenty-One

If at all possible, Ripley's cheeks have gone even whiter. He stares across at his father in horror, and I have to admit, I'm feeling similarly horrified. The music continues to thump, the smoke continues to swirl, and the outside world is unchanged, yet here, in this little stone room, the world has just shifted in a great, great quake.

"What do you mean, you named me?" Ripley says. "You knew I was . . ."

His father nods, closing up that question. Then his shoulders drop and I wonder if he's ready to break character, revert from Finnabar of the Stars to a man who needs to explain to his son why he knew of his existence but never once contacted him through the years.

"If you are Ripley Howel Omen, then I am your father," he says.

"My middle name is Jonathan," Ripley says, narrowing his eyes.

"Ah yes," Finn replies. "Your mother wanted to go with the more normal middle name, and since I picked the first name, I had to relent." He knocks his knuckles against the table. "So tell me how you came to call on my services this evening."

"Your services?" Ripley says. "I was looking for my father."

"Apologies," Finn says and sits back. "I'm not very good at this sort of thing."

Father and son break eye contact, and the boiling blood scent in the air is detectable over the fruity, sweaty smell of The Velvet. I figure it might be time for me to intervene here and get some answers. As an outsider, it might be easier for me to calm everyone and ask what needs to be asked.

“So you remember Ripley’s mother?” I say. “Can you maybe tell us what happened? How you knew about him when it seemed his mother didn’t even know your name?”

Finn sighs and stares up at the ceiling. He twiddles his thumbs, then rubs the make-up beneath his eye. It does not seem as though he is ready or willing to give up this information, and I’m starting to get a tingle of rage in my veins. After all we went through to find him, this guy is going to talk.

“It’s the least you can do,” I say. “You weren’t even in his life.”

“Let’s not go that route,” Finn replies. “I was most certainly in his life. At least until his mother passed away.”

At this Ripley looks up.

“On your birthday, every year,” Finn continues. “Bar Bar the Clown?”

Ripley lets out a laugh of recognition. The laugh is laced with fury. “That was you.”

“That was me,” Finn confirms. “I stopped when your mother passed away because your grandmother had no idea who I was or how to contact me. You were getting too old by that point anyhow.”

“Wouldn’t it have been a better idea to stay in his life knowing his mother was gone?” I say.

“That wasn’t the agreement his mother and I had,” he returns. He taps the table with his knuckles again, then glances behind him at the door. “I tour with this group.” He gestures at the door as though indicating the troupe members. “It’s my life, and I never had any intentions of settling down and becoming a father. It wouldn’t be fair to me or the child.”

“I was the child,” Ripley says. He stands from the chair, screeching the legs against the floor. “You could have at least told me who you were or explained why you weren’t around.”

“Sit down,” his father says, and Ripley, to my surprise, obeys. “I’m going to tell you what happened, all right? It was not what your mother wanted, but I can see that you need some kind of closure and explanation here, so I am going to break that trust.”

“I’m listening,” Ripley says, although he’s not looking at Finn. “You can start with the one-night stand.”

“It wasn’t exactly a one-night stand.” He adjusts his cape and settles back in the chair. “I shared two wonderful days with your mother. When I met her, I was drawn to how empty she was. We were at a hotel right here in Connecticut, in a lounge with people drinking and laughing and having a good time, and there she was sitting alone, staring out the window. When I went to talk to her, I was surprised at how lifeless she was. She was like a robot on the command of ‘do life’ with no humor or light left in her.”

“She had depression,” Ripley interrupts. “And you could have saved her from that if you stayed around long enough to spot the disease and get her some help. I was too young to do it.”

“Her and I both understood my lifestyle,” Finn says without fighting the issue. “Although I can’t pretend to have known hers. All I can tell you is that she opened up to me in that hotel, and when we parted, my only hope was that I reached her somehow. That I brought her some sunlight. She contacted me around Valentine’s Day that year to tell me she was pregnant. To this day, I don’t know how she found me, but she did. We agreed that she would raise you on her own, and I would come once a year to visit without you knowing who I was. All I wanted from that visit was to make you laugh. Nothing more.”

“Father of the Year,” Ripley says.

Finn rubs his chin. “I can see you have some built-up anger about the situation, and all I can tell you is that I had not planned to have you. This lifestyle can be very lonely, and when I connected with your mother, it was not to destroy her life or bring a new life into the world. It was because both of us needed something from the other one that night.”

“So my two lonely parents needed sex and that’s why I’m sitting here right now.”

I rest my hand on his wrist and try to settle him, but it’s no use. He’s rightly enraged.

“Not sex, no,” Finn says. “A partner. Intimacy. Would you argue that most children come to be that way?”

Ripley shakes his head.

“Good,” his father says. “Then I can continue. After finding out about you, your mother and I agreed she would raise you alone, and that it was best that you never knew me. I’m surprised to see the drawing.” He indicates the paper. “It was her firm belief that you never knew who I was.”

“I think she wanted him to,” I interject. “She left it in the suicide note so that he would find you someday.” I take a breath, because I’m not sure Ripley wants me to say what I’m about to say. “He has the gift. Just like you.”

Finn tilts his head.

“Tell him,” I say to Ripley. “He should know.”

Ripley hesitates, but his father’s eyes are expectant. He rubs his forehead, and through the movement, I notice that some of the color in his cheeks has returned.

“When I was sixteen I started something along the lines of what you do.” He pushes the sapphire star across the table, toward his father. “Only with balloons.”

His father surveys him again, inspecting, scrutinizing, gazing into Ripley’s eyes as though seeking an answer in the depths. “You’re a magician,” he says at last. “You were born with the gift.” He smiles in pride, crinkling his eyes. “I should have known.”

“I don’t consider myself a magician,” Ripley says. “I just give out balloons to people and read their emotions to help them.” His chest expands. “And I definitely don’t charge them five-thousand dollars to do it.”

“Ah,” his father responds. “But you live with your grandmother, who, if I remember, has a lot of money from when your grandfather passed away of cancer before your birth. So . . . you are comfortable and need nothing. I, on the other hand, need to make a living. The troupe I travel with needs money for traveling expenses, food, clothing, and supplies for our shows. Plus what we do is extraordinary, so we charge extraordinary fees.”

“I’ll say,” Ripley replies.

Finn squirms in the chair.

“So how did you know his mother passed away?” I ask to move the subject away from money. “You said his grandmother didn’t know about you?”

“No, she didn’t,” Finn replies. “Around his birthday one year, I didn’t hear from Olivia at our planned meeting date. I thought maybe Ripley was getting too old for the clown visits, but still thought she would contact me to discuss some other yearly method of interaction. Finally I was in touch with a family member—maybe his aunt—under the disguise of long-lost family

friend, and she told me Olivia had passed of . . . what she passed of. It shocked me, because of Ripley, but I guess the disease was more powerful than a mother's love."

"That's not how it works," Ripley says.

"He's studying to become a psychologist," I say. "He knows about all mental illnesses and writes papers about finding cures." I pause, then add, "That's the true magic of who he is."

Despite the situation, Ripley smiles at me. It's short-lived, however, because of his current battle with the caped man sitting in front of us.

"So now you know who I am and what I do," Ripley tells his father.

"You're a magician," his father replies. "You can tell me a million times that you're a psychology person, but some people are just meant to be magicians. It's inside of their souls and pours out from their eyes. You can always see the magician in a magician's eyes, and you, my son, have those eyes."

Ripley bites into his lip.

"Tell me," his father says. "Would you like to meet the troupe? Do you have an understanding about what we do?"

Ripley nods, and his hands relax on the table. As I'm about to question what's going on, and why Ripley is buckling, a woman sticks her head through the doorway as though checking the vacancy of the room. Finnabar follows my gaze and turns to spot her.

"Shevanton," Finn says, developing a sudden French accent. "Come inside and meet my son."

The woman appears fully through the purple smoke. She's actually a short girl not too much older than me, with platinum hair in face-framing locks more beautiful and luxurious than

I could ever hope to achieve with mine. Across her eyes, she's wearing a lacy red blindfold. She places both hands on Finnabar's shoulders, bends, and whispers in his ear. He nods, confirming whatever she asked, and she moves forward exposing her outfit of scarlet artist's smock with nothing else beneath. Without saying a word, she pulls a notepad from her smock, along with a red pencil. I can't see her eyes through the blindfold, but her stare appears to be directed at Ripley and me as she chews the end of the pencil. Finally, she sketches two drawings and hands them to us without explanation.

"I am pleased to introduce the artistic renderings of Mademoiselle Shevanton," Finn says, reverting to his Finnabar of the Stars persona.

When I look down at the drawing, I see that I'm holding the sketch of a red heart. Shevanton rips the drawing from my hands and then Ripley's hand, and with a sudden shiver that shakes her smock, she makes another mark on the drawings and hands them back.

"Why?" Ripley says.

She's drawn a black lightning bolt through the red hearts on our twin sketches.

Mademoiselle Shevanton does not offer an explanation.

"Would you be a darling and bring my son and I a bourbon?" Finn says. "And whatever his girlfriend would like, too." He glances at Ripley. "Share a bourbon tonight?"

Ripley nods. He asks me to drive the SUV home, and I say yes while passing up any beverage of my own. Shevanton exits the room, leaving behind her a sense of unease.

"She predicts the future through artwork," Finn tells us. "That was just a quick sketch, but her paid drawings are really quite beautiful. Some of her clients actually hang them on their walls."

“The blindfold is part of the act?” I ask.

“Partly,” Finnabar returns. “She doesn’t like too many visuals messing around with her creative eye and her sixth sense. She can see a smidgen through the lace; just enough to move around and function.”

“Wow,” Ripley says. “So what’s this all about?” He holds up the heart drawing.

Finnabar shrugs, diverts his gaze. “We have an incredible and unique group of people here in the troupe,” he says. “Ari the Aeromancy Girl and her partner Dagan, Cormag, Man of Three Wishes, Madam Sunilda—”

“What does the three wishes guy do?” I ask.

“Just what he says he’s going to do. He’s dressed as a genie and ready to grant your heart’s deepest desire.”

“That’s impossible.”

Finnabar tosses his head back in a cackling laugh. “These are of a sexual nature, starlight.” He squints at me. “What did you say your name was?”

“Cammie,” I say. “Girl of Nature.”

He turns to Ripley as though seeking clarification.

“Her real name is Chamomile,” Ripley says. “That’s what I call her. It’s more unique and I like it better.”

“As do I,” Finn returns.

He studies me, until Shevanton returns with two glasses filled with amber liquid. She places them down, runs her hand over Ripley’s shoulder, and exits the room. Between

Shevanton's ominous drawings and her touching Ripley, I'm envisioning yanking off her blindfold and strangling her with it.

As Ripley and his father sip drinks, they discuss more about what Ripley does as The Balloon Man. Then the conversation steers toward the Finnabar of the Stars act and more bourbon is set down, compliments of Mademoiselle Shevanton. I listen with interest, wanting to know more about Ripley's father, but more curious about how their acts could be so similar without them having even really known each other. Finn's star act is nearly identical—he uses the stars to connect with people, understanding from their emotions what they need. The stars were born of his study of Astrology, and he connected each star to one of the planets or a certain star inside of a constellation. His red crystal star is Mars, he says, which symbolizes a person who is angry or combative but needs to settle down. It's a little more involved than Ripley's balloon service, but, as Ripley noted, there is a variance of fee charged, too.

At two a.m., the Woman in Red appears in the doorway and holds up two fingers, announcing, I suppose, that Finn has new customers.

“Keyna, this is my son, believe it or not.”

“That's the rumor,” the Woman in Red replies.

“Would you be so kind as to let them roam about The Velvet while I render services?”

“They're free to do as they wish and talk to who they wish.” She moves further into the room to address Ripley and me. “Our rule of the house is to take what you need but leave it inside.” She taps her forehead with her finger.

I shake my head, not understanding.

“This is a private club,” she says. “What you see and experience here is for your own knowledge and entertainment. You are not to repeat what you see. Some of what we do is acceptable within our own little culture and society but might be frowned upon elsewhere.”

My mind develops an image I was trying not to form earlier when told that fees are paid for magical sexual wishes. “I understand,” I say.

“Then you are free to roam the club.”

She exits the room, and Finn announces that when he is finished, he will come and find us. He tells us to enjoy ourselves, and we leave the safety of his room behind.

“Are you okay?” I ask Ripley.

He’s holding his bourbon, his eyes growing unfocused as we navigate the cavernous hallway. “That wasn’t what I expected,” he mumbles.

“Me too,” I say.

“He knew me,” Ripley says. “He knew who I was.” He stops suddenly, presses me to the stone wall, holding me. “He was Bar Bar.”

I stroke the back of his head, letting him fall into me, the stone digging into my back.

“How could the only thing that made me happy when I was a kid . . .” Some of the bourbon spills from the glass onto my shoes, and I grasp his back and try to adjust him upright.

“You’re going to be okay,” I tell him. “I told you I would be here for you.”

He nods, and we move into the largest room in The Velvet, where that fruity, sweaty scent is the most abundant and nauseating. This dance room is the source of the music, and the girls and guys in here are thumping and thrashing to the thunderous beat. A few of them are wearing purple glowing necklaces, and a few are stripped down to nothing more than sports bras and

shiny shorts that look like black underwear. Dotted here and there are members of the troupe, recognizable by their circus performer costumes. I reach out for Ripley's hand, and when I make contact, he squeezes my fingers and pulls me close.

