

HOLLOW

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(manuscript)

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THIS UNFINISHED MANUSCRIPT
WAS RELEASED
BY THE AUTHOR AND
IS UNEDITED

ONE

The letter sits before me. A thick scent of an older woman's perfume rising up to my nostrils and sending chills down my spine. I nearly cough my lungs out as I set the envelope to the side and stare down at my name written in bulky black letters, with the Braille version below it. I have dreaded this day for years and now that I'm of age, the paranoia has gotten worse. The ticking of the electronic grandfather clock that sits near the front door is amplified and beads of fresh sweat begin to slither behind my ears. I consider pinching myself to see if I'm dreaming, but it's useless. Pinching wouldn't even secure it as a dream. I'd have to stab myself in the hand with a fish gutting knife to know if it's all real or not.

My guardian sits across the room in a large green chair, biting away at her nails, or what is left of them. Ebbie has been my parental figure since my parents were beheaded when I was eight. They had been protesting against the new master and because of their beliefs they were executed. Ebbie was my nanny before my parents died, and the government decided to let her take care of me until I turned eighteen. She is the definition of comfort to me. I'd wither without her and I'd be useless to the world without her guidance and love. My mother and Ebbie had known each other since childhood and when she was sealed as a house keeper/nanny, my mother and father hired her before the government sent her off to be ripped to shreds by the rich. We were like a family, and still are, even as the two of us. The moment the letter arrived, it changed that forever. We are shattered now. Autumn leaves ready to be crushed into nothing. They will take her eventually. They will place her with another family and our ties will be torn to shreds and I will not be allowed to communicate

with her. I begin hyperventilating at the thought of being separated from Ebbie. But I quickly calm myself down, so that she doesn't see how crushed I feel.

Tristan Lark. My friend. My twin. How will he take it? I've known the boy since the sixth grade and when he is not oiling bots or shoes, he's with me. In school, he was the boy who everyone ignored. The unwanted one. The boy who was born without parents. He was made in a lab and to many, such a thing is ungodly—taboo, even. I was the one who talked to him during bell breaks and in time we became the best of friends. We talk about everything and leave nothing behind. We read similar books, swim in the green river for hours on weekends, and he's like a brother to me. I don't know what I'd do without him. I never had to worry about that... until now. Tristan fortunately was disconnected from the site and now lives on his own above a shoe store and a bar ten minutes from my apartment. He'll be without me. We will never see each other

again. I must see him tonight. There is no question about that.

The apartments Ebbie and me currently live in are all bundled together like medium sized shacks and we get to live here for free since I'm still under the age of eighteen. It's got two floors, but it is very compact. The upstairs area belongs to our bedrooms and the downstairs belongs to the kitchen and living area which are formed into one. I graduated from Lincoln Community School last May and I have until the age of eighteen to secure a job and housing so when the apartment is taken, I have somewhere to go. I am no longer required to have a job or anything... I am nothing but a purchased teenager, awaiting the moment when I don't even belong to myself.

When a girl or boy turns sixteen, they are eligible to be sold in an online auction.

Luckily, I am the only child and I don't have to watch my siblings being sold off to strangers who may do whatever they please with them. No, the authorities do not check on the teens that are sold and if they end up dead, hanging from the street lights, then that's just too bad. If no one bids on you within a month, you are disconnected from the site and are set free to live your life. Parents have no control of the outcome. If you are purchased, then you must say goodbye to your family. It's awful, nerve-racking, and most of all, heartbreaking. Everyone I know that is my age dreads this moment when they receive a letter stating that they now belong to someone else. Stating that their lives no longer matter and they are the property of a complete stranger.

Tears erupt and my red bangs fall over my hazel eyes. I weep in silence as I grip the edge of the table, which is keeping me from having a hideous breakdown. Ebbie looks over at me, and then returns to munching on her nails. She's known about

this letter for an entire week and I am to be collected *tomorrow* morning. I am also not allowed to bring any of my belongings. I now belong to a woman named *Cordelia Scott*. There is no information on her and I am left with nothing but many thoughts swarming in my head. I still can't believe that I have been sold. I am somewhat relieved that I haven't been sold to a man. I recall a girl named Fiona who I had met in the ninth grade. The day before our school graduation, she had received her letter and had been sold to man who forced himself on her every evening and pierced her eyes to keep her from escaping his house. She's dead now, but I still remember her being the clown of our school. Her youthful smile and luminous blonde hair. I just hope I don't end up like her.

“I'm not sure what that woman will do with me.” I finally speak after an hour of re-reading the letter. My voice is crackly from crying and my eye lids are swollen.

“I’m sorry, Leah,” Ebbie says, as she picks herself up from the chair and walks over to me. Her eyes are the color of melted chocolate and the warm setting sun light from the kitchen window shines onto the smooth skin of her hairless head. Ebbie has a disease called alopecia and decided to shave the rest of her hair off to make it look less noticeable. She wears earrings every day and today she has blue dolphins dangling from her dark skinned ears. I am pale, extremely freckled and I have the body of a high fashion model, or so I’ve been told. Tristan likes to amuse me by saying I should be walking the runway on television. I can’t stand those types of girls. Speaking of diseases, there are few cures for some. Some types of Cancer have cures, AIDS has a cure, and Diabetes was cured five decades ago. Unfortunately, the government only focused on the big diseases to find cures for. Sadly, for people like Ebbie, her disease was slapped in the face and was never cured. But I’m pretty sure the government wanted it this way. If there are no diseases, there is no health care

and without health care there's no money for the government. The government is bleeding humans of money and slowly letting the lower class people die from small diseases, who can't afford medical insurance and walk around the city with missing teeth, eyes, and arms.

“It's not your fault, it's the master who should be blamed.” I fold the letter and place it back into the envelope. Ebbie takes it from me and walks over to the staircase leading up to our rooms. We've lived in this apartment for the last five years and before this, we lived in North Carolina in my childhood home.

“I'm gonna to take a little nap and then we'll eat supper,” She says as she heads up the stairs, leaving me alone at the kitchen table. I stand up and walk over to the window next to the sink. The sun is nearly done setting and the stars are barely beginning to appear. This is my last night in this house, and my last time with Ebbie and

Tristan. Running away is not an option. They will make it a hunting party and terminate me when I am found. The only other way out is suicide... and that thought hasn't crossed my mind just yet. How will Ebbie and Tristan go on without me? How will I go on without them? This is all too much for me right now. I need to see Tristan. Now.

. . .

I wrap my brown knitted shawl around me and hurry down the front steps of our complex. There are silver blimps in the sky that countdown the curfew for citizens ages five to seventeen. The hot pink timer glares down at me near a light gray cloud, letting me know that I only have two hours to be outside. If you are caught after curfew, you will be placed under house arrest for how ever long the mayor sees fit. We don't own a phone, so I have to wait outside the complex for Tristan to come by after he's

off work. I hope that he decides to stop by tonight. If he doesn't, I'll be gone in the morning and he'll never see me again. I hate what is happening to me, and I hate this woman for buying me. It's not fair to me, or anyone else to be sold. But I plan to come home. I will not let the government have my life. I will take it back.