"Dance?" he says.

"Now?"

"I need to forget for a second," he returns. "I need to let go."

He moves against me and his drink spills from the glass again.

"Are you drunk?" I whisper in his ear, because this does not feel like Ripley.

He doesn't reply, but keeps dancing against me in movements that feel more like what we did in private at the inn. But everyone else at The Velvet is moving like this too, hopping and humping inside this purple zoo, ignoring what others are doing and escaping into their own worlds of exotic, inappropriate dancing. This is not what I expected from this night at all, but I go with it. I might never have a chance to experience something like this again.

We twirl and tilt to the music, held together at the hips, bending backwards and frontwards, painted in glow. By the time we finally crash, spinning in euphoria and dripping in sweat, we're close to the stone wall in the back of the room. Ripley falls back into it, then slides all the way down until he's on the floor. His eyes slam shut.

"Ripley," I say, bending down. "Ripley!"

"Let him rest," a woman's voice says from behind me. "He's okay."

When I spin around, I'm greeted by a woman who looks exactly how I have pictured myself many, many times—only this woman is the real deal.

“Madam Sunilda,” she says, and her gypsy bangles jingle on her wrist as she extends a hand.

She’s an older woman with a gold scarf wrapped around her head, tufts of black frizzy hair, and layers and rags of old clothes. Her skin is shiny and her eyes are a glittering green. There is so much shimmering, sparkling jewelry on her ears, around her neck, and along her arms that she looks like a traveling jewelry store.

“Come for a reading, beautiful girl,” she says in a mysterious, whispery voice, letting go of my hand.

“I can’t leave my boyfriend!” I say over the music. I wipe some sweat from my arms.

“He’s okay,” she says. “Let him rest a few moments. He needs to.”

With that she turns, and I have no choice but to follow, hoping Ripley will find me once he wakes.

Madam Sunilda guides me toward a room close to the lobby, where the music is quieter but still hums and vibrates in my ears. It’s possible that the music might linger there forever, that I’ve done some kind of internal damage. When I fully enter the room, it’s exactly as I would have imagined it, with an enormous crystal ball positioned on a center table, at least three packages of tarot cards, two teacups, a dozen lit candles, and a set of strange dice covered in odd symbols.

“You’re a fortune-teller?” I say, settling in the chair across from her.

“Either that or I’m sitting in the wrong room.” She laughs, cracking some of her ruby lipstick. “You’re a little out of place here, aren’t you, sweetheart?”

I shrug. The night whirled by so fast that I'm still trying to catch up with it. When I was thumping to the techno music among half-naked people and stone walls and smoke and glowing lights, I imagined: what would my father think right now? If he saw me . . . he would have disowned me on the spot.

"This is what I wanted," I say and study a dent on the table. "I wanted an adventure with magic all around me. And I got that, but now I just feel . . ."

"If only life did what we wanted it to," she says. "If only everything worked out as we had planned." She reaches across and grasps my hand. Her long fingers close around my wrist and she shuts her eyes, taking a deep breath. "I see a bridge," she says and opens her eyes. "A literal passage into a new world."

It's possible she means the bridge Ripley and I stood on at Michlin Park. It seems so long ago now. The pink balloons, the newness of everything. So simple, it was.

"You're stuck halfway," she says, gazing over me. "Soon you'll make a choice. Cross the bridge or go back to the comfortable other side . . . the beginning. You've come a long way, dear. I hope you realize that."

Goosebumps erupt all over my arm, and I'm not sure if it's because the gypsy's hand is cold on mine or if it's because of her words. The funny thing is, as cryptic as her reading is, I still understand exactly what she's telling me.

"I fell in love," I say. "But my mother told me to work on myself, too."

"I feel as though your choice will dance on that line," Madam Sunilda tells me. "My advice is to find a way to compromise, combine the elements. A way that satisfies *you*, my dear. Nobody will live your life except for you."

“I understand.” It’s just now that I realize I don’t know where my pocketbook is. Ripley and I were dancing and I think I set it down somewhere with his drink, but I have no idea where. “How much is the reading?” I ask, hoping it’s not five-thousand like Finn’s readings.

“It’s already been paid for.” She gestures toward the door, and when I spin around, I see Finn standing there, top hat brushing the top of the doorway. He raises a drink to me, and I thank him.

When we reach Ripley, he is still asleep—or passed out—against the back wall of the dance room. Finn slaps at Ripley’s cheeks until Ripley finally opens his eyes, staring up at his father as though he has no idea where he is or who is standing over him.

“Wake up,” his father says.

“It must have been all the bourbon and the dancing,” I say and bend down to smooth his hair. “Do you want to go back to the inn now?”

“No,” he whispers. His eyes are glazed over and glistening. “I want to . . . to talk to my father.”

We finally get him to his feet, and while it’s slow going, we make some rounds, meeting the troupe members with Finn introducing Ripley. For a man who did not want to be involved in his son’s life, he is positively bubbling over with pride now. Unless I perceived the entire interaction wrong, Finn was most interested in Ripley after finding out he was a magician. I understand that a man would embrace a commonality—especially a rare gift like magic man—with his son, but I also know, because I found out the same thing, that there is more to Ripley than The Balloon Man.

As we move in and out of the stone rooms, we meet more troupe members, sit at a glowing purple bar with weird white plastic seats and hanging lights, and even learn about Aeromancy, compliments of Ari the Aeromancy Girl and her partner Dagan. Her show is more of an instructional lecture, with a highlight on weather divination and cloud reading. It was in this room that we earlier saw the group of people with arms raised to the sky—they were connecting with Mother Earth. Ripley is silent as stars, leaning, and his eyes are droopy. It reminds me a lot of my father in his drunken times, which makes me worried that because it's Saturday, my father might be drunk right now with nobody to look after him. I swallow the thought and try to focus on our next room.

“May I present the eldest troupe member, Alastair Fairlane?” Finnabar says.

We've entered a tiny room, just large enough for the four of us. Alastair is an elderly man with doughy cheeks, folds of wrinkles across his forehead, and white hair sticking out in random spots from his scalp and ears. He's wearing a long black coat, and when we approach, the air surrounding him smells faintly of roasted peanuts.

“Conner's uncle, right?” I say, and extend a hand. “We've heard so much about you.”

“Is that so?” Alastair replies, shaking hands. “Well, to coin a phrase, any friend of Conner's is a friend of mine.” His smile exudes warmth.

According to Conner, Alastair is able to see and touch the vibrations of thoughts and emotions. While Winston the Great could transform those vibrations into touchable things like wallpaper, Alastair uses the gift differently. In his act, he focuses on couples and attempts to tell them if they are properly matched or if their vibrations are different, making them incompatible. He perfected this act after assessing Conner and Chandry, who, according to him, had the same

vibrations. When I ask him about his gift, he goes further than Conner did, explaining about vibrations in nature.

“I can touch them,” Alastair says. “Elements of nature. To me, a sunbeam is hot metal and the wind is shards of glass. I feel starlight as icy feathers.”

“That’s incredible,” I say. “I would love to have that gift.”

“To those that don’t have the gift I offer imagination,” Uncle Alastair says.

I smile back at him, matching his warmth, and we talk about Conner and The Brightwick Inn until Ripley is leaning so far over he’s touching my shoulder with his forehead.

“I think you can stop drinking now,” I say. “It’s time to go home.”

“Alastair,” Finn says. “May I stop at the inn before leaving the east coast to say goodbye to my son?”

“Of course,” Alastair says. “I’ll ask Keyna for the cellular phone tomorrow so that I may call my nephew and see what can be arranged. It’s possible we can park the trailers in the inn parking lot until departure time.”

“Appreciate it,” Finn says. “It has been a nice visit so far.” He turns to me as Ripley’s forehead sinks into my shoulder almost painfully. “May I come to see him tomorrow evening?”

I’m not sure how Ripley would respond to this, but since it doesn’t seem like Ripley can respond to much right now, I take the handles. “You can,” I say. “You’ll be leaving right after that?”

“We’ll be here a few days, then we leave for The Great Lakes area,” he says. “With one stop in New York before that.”

We part ways with the understanding that Finn will come to see Ripley one last time before leaving. I'm hoping both father and son got what they needed from tonight and can say goodbye tomorrow with everything closed up. This is what I wanted for Ripley all along, from the beginning. Now that he knows who he is, I'm hoping he can move forward. That *we* can move forward.

I gather up my pocketbook and head to The Velvet's lobby to locate our umbrella, trying to keep Ripley awake and functioning. I have no idea how I will navigate back to the inn by myself—it has to be close to dawn and I have little idea where I am in this state, what roads to take, when the sun will rise. As I bend to pick up the umbrella, a piece of paper falls from my pocketbook and flutters to the floor. As I kneel down to pick it up, I realize it's the sketch from Shevanton, the red heart broken in two. I crumble it up in my palm, stick it into my pocketbook, and glance back behind me.

The Velvet is dying down. The music is still loud, but the crowd zooming through the smoke and hallways has diminished. From where I stand I can see the doorways of the cavernous rooms, the settling purple smoke, and the capes and costumes of troupe members as they clean up their props for the night.

"I still don't know," Ripley says from beside me.

"What don't you know?"

"Why I can do it," he says. "He never really said why I can do it."

I don't know how to reply, but since his father is coming tomorrow, I figure that will be one final question to ask before his father leaves his life again. In his ear, I tell him that by tomorrow, Sunday, everything will be tied up for him. I tell him that it's almost over.

“Keys,” Ripley says and lifts his elbow to nudge me.

I take the car keys from him, breathe in the fruity, sweaty scent of The Velvet, and tug Ripley up the staircase, leaving The Velvet behind. As I head back to the parking lot, I partially examine the experience and understand that while bits of The Velvet have yet to fully sink in, other parts have already stuck to me; part of the nightclub has shaken my soul and left it so unsettled that I wonder if I will ever, ever be the same.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It's past noon when I awake to a knock on the door of Winter Romance. I know who it is, and even ignored it a few times earlier, but the knocking is getting more persistent, so I rub my eyes and sit up. Ripley is a dead weight beside me, facedown in the pillow, his hair stuck together as though it got wet and then dried and molded to his head. I check his back to make sure he's still breathing, and he is, so I extricate myself from the covers and swing my legs over the bed.

"Coming!" I holler as the knocking continues.

When I open the door, Conner is standing in the doorway. He does not look happy.

"I tried to text at least fifty times," he says, rushing into the room. "And it's Sunday. You guys were supposed to be out of the room an hour ago and you're still sleeping!"

"I'm sorry," I say and let him inside, closing the door behind him. "The night didn't go as expected and we didn't get back until almost six in the morning."

"So?" he says, and glances at Ripley still passed out in bed.

I sigh and rest my butt on the bottom edge of the mattress. "It turns out his father knew about him," I say, and then go on with the full story.

Conner leans his back against the wall near the door. "I knew it was Finn," he says.

"When Ripley mentioned the star thing, I knew for sure, plus it was my gut feeling . . . you know

how I can find lost things? I guess Finn was lost to Ripley, so Finn kept popping up in my mind. But I never would have guessed all that other stuff.”

“He didn’t handle it well,” I say. “He drank so many glasses of bourbon that I lost count.”

“Man,” Conner says. He crosses his arms. “I hate to be like this, but I really, really need you guys out of the room by three. Earlier, really, so we can clean.”

“This isn’t going to be our room anymore?” He told us this already, but I guess I was thinking we had all day Sunday, not that we had to be out so soon.

“I can set you guys up in the basement near the Trapdoor Room, or in Winston’s house outside. I have to warn you though that both locations have spiders. Big ones.”

“Great.” My shoulders fall. “I’ll get us packed up and try to wake him, but I think I’d like to go to Winston’s wagon for now until we figure out when we’re leaving. Your uncle should be calling you soon about Finn and the troupe coming here.”

“Okay,” he says and moves to the door. “I’ll see you at check-out then.”

He starts to open the door, and I move closer. “Can I ask you something?” I say it kind of low, even though Ripley is dead to the world right now. “Do you really want to travel with the troupe? Do you really want to leave the inn and your writing and Chandry just to live that lifestyle?”

He sighs. “I can’t say I wasn’t expecting you to ask that. I told you once before that this is a calling. You can’t ignore it.”

“Do you think . . .” The question has been forming in my mind since last night, around the time Shevanton drew the hearts. I ignored the question then, because that’s what I do, or what

I used to do. But I can't ignore it anymore. "Do you think it's enough of a calling for him to want to go?"

"With them?" Conner says. "With *us*?" He looks over at Ripley's sleeping form. "If he's a part of this world and has the calling, it's going to be impossible to ignore. But since he has a thing going on his own already with the balloons . . . I don't know."

I nod, and Conner pats my head; I suppose he's trying to comfort me. Then he leaves the room and I stare at Ripley a full five minutes before attempting to wake him, which begins with a gentle shoulder shake and ends with me sitting on his back and wiggling my bottom. When he finally awakes with a groan that cracks the ceiling, I hop off him and announce that it's time to get up—we're supposed to have been out of the room more than an hour ago.

"Hangover," he says into his pillow.

"I'll get you some coffee and aspirin," I tell him, almost thankful that I have experience with this kind of morning drunken illness. "But for now, you need to get up. Conner needs the room, and your father is coming here later."

"My father?" he finally spins in the bed, blinking up at me.

"You don't remember he asked last night? He's coming to say goodbye before they head off again, so—"

"I don't want to see him," he says. "Last night was a disaster." He scratches his head as though trying to recall. "I apologize. God, the dancing."

I'm actually surprised he remembers that. "It was epic," I say and laugh. "Distasteful, but epic."

He smiles. "Love you," he mumbles and pulls the covers over his face.

“Love you back,” I say. “But get out of bed now.”

\*\*\*

When I drop my yellow suitcase onto the floor of Winston’s wagon, the entire place rattles, and for a second I even worry it’s going to come down on top of me. It’s the coolest place in the world, or so I thought before I had to live here. Conner closes the door and situates Ripley, handing him keys, as I head slightly north to inspect the facilities. Not good. The bathroom is basically an outhouse with a shower head fixed to the wall. And Conner was right: there are at least five spiders sunk into the corners. I’m a nature girl, but spiders aren’t my favorite products of earth.

Conner announces that he spoke to his uncle, and the troupe will be staying here overnight in their trailers, parking them in the parking lot. He wishes us luck, says he’ll see us at dinner, and leaves.

“I can’t believe someone else will be staying in Winter Romance tonight,” I say and toss my suitcase onto the bed. “Not that this room isn’t great . . .” I roll my eyes and hope he is awake enough to catch my sarcasm.

“If you want . . .” Ripley pauses, sits down on the bed. “We could head out now. Go back to Gram and your dad.”

I texted my father earlier to tell him the night was a success with Ripley meeting his father, but that I’ll save the rest of the full details for later. I also texted Lizzie while waiting for Ripley to sip coffee and shower, and I let her know that I was still in Connecticut with the mystery man. She is interested in my life nowadays like she never has been before.

“How much would we owe Conner at this point?”

“Nothing,” Ripley replies. “He isn’t charging us.”

Honestly, I had expected that, or at least I was hoping Conner would do something like that. He did tell us that the inn makes so much money that they could charge a dollar a night for the next year and still have enough for cleaning, supplies, and food. Still, I’d like to give him something. Leave a gift or some money for our meals.

“What do you want to do?” I ask.

He glances at my suitcase, then down at the floor at his black bag. “Stay with you here forever,” he replies. “But skip the whole saying goodbye thing with my father tonight.”

We haven’t talked about last night too much in the rush to get out here. But, I’m thinking it’s time. “So you’ve decided that you won’t form a relationship with him?” I sit down beside him on the bed.

“It doesn’t even come down to that,” he replies. “He travels all the time, and that’s his life, so it wouldn’t matter. I’m just going to say goodbye to him and that’s that.”

“But you said you wanted to know why you were the way you were,” I remind him. “Last night, I don’t know if you remember, but you said he never addressed why the balloons were magic, and his stars, too.”

He nods, reaches over to the side table, and picks up a deck of playing cards. He shuffles them. “Here’s my guess,” he says, laying random cards down on the bed. “These objects aren’t magic, just like the wallpaper at the inn isn’t magic. It’s the person who is supposedly the magician, so whatever makes this happen comes from the person.” He swipes the cards up in one movement and sticks them back into the deck. “The balloons aren’t magic—I am.”

“It’s a combination,” I say and take two cards from him, resting one on top of the other.

“It’s you plus the balloons, or your father plus the crystal stars, or Winston plus the wallpaper.”

He nods. “I guess I’ve always known this but tried to fight against it,” he says. “That was why it was such a big deal that you didn’t love me but The Balloon Man.”

“You need to find a way to blend the two,” I say. “Stop thinking of them as different beings.” I lean and kiss his cheek. “You’re incredible either way, just think how it would be if you were both together.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But when both people are lost—”

“You’re not lost anymore, you’re found—both of you.” I take the cards from him and place them back over on the table. “All that’s left is saying goodbye to your father and maybe saying that you’ll see him sometimes when he’s on the east coast. You can decide later whether you forgive him or not. But for now, I think you should see him one last time, figure out what you can about your family history and the magic, and then move on.”

“You’re right,” he says. “I guess I should see him one more time, especially since last night was such a blur.”

“Ha,” I say and toss back my head. “You remember meeting him and a little of the dancing, but nothing about the troupe?”

“Um . . .” He scrubs the back of his neck. “There was a girl with some drawings, right? And a guy with genie pants carrying a lamp who wanted to grant wishes?”

“Cormag, Man of Three Wishes,” I say. “Though I’m pretty sure Man of Three Wishes used to be Woman of Three Wishes.”

“Yeah,” he replies. “I think I remember that.”

We smile at our shared memory of the night, then he sighs.

“My brain still feels like it’s banging against my skull.”

“I’m not surprised. You drank so many bourbons I didn’t know if you were Ripley anymore.” I laugh. “Ripley, Man of Bourbon.”

“Very funny, Chamomile, Girl of Nature.” He presses me to the bed. “I love you, Girl of Nature.”

I reach up and smooth his bangs. Then I wrap my legs around his waist and stare upward at the ceiling, a white cracked audience not nearly as romantic as our garden full moon or our Winter Romance room. “Do you think the people who have Winter Romance right now will do the same things we did? Feel the same way we did?”

Ripley brushes his lips against my neck. “It wasn’t the room,” he whispers. “We felt that way anytime we were together, wherever we were.”

The bed makes a peculiar creaking sound as Ripley lifts my shirt. I ignore the cracked ceiling and focus on Ripley’s kisses, his touches, how his fingers undress me. With the magic props all around us and a distinct chill seeping in from under the door, we slip beneath the covers, pressed together in warmth. We dance mouth to mouth and skin to skin, until the gypsy wagon pulses in magic fire.

\*\*\*

After catching up on phone calls, Ripley and I get ready for dinner, bumping into each other on our way in and out of the tiny bathroom. Conner texts somewhere in this shuffle to tell us that Finn and Marnimer’s Troupe have arrived and are situated in the parking lot. They will be attending dinner in the dining room, where Leah is in a rush, attempting to pull together a meal

for a mostly-unplanned dinner party consisting of a dozen outside guests. Ripley's gray shirt still smells like The Velvet, and even though we spent much of the late afternoon hours making love, the scent revives something in me and I wrap myself around him, inhaling his shoulders and his collar until he laughs and tells me we have to get to dinner.

As we walk across the parking lot, most of the space is taken up by the enormous trailers of Marnimer's Troupe. There are some people standing outside the trailers—nobody I recognize—so we keep going to the inn, which feels like it's a mile away compared to when we were upstairs in Winter Romance. That was a bit of a trip being three floors away from the dining room, but from Winston's wagon, it's a bonafide journey.

When we enter the dining room, Conner is already here, standing beside a guy his age but about four inches taller. The kid next to him is clean-cut with tidy dark hair, and he's wearing a navy suit jacket and shiny black shoes. From Conner's description, I'm sure this is the fourth and final owner of The Brightwick Inn, Zach. He's motioning for Chandry to move some chairs, shifting his finger around like an orchestra conductor. Conner rolls his eyes at least three times before Ripley and I even cross the room.

"This is Ripley and Cammie," Conner says to Zach. "My friends who are staying in Winston's inventing house."

"That's not really where we put guests," Zach tells us as a greeting. "It reflects poorly on the inn, and I told Cons that but he still went ahead and put you in there."

"Sorry," Conner says and lowers his head. "They're more like family than guests anyhow."

"It's okay," I say. "We like the history of the wagon."

“The thing needs to be torn down,” Zach says.

“Oh, don’t tear it down!” I say.

“Whatever,” Zach replies, waving me off. “Just don’t take any pictures of the room or put any information on the net. I would compensate you for your troubles but Cons said he already gave you stuff for free.” He jerks his head sideways. “Chandry! That is *not* where that table goes tonight!” He stomps away.

“He’s stressed because of the troupe,” Conner says. “He wants everything to be perfect, even though I told him these people aren’t likely to be future guests.” He sits down and gestures for us to follow. The tables are put together in a long line, taking up the front of the dining room near the window. “I talked to Uncle Alastair,” he goes on as we settle in across from him. “In the trailer. He said it was nice to meet you guys last night, and I told him about me maybe doing online writing classes in the fall and joining the troupe. I’m trying to get him to do more traveling, but he’s always saying he has arthritis and just wants to be home as much as possible. He has a house here in Connecticut. I told you that, right?”

I nod politely, and Ripley does the same beside me, although it seems as though Ripley is not quite up for all of this conversation yet. His eyes are still not quite alert as though he’d rather be cuddled up in bed or hanging out watching TV.

“So Uncle Alastair also said that even though you’re not a Fairlane, he thinks families like ours were probably once related at some point, probably going back farther than Winston and Marnimer even. Like ancient times. So we could be distantly related.”

Ripley smiles, and I remember what he said about Conner feeling like a brother to him.

“You’re in an awfully good mood tonight,” I tell Conner.

He shrugs. “The troupe is here.” He lifts his chin, gazing over us. “Um, literally. The troupe is *really* here.”

When I turn back I see that they’ve entered, and I realize why I didn’t recognize anyone when I passed the trailers—they are not the troupe I remember from last night. Streaming in are normal men and women, dressed in plain clothing of mostly jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers.

Mademoiselle Shevanton is wearing pink sweatpants and a jacket with sports numbers on it, the Woman in Red is the woman in turquoise today, and Madam Sunilda is still wearing layers and rags, but less theatrical ones; they’re more like thrift store clothes, ratty sweaters and patched baggy pants. She spots me and lifts a hand in greeting, still retaining a bit of her Madam Sunilda act in the mystical movement of the wave. I wave back and remember what she told me about the bridge I have to cross. I’m still halfway across and dread the rest of the journey.

Noisily, they all take seats at the table as Zach directs them like he’s the maitre d’. Finn is toward the back of the group and does not look like Finn. Today, he looks even more like Ripley, his face devoid of makeup, his hair styled with no magic-man top hat adornment, his clothing a normal jeans and white button-down shirt. He finds us and pushes through, sitting down across from us while Zach orders Chandry to fetch pitchers of ice water.

“I see you made it through last night,” he says to Ripley. He glances around. “This is an interesting place. Filled with magic. I felt it as soon as I walked in.”

Ripley doesn’t respond, and the troupe continues to chatter amongst themselves. I catch some of their conversation, mostly about the inn and their next stop in upstate New York. Zella of the Veil, the old woman I saw in the darkened room last night, is conversing with Doctress Pinkie, who does body readings, about how crowded the carnival in New York is in the

springtime. The Mirror Man is talking about the traffic on the coasts, and while I think his intended audience is Lady Luck—a purple-haired Asian girl who works with Numerology—she doesn't appear to be fully absorbed in his ranting. Ari and Dagan are discussing last night's lecture on weather divination, with Ari wondering if they should incorporate cloud shape symbolism into their lessons. Ari and Dagan are wearing jeans and t-shirts like most of the troupe, but both of them have green beaded necklaces around their necks.

Chandry brings out pitchers of water filled with lemon and ice, and while these go around the table, I try to strike up a discussion with Finn, hoping it will break the tension between father and son as well as the bourbon did last night.

"I still have my star," I tell Finn. "When I hold it, I feel relaxed."

"It should continue to do that when you need it to," he replies, then shifts his head to address Ripley. "I would guess your blue balloons do something similar?"

"People who are sad or depressed ask for the blue ones usually," Ripley replies. "I try to give yellow to people who need uplifting, but to someone who needs to be relaxed . . . I guess a blue or green one would work, yeah."

"I think what you do is amazing," Ari says, leaning over to join in our conversation. "Especially since you knew nothing about your gift and did all of this on your own."

Conner once mentioned that Ari and Dagan were of Native American background, and they both look it, with gorgeous, hawk-like eyes and high cheekbones. Ari's hair is ebony and falls over her shoulders in thick waves. Dagan is absolutely breathtaking with feathery dark hair and skin tone of deep tea.

“Dagan had to teach me everything,” Ari goes on. “My grandmother is Native American. *Was* Native American.” She pauses and Dagan wraps his arm around her shoulder. “And she taught me some things when I was little, but Dagan was brought up with the history of Aeromancy and he knows so much. He was going to be a meteorologist but we made the decision to join the troupe so we could teach others about Aeromancy and tour the world.”

Ripley takes a sip of lemon water. “You don’t miss being home?” he asks. “You couldn’t do this in your own area?”

Ari shakes her head. “You reach so many more people this way,” she says. “Even if Dagan became a meteorologist, he wouldn’t be able to pass this knowledge to so many other people. When you’re put on the earth, you have a responsibility to help as many people as you can with the gifts you’ve been given, or what point was there to being here?”

Ripley nods and visibly perks up with light dancing in his eyes. Finn catches the light.

“I can only imagine what kind of draw a balloon act would have,” he says. “Maybe a tuxedo for a costume . . . a black top hat and shoes that are five sizes too big!”

Ari and Dagan chuckle as Chandry appears with a tray of appetizers. She sets down a huge plate of fries smothered in cheese and sprinkled with chives, then moves to the other end of the table and places down some crostini with tomatoes, basil, and oil. Light and soothing Celtic music starts up from hidden speakers, adding to the atmosphere.

“Don’t forget about Conner,” I say. “He’s thinking of joining the troupe in the fall.”

Finn gives me a polite nod before turning to Conner, seated beside him. “Alastair always tells us you’re nearly ready to join as Treasure Boy. Boy of Lost Items . . . something along those lines.”

Conner nods, talks down at the table as though suffering from sudden social anxiety.