“Miss Munro, why are you out after curfew?” a voice speaks from behind me. What? The blimp said that I have two hours left. My heartbeat quickens with fear as I turn to face the trooper who has caught me. I can't be put on house arrest. I don't even have a home anymore. To my surprise, I see Tristan with both of his hands on his heart as he laughs like a hyena.

“You're an ass, you know that?” I charge up to him and swat him hard on his left shoulder. He knocks his blond hair out of his eyes and stares down at me. I'm going to miss him sorely. He is my best

friend and I can't think of life without him. I just can't. He'll have Ramona, his girlfriend, to keep him company. I like her and I know she will take care of him.

"You don't look well. What happened?" he raises an eyebrow at me. He knows when I'm lying. So I know that I have no choice but to spill everything to him right now.

"I got my letter," I say, tightening the shawl around me. His cheeks deflate and his brow furrows in sudden anger. He tends to go on his crazy rants when I bring up stuff about the government.

"You... you've been sold." the words fall from his mouth and takes a seat on the steps of our complex. This is different. Usually, he will start yelling and threatening. But not now. Right now, he seems to be hit with something else. Sadness, maybe?

“They are coming for me in the morning.” he rises as if to protest, but I grab him by his arm and pull him back down. “I know- I know. But I can’t do anything about it. You know I’m going to miss you like hell, right?” he fully turns to me and takes me into his arms. He smells of cherry shoe shine and leather. He’s been like a brother and I somehow feel as if I’m losing my family all over again. I cry into his chest for a while, and he lets me. He rocks me back and forth, saying that everything will be okay and that we’ll see each other again. But will we, really? Or something terrible happen to me while I’m gone? I suppose we’ll just have to wait and see.

“You don’t take shit from anybody, you hear me?” he has my chin in his big hands and he’s staring directly into my eyes. He has blue eyes like my father and he reminds me of him so much. Which is one of the many reasons we’ve never went further in our relationship. He’s too much of a family figure and too important to

destroy with anything else than friendship.

“I won’t. You know I won’t.” I smile.

“Who bought you?” he finally asks, after holding me for what seems like an hour. The curfew is soon. We need to say goodbye before we get caught by troopers. He releases me and I rewrap the shawl around me, tightening it.

“A woman. Her name is Cordelia Scott. I’m just glad a man hasn’t purchased me. Remember that girl with the eyes?” he nods, recalling the memory of Fiona. “I won’t end up like her, Tristan. I won’t let that happen to me.”

“I know you won’t. You are stronger than anyone I know. You’d break someone’s fingers if they touched you wrongly.” he laughs, making me remember when I kicked a guy in our school so hard in the genitals that he was in the hospital

for a week.

“Enough with breaking fingers or crushing genitals. I will kill someone if they touch me.” a loud siren booms from the sky and the blimp’s timer blinks neon green. We have ten minutes to head inside our homes before the troops are sent out. I can’t keep him long. He has to go or he’ll be caught on his way home.

“I’ll come for you. I promise. I will find information on her and I will bring you home.” Tristan grabs my face and kisses me on the forehead. I don’t respond because it’s useless. He’s got it in his head now and there is no way of changing his mind. But I hope he does find me. He knows we can’t come back here. They will be looking for me. I know they will.

“Goodbye, Tristan.” I hug him for the last time and watch as he turns away from me and jogs down the street. The street lamps catch the back of his blue shirt as he

swoops further down the street. This is it. The last time I see him, is the back of his work shirt.

“I will come for you!” he screams so loud from down the street, I bet Ebbie can hear him.

“I’ll be waiting!” I reply, choking back tears.

I sit in Ebbie’s chair watching the stars and counting them one by one. I am really going to miss this place. The smell of oatmeal cooking. The smile on Ebbie’s face when she sees me come down the stairs in the morning. Damn it. Why does it have to be like this? I turn to the kitchen and see Ebbie at the stove, stirring a pot of her lovely oatmeal. I am strong. I am strong. I am strong. I repeat it to myself. Just because I can kick a guy so hard he ends up in a hospital and I am tough on the outside, doesn’t mean I don’t come apart or become

insecure at times. I just have to keep reminding myself that I can do this. Because otherwise, I'll end up like Fiona.

“How you feelin’?” Ebbie startles me from behind. I turn around and face her, resting my chin on the back of the chair.

“I’m dealing with it, I guess.” I look up into her eyes and see that they are red and glossy. She’s been crying for me and I know that when I’m gone, it’s only going to hurt her even more.

“You just take care of yourself, baby. I don’t want to see some hideous stuff on the news. I don’t think my heart can handle that.” she swipes tears from her eyes with a dish rag and smiles at me.

“Your going to be fine, Ebbie. Promise me you’ll take care of yourself.” I get up from the chair, walk around it, and take her into my arms. Ebbie erupts into tears and

cries hard onto my shoulder.

“I won’t let ‘em take you!” she cries.

“You have to or they will hurt you. I don’t want them to hurt you. Just promise me you will be okay.”

“I promise. I promise, Leah.”

Ebbie’s made my favorite meal for dinner. Oatmeal with chunks of strawberries and black berries. We usually eat this for breakfast, but I’ll be gone before that time comes around. We eat in silence as questions flood my head. What will this woman be like? Will she be abusive? Will she be a horrible human being? I suppose I’ll find out when I arrive at my new home. I don’t even want to think of it as a home, because it’s not, it’s like being a hostage. I wonder what goes through someone’s head when they decide to purchase a person. To me, they are not right in their mind for

doing so, and I shouldn't expect this woman to be alright in the head. I should expect the unbelievable and the unforgivable.

I put my spoon down and turn to the window. The stars look especially bright tonight and earlier I think I counted four hundred and twenty seven. The wind is making odd sounds around this old apartment. It sounds as if ghosts are shuffling about, opening doors and creaking the floorboards. I am glad my parents aren't alive to see this happening to me. They wouldn't be able to handle it. It would be a much worse departure for me if they were still living.

"I'm going to miss you very much," Ebbie breaks the silence. I turn around in my chair and smile at her.

"I will miss you too." I reach my right hand across the table and grab hers.

“Promise you’ll write me.” she says, dropping her spoon and crying again. I scoot off of my chair, walk over to her, and rest her head on my chest. It seems it’s much harder for Ebbie than it is for me. I swear I can feel my heart breaking.

“I will write to you everyday,” I tell her. I let her go as she sits back down and picks up her spoon.