“The first time it happened—my gift, I mean—we were babysitting Zach’s little brother and we lost him. I was able to find him by going backward in my mind and locating him. Later I realized I could do it with items, too, not just people.” He lifts his head to Ripley, across from him.

“Imagine how many people I could help find important things if I toured the country.”

“And Europe,” Finn adds. “Goodness, we have quite a crowd in Europe when we go.”

As we nibble crostini and destroy the plate of cheese fries, the conversation stays on Conner, touring Europe, and helping people through unique magical gifts. I listen to the conversation with little to add. It’s my boyfriend who can do all this, and my friend Conner. I’m just Cammie, Girl of Nature, which unless said in private while laughing with Ripley, is of little else importance.

Dinner arrives, plates of roasted chicken and swirls of buttered mashed potatoes accompanied by a vegetable selection of glazed carrots with cherries. Chandry sets up a basket of rolls on the table, motions to Conner that she needs assistance in the kitchen, and he frowns, getting up from the table. As we eat, more troupe members make their way into the discussion of Ripley’s gift, and by the time I’ve finished my mashed potatoes, Ripley is somewhat of a superstar: *Tell us how you got started . . . Did you ever wonder if your missing father was a magic man like you? . . . How come you give the balloons away for free? . . . Do people ever ask for more than one? . . . Were you surprised that your father had a similar act?*

Ripley is laughing along with Cormag by the time our plates are cleared by Chandry and Conner. Uncle Alastair, a few seats down, offers to help but Conner waves him away, then disappears into the kitchen. Cormag is at the other end of the table, but rolled into the

conversation like everyone else. It turns out that beneath the genie turban and shiny costume, he's a strawberry-blond with an array of floral tattoos. He has a light, ordinary voice. The normalcy of him now, outside of The Velvet, throws me a bit, but I am beginning to understand how this works. These are normal people with extraordinary gifts who function together as a family.

“ . . . and I don't think we'll go back there for some time,” Cormag goes on, talking about Finn being so angry at a customer that everyone thought he was going to throw one of his magic stars at them. “The new owner never really liked us there, did they, guys?”

Collectively, the troupe shakes their heads.

“But normally we love the west coast,” Shevanton adds. “The sunshine there is just so different from the sunshine on the east coast. More . . . uplifting.”

“True,” a few troupe members say.

“I've never been to the west coast,” Ripley says.

“Avocados, oranges, and sunshine,” Ari says. “It's not a myth.”

“You would love Ireland,” Finn tells him. “You do know that you're part Irish, right?”

Ripley shakes his head. “Do I have grandparents?”

“Oh yes!” Finn says. “Katherine and Bobby. They live in Florida. Katherine is an award-winning pie baker and your grandfather Bobby used to own a golfing supplies store before he retired.”

“I've never even golfed,” Ripley says and everyone roars with laughter.

He asks his father if he can meet his grandparents, and his father replies that he can indeed meet them, but that they do not know of his existence in the world, so the meeting will

have to be handled delicately. Chandry and Conner return with two enormous cakes that look store-bought, and judging by the amount of notice Leah had about the troupe's arrival, I'm guessing they probably are. Chandry sets down the chocolate cake at Cormag's side of the table, while Conner places a cake coated in coconut at our end of the table. He finally sits down again, and Uncle Alastair pats his shoulder.

"The troupe is looking forward to this one's arrival," he announces. "To coin a phrase, the young will continue what the old have begun—only better."

"That's not a phrase, Alastair," Finn says.

"Ah, but it is now," Uncle Alastair says and the troupe falls into laughter again.

After cutting into the coconut cake and distributing slices, I sit back and watch the troupe devour dessert. Finn finishes his slice and falls back with his hand on his belly, a full and satisfied grin breaking his features.

"No liquor license, I assume, Conner?" he asks.

"Not yet," Conner replies. "We've been looking into it, though."

"I could use an after-dinner refreshment." He eyes Ripley. "How about you and I have a little outing around town. One last father-son drink?"

At this, Ripley sets his fork down against the plate. "I'm not sure," he says. "I'm still recovering from last night."

"We'll tread lightly," Finn says. "Just you and I, along with a little brandy or some flavored rum. What do you say about finding a place or two?"

Ripley turns to me. "Would that be okay?"

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah, yeah . . . of course it's okay."

“Settled, then,” Finn says. “We can go in the trailer so you can see how nice they are on the inside. Perfect for traveling, with televisions, plush couches, full kitchen . . . we even have light-up makeup stations!”

“Wow,” Ripley says, his favorite word. He stands with his father, digs into his pocket, and hands me the key to Winston’s wagon. “Keep the door locked,” he tells me. “I won’t be too long.” He kisses my cheek, and leaves the dining room, walking beside his father.

Cammié's Journal 30 April

---

*The last few days have floated and bumped together like one big crashing wave and I'm feeling as though I have not written but find that I have written, just not enough to fill in everything that has happened to me. I want to say that the world has been tossing me around these last few days, but in the same breath I can relay that I have asked for the ride, in all its turbulent beauty. I long for a balloon and just now realize it; I will never tell a soul about this longing. Ripley would not understand. We've come too far for me to ask for a balloon.*

*One thing is sure in life: it moves forward and it changes. I think that's why I love the sky and stars so much. The sky spins, but the stars and the patterns, they stay the same every night. You can count on them to be up there as they were the night before. But life here on earth does not share the luxury of permanence. On the map: I am Here. I am looking up at the stars knowing that I am the same. I want life to keep spinning but still stay the same. Is that so much to ask?*

*The two of us stepped through the door but only Ripley belonged in the room. The two of us stepped through the door but Ripley, I fear, will step much further inside. The two of us shared our pink balloon but only Ripley's will catch the wind.*

*Only I can cross the bridge. And I have a feeling I will have to cross soon.*

*Or turn back, running.*

I place my journal down on the bed and stare at the wall. Winston the Great and his son Marnimer stare back at me. Marnimer is a heavy-set boy with round cheeks, and unless something is wrong with the poster, his skin is green-tinted. Winston looks as though he would fit right in with modern-day Marnimer's troupe, even though he lived so many years ago. He sports a top hat like Finn, a grand tradition of magicians, I suppose, and his eyes, like Finn once said, speak of magic. *You can always see the magician in a magician's eyes.* Finn understood who Ripley was from the onset.

It's midnight and Ripley has not returned. He texted once to make sure I was okay, and I texted back a spirited "fine!" while curled up in a ball, thinking on the night, thinking about my journey so far. At home, I'm Cammie. My hair is unnecessarily long, messy, and blond. My father is Teddy. We own and run Tie-Dye Me and listen to classic rock all day. We smoke pot once in a while. We dance. Here, with Ripley, I am not sure who I am. He is in one world and I am in another. He fits here, and I fit there. I feel the future tugging on me, long cold fingers digging painfully into my wrist.

I try to figure out when this feeling started, when I approached this sudden dark turn in my path, and can pin it down to when Shevanton handed us the broken hearts. From there, Ripley turned into someone I didn't recognize as Ripley. But tonight I realized that the Ripley from last night is perhaps the true Ripley. He fit into that family at dinner. He might not even know it yet, but this is the world he belongs in. His father said he could tell him a million times that he's a psychology person, but some people are just meant to be magicians. I guess I was right from the beginning: Ripley is The Balloon Man.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

Ripley did not return from his night out with his father until after three in the morning.

He banged on the door and then stumbled into Winston's wagon, knocking into the wall and shushing himself while I hopped back into bed. I pretended to sleep, pretended I *had* been asleep, but had in fact been up the entire time waiting for him. He went into the bathroom, peed for about ten minutes straight, ran some water, and fell into bed beside me. As another gray morning places its face against the small window in the back of the gypsy wagon, I am pressed into the wall, Ripley an unmovable mass beside me.

My phone is under my pillow, so I text my dad a "good morning" and even consider texting my mother, just to let her know what happened between us was not a shared hallucination. But then I figure it might be best for her to make the next move. I don't want to seem too eager, and honestly, I have enough going on right now without worrying about being in her wedding and fixing up our relationship one-hundred percent before that September date. There is so much to tidy up when I get home: my friendship with Lizzie, my relationship with my mother, and whatever damage was caused from me leaving my father. Still, I haven't felt this whole since I was thirteen, at least when it comes to my family and my friends.

When Ripley finally stirs in the bed, I nudge his shoulder and wait for him to open his eyes. The wind is picking up outside and it's like a freezer in here, an outdoor box with no insulation at all, so I roll into him for warmth. He wraps his arms around me, and with much

more force than I would expect from someone who has been drinking for two straight days, he pulls me into his chest. He smells like sweat and alcohol, and the sharp mixture of scents moves from my nose down into my throat, burning.

“Is this our last day?” I whisper. I hadn’t intended to ask that.

“Shh,” he whispers through my hair. “I don’t want to hear the words.”

“How did last night go?”

“Well enough for me to leave it all behind with no regrets,” he says back. “Thank you for making me do this.”

“I’m glad you found your star,” I tell him, and my voice breaks.

“Hey,” he says, and sits us up. “What’s the matter?”

I wipe my eyes, and while I know where this sudden downfall is coming from, I can’t quite verbalize it yet.

“Tell me,” he says.

“What are we going back to?” I say finally.

He smiles, that beautiful rare smile that reaches his eyes. “A million things,” he says.

“You and me?” I ask. “That’s what you want?”

“Why would you possibly think . . .”

My eyes give me away as they turn, without thinking, to the poster of Winston and Marnimer.

“I love your imagination,” he says. “But in this case, it’s just an imagination.”

“Is it?”

I'm cold as a popsicle, and I don't want to get out of bed, but I climb over Ripley and make my way to the little window, staring out into the drab greenery of the woods around the wagon. A gust of wind circles the wagon, shaking the roof and walls.

"They're a great group of people," Ripley says from the bed.

I keep my back turned to him, staring outside.

"And I really like Conner, and I love my dad, but I hate my dad." He exhales, letting go.

"He asked me."

My insides tumble. "I figured he was going to. The entire dinner felt like a setup."

"How could he not ask me?" he goes on. "I have the gift and they all like me. After drinks last night I hung out with all of them in the parking lot, and it finally felt like I belonged somewhere, like people understood me. But there were so many things to consider, things I couldn't leave behind, like Gram and my free balloons, and . . . you."

I spin to face him. He's sitting up in the bed, covers on his lap, hair a tumbleweed, blue-green eyes glistening. "So if you told him you didn't want to go with them, then why did you lie to me just now and say it was all in my imagination?"

He stands from the bed and moves to me, wraps his arms around my waist from behind and digs his chin into my shoulder. "I don't know," he says. "I guess I didn't want you to be upset."

"They were all telling you exactly what you wanted to hear," I say, pulling away slightly. "Telling you how many people you could help and how great life is on the road. If it was that great, why did your father have to turn to a stranger for love that night at The Sorrell Hotel?"

“You’re not being fair,” he replies. “Like Conner said, this is a calling. You think he wants to leave the inn behind? He loves the inn. And he loves Chandry, too.”

Squirming, I break away from him. We stand face to face. “Just be honest with me,” I say. “If it weren’t for me, would you go with the troupe?”

“I don’t agree with the high fees they charge,” he tells me, dancing around a firm reply. “My father and I talked about it last night but had no breakthroughs, nothing I could ever stand behind. And I would have to leave Gram with my aunt, who wouldn’t be around as much as me, so she’d be lonely. So, if it weren’t for you, I would still have reservations. But . . .” His gaze falls on a long chain of Winston’s colorful scarfs. I think I actually was playing with them last night in boredom, stringing them together. “Yes,” he says at length. “Yes, if it weren’t for those things, I would do it. I would do it to help people with my gift, I would do it to travel the country, I would do it to build a relationship with my father, I would do it to experience all that we experienced at The Velvet. I would do it because I fit in.”

“So in the end,” I say, “you were The Balloon Man after all.”

He opens his mouth to reply, but then closes it and shrugs.

“I’m going in the shower.”

I grab my yellow suitcase, the whole damn thing, and head into the bathroom.

\*\*\*

I snuck out of the wagon while Ripley was in the shower, ran past the trailers in the parking lot, and ended up in the sitting room at the inn. Leah has more bags of popcorn than usual set up for guests; this time I guess she was going for caramel corn drizzled with chocolate. It looks fancy. I sit on the rose couch and remember when Ripley and I first arrived here, how he

was so playful and I did not yet recognize it as the blossoming love between us. No matter what happens, I know that I love Ripley. And not in the first love way, because it was far too intense and unique for that label. What we have is forever love, and I know this because it hurts so bad.

Chandry saw me come in, and I suppose she noticed that I'd been crying, but it's nearing checkout time so she's been handling customers. I'm expecting her to come in and talk for a bit, but when Conner arrives through the doorway, I'm not surprised. She probably texted him or maybe he came to the lobby and she told him I was in here alone. Conner moves through the room, checks the refreshments to make sure they're neatly lined up, and sits in the gray chair across from me.

"You had a fight with him?" he asks.

"It's obvious, I guess," I reply. "I guess someone on the outside would say the whole thing is stupid, that we haven't been together very long, that I'm being selfish—"

"Love is love," Conner says. "I mean, I've been through this so I know. Chandry and I are teenagers and her mother told her constantly that she'd meet dozens of other guys along the way, so why get so upset when something doesn't work out? But that's bullshit because love feels the way it feels, and breaking up feels the way it feels. You didn't break up, right?"

I go on to tell him that we didn't break up, but that I questioned everything that happened with the troupe and especially how Ripley has changed since meeting his father. It was such a fast transition that I fear it has been there all along. In fact, I *knew* it was there all along, knew who Ripley truly was. For a seventeen-year-old guy, Conner is a good listener. Maybe along with magic he was born with insight. I know Ripley was.

“I know it’s not what you want to hear,” Conner says, “but Chandry and I still consider ourselves together but not together, if that makes sense. We don’t date other people and we probably never will. It sucks for the girl left behind, I know.”

“So you expect her to go her whole life without someone?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “But Uncle Alastair told us that our vibrations were so similar that we would never find anyone else that close again, not in this lifetime.” He glances at the door. “There’s something I didn’t tell you about my past. You know that my mother disappeared, right?”

“I do,” I say. “I remember you told us that, but I didn’t feel comfortable asking you for more details at the time.”

He nods. “When Winston designed the wallpaper for the inn, he was doing it for his wife Marie. When Winston was traveling with Marnimer, doing magic shows or healing sessions for money, Marie was home alone, staring out the windows, missing both of them. He originally designed the wallpaper in Summer Garden for her so she could be happy, then the Dreaming of the Sea wallpaper for her to always feel relaxed and at ease.”

“That’s really cool,” I say. “But what does it have to do with your mother or with Chandry?”

“Because I’m related to Winston and his family. I’m part of the true history of this inn, the dark history.” He pauses dramatically. “Midnight Rendezvous attracts so many ghost hunters because it’s haunted. Winston and Marie were murdered in that room.”

“My God,” I say and palm my heart. “Murdered here?”

He nods again, confirming. “What you have to understand about this lifestyle is that people are not always going to understand it. Winston and Marie were murdered—poisoned—because people thought they were of the devil because of what they could do. I’m a descendant of the family on my mother’s side, and because she was part of that world, she was either targeted or . . . I don’t know.” He takes a breath. “I could never be with Chandry because I would worry about her in this lifestyle. Worry that she would get hurt somehow along the way.”

“Times are different now,” I say. “People are more accepting.”

“Are they?” he returns. He slaps the arm of the chair. “Whatever,” he says. “It’s the life I’m in, can’t change it. Anyhow, what I’m trying to get you to realize is that we’re a bunch of outsiders. A group of *misfits*. People are not going to understand us—we’re always going to be different.” He narrows his eyes, looking at me. “Why do you think Ripley didn’t go to college? Why he does online classes? It’s because he has never felt like he fit in anywhere. That’s probably why he picked you, someone who would understand him and accept him the way he truly is.”

That statement does not require much thought or soul-searching. I know why Ripley fell in love with me. I wanted to be a certain person for him, so that’s what he was attracted to. I pushed him toward finding himself, pushed him toward his true calling as magician. But now that he’s found himself and accepted his calling and place in the world, what am I?

“Madam Sunilda told me that I have to cross a bridge soon,” I tell Conner. “In my reading. She said that I’m halfway across and will soon make a choice to cross or turn back.” I lower my head. “I accepted Ripley and pushed him to be this person, but in the end, it came back to haunt me.”

“She’s a good psychic,” Conner says. “All those crystal balls and cards and stuff . . . it’s just props. She doesn’t even need any of that.”

“So what does it mean?”

Conner rubs his chin. “I’m not so good with the emotional stuff yet,” he says. “I mean, most of the troupe will tell you that doing what we do is one part divination, one part entertainment, and one part emotion.” He pauses, thinks. “Maybe psychology. Understanding people and reading them. That’s why Ripley is so good at what he does. It’s something that’s already there, and he’s adding even more to it with the schooling.”

“Yeah.” I nod. “So?”

“I guess what I can tell you is that in the end, you and I both know what he really wants to do. If you pushed him to do it, he would, but if you told him to stay, he would stay and live a normal everyday life but never really be fulfilled.” He taps the arm of the chair, thinking. “And you can either follow or stay behind. Um . . . cross the bridge with him or head back the other way.”

That’s what I figured Conner would say. I really knew it all along.

“How are you seventeen?” I ask.

He laughs. “I read a lot.”

We laugh together, then talk a bit more about the troupe and Conner’s eagerness to join them in the fall. We munch popcorn and discuss the future of the inn, until finally, I decide I better head back to Ripley. I tell Conner goodbye, and he wishes me luck, then awkwardly pats my head. Yes, he still needs to work on the emotional stuff.

\*\*\*

When I cross the parking lot, a few troupe members are outside of their trailers, taking in the grayness of the day, turning their faces to the wind, maybe waiting for the sun to break through. They spot me and lift a hand to wave, which I return and pass through the gate and the wooded area, to Winston's wagon. When I step up the metal staircase and turn the handle, I'm met with a doorknob that won't budge. I forgot to take a key. I lift my hand and knock, and Ripley appears, opening the door only a half inch before peering out. He smiles and waits. For what, I'm not sure.

"I need to talk to you," I say.

"Oh yeah?"

"Open the door," I tell him.

"Open it?"

"Yeah," I say and stomp my foot on the metal. "You're acting weird."

"I *am* weird," he returns. "And so are you. All the best people are."

"Just open the door."

"If you say so."

When he opens the door, I gasp, staring all around in wonder, enchantment, not believing what I'm seeing before me. The wagon has been transformed into a sea of hovering red balloons, white strings dangling in my face, dozens and dozens and dozens of them. I step inside, into the balloon wonderland, and spread my arms, letting the strings dance on my hands and wrists. I have never been in the presence of such magic.

"What . . ." I can hardly verbalize the awe inside of my chest. "Ripley!"

As the balloons bounce and bump along the ceiling, Ripley grabs my waist through the mass of hanging strings. “The Balloon Man,” he says.

I smile and let myself fall into him, my hair whipping over his shoulder.

“How could you possibly think I would leave you when we’re just starting something up?” he says and strokes my hair. “When you’re the one who changed my entire life in the best way possible?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper and wrap my arms around his middle. “I just . . .”

We hold each other for a while. I close my eyes, then open them to the sky of red balloons above us. Ripley steers me toward the bed, pushing his way through the strings, and sets me down at the edge.

“It’s what we thought,” he says, and kneels down in front of me, taking my hands. “My father said that part of me goes into the balloons, into the entire thing, the strings and the color. It’s the same with his stars. The stars are magic because *he’s* magic.”

“I feel your magic in the room,” I say, and I do. It feels distinctly Ripley, like the way I imagine he loves me amplified in as many balloons. “I love it,” I tell him. “How did you do it all?”

He moves to sit beside me. “They helped me,” he says. “The troupe. We made an assembly line across the parking lot. Of course it had to be the windiest day.” He laughs. “Shevanton lost one of the balloons and we were all running around nervous that you would come out of the inn and see it floating away. Then we all just started laughing.”

“They sound great.” I take his hands. “That’s why you should go with them.”

He takes a breath, not replying at first. I wish he would say something, because that was one of the hardest things I've ever had to say in my life.

"I'm not going," he says at last. "I got swept up in it—I admit it—but I'd rather be with you, and if I go with the troupe, I would hardly ever see you. I'd rather just do my thing in the parks, give out the balloons, get my degree, and stay with Gram. It's a done deal. I've decided it already."

I shake my head. "But you need to do it. The world needs to be happy right now. They *need* your balloons."

He thinks on this, then says finally, "Come with me. Share another pink balloon with me. A forever pink balloon."

I lower my head. "I can't," I whisper.

"Ari and Dagan do it," he says, urging. "They're a couple."

"But I'm not magic, and they both are." I thought a lot about this when I was in the sitting room with Conner. "I would never fit into that world. At The Velvet, I was out of place, not like a fish out of water, even, like a fish who just prefers to be in the water floating aimlessly. All of those people are big, loud, dazzling fish—"

"Who float around aimlessly," he says. "It's everything you want."

I stand from the bed, and grasp one of the white dangling strings. "My life is back in place in Redfield. I have the store and my father, my mother's wedding in September, and Lizzie is coming back in a few weeks. Everything is as I left it only better. I have to rebuild all that. I'm comfortable there. I only just realized that recently."

He nods, accepting. “Then I’ll stay in Massachusetts,” he says. “I had already planned to.”

“Think on it,” I say. “How long do we have?”

“It’ll be hard to join up with the troupe once they’re past New York,” he says. “But they’re leaving tomorrow for upstate New York to do an after-hours carnival gig for a few days. We can stay here one last night tonight for me to make a decision.” He stands, grabs my hands and holds them. “It means a lot to me that you wanted me to go. I wish I could do as much for you as you do for me.”

I gaze up at the balloons. “You do,” I say. “Honestly, you do.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Monday night I'm in the parking lot of the inn, staring at The Brightwick Inn sign through white illumination, sitting on a lawn chair in front of Finn's trailer. It's like a big house inside; he wasn't lying about the amenities. It's a moving home, complete with beds and kitchen and television. It's a touch outdated with a brown color scheme, but it's still cozy and it does not feel as though you are missing out on anything in the modern world. Finn shares his trailer with Ari, Dagan, and Lady Luck, whose real name I just learned is Far Peretz. The other troupe members share trailers as well, with the oldest members bunking together: Madam Sunilda, Zella of the Veil, Doctress Pinkie, and for the moment, Uncle Alastair. All of them are over fifty-five.

Across the lot, the troupe members are relaxing outside on chairs, moving in and out of trailers, and basically using the place as a campground. Rumor has it that the troupe "donated" two-thousand dollars to the inn for the use of their parking lot and for food, so dinner tonight was even more extravagant than the night before. Leah, having time and some help from Chandry and Chandry's mother, put together a meal of rib-eye steaks, roasted rosemary potatoes, and creamed spinach. Our dessert was a hearty bread pudding rich with cinnamon flavor and topped with whipped creme. I love it here so much.

Ripley and his father are sitting across from me in chairs, discussing The Mirror Man act, both slouching from overindulgence at dinnertime. Thankfully, there has been no mention of going out for drinks this evening.

“So not everyone uses divination,” Ripley says. “Eliot uses the mirrors to do like a Houdini sort of act?”

Finn’s eyes travel toward a trailer at the side of the lot. “The man is obsessed with Houdini,” he replies in a low voice. “Love Eliot, but most of what he does is literally smoke and mirrors.”

Ripley laughs. “And the Woman in Red? Just the Master of Ceremonies?”

“No no,” Finn replies. “Keyna’s a psychic. She’s the door you have to pass through to get to us, and she is very much locked until you pass her test. I’m sure you remember her studying you. That was to make sure you weren’t police or someone who wasn’t trustworthy. It’s really important that we don’t meet law officials, particularly since Cormag’s act might be seen as prostitution in some cases.”

I glance up at this.

“And then we have Doctress Pinkie, the dear, who mostly has to have a naked canvas to work on when doing body readings. She studies everything from palms to navels.”

“Wow,” Ripley says.

Ari and Dagan step out of the trailer, announce that they’re going to tour the night gardens, and walk away swinging held hands and gazing heavenward. Ripley and I share a smile.

“So tell me about Zella of the Veil,” I say. “Medium?”

“Talks to crossed-over spirits,” Finn confirms.

We discuss the troupe as the night spins on. Finn and Ripley have a similar sense of humor and laugh about some of the experiences Finn and the troupe have had along the way. The troupe, according to Finn, likes to play practical jokes on each other to keep spirits high and wits

sharp. Genie lamps have been stolen, full racks of costume clothing have been swapped, and once, Finn's suitcase of stars was replaced with a suitcase of toilet paper.

“ . . . I guess on many occasions it's an initiation,” Finn continues. “Many of the troupe members are newer; as you probably are aware, a high percentage are in their twenties only. We take pity, though. I remember being new to the troupe and so do many of the senior members. In fact, I was relatively new when I met your mother.”

Ripley's expression changes, a sudden light gone off.

“I was wondering . . .” Finn sits forward. “Before I leave, and you can say no to this of course, but I was wondering if I might see some of that letter she wrote you.”

Ripley's eyes betray his shock and apprehension at the question. He hesitates for a second, gazing down at the pavement, but then finally stands. “Of course you can,” he says. “It's in the wagon house. I'll be right back.”

Grazing my shoulder with his hand, Ripley leaves for Winston's wagon. A trailer door closes from across the lot, and the only people left outside are me and Finn.

“I wanted to tell you a story,” Finn says, watching Ripley pass through the gate and disappear into the woods. “Quickly, if I can.”

I sit back and tell him to go ahead.

“When I was a young boy, I was the odd kid out, always reading sci-fi novels, looking up at space, never really fitting in with other kids or the real world. My parents tried to nurture this, and when I understood who I was and what I could do, they pushed me toward the troupe. It was a sacrifice on their part. They knew I would be traveling and living an alternate lifestyle.”

“How did you find out about the troupe?”

“My great-grandfather had the gift,” he says. “So there were family photos and records of someone who was in the troupe. A scarce few records, but we did have them, a permanent skeleton in the family closet, if you will. My point is that sometimes we have to make sacrifices for the people we love when we know they are meant for something bigger than we are.”

I shake my head to cut him off. “If you’re trying to say it’s my fault that Ripley is not going to join the troupe, it’s not. I understand that he’s needed in this world and that he has a rare gift. I knew that from the start, knew he was meant for bigger things before he even did. I told him to go with the troupe, especially now that he knows who he is and has accepted his identity.”