“I don’t understand. I’ve never understood. Why do they do this to poor children? This is disgusting and it makes me sick to my damn stomach. I wish I could give the master a piece of my mind. I’d make him eat his tongue. Oh lord, yes I would.” Ebbie rants. I can’t help but let a laugh slip and shake my head. I love her so much.

“I’m going to go to sleep now.” I stand up and place my spoon on the table. I feel like I need to be alone for a while.

“I’ll wake you when they arrive,” She says, trying to hold back another flow of tears. I’ve cried too much already to start again, so I turn to the stairs and make my way up to my room, to fall asleep, and awake in this apartment, for the last time.

TWO

“Miss Munro.” I awake to an unfamiliar voice. I open my eyes and swing myself against the wall in fright. *Who is this woman?* I let my eyes adjust and attempt to breathe in calmly. There are two armed troopers on either side of her and she looks old enough to be a grandmother.

“Who are you?” I ask, my voice raspy and crackled. Her blonde-gray hair is in a tight bun and she’s wearing too much blue eyeliner. She’s dressed in a velvet brown dress and she has a necklace of silver keys around her wrinkled neck. She takes her hands out from behind her and hands me a piece of lined paper, folded in the shape of a heart. I hesitantly take it from her and open it, taking quick glances at the old woman and the troopers. They are probably

here just in case I am uncooperative. I've only seen a few up close and since their faces are obscured by black helmets along with their all black leather attire. Do they have children? Do they even feel bad for me? I look down at the piece of paper and see that it's a note in Ebbie's handwriting.

Leah,

I don't have the guts to say goodbye to you. I wish you luck and hope that you keep your promise and write me everyday. I am leaving the house for the morning and I'll come back after you're gone. I love you Leah and I always will, forever and ever. Forgive me for not being there when you leave. I love you too much to say goodbye. Think of me often.

Love always,

Ebnera

I refold the letter as a giant lump

forms in my throat. I think it would have been even harder for *me* to say goodbye. The troopers would have had fun with me. I forgive her. I look at my bedroom window and see the blueness of the early morning sky. I have to leave this all behind. They might as well extract my memories too. How do other people my age deal with this? Especially when they are leaving their families behind. I'm not sure if I can go through with this. I have no idea what will happen to me. I am strong, I repeat over and over in my head.

“Leah Munro, we must make haste and leave before the clock strikes eight.” I look up at the old woman and look down at her feet. There at the bottom of her dress is a large red paper bag.

“Who are you?” I ask again.

“Mrs. Cain. I've come to retrieve you for Ms. Scott,” She explains.

“And what’s that?” I nod to the bag. I’ll be damned if I get up from the bed and turn my back, only to have her take a hammer out from the bag and bash me over the head. I don’t trust anyone right now.

“You are not allowed to bring anything from your previous life. In the bag, are your shoes and the dress you will wear when you meet Cordelia. I will leave the room and wait in the hall for you to dress. Please be quick.” She turns and leaves the room, along with the troopers. Looking down at the bag, I get up from my bed and walk over to the window. I stare down at the empty street and finally contemplate suicide. But I simply don’t have the guts to end myself. I’ll just have to deal with this the best way that I can. There has to be a way for me program myself not to feel, to erase emotion. I wish I knew of a way.

Picking up the bag from the ground, I peek inside and see what looks like a light

pink dress and black flats. I pull out the dress and see that it's long and puffed out. It reminds me of a photo I saw once of *Marie Antoinette*, the waist so thin and the bottom of the dress concealing a hoop skirt. The back has a long gold zipper with what looks like a shoelace attached. I suppose that is used for the person to get dressed on their own. I peel off my green t-shirt, gray shorts and toss them onto my bed, where Ebbie's letter rests. I see a pair of white lace underwear at the bottom of the bag, lying folded next to the shoes. I put on the underwear and am surprised that they fit. Next, I step into the dress, my hands shaking from being nervous and scared of what is to come. I grab the shoelace string and pull the zipper up, breathing in and exhaling as the zipper reaches the top. The dress fits like a glove and the shoes slip on perfectly. *How did they know my sizes?* They probably have everything on that damn site. I take one last look around my room, and breathe in the vanilla softener Ebbie uses to clean my bedclothes. I snatch Ebbie's letter up and shove it into the top of

my dress. I don't care if I have to leave everything behind, this letter, I will not leave. The door opens behind me and I take a moment to myself, before I turn around to face Mrs. Cain and the troopers. Mrs. Cain stares at me and places her left hand on her chin.

“Yes, I think you will do perfectly.” She smiles as she grabs me by my right wrist and rushes me out of my bedroom. We descend down the stairs like thieves in a millionaires house. The troopers are right behind us, and one has the tip of his gun jabbing into my spine. I can feel a corner of Ebbie's letter poking at my left breast and it's heavily uncomfortable. Heading out of the front door, I turn and take in the front hallway of our apartment before one of the troopers closes the door and we hurry down the stone steps of the building. A black vehicle pulls up and the back door opens for Mrs. Cain and I. She pushes me by my back and I crawl into the back seat of the car. The troopers stand on the sidewalk, staring at the car their guns at their side.

Shouldn't they be coming along with us?
What if I attempt to jump out of the car?
Mrs. Cain slides in, closes the door and
snaps her fingers to the driver concealed by
an oval black window. Looking up from my
dress, I see another girl sitting across from
me. She looks older than me and has raven
black straight hair, with perfectly squared
bangs. Her eyes look green with a tint of
yellow and she has an olive tone to her
skin. She's wearing a dark blue turtleneck
and a pair of black skinny jeans,
accompanied by black heeled boots. She
raises her thin eyebrows and rolls her eyes.
It's then that I see a gun on her belt. She'll
take care of me if I attempt anything.

“Can I help you?” She opens her
mouth. She has a British accent and her
teeth are very white.

“No.” I speak, my voice is high
pitched. I feel awfully nervous.

“Then cease your gawking and keep

your mouth shut until we get to the house,”
She snaps. What a bitch. I force my eyes to
the window and suck in my cheeks.
Normally, I’d tell someone like her off, but
I have no idea who she is and she has a
damn gun.

“This is Ivy Pearce, she is Ms. Scott’s
assistant. While *I* run the house,” Mrs. Cain
tells me. I turn to her and nod. I don’t want
to anger the ice queen. As the car drives off,
I strain my neck, watching the apartment
building as it fades and becomes so distant
that I can’t breathe for a few moments. I
don’t like this. My palms are beginning to
sweat and my heart feels as if it’s about to
explode. I need to know what is going to
happen to me. I don’t care if Ivy becomes
angry anymore or threatens to shoot me, I
need information *now*.

“Mrs. Cain?” I turn to her.

“What did I tell you?” Ivy sneers at
me. I’m not in a good state right now and I

won't hold my tongue for this girl.

“Did you purchase me?” I ask Ivy.

“No,” She replies.