Finn strokes his chin. “You’re a uniquely wise girl,” he says. “Woman.” He corrects himself. “But you’re still not seeing this clearly.” He glances toward the dark woods. “His aunt can take care of his grandmother, and quite honestly, the woman was never meant to raise him anyhow. She understands that he’s a man and it’s time for him to leave the nest. And as far as his concerns about charging money for the act, I can’t change that because Keyna handles our finances, but he can always discuss matters with her to come to some kind of agreement. What I’m trying to say is that all his loose ends can be tied up except one. And she’s sitting right in front of me.”

My hands ball into fists, but then I let them relax. That is not who I am, and he won’t make me that way. “Why do you want him to go so badly?” I ask, calm and level. “You didn’t want too much to do with him at The Velvet until you found out he had the same gift you did. Now all the sudden you want to be a traveling father-son team?”

“That’s not my only reason for wanting to form a relationship with him, Chamomile.” He taps the plastic arm of the chair. “He has a gift that needs to be shared, and I’m not talking about

through a couple of parks in his area. That will never fulfill him now that he knows what might have been. He'll just keep branching out and branching out. The draw will become too immense and he'll either set out to find us anyhow or crumble beneath the pressure." He stops as Ripley appears at the gate. "You have to find a way to make him go, even if that means you lose him."

Our gazes remain locked until Ripley takes a chair, staring down at the letter.

"I'm not sure what part would interest you," Ripley says. "The entire thing is pretty depressing."

Finn finally removes his eyes from mine and grins at Ripley. He takes the letter from him, or at least the pages Ripley is willing to part with, and begins reading by the parking lot lights. Ripley turns to me and nudges my elbow, smiling, and I return the smile. It would be easy for me to be mad at Finn here. I could say he was a manipulative man, trying to pry something from my grasp that is rightfully mine. And all of that would be true. But I also know that Finn is attempting to build a new relationship with Ripley right now—so we're actually navigating the same waters, steering the same ship. We want what's best for Ripley, want him to be all he is meant to be.

"This is pretty much as I remember her," Finn says after reading, and places the letter down on his lap. "My memories are fleeting now, but her voice still rings in my ears, especially after reading her words."

"Is there anything you can tell me about her?" Ripley says. "Something I might not know?"

Finn nods. "My impression of her was that she craved love, and she had it when it came to family, but I don't know if anyone would ever have loved her the way she needed to be loved

in a romantic way. In addition to the depression, I believe she lived with the belief that love had to be a certain way, and while I think she might have found a bit of what she was looking for that night with me—someone who matched her intellect and could swim in thought as deeply as she could—I also believe she never would have found it in the real world.”

“If you had stayed—”

“I could have loved her,” Finn says, finishing for Ripley. “Yes, I could have.”

Ripley nods. He folds his hands together and sits back in release, as though something long awaited in his life just completed itself.

“I should also tell you that when you were a baby, you were her world. There was nothing she loved more than you, even if she had a difficult time showing that. She did the best she could with the hand life dealt her. With the *illness*.”

I reach over and grasp Ripley’s hand. He closes his eyes.

“We should probably head to bed now,” I say.

Ripley and I stand and say goodnight to Finn, then head back to the wagon and our last night together at the inn. There are a million thoughts running through my mind as we walk, but mostly, I’m already missing the inn and my adventure with Ripley. Whatever happens from here, at least I have the memories.

Inside the wagon, the balloons are still in place, and while I adore them, it’s a bit difficult to get ready for bed with them bouncing around. I laugh a few times with Ripley, who by the sagging around his eyes, really looks as though he needs to turn in early. When we finally tuck into bed, I nuzzle into him, setting my cheek to his chest.

“An indulgent few days,” he says. “Drinking and eating and making love and dancing.”

“So you need a break?”

“I didn’t say that.”

I laugh and maneuver around in bed until I’ve straddled him but I’m still hooded in covers. It’s freezing in here.

“This is new,” he says.

I toss back my head, laughing. Then I spread out his arms and brush my fingers over them, letting my fingertips run over his muscles, the grooves and bumps.

“You lifted me so easily that first night in the garden.”

His eyes close in pleasure and his head relaxes against the pillow. “I lift a balloon cart in and out of my car at least a dozen times a day,” he says. “I have a little bit of something going on.” He flexes and I laugh again.

“This is our last night,” I say, growing serious.

“No,” he replies. “It’s our first night. We can put all of this behind us now and start from the beginning.”

“But no more magic rooms or magic gypsy wagons.” I glance at Winston’s magician’s rings and mystical dice. “I love this place so much.”

“So you’ve said,” he teases. “Once, twice, every minute.”

“Funny,” I reply, and let my lips brush his neck. “I’ll really miss it all. But we still have tonight.”

For our last night together at the inn, I let him rest back while I take the lead, undressing and caressing. Trying new things. The night moves on in breaths and whispers, and when it’s all

done I hold him, let him dissolve into a dreamland where the future can't hunt him down and hurt him. For this moment in time, he deserves that.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

Morning fog rides up the sides of the wagon and dusts the woods outside the window. I've been staring outside for the last twenty minutes while Ripley showers and readies himself for the day, wishing I could reach my hand out to the fog, swipe it up, and take it with me so I had some part of the inn always in my grasp. I'm completely disregarding the whole pack up and leave thing for the moment. The longer I put it off, the longer I'm here. I can't make sense of wanting to be in this world forever and wanting nothing more than to leave it behind and step back into the real world. Madam Sunilda was right about the bridge, but right now, I'm comfortable still stuck right in the middle.

When Ripley appears from the little bathroom, he gives me a sad smile and shoves all his clothes into his black bag. He pulls the covers up on the bed, tucking in corners, leaving it all neat and tidy. He replaces the deck of cards, situating them on the night table, then he makes sure all the magic props are as they were before being disturbed by the people and balloons that have been going in and out of the wagon the last few days. This morning, first thing, we had to scoop up balloons by strings and carry them out to the inn. We kept only a few, donated them to the lobby as fun decor, hoping they add to the enchantment and magic of the inn, if only for a few days. Ripley's balloons, as magic as they are, do sink over time.

We head to the dining room where the tables are still lined together for the troupe, and some members are here, munching toast and sipping coffee. On weekdays Leah is in school, so

Chandry's mother is usually the chef, and it looks as though she's put out a simple meal of scrambled eggs and bacon with sides of toast and some cereal offerings. Conner skipped his morning classes today to see us off, but despite this sacrifice, when he arrives at the table and settles in across from us, we all don't say much to one another. We eat a meal of scrambled eggs and bacon that has cooled slightly because of our lateness of arrival, and the mood is dismal. Ripley does make an attempt to lighten it up with a joke about a dream he had last night in which he was a jester, dancing and making people laugh, and Conner and I shrug and chuckle while finishing up our breakfast plates.

After breakfast the clock forces me to pack my suitcase, and I do while Ripley sets out to find a gift for Conner. He returns a half-hour later with a gift certificate to one of those Escape Room adventures, where you get locked into a room and have to escape through figuring out puzzles. Ripley sticks a hundred bucks into the gift card envelope too, even though that is only a small fraction of the true amount we would have paid for all the food and lodging over the past near-week.

Just after eleven we pick up our suitcases and silently exit Winston's wagon. We walk through the woods toward the gate and parking lot, and while the morning fog has lifted, the melancholy and moisture in the air remains. The sky is white, and with the bumps of gray clouds here and there, it looks like a rocky ceiling. Finn is waiting beside his trailer with Conner, and we wave and hold up a finger while we deposit our bags into the back of the SUV, then make our way over.

"Thanks," Ripley says, handing Conner the envelope. "For everything."

When Conner opens the envelope and peers inside he smiles and shakes his head. “I’ll have to use this up really quick,” he says. He pauses, looks around at the troupe members who are now circling in to join the farewell. “I wanted to tell you this at breakfast, but I decided it would be best to do it when you were leaving.” His shoulders raise and he lifts his eyes to take in the troupe members around him. “I’m joining the troupe.”

Finn claps his shoulder. Uncle Alastair beams with pride from behind him.

“You mean, now?” I ask.

Conner nods. “I didn’t just skip school today; I’m not going back. Graduation is only a few weeks away, and I talked to guidance and they said I could leave now and still get my diploma.”

“Wow,” Ripley says. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Conner says. “They’re here now, so why not just go with them?”

“I’m going as well,” Uncle Alastair says. “With my nephew along, I’ve decided to abandon my need for retirement. As the saying goes, you only grow old if you stop playing.”

Finn steps forward. He extends a hand to Ripley. “I was honored to spend the last few days with you,” he says, and makes a bowing motion with his head. “I can’t take credit for raising you, of course, but I can say that you are everything I could have ever hoped and dreamed.”

Ripley shakes his father’s hand, and they half-embrace, tapping each other’s shoulders.

“Remember what we discussed about the act,” his father says as they break apart.

Ripley nods.

Keyna, the Woman in Red, steps forward into the circle. She's holding a folded black velvet cloth in her hands. "One last thing to do," she says. She opens the black velvet, exposing two shimmering Marnimer's Troupe pins. The blue eyes in the center of the pins gaze upward at the white sky. "The symbol on these pins was designed as a reminder of the healing power of magic," she says. "Of the perpetual magic eye we all possess that allows us to see inward." She bows her head. "Conner Kaplan, step forward, please."

Conner takes a breath, and, zipping up his black sweat jacket, he steps toward Keyna. She removes one pin and fastens it to Conner's sweat jacket. She kisses his forehead and he steps back into the crowd, gazing down at his new pin.

I know what's coming next. I knew when I saw the two pins, but part of me hoped Conner was getting two pins—maybe one of them was a spare.

"Ripley Howel McAllister," Keyna says, her tall dark form rising above the heads of the crowd. "Step forward, please."

Ripley shakes his head. "I'm honored," he says. "But I discussed this with Chamomile, and I've decided that I'm not—"

"It's an invitation," his father says. "You're a member now, and if at any time you want to join us, you can."

With that, Ripley relents and steps forward. Keyna pins the symbol for Marnimer's Troupe onto his blue shirt, takes his cheeks in her hands, and kisses his forehead. He glances down at the pin, then up at his father.

"I'm so proud of you," his father says. "And so very happy that we were able to form a connection so quickly. Despite our different lives to this point, we are so much alike."

Ripley's eyes glisten. He bites into his lip.

"I would love for you to join us, son," he says.

"You belong," Conner interjects.

Ripley's eyes travel around the circle, taking in the troupe members, Shevanton, Ari and Dagan, Cormag, Eliot The Mirror Man, Zella of the Veil . . . the whole crazy lot of them. He looks back at me, then at the troupe, back at me, then at the troupe.

In this moment, I know what I have to do. I've known it all along, constant whispers in my ear, changing each day we went on, now on top of me with a boom of shouting voices. I've known it with as much force and assuredness as I knew I loved Ripley. With a glance at the troupe, I grab Ripley's elbow and tug.

"Excuse us for a few minutes," I say to the troupe, and Finn presses his lips together nodding, as though he knows exactly what I'm going to do. I steer Ripley away from the troupe, down the front pathway of the inn, and to the gardens. I'd intended to do this at the rock wall, but the troupe is heading out soon. With not much time to spare, I stop at the fairy gardens. Under the white sky, the fairies have taken on a gothic quality, washed out, pale.

"What's this about?" Ripley says.

I reach up and wrap my arms around his shoulders. He hugs me back, squeezing my waist. I wish I could hold him forever, capture him among the fairies in the garden, my forever prisoner. My forever Balloon Man. I want to hold him by a string.

But it's time to let him go.

"You're going," I whisper in his ear.

"No," he says back. "We already discussed this."

“We discussed this when we were together.” I step back, grasp his hands. “But we’re not together anymore.”

He searches my eyes.

“It’s over,” I say, and keep my voice level, calm, assured.

“I know what you’re doing,” he says finally. “And I love you for it, but it’s not happening.”

I shake my head and let go of his hands. “It’s too late,” I say and my voice breaks. “I love you too much to keep you from what you’re meant to be. So I don’t want to be with you anymore. That’s firm and final. Take me home to my father.”

“Chamomile.” He steps to me but I hold up a hand and take two steps backward.

“You can drive me back to Redfield now, say goodbye to your grandmother in Michlin, and then join up with the troupe in New York.” I raise my eyes to him. “Don’t tell me it isn’t what you want.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but then lowers his head.

“Then you’ll take me home?”

“Yeah,” he whispers. “Let’s go home.”

\*\*\*

Going somewhere on a trip, expectant for adventure, always seems to take longer than going home. Before I know it, we’re back over the border of Connecticut into Massachusetts, the radio low, the SUV rumbling beneath me, the sky breaking apart into bursts of spring blue. Ripley and I have not said much on the ride home. There is so much to say that it is almost impossible to pick one topic as a starting point.

There's a deep ache in my belly that I have not yet had the chance to examine. For the moment, I've kept all my thoughts cemented in my mind and don't let them down into my heart and soul, don't let them morph to emotions. My heart feels destroyed in a way that is not mendable, like when you break something of glass and it shatters into so many tiny shards and pieces it would be impossible to even try to put it all back together. But Ripley would catch any little breakdown or loss of confidence, so I have to stay strong. Him going away depends on that.

When we arrive at Redfield Village, Ripley pulls into the parking lot behind the book store and kills the engine. He sits in silence for at least a minute, glued to the seat, staring ahead at the pathways of the village, the people moving along with bags in their hands, some talking on phones.

"I don't know how to tell Gram," he says.

"Start from the beginning," I say. "She'll understand. I think she knew when you first left it was probably a goodbye."