“Then you have no control over my actions,” I snap and turn to Mrs. Cain. My heartbeat quickens and I can feel my mouth going dry. I just hope she doesn't take out her gun.

“Why you little-”

“*Ivy!*” Mrs. Cain cuts her off. Ivy glowers at me and snaps her head to her window.

“What is it, Miss Munro?” Mrs. Cain turns to me. I can't believe I just challenged a girl who is a higher rank than me, but she needs to take a lesson in kindness and cut the bitch act.

“What is to be done with me?” I ask. It’s the main question roaming around in my head at the moment. She places both of her hands in the pockets of her dress and attempts to smile.

“Cordelia is a very generous woman. She’s taken in many girls and has raised them to be magnificent humans. She purchased you, because she felt she could give you something more... and once we arrive, she will explain her reasons better than I.” So, this woman buys girls off of the site and gives them better lives? What if the girls are perfectly content with the life they are already living?

“What if the girls don’t want to go?”

“Who wouldn’t want to live in a beautiful manor, wear the most luxurious clothes and eat gourmet meals?” She says. I was fine with the life I just left behind. I don’t want expensive clothes, food, or to

live in a manor. I just want to be *home* with Ebbie and Tristan.

“How long will I be living there?” I’m very curious. This all would sound too good to be true to a girl who didn’t care about what she left behind. I honestly don’t see why a woman would buy girls just to spoil them... there has to be a motive behind it, and I’m not sure I want to know exactly what it is.

“Until she lets you go, of course.” Ivy breaks into our conversation. I look at her, then return my eyes to the ground.

“You can ask Ms. Scott all the questions you want, but for now just enjoy our ride and take a nap if you must.” Mrs. Cain pats my right thigh and I bite down on my bottom lip. I’m not even sure I’ll be able to ask this woman all the questions I want. I’d be too scared to pummel her with *all* of my thoughts. I just want to go home and take a nap in *my* bed. I want Ebbie to

make me a bowl of oatmeal with strawberries and black berries. I want to wake up and see Ebbie watching her morning shows. I want my old life back.

I can't sleep. I don't trust anyone at this time. I can just imagine that I fall into a deep sleep and wake in a tub full of ice with one of my kidney's missing... or don't wake at all. My stomach feels odd and I'm growing nauseous. I haven't eaten anything since last night and I have to clear my throat to cover the sound of my stomach growling every other minute. We must be hours from my home and the city of Lincoln in Massachusetts. My butt is sore and going numb from the long ride, and my mouth is as dry as a dish of desert sand. Ivy is reading something on an electronic tablet and Mrs. Cain is resting her head on the glass of her window. Rain droplets scatter the windows of the car, and provide me with a made up game for the rest of the ride. I count each droplet, as it cascades down to the bottom of the window. I've

counted a hundred and twenty-two, so far. I think of my parents, as the car passes rows and rows of trees. Our home in North Carolina used to be surrounded by trees. I would venture into the trees and find my way home by the stuffed animals I'd hang on the rough bark. I'd know I was close, when I'd pick up the scent of Oatmeal cookies, my mother's specialty. My father would lift me up over his shoulder and tickle me, as we hurried into the house. I don't have pictures of them. I don't have anything to remind me of them, besides my memories.

When I think about them, I can recall everything except their faces. I get frustrated when that happens, and I use my pillow to vent on, by crushing the cotton between my teeth, sometimes releasing specks of blood on the whiteness of the material. Suddenly, the car begins to rattle a bit as we enter through a gigantic iron gate. We continue to drive over loose rocks and pine cones that have fallen from the trees above. I can't see straight ahead, but I can

faintly see what looks to be the giant house. The manor. Ten minutes later, we pull into the small courtyard of the manor and the car comes to a sharp halt.

Mrs. Cain's head taps the window hard and I conceal my mouth, wanting so much to laugh. Her eyes flutter open and she yawns. The driver hurries out and opens my door first. I pull my dress up and step out of the car, my eyes adjusting to the gloomy setting of this estate. The sun is obscured by gray clouds and the wind smells of rain and rusty metal. I can see a large garden with animal shaped bushes and wooden archways on the side of home. I dodge fresh puddles of rain in the stone below me, and make my way over to the front of the manor. I finally look up at the structure and see that it's not as extravagant as Mrs. Cain made it seem. There are eleven windows staring down at me, with black bars covering each one. The bars make the house look more menacing than beautiful. The exterior is painted a chocolate brown, with the paint chipping in some areas and

the windows do not look like they are made of glass. Mrs. Cain stops beside me, as Ivy walks up to the large burgundy front doors, flips open a gray touch-pad that is connected to the door panel and taps something very quickly. The driver tips his black hat to Mrs. Cain and I as he proceeds back over to the car. A moment later, I hear the vehicle back up and head out of the estate, leaving me to wonder what lies beyond these two big doors and the mysterious barred windows.

I'm silent as I follow Mrs. Cain and Ivy through the front doors and into the manor. A heavy scent of rubbing alcohol shoots up my nose and I sneeze. Looking up, I notice a long wooden staircase leading upwards towards the second level of the home. The walls are dark wood with oval frames minus photos. What is the purpose of frames without photos or paintings?

To my left, I see what looks to be a living area with gold fabric loveseats and a

long glass coffee table separating the furniture. There's a large faux fireplace and a giant portrait of a man with long black hair and a crooked nose. The only frame with something inside. Is there a man living here as well? The front hall floors are all dark brown wood, while the living area has a dark green rug with white rose designs embedded in the material. To my right, are two brown doors that are ajar and from where I am standing I can see books inside the room. Physical books are sort of rare nowadays, and I assume that the room I am staring into must be the library. Directly above me, is an enormous crystal chandelier with what looks like a *raven* sitting on one of the large brass stems.

“Is... that a raven?” I ask. Curious as to why a woman with so much money would own such a disturbing type of animal.

“Yes, his name is Remy and he is Cordelia's.” Mrs. Cain smiles at me. I

would think someone like this Cordelia would have either a pug or some kind of glamorized dog. But a raven, I've never seen as someone's *pet*. Looks like this will be an interesting experience, living here. Barred windows, hollow frames, and a spooky raven? Yes, it will be interesting nevertheless. Remy flies down from the chandelier and swoops into the second level's hallway. It's so quiet that I feel embarrassed even breathing. I wonder what Ebbie is doing right now. Is she eating lunch, or napping in the living room? I wish I knew.