He nods, lets out a breath of air, and opens his car door.

Around the back of the SUV, he removes my yellow suitcase and hands it to me. I set it down on the pavement, standing before him, not knowing how to do this goodbye.

"What did your father mean about the balloon act?" I say.

Ripley closes the back of the SUV, then shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, looking downward. "He wants me to think about adding different balloons, different types, maybe something organic wrapped around the string so it will last longer for people."

"Those sound like good ideas," I say.

"Yeah."

We stand staring at one another, lost for words, still connected in a way that doesn't feel quite final yet, like a sunset holding on, colors only beginning to fade.

“What you did for me?” he says finally. “I'll never forget that.”

“I love you,” I tell him. “I don't know what better way to say that than letting you go.”

“I love you too,” he whispers. “I always will.”

At the same time, we fall into each other. Everything I felt before and tried to fight comes tumbling out, and as he strokes my hair, I sob into his shoulder, cursing the tears. We hold each other until my tears freeze and I am sufficiently dead inside.

“Good luck,” I say and snifle, grasping both of his hands. “I know your act is going to be great.”

“I would have stayed if you told me to,” he says. “You're sure you won't come?”

My insides scream for him. Yes, I want to go with him and hold him and love him forever. But I've made a decision to go back to the comfortable side of the bridge, and that is how it has to be so both of us can live the life we want to live. He doesn't know about my encounter with Madam Sunilda that night at The Velvet, and that, for whatever reason, is a secret I want to keep tucked inside of me forever.

“It's not the life I want,” I say. “I thought I was a gypsy, thought I wanted the pink balloon, then fought against it, and in the end, I realized there's nothing more I want but to be settled down somewhere, home and permanent. I want to be comfortable in a house somewhere, a cozy old one like the inn, with a garden and some kids.” I pause, look up at the sky.

He nods sadly and kisses my cheek one last time, leaving a sensation of cold feathers and numbness behind. He turns to leave.

“Ripley,” I say and he spins back. “Promise me that if you ever get lonely on the road, you’ll call me and you won’t look for some stranger, okay?”

“You got it,” he says.

He smiles at me and tears break the corners of his eyes. Then with one swift movement he’s back inside the SUV, backing out, driving out of Redfield Village and out of my life. I watch until his back lights fade away, pull in a few more sobs, and then grasp the handle of my suitcase. I’m ready to head back to Tie-Dye Me. Home.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The familiar scent of incense fills me before I even open the glass door of Tie-Dye Me. I spot my father through the door, standing at the register, singing and rocking his head, looking a touch balder than he did when I left him. When I walk in, Heart's "Magic Man" blasts over the stereo system. He is oblivious to my arrival, in his own world, moving his hands as though playing an invisible guitar. I can't help but laugh.

"Excuse me!" I say over the music. "Do you know if that crazy blond girl still works here?"

He glances up and breaks into a smile that lights up the entire room.

"Gypsy Girl!"

I drop my suitcase and run to him, then jump into his arms and hug him like I've never hugged him in my life. When we break apart I examine him, determine that he has not eaten well since I left, and try to figure out what I'll go out and get him for dinner.

"So?" he says. "Where's Ripley?"

"He left to travel the world with his father," I say and it hits me all over again. "We broke up."

"I'm sorry," he says and hugs me again. "So sorry, Cammie."

There is something in a father's hug that can never be replicated. There's a comfort and safety, and as destroyed as I am right now, I'm okay here with him. I'm at Tie-Dye Me, my

familiar home, the CDs and candles, the incense, the t-shirts and scarves, and the . . . I hadn't noticed when I came in, focused on my father.

"Where's Mrs. Fry?"

"Ah," my father says. He lets go of me. "Mrs. Fry quit."

"Oh my God," I reply. "Why?"

"Lizzie is coming home for the summer and she wants to spend the time with her. I guess Lizzie had some problems this year and really needs to be home resting for a little while."

"Problems?" I say. "She texted me and didn't say anything was wrong."

"I don't know," my father says, but his eyes shift like maybe he does know. "Some academic issues, some social issues. I think she'll be really happy you're home again."

"Sometimes, things don't turn out as planned," I reply, and my father dances me beneath his arm in our little dance move.

"Heartache calls for closing down the store and sitting in the backroom," he says.

I fold my arms. "Getting high does not erase all of life's problems."

"No," he says, laughing and holding his belly. "But it sure does take them away for a while."

So we lock the door of Tie-Dye Me, flip the sign to Closed, and head to the backroom. Amid a cloud of smoke, inside the sweet smell of marijuana, to the tune of "Eight Miles High" by The Byrds, I forget Ripley. I slip into a backdrop of colorful sky, waving my arms in flight and surrender, forgetting the images of the past week, the scent of his skin, the blond beauty of his hair and tropical glow of his eyes. I forget all the balloons, mentally pop them all away,

passing the medication back and forth with my father. It will all come back, all the darkness and pain, probably harder, swelling inside of me, but for now, I am free of the balloons.

\*\*\*

I remain high for the afternoon, into the evening, until my father and I are craving super-sized everything at whatever fast food restaurant is the fastest. He tells me to take his car, and while Mick Jagger oo-ooos in my ear, I grab my journal from my suitcase and head out with my father's keys. He spots the journal in my hand, which is good, because then he won't wonder why I'm taking so long when he knows we're both about ready to eat whatever stale UnicornTreats are left at the bottom of Mrs. Fry's stand.

My father's car is an old chevy wagon in an annoying teal that screams 1990s. We affectionately call it the Tie-Dye Me Wagon and keep feeding it oil and gas to keep it alive, for whatever reason. I situate myself inside and try to clear my head, but the fog is pretty thick. I shake my head and buckle my seatbelt, then head to Redfield's Burger King with the intended first stop of Well's Park.

It's going to hurt like hell, but I have to see what life will be like without him.

---

*Cammié's Journal 2 May*

---

*The Balloon Man is gone; I can tell by the silence that has fallen over Well's Park. This spring and summer, park-goers will go without his balloons, without his magic, without the squeaks of his cart wheels over park pathways. It's my fault, and they can hang me for that or thank me for that. It was time to share him with the world, let him greet new faces, tuck white ribbons into new hands. The Balloon Man changes every life he touches, even if you only hold the string, delight in the colors. I was lucky enough to have all of him, if only for a short time. I am blessed.*

*The Balloon Man once told me to always go on feelings. I did that and let him go, so why do I feel like a feather blowing through the park, broken, twisted, dead? The parts of me that were alive belonged to him. And I wonder if that's what love is, when two people are stronger together than they are apart, alive and electric together as one, and if there's a magic in that I never fully understood. Now he's a memory and time will break him down to soft colors and blurry fire.*

*I will see him in everything along the way, in every park, in every child, in every color of the rainbow. In red I'll remember his love, reaching out for his hand in the dark, entwining it with mine as we moved as one. In orange I'll remember the sunsets in Michlin Park, the bridge where he gave me the pink balloon. In yellow I'll remember his magic gift, how he made strangers happy with one simple act. In green I'll remember how he knew me, Girl of Nature to the core. In blue, I'll remember his father's star. I'll remember how I masterfully put those two lost stars together, knocking myself right out of the sky.*

At home, I tuck into bed early, my mid-section satisfied from a dinner of cheeseburgers, fries, and soda, but the rest of me so, so hollow. The TV blares out in the living room and my father chuckles at something on the screen. I think about The Balloon Man, where he is now, if he's almost to New York. I wonder what his first show will be like and how he'll handle the new venues. I imagine the underground after-hours carnival and envision an entire world like The Velvet, where The Balloon Man thrives inside purple lights and circus smoke. I allow myself a giggle at his top hat and presumed costume of tuxedo and big shoes. I'm about ready to close my eyes when I see that I have a text from Chandry.

Conner did not give her much warning. For that, I feel lucky, because at least I had some time to prepare for the loss. But Chandry texts that she is broken, sitting outside the door of Winter Romance with her treasure chest necklace squeezed in her palm, hoping the current occupants of the room don't come out and see her crying. I finally ask her what's inside Conner's treasure chest, and she responds that it's a slip of paper that says "I Love You" and that it's her most cherished possession. She vows that she'll never take the necklace off, and confides in me that she's happy to have me to talk to—I'm the only one who truly understands.

I think about her even after we're done texting, wonder what it would have taken to get the two together, what would have made Conner stay, and then I realize that he's the same as The Balloon Man, that he felt the tug of his calling and could not turn away, even if that meant losing the love of his life. I remember how much Conner loved the inn, too, how he always showed us around, explaining the history, knowing every inch of the place. As I doze off, the inn becomes a dizzying blur in my mind, faces, wallpaper, scent of popcorn, magic props, Trapdoor Room.

Chandry said her and Conner first broke up in the Trapdoor Room. He did it there so it wouldn't hurt, but Chandry said it still did.

Stupid magic.

\*\*\*

In the morning I awake to a female voice out in the living room, and for a moment, I wonder if I'm thirteen years old, Mrs. Bell's class, fruit punch and peanut butter lunches, failed attempt at the track team. I spring out of bed to get dressed, but she enters too fast, opening her arms as soon as she sets foot inside my room.

"Surprise!" my mother says.

She looks different. She smells different. When I hug her, her hair is no longer carefree wisps against my face, but blunt and business-like, sculpted around her ears, curved in toward her cheeks. She smells like flowery perfume, not the earthy scent of my memory. But her voice is the same, her hug is the same. Still tight around my back like she's afraid I'll blow away or get taken if she lets go.

"I'm still in my pajamas!" I say when we break apart.

"I'm sorry!" she returns. "I just heard you were back and wanted to see you." She takes my hands, spreads my arms to examine me. "I've seen your pictures online for so long, but they do not do you justice. God, Cammie, you have grown so beautiful."

"Thank you," I say, shy at the compliment, awkward at the interaction. I know how The Balloon Man felt now, trying to love someone he hasn't seen in so long, someone who shares blood but not all the same memories.

“He was a fool to leave,” she says, and immediately regrets it; I can tell by the way she shifts her hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. It’s way too soon.”

I shrug, let my face relax into the expression of the last evening, morose, lost. She sits me down on the bed with her, and I allow her to stroke my hair, though it still feels weird. She’s pushing too much too soon, but in this moment, with my first big love loss, I need her. I can’t lie about that.

“So this guy really was some kind of magic man?” she says.

“You would only believe it if you experienced what I did over the last week.” I go on to tell her the story start to finish: the initial departure from Redfield, The Sorrell Hotel, The Brightwick Inn, The Velvet, Marnimer’s Troupe and the magic, the full adventure.

“My goodness,” she says and tucks a loose strand of my hair behind my ear. “You’re right—I would not believe any of that unless I experienced it.”

Speaking it all aloud, the whole trip sounds like one long hallucination. Part of me wonders if it was merely a big *Wizard of Oz* dream with vivid color and characters. My mother’s eyes are soft and understanding, but I register a hint of disbelief; maybe she thinks the story is exaggerated, like I added fluff and substance to the middle, sparkle around the edges. If she remembers who I am at all, then I’m sure she doesn’t believe most of what I’ve told her. But I also know that mothers find ways to mold make-believe into real worlds for their kids, even when they don’t believe their stories.

“It seems we’ve both had an incredible spring,” she says.

“Oh,” I say, remembering. “Let me see your engagement ring.”

She beams, shows me the huge wad of diamond on her finger. We talk about the wedding, but it's obvious that even though I'm trying to be polite, I'm just not into discussing the pinnacle moment of someone's romance. She understands and just lets most of her sentences trail off.

"I'm sorry," I say after this goes on for a few minutes. "I'm just really missing him."

She wraps her arm around my shoulder and we stare at the blank wall before us. I'm sure she's wondering why the room isn't really decorated, why someone who loves color and life like I do has left it so unadorned over the years. With her here with me now, in my bedroom, I realize why I did it. Part of me hoped she would come back, that they would get back together so we could be a family again. I never wanted to live in this apartment, never planned on staying.

"I think it's great that you let him go do what he wants to do," she says at length. "But what about what *you* want?"

"You made it seem like I should figure that out, and I did. I want a home and a stable life, maybe an education. Dad is always on my case about college courses, so I thought maybe I would take classes in marketing or environmental science. I have to do life without Ripley, or I have to settle for some other guy who won't have his uniqueness or his magic or even love me like he did, and that's what I'm trying to make peace with now."

"That's really good," she says. "But he's the man you want. Trust me when I tell you that good men like that are rare. I've only found two good men in my entire lifetime."

"I'm hoping one of them was Dad."

She lets out a laugh, glances toward the living room. "Of course one of them was your father. With all his faults, he loved me and he's the best father a woman could want for their child." She turns back to me, and I catch some of the love loss in her eyes. She misses him

sometimes, and because of that I can let it all go. She's moving on with her life, and I have to be happy for her and move on too. "I'm going to tell you now to go and get Ripley, and it's going to seem like odd advice, but I want you to do this on your terms."

"It felt like the right thing to give him up," I tell my mother. "Why would I go and try to change that?"

"I love that you sacrificed for him," she says. "But what did *he* give up?"

"That's not what love is."

"That's *exactly* what love is." Her tone is firm, motherly. "You love together, laugh together, forgive like your father forgave me. You sacrifice and you compromise."

I remember, just now, something Madam Sunilda told me about compromise: *My advice is to find a way to compromise, combine the elements. A way that satisfies you, my dear. Nobody will live your life except for you.* Is there a way I can cross the bridge with Ripley and we both get what we want on the other side?

My mother stands from the bed. "I have a wedding gown fitting this morning," she says. "So I'm going to go. But I'm glad we had a chance to sit and talk."

"Me too."

I stand and hug her, and she leaves, closing the bedroom door behind her. There are a few mumbles and murmurs out in the living room as she talks with my father, and again I'm thrust back into my thirteen-year-old self, then forcefully thrust back when the apartment door closes. I sit on my bed, tuck my leg beneath me and think.

My mother was right: Ripley is a good man and the man I want. The man that will make *me* happy. With his magic and light and altruism, it will be impossible to find anyone close to

him in my lifetime. It's what Conner and Chandry faced, even though young, because life handed them their soulmates way too early. I think about them and the inn, something bubbling inside me, an excited fireworks sensation, an instinct to blend my love for The Brightwick Inn with my love and desire for Ripley.

It takes me nearly an hour, and by the time I'm done, now resting on my back and gazing up at the ceiling, I think I have it. There's a way to compromise—a way Ripley and I can both be happy. And if I do this right, we can make some other people happy, too.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

There isn't much time. The troupe is only staying in upstate New York a few days, then moving to the Great Lakes area where I have no idea where to find them. Keyna does not allow technology, so I can't call or text, but I wanted to do this a different way anyhow. I overheard during breakfast at the inn that the town they were going to in New York was called Trollberry—it was a name that was thankfully unusual and thankfully got stuck in my brain. An easy online search led me to a carnival this week in Trollberry at St. Mary's Church. This has to be the place.

It's a four-hour drive from Redfield to Trollberry. Right now, it's just after one o'clock, and my father is in the backroom of the store, playing around with some new merchandise that came in while I was gone—tie-dyed party supplies, tie-dyed flasks, and these really cool lava lamps that are cylindrical and nearly as tall as I am. When I flip the store sign to Closed and enter the backroom, he's got the red lava lamp glowing, watching the globs of color move around the glass.

"Can I talk to you?"

"Sure thing," he says and sits down on top of the desk.

I position myself in the chair. "I talked to Mom."

"I know," he replies. "I was there."

"I mean, I talked to her about my thing with Ripley."

He nods, eyes expectant for the news. He knows. Of course he knows.

“I’ve made a few decisions and I wanted you to be the first to hear them.” I rest my elbows on the desk, fold my hands beneath my chin. “Mom made me realize how much Ripley means to me, and that I really need him in my life.” I exhale. “I’m going to go get him back.”

My father merely smiles.

“But I’ll be back soon, if everything goes as I’ve planned it. I’ll spend the summer here with you and Lizzie, be in Mom’s wedding, and then in late September I’ll be off. So, we’ll have a lot of time together, and then—”

“Look,” he says and holds up a hand to stop me. “I’ll be the first to admit that I didn’t want you to go with Ripley. I fought against you leaving—whether for a day or for a year or for forever—for a long, long time. But in the end, I realized I had you longer than most parents do. The first few days you were gone, it was hell—the quiet, the dullness. But I was okay. I survived. And then by the time you got back it was the new normal.” He sighs. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m okay with whatever your life choices are. I’m going to be okay.”

I reach across the desk to hug him, closing my eyes, not wanting to let go. He is not a perfect man, without a doubt. But he is the greatest father to ever walk the earth.

“I’m leaving for New York tonight, but I’ll be back soon.”

“Drive safely,” he says as we break apart. “Make sure your cell is charged, and don’t stop for anything. You know where you’re going?”

“Sort of,” I confess. “I know the venue, but it’s an after hours thing, so I’m not really sure what to do when I get there. I’ll have to find him at the carnival somehow.”

“And I thought I had a strange lifestyle.”

We laugh together, then begin pricing the tie-dyed party supplies before turning on all the new gigantic lava lamps. They light up the backroom in a rainbow of colors, and we watch them bubble and move before leaving the backroom, closing the light.

\*\*\*

It feels as though I'm driving into the sunset. The horizon is tangerine in front of me, and I revel in the swirls of colors until dusk falls and the state of New York presents itself in shadowy evergreens. I'd made one stop before my lone journey to win him back, but other than that, I have been trucking along, listening to a playlist of hip-hop, 90's alternative, and classic rock. Every new step in the directions I have to mentally stop myself and remember where I'm supposed to go, but I think I can get there on my own. Hopefully I don't end up in California.

Trollberry sneaks up on me, and I have to turn around a few times, but as the clock rounds on one a.m., I arrive at my destination. The town is dark, and besides a few lit up gas stations, there is not much going on as far as nightlife. I pull down the street that leads to St. Mary's, then wind the car down the long drive into the church. It's an oddly shaped church with a right-sided pitch topped with a long silver cross. A silver-green pine tree stands between the church and the parking lot, and when I realize that the parking lot is not available, I hit the brake. The parking lot is filled with dark carnival rides—silent carousel horses, Ferris wheel carriages silhouetted against a black sky, empty game and food stands, and ride umbrellas along the paths like enormous mushrooms. I pull over to the side of the street and park.

The troupe is not here. There are no signs of life, save for what might be a janitor or someone moving a garbage can on wheels near the far back of the parking lot. I squint through the sprayed, weak illumination of the spotlight shining on the face of the church, trying to make

out the trailers in the distance, hoping I recognize them. I step out of the car and walk along the sidewalk, the steel carnival gates beside me. Way, way back, some of the trailers are recognizable as the troupe's trailers, or at least I find the similarities in color and grandeur beyond coincidence. I turn back to the car, grab my gift for Ripley, and lock up. I'm not one of those girls who carry mace, so whoever this janitor-type person is, I'm praying they are friendly.

The faint scent of cotton candy and fried food is in the air, or maybe stuck in garbages as I near the back of the parking lot. The trailers are in darkness. I hear footsteps beside me near the corn dog and funnel cakes stand, and I pause, breathing hard. The man from the clean-up crew is standing next to me, palm resting on the top of a broom handle. I turn my head to him with slow, abrupt movements, like a jointed doll. He's a mustached man with graying hair. He's not smiling.

"Carnival's closed, lady," he says in a gruff voice.

There is no magic troupe here, that much I have figured out. But since this guy is the only one around, I have to give it a shot.

"Would you happen to know if the circus is in town?"

Under the weak lighting, his eyes open wide. He scratches his head.

"You want to go down there." He points toward a stone pathway in the opposite direction of the carnival and lot. It seems to wind behind the church, a curving path into darkness.

"Thank you," I say.

I'm pretty sure I'm about to be raped down there, murdered and cut up, so all they'll find is the green scraps of my skirt and some tufts of blond hair, but still, I continue on. Leaving the light of the parking lot behind, I step down the pathway, around the back of the church. My heart reminds me of the seriousness of the task with hard hits against my ribs. I gasp in some night air,

can no longer smell the carnival scents, no longer have the privilege of even that weak lighting around me. But finally, up ahead, I see what looks like a house, maybe something that was once of the parish. The lights are on, flickering through windows.

The lights are *purple*.

Speeding up, I move down the path toward the house. As its form moves closer, I can make out the details. The *creepy* details. It does not look as though people are in daily residence—it's an old brick house, two-story, square shaped with green slatted windows on the top floors, a lower window with at least twenty panes of glass, and what appears to be a bell tower right up on the top. There is one door to the left of the house, white with a metal knocker, purple light flowing out of the arched glass cut-out on top of the door. There's an iron gate around the perimeter, so I step through and foot the grass to the front door.

I lift the metal knocker and wait only a few seconds before the door pulls open and Keyna is standing in front of me. She's dressed in her Woman in Red costume, and while that is part of the act tonight, I also remember that when she's not in costume she's every bit as poised and sophisticated.

"Chamomile," she says.

"Is the circus in town?"

"We don't need to do that," she says and opens the door.

Inside, purple lights flash and glow amid a crowd of dancing people, just like the ones at The Velvet, but the church crowd is dressed more eloquently in low-cut black cocktail dresses and suit jackets. The music pumps through a huge living room area with wood floors, and the

troupe's bar is set up and waiting on patrons, just as it was at The Velvet. Smoke mists along the floor, riding up the hem of my skirt.

"Is he here?" I say.

"He's set up upstairs," Keyna returns. "Please wait here a moment."

"Oh, please don't tell him I'm here!" I say and grasp her elbow. It's bony, but warm.

"Very well," she says, glancing up at what I've brought along for him. "But I should tell you that even though he and Finn spent the evening setting up his act, he has not been able to perform yet, even with my positive attempts to sell his new act to the crowd."

"Why?" I ask over the music.

"He wanted to go back to you." She shrugs, mildly irritated at the question. "The magic was just not working, apparently. I've seen it happen before. This is why I take away phones and all other devices that can reach the outside world." She points to a staircase on the far side of the room. "He's upstairs. All the way down the hall, last door on the left."

"Thank you."

I turn into the dancing crowd, getting bumped and knocked, wanting to cover my ears from the bass. I'm nearly to the staircase when a bald guy blocks my path, shoulders jumping up and down to the music.

"Hey, gorgeous!" He attempts to hook my waist. "Wanna dance?"

"Um," I say, stepping around him. "I'm with The Balloon Man."

I trot up the creaky staircase, away from the music, away from the dancing scene. At the top of the stairs a long corridor presents itself in closed doors. With slight hesitance, because in

anticipation of seeing him again my insides have just iced over, I step down the hallway. At the end, I place my hand on a gold doorknob and turn, turn, turn. I push in, peeking.

His balloon cart is set up in the middle of a room filled with colorful balloons. He's sitting, wearing a tuxedo with a maroon vest, but his top hat is in his lap as he gazes downward at the scuffed wood floor. As the door opens fully and I step inside, he registers the guest, dons his top hat, rises to greet me. His head and eyes lift to find me standing in the room, holding a pink balloon. He stares at me like I'm an imagined ghost, not real, then breaks into a teary smile and runs to me.

Without words we embrace, surrounded by balloons, falling into each other.

"How did you find me?" he says, cupping the back of my head. "You drove all the way here?"

"Yes," I say in his ear. "And I guess I found you the same way your mother found your father after they parted. Just keep following the clues, keep moving."

He doesn't let go of me, and as much as I want to hold him forever, I do have something to talk to him about. I step back and we separate, and even though there are a million balloons in the room around us, I hand him my pink one, hoping he understands the meaning.

"A new adventure?" he says.

I nod. "What would you say if I told you I had an idea for you to work out of the inn? You and Conner could do your acts from there, maybe in the garden, and people would come from all around, just like with the troupe only you wouldn't be traveling. You could charge whatever you want, and I could advertise for you, market, run the register and manage the money. I have experience with that, plus I could do online school with you at night, and—"

“I love it,” he says. “I was going to go back to you tomorrow anyhow. I just . . . I couldn’t do it without you. We’re a team.”

I hop up and kiss his forehead. “Do you think Conner will like the idea? We would all have to live at the inn, but he would be with Chandry again.”

“Only one way to find out,” he says. He grabs my hand and pulls me across the hall, opening a door similar to his. Conner is inside, sitting beside a long wood table that’s covered in scrolls of paper and feather pens. Next to these is a huge red treasure chest, and I’m guessing his act must be composed of customers writing down queries for Conner to “find” the lost items as requested. He’s dressed like a pirate with a tight brown vest, off-white flowing shirt, and a red scarf around his head.

“Cammie?” he says when we enter. “What the hell—”

“Long story,” I say, and I don’t go into the specifics of my arrival but head straight into my proposed plan of Ripley and Conner doing their acts from the inn as part of the inn’s overall experience. It’s hard to gauge his answer from his expression, so I end with a final offer, one I was planning on anyhow. “You and Ripley would continue to tour with Marnimer’s Troupe throughout the summer, so this wouldn’t happen until the fall. I want to spend the summer with my mom and dad and with my best friend Lizzie. All of them need me right now for various reasons, and I need them. After my mom’s wedding, we’ll make plans at the inn.”

Conner exhales in thought.

“We could pay room and board from Ripley’s earnings, maybe live in Winston’s wagon. Zach wanted to tear it down, but if we—”

“It’s not that,” he says. “I don’t see Chandry or Leah having a problem with it, obviously, it’s getting it all past Zach.”

“You’ll think of something,” Ripley says and claps his back. “You can stand up to him just fine, right? Don’t let him push people around anymore.”

“Plus isn’t Zach going to college?”

Conner nods. He smiles. “I really like the idea, Cammie. I could do everything from the inn, be with Chandry and you guys . . . it all makes sense.”

We share a three-way hug, then I glance around at the pirate land set-up.

“Don’t laugh,” Conner says. “I see it coming.”

“I’m not laughing,” I say, and press my lips together because of course I was going to laugh.

“Uncle Alastair is still mentoring me, and without much time to get the act perfected, Ripley and I were kind of just thrown at the end of a hallway with not much in the way of props and costumes.”

“Your costume is just great,” I say. “I’ll have to take a picture for Chandry.”

“Don’t you dare,” he says.

We all laugh, and Ripley and I head back to the balloon room, closing the door behind us. Inside, among the balloons, with the muffled carnival techno music below us, we melt into each other and kiss, long and sweet. The room seems to spin, clouds of colors above me, clown-like, a rainbow circus. Every color bursts inside of me, a gift from Ripley, the entire room of balloons for me alone. The Balloon Man is magic again.

**END**



*All Rights Reserved*

*Copyright 2019*

*Carla Trueheart*