“This way, Leah.” Mrs. Cain gestures to the staircase, as Ivy and I follow her upwards. I admire the Victorian décor wallpaper, with its velvet gold designs and cream colors. Ivy looks back at me and shoots me an evil glare. I return a smile and turn to the wall, ignoring her eyes burning into me. *What is this girl's problem?*

We reach the top of the stairs and I

stare down the long hallway with doors on each side. A tall metal digital grandfather clock is ticking away at the end, concealing a small oval window that is bar-less. I see it as a way that may lead to an escape, but as we near the end, I see that only my head would fit through the frame. The lights above are shaped like tear drops attached to spider web designed miniature chandeliers. I've never seen such designs in a my sixteen years of life. I catch a scent of mint and chocolate as the alcohol smell fades. I wonder where that scent is coming from? My stomach growls with the very thought. The hall is extra wide and the floor is wood paneled like the downstairs. The doors on each side are wide as well and remind me of church doors for some reason. There are also gold door knobs and shiny silver painted floral designs on the doors. My right ear twitches at the sound of voices coming from one or a couple of the rooms. I stiffen in the middle of the hall, attempting to make out what they are saying, but they are too muffled to make out words.

“You will meet the other girls in a few moments.” Mrs. Cain leads me over to another door, but this one has shiny silver spiders painted all over it. I correct my posture and place both of my hands behind my back. I shouldn’t show respect to this woman, but I have no idea of how she punishes these girls and I don’t want to find out from experience.

Mrs. Cain opens the door and walks in, her hands behind her back as well. We enter the room and I turn and see Ivy standing in the doorway. Mrs. Cain nods and Ivy leaves the room, closing the door behind her. I turn back and see a gigantic white canopy bed with gold stripes garnishing the bedspread. Everything in the room is white. A giant replica of the spider web chandeliers is dangling from the top of the ceiling, and I shudder at the raven sitting on one of the stems. Remy’s eyes pierce down at me, seeing into my soul and freaking me out a bit. The sweet and bitter scent of chocolate and mint distracts me

from the bird, a tiny portion of saliva caressing the right corner of my mouth. I wonder when dinner is around here? I feel as if I'm going to faint any minute. I notice a woman sitting in a white rocking chair near the large window. She's facing the glass, rocking slowly back and forth. The sound of the wood creaking under her chair sends chills down my spine, as I rub the sweat from my hands off on my dress.

“Go on.” Mrs. Cain points to the woman and I obey. I slowly walk over to her chair, her dark brown long hair flowing over her bony pale shoulders. I stand still, as the chair stops rocking and the woman stands up straight. She walks over to the window and presses her hands on the glass.

“Welcome to my home, Leah Munro.” Her voice is raspy and light. How old is she? I have no idea what to say to her. I will not thank her though, she's taken me from my home & has stripped me of my life.

“Are you Cordelia?” I ask. She laughs, still staring out the window.

“Yes, and this is your home now... don’t attempt to run away, I don’t fancy being betrayed by my daughters and I don’t care to know of your previous life, so spare me the sappy story and bore someone else with your tears.” She turns from the window and faces me. My heart leaps into my throat at the site of her. I attempt to keep myself grounded, but I’ve never come across someone with such heavy disfigurement. Her eyebrows are drawn on and half of her left cheek is sunken in and looks as if half of her face doesn’t even exist. I switch my eyes to the ground and lick my dry lips.

“A house fire did this to me, if your wondering.” She walks over to me. Oh no, please don’t make me look. I can’t look at her without staring, my manners are useless right now.

“I’m sorry,” I tell her, my eyes still directed to the ground. She reaches her left hand out and cups my round chin, her nails slightly digging into my skin. She forcefully lifts my head up and I look into her light brown eyes.

“There is nothing for you to apologize about. Sit down, Leah.” She gestures to a cushioned chest at the foot of her bed. Mrs. Cain backs up to the wall near the door, and stands still.

“I... would like to know why you’ve brought me here.” I hear the dryness in my voice. I am scared of her, but I’d feel a little better hearing *her* side of me being purchased. She walks over to a tall dresser and leans her right elbow on it.

“I want to give girls who don’t have families, better lives. Your profile explained that your mother and father were murdered in a protest, and that you lived with a guardian named Ebnera Darling. I am not

heartless Miss Munro, I do not rip children from their families. I am very kind to the girls I take in, and in a year or so, you could be happy with a man and children, or single and happy... whatever you choose. I just don't want you to grow up in a low society, with drugs and prostitution as a way of life." I look into her eyes, but I still don't feel safe. There is something about this woman that sets something off in me. I don't trust her... and I don't want to.

"Thank you for bringing me here." I lie.

"Your welcome, Leah. I suppose I should explain why I look like this," She says.

"It's none of my business," I reply.

"As one of my new daughters, it is your business." She smiles and I force a smile in return. "There was a riot in New

York city when I was seventeen. Some boys near my family's apartment threw a Molotov cocktail through our living room window, which engulfed our home in flames. I was the only one who awoke to the smoke. My parents and only sister were dying by the time I pried open my bedroom door and rushed out into the hall. I watched my sister burn to death... her screams tearing through her bedroom, and her body on fire. I tried to put out the flames with a blanket but it just made it worse. She died in my arms... and then the apartment exploded." She looks up at the window and wipes tears from her eyes. I can't help but shed a few of my own. "I woke up in the hospital with my face and half of my torso, like this, and it's been thirteen years since it happened. I can still smell the smoke sometimes, and hear my sister's screams."

"I'm very sorry," I tell her.

"Again, Leah, there is nothing to apologize for. I do hope that you will

appreciate life and not spit in the face of it. I am very happy to welcome you to my home. Now, Mrs. Cain will explain the rules of the house and I hope that you will be happy living here in your new home, with your new sisters and your new *mother*.” She smiles, but to me it seems sinister. I don’t trust her one bit. I may feel sorry for her, but that doesn’t change the feelings deep inside of me. I don’t believe we are here to be her daughters. I believe we are all in for a hectic experience that will not end well for anyone... especially me.

THREE

The hallway is deserted and creepy, as Mrs. Cain and I stand in the middle of it. We're directly in front of a bedroom door that before looked simple and wooden, but now seems to be made of some kind of metal. Why do the doors need to be metal? I turn to Mrs. Cain as she scratches the back of her neck and coughs into her left hand. The face of Cordelia is still stuck in my head like an awful nightmare. I didn't mean to seem so rude and manner-less, but I have never actually seen someone like her. I'm sure that I will get used to seeing her, but it's just so new to me. I also hope that these girls I'll be living with, are not kniving and disrespectful. I'm going to be staying with them for a very long time and developing bad blood is definitely not my cup of tea. All of a sudden, rapid pattering

begins to take over the hall's ceiling.

“A storm is brewing, good thing we brought you here early,” Mrs. Cain says as she turns to me and smiles.

“Is this my room?” I gesture to the door.

“Yes and no. You will be rooming with four other girls in this room.” She looks at the door. “The house rules are simple and should be easy for you to comprehend. You are not allowed out of this bedroom after nine in the evening and bedtime is midnight. You will eat your meals with the other girls in your bedroom when Alec brings your food to the room. You are free to roam the house, except for the rooms near the back doors and you are not allowed outside what-so-ever. Do you understand all of this?” I look at the bedroom door and swallow hard. I am powerless, I have no authority and I don't have the strength right now to challenge

anything she is telling me.

“I understand.” Tears spring from my eyes and I bite down hard on my tongue, trying to stop myself from crying out loud. This is my life now. What will become of me in a year? Will I be dead? Will I be married off to some old bastard? I’d prefer death over being compelled for the rest of my life.

“There, there now... it’s not so bad, soon you will be free and happy.” Mrs. Cain touches my arm and I jerk it away. I look up at her and shake my head.

“I’m sorry.” My voice cracks. I just don’t feel like being touched right now.

“It’s perfectly fine,” She says as she pulls out a handkerchief and dabs the white cloth over both of my eyes.

“Thank you,” I manage to say. She

places the hanker chief back into one of her pockets and smiles.

“Any questions?” She asks.

“No, I’m fine now.” I lie. There are millions of questions resting inside my head. I just don’t feel like talking to her right now. She turns away from me and quickly opens the bedroom door in front of me.

The light from the room shocks my eyes and the first thing I see, is a gigantic window with bars and a light blue seat attached to it. I take my first step into the room. I take in the pure white walls with light pink rose designs garnishing the entire room. The carpet is white and the chandelier is silver with rose shaped bulbs. It’s beautiful. I look to the right and see six twin beds lining the walls, each with a white dresser separating the silver headboards. To my left, I take a step back, noticing six more beds... and four girls

sitting on one bed to the far corner of the room.

A blonde girl with a braided pony tail crawls off of the bed and walks over to me, holding her periwinkle dress up, showcasing her bare scarred feet. My manners tell me to greet her with kindness. It's not this girl's fault that I am here. She is in the same situation as me. Mrs. Cain pats my right shoulder and walks off to the door.

“Be kind to her girls, Cordelia will see one of you in the morning and Alec will be up with dinner soon,” Mrs. Cain says as she closes the door and what sounds like a hundred locks snap in unison. I turn to the door and whispers erupt amongst the girls on the bed. I look at the girl in front of me and attempt to smile.

“Leah Munro.” I reach my left hand out and she takes it, shaking it lightly.

“Dawn Wagner,” She says. Her eyes are light blue and she has freckles like me, but hers are a light shade of pink.

“I’m Violet Nakamura.” A girl stands up from the bed and hurries over to me, taking me into her arms. She smells like cherries and something milky. I smile at her, as she lets me go and I see that she’s Asian. Her hair is black and is in a pixie cut with long pieces peeking out from the sideburns.

“Leah,” I say. Violet takes me by my right hand and rushes me over to the last two girls. I notice one of them has the same dress as me and I blush in embarrassment.

“This is Chloe Smith,” Violet points to the girl wearing the same dress as me. She’s got short green hair and her eyes look brown and round. She doesn’t smile at me. Instead, she makes a fierce smile at me, baring her teeth and turning to the window. *Great!* Another Ivy. Also, I haven’t seen

colored hair on someone since middle school. I once contemplated getting purple highlights, but I thought I'd look very silly. Chloe, actually looks really pretty with green hair.

“And last but not least, Ella Gomez.” The other girl smiles at me. She's got super long brown hair and dark tinted skin. Her eyes look brown and she has an oddly shaped mole the size of a penny near the hairline of her forehead.

“So where are you from?” Violet turns to me with a huge smile. I don't see why this girl is so chipper, considering the situation we are in.

“Lincoln, Massachusetts.” I sit down on one of the beds.

“That's my bed. Yours is next to the bathroom.” Chloe turns from the wall and points to a similar twin bed on the other

side of the room, near a large white door. I quickly stand up and straighten out my dress.

“Sorry,” I peep. She rolls her eyes and slouches her bare shoulders.

“I didn’t tell you to get off of my bed, I just meant- forget it!” She stands up from the bed and walks over to the window, her arms crossed.

“She’s got this hard shell, but deep down she’s as soft as bunny fur,” Dawn whispers into my ear. I look over at Chloe and think that maybe she might not be the next Ivy after all.

“How long have you all been here?” I ask, looking at each of them.

“Three weeks,” Ella says.

“Ella and I were brought here the same day.” Chloe turns from the window.

“Two months,” Violet smiles. I turn to Dawn.

“I arrived here a month ago,” Dawn says as she turns away and walks over to a bed. She sits down and begins twisting each of her fingers. She looks awfully nervous, like me, but it also looks like something else is bothering her.

“What happens to the girls who are brought here?” I walk up to Dawn. I’ve got Cordelia’s and Mrs. Cain’s explanation. Now, I need to hear it from one of the girls. Dawn looks up and points to Violet.

“She’s been here the longest.” I walk back to the group of girls and look at Violet. She puts on a giant grin and runs over to a green decorated bed and gets down on her knees. I stare, as she pulls out

a giant black book from between her mattress and hurries over to me, placing the book on the bed before me.

“What is that?” I ask.

“It’s a photo album, silly.” Violet giggles as she undoes the yellow tassel and opens the album.

“Photos of what?” I look down at the first picture. It’s a red head girl with her arms around a man who looks old enough to be her father. There is a small child sitting on the loveseat next to them, and the man looks delighted.

“This is Kimberly. She was in the group of girls I was brought here with. Cordelia marries us off to men who are looking for love and are willing to take care of us. She’s like a motherly match-maker... and as you can see, we end up happy, with families to call our own.” Violet caresses

the photo then looks up at me. I can see in her eyes that she's happy here, and believes that Cordelia wants the best for us. I don't feel the same way. I don't feel that Cordelia really cares for us, even with these photos showing the girls who were once here, happy and in love. There's something else behind Cordelia's *loving* heart. Something sinister. I just hope I'm not the only one who feels different. But then again, I could be wrong. But most teens that are sold either end up dead or something horrid happens to them. I've never heard of a happy ending. This is not a fairy tale.

"I was happy before I came here," I tell her.

"So was I," Dawn says, picking up her dress and running over to me. She seems excited that I feel that way.

"I wasn't happy... I was being raped by my uncle, while my aunt acted as if it weren't happening," Chloe explains. I

frown, staring at her.

“I’m sorry,” I say.

“Please don’t say that crap... why are you sorry? What did you do to me?” She jabs herself in the chest, angrily.

“Chloe, calm down,” Dawn tells her, as she walks over to her and grabs her hand, caressing it softly.

“I want to get the hell out of here!” Chloe cries.

“We all do,” Ella says.

“I don’t understand you, Chloe. Your uncle was doing awful things to you and you want to get out of here? Be grateful for where you are right now... *you disgust me.*” I turn in astonishment to Violet, as Chloe races past me and takes Violet to the

ground. I leap backwards, watching Chloe pummel Violet, as Dawn and Ella attempt to pull Chloe up.

“Stop! Do you want to get tased again!” Ella screams at Chloe. I am in shock. I haven’t seen girls fight in a while, and I’m not good with violence. I close my eyes and can hear hair being torn from scalps and someone’s dress ripping. I open my eyes and get up from the bed to finally help, but before I can run over to them the door bursts open. Ivy hurries in with what looks like a black cell phone in her right hand. She looks over at me, as she bends down and shoves the device into Chloe’s back. I hear a loud buzzing sound and see Chloe fall over in agony.

“What did you do?” I ask Ivy. She ignores me and slaps Violet across her face. Violet stops screaming and gets up from the ground, pulling up her dress. It was Violet’s dress that had been destroyed.

“You girls make me come in here again, I will take you outside and blow your damn heads off. Do you hear me?” Ivy growls. Dawn, Ella and I nod in unison. Ivy spits on Chloe’s head, a thick wad of saliva gleaming from the top of her green hair. Ivy turns and charges out of the room, slamming the door behind her and locking it.

“What just happened?” I ask, my heart beating rapidly in my chest.

“Chloe’s been tased, again.” Dawn says, as she gets on her knees and lifts Chloe up. She’s shaking and her eyes are wide and bloodshot.

“Stupid girl!” Violet snaps.

“Violet, shut up and sit down.” Ella commands. Violet ignores Ella and walks over to the white door near my bed, looking back at us, as she walks in and closes the

door.

“I-I f-fucking hate h-her.” Chloe stutters, as Dawn picks her up from the ground and walks her over to a bed.

“Just lie down for a bit. *Relax.*” Dawn grabs a tissue from a tin box on the dresser next to her, and cleans Ivy’s spit out from Chloe’s hair. I may have challenged Ivy in the car, but now that I’ve seen her angry, I don’t want to experience what Chloe has just gone through. I make a mental note to stay away from Ivy as much as possible.

“Is she going to be okay?” I break the silence. Dawn looks over at me and tosses the tissue in a small trash bin.

“She’ll be fine. It’s happened to her once before,” Dawn says.

“And she can’t seem to behave.” Ella adds, as Dawn covers Chloe with a blanket

and walks over to me.

“So, where are you from again?” She asks. I think she’s trying to change the subject, so I let her. I look out of the window, the gray fog beginning to build at the base of the garden.

“Lincoln.” I turn back to Dawn.

“I lived in Norman,” She smiles. Norman is about five miles out of my city.

“What school did you attend?” I ask.

“Milton,” She says, as she walks over to me and stares down at the fog.

“I’m from San Diego.” Ella joins Dawn and I.

“My parents died when I was younger. They were protesting and got killed. I was

living with my guardian Ebbie, when I got the letter. I didn't want to come here. I don't want to be here." I spill my heart out to the two girls. Dawn reaches her right hand up to my shoulder and rubs it gently.

"I was taking care of my younger brother when I got the letter. My parents were in Russia for the week for business. They took me four days later. My brother Ethan held onto my dress as they dragged me out of my house." Dawn begins to cry. "They kicked him in the face and he fell down the porch steps. I watched my parents hurry to his aid, as he bled from his mouth. They kicked a four year old in the face!" Dawn socks the window hard. I wince at the sound, but the glass hasn't broken. I turn to Ella and she shrugs her shoulders.

"It's Plexiglas. There is no way out." Ella turns back to the window. I take in deep slow breaths realizing that there more than likely is no escape. I'm not sure if I'll last here much longer. I turn to Dawn and

she wipes the tears from her face.

“We’ve tried leaving. All the doors have sensors and there are camera’s hidden around the house. We can walk around the house, go into the library and sit in the living area. But we can’t get out.” She looks down at her red knuckles and rubs them.

“It’s useless attempting to escape. I want to see my mama so bad. They sent Mrs. Cain to get me and I walked out of my house with my mama crying in a corner. She was all I had. Now I have nothing. I can still smell the house though. The faint scent of my mama’s Arroz Con Leche. God, I’d give anything to eat that again.” Ella smiles at the thought. I turn my body around and stare at Chloe. Dawn notices me staring.

“She was happy to come the first time she got here. Then she began to lose it and now she wants out. She’s the strong one out

of all of us,” Dawn explains.

“She’s also the dumbest.” I look up and see Violet heading our way.

“Go away. No one wants to speak to you.” Ella walks up to her and crosses her arms.

“Fine. You all are going to get yourselves killed. While I will be living the beautiful life with the man of my dreams.” Violet bats her lashes.

“Right. A sixty year old man with old wrinkly balls waiting for you.” Ella laughs.

“Shut up. I hope Cordelia calls upon me tomorrow morning. I hope I’m gone before I go completely insane because of you twits.” Violet jerks her head around and hurries over to her bed. I wonder what Violet’s story is, but I doubt she’ll tell me. She’s too excited about living here. What

an idiot. I turn back to the window and spot a guy, who looks my age, walking through the garden. There is a long silver stick in his right hand. He taps it on the ground while moving through the foggy trail.

“Who is that?” I ask, tapping on the window with my fingers.

“Alec. He’s the butler. He brings us our meals and attends to Cordelia’s needs. He’s a very sweet guy, but he doesn’t talk much.” Dawn explains.

“What’s he doing with that stick?” I lean closer to the window. He has black short hair and circular red sunglasses. He looks very tall, at least six foot, and he’s as pale as snow.

“He’s blind,” Ella says. Now that explains the stick. I’ve seen blind people, but I’ve never met one. I don’t think I could live without seeing. I’d be so depressed and

lonesome. He leans the stick on a low fence and squats down to a pile of pumpkins. He's actually very good looking, his black eyebrows and his strong facial features.

"Don't bother. He's into men." Dawn says. I turn to her and my mouth droops open.

"Seriously?" I ask.

"It's the fifth thing we know about him. The first being that he's blind. He's nineteen and Cordelia took him from his grandfather to serve her here. He's been here for five years. He's very nice, but like I said, he's non-talkative." Dawn peers down at him. I knew a homosexual guy in school. His name was Ryan and he liked my pink heels. He was the flamboyant type and he was a very kind person. I wonder what happened to him after graduation. I wonder if he's been sold too.

“He’ll be up here with our food in about twenty minutes,” Ella says. “I’m starving.”

“He makes the best meals. I wonder what he’s making tonight.” Dawn smiles as the bedroom door opens behind us. Mrs. Cain enters the room and heads over the middle of the room.

“Miss Munro. Will you come with me?” She extends her wrinkly right hand and I slowly make my way over to her. Dawn, Violet, and Ella watch in silence as I leave the room and enter the cold hallway once again.

“Mrs. Cain,” My voice squeaks.

“I thought I’d give you a quick tour of the house before dinner,” She says as she leads me down the hall and we make our way down the stairs and into the living area.

FOUR

The living room is large and smells of mothballs and alcohol. The portrait looms above me, it's of Cordelia, I can tell by the eyes. She was beautiful before the incident. The carpet is soft under my shoes and everything looks untouched and coated in a thick layer of dust. Does anyone ever come down here? I look up into the ceiling and am spooked by my own reflection. The ceiling is entirely made of mirror and there are white swirl etchings in the glass. It's truly a beautiful sight. I bend my neck back a little more to get the full effect, but I freeze suddenly. Next to Mrs. Cain, is a blond girl, with white bloody bandages concealing her eyes. She looks as if she's hovering above the ground and her long hair is moving like the tentacles of a jelly fish. She advances forward, her arms

extended to Mrs. Cain's neck.

"Mrs. Cain!" I yell, tearing my eyes away from the mirror and looking over at the elder woman. She's alone, staring at me with wide eyes. I look up and see that the girl is gone and feel my eyes suddenly water with tears.

"Miss Munro, are you feeling okay?" She asks. I turn away from her and swipe the tears from my eyes. *I saw her*. She was there. Or so I thought. There is something wrong in this house, and I'm not sure I want to uncover *every* single thing about it. I reset my mood and turn, smiling at Mrs. Cain.

"I'm fine." I raise my cheeks in a false smile and showcase my teeth.

"If you say so," She waves her hand and walks out of the living area. "Follow me." Her voice rings from the main hall. I

look up into the mirror before I exit the room and breathe out in relief. I can't deny that she was there. I know for a fact that I am not seeing things.

“You are not allowed in that room.” Mrs. Cain gestures to two large steel doors, without doorknobs. I stare at the door and attempt to brush the ghostly incident out of my mind for the moment.

“There are no doorknobs,” I say.

“Yes. But still you are not allowed in that room, or near those doors. Keep in the front of the house and behave yourself. I will not stand for mischief. The library is free to use when Cordelia says so and the other bedrooms in your hall are vacant and locked. You are not allowed out of the room, unless you are escorted by me or Ivy.” She turns back to me, smiling.

“Why can't we go outside?” I ask. It's

a question that has been burning inside of me.

“We don’t want to risk you all escaping; she has paid too much for you to lose you. Miss Munro, we don’t play games here. If you attempt to escape you will suffer tremendously. Don’t disrespect our generosity. I assure you it won’t end well for you if you do.” Her voice becomes stern and sharp. But on her face is a creepy smile. I swallow hard and tear my eyes away from hers. I’m screwed.

The halls are so quiet I can hear myself breathing and I can smell the faint scent of warm pumpkin pie coming from under an oval black door. That must be the kitchen. We hurry down the hall and stop at the bottom of the stairs. Mrs. Cain stares down nervously at her silver wrist watch with a purple hologram that reveals the current time. 7:28pm. Mrs. Cain turns to me, and then looks up the stairs. She spins around taking me in, eying with curiosity.

“Can you make it to the room on your own? Can I trust you? The door will lock automatically and Alec will be up in a few minutes with your dinner.” She looks down at her watch again. Is this some kind of test?

“Yes. I’ll go straight to the room.” I say, passing her, already making my way up the stairs.

“Good. I will see you in the morning. Cordelia will call upon a girl and one of you will leave this house tomorrow afternoon. It will be a good day.” She says as she turns away from me and picks up her dress. She shuffles quickly down the hall we just came from and I turn and continue up the long staircase. I’m not stupid. I’ll head straight to the room and obey. I can’t even imagine what they will do to me if I try anything right now.

“*Leah.*” A soft female voice echoes in

my ears. I halt in the middle of the staircase and my heartbeat begins to pick up its pace.

“Who’s there?” I ask.

“It’s only me, miss.” I break my frozen state and turn around. The boy from the garden, Alec, is making his way up the stairs with what looks like an animal carrier in his left hand, as his right grips the railing. Dangling from his right wrist is a long silver object and his glasses will me to look at his eyes. I look around me and search the area. The voice wasn’t Alec’s. His voice is deep and masculine. The voice that called me was a female. I’m one hundred percent sure of that. I hurry the rest of the way up the stairs and let him pass me, his head turning to me as he heads down the hall.

“Hi,” I say.

“I’m Alec Brown. I am your servant. If

you will follow me, I have dinner ready for you girls.” He smiles and leads me down the hall. He opens the door for me and I enter the room, the girls staring, curious as to where I’ve been.

“Hello, girls. Today is Chicken Parmesan with a slice of pumpkin pie.” He opens the animal carrier. But inside are five trays of steaming food. I watch him, as he takes the object from his wrist and shakes it forward. It extends and becomes the silver cane that he was using earlier. He taps the floor with it and walks over to a row of three chairs. Behind the chairs is a large gray tray. He takes it from behind and sets it up near the bedroom door, and places the small trays on the large one and closes up the carrier.

“Thank you, Alec.” Chloe walks up to him and gives him a hug.

“You’re welcome,” He says and turns to the door. He nearly trips over something

and bends down, searching the floor with his free hand. He stands up and feels the object, then turns back to the room.

“Did you drop this? Miss.” He walks over to the middle of the room and holds out the large locket to no one. I take a step forward and take it from him. It’s not mine, and I don’t know why I’ve taken it from him. I look at Dawn and she places her left index finger on her closed mouth and waits for Alec to leave.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“You’re welcome.” Alec smiles and leaves the room. Dawn is the first one off of the bed, as she hurries over to me, nearly tripping on the bottom of her dress. None of the other girls seem to notice what has just happened. They are all occupied with getting to their meals.

“What is it?” She looks into my hand

and I turn it over, admiring its beauty. It looks more like a pocket watch to me. There are spiders spinning webs and bats cascading down from dead trees. Whoever made this did a really good job. Its silver shine twinkles in Dawn's eyes as I unlatch the clasp and open the locket. Inside is a folded piece of black paper. I slowly retrieve the paper and close the locket, handing it to Dawn. She moves it around in her hands, as I unfold the paper and raise my eyebrows at its contents.

*Leah,
It's not safe
Leave this place.*

It reads in silver ink. My mouth quivers and I hand the note to Dawn. She reads it over and gasps softly. I look into her eyes and shake my head. I don't know who wrote that and it was in the doorway when Alec was about to leave the room.

Who wants me to leave? And someone meant for me to find this. I knew something wasn't right, and it looks as if someone is trying to help me.

“We are not allowed paper or pen. None of us could have written this. We aren't even allowed to own anything. I'm surprised Alec didn't report you.” Dawn stares down at the note.

“It's not mine. I don't have anything with me.” I lie, thinking of Ebbie's note hidden in the bust of my dress.

“Then this is truly odd.” Dawn shakes her head lightly.

“Are you sure there aren't other girls in this house?” I ask her.

“We've never seen any, just us.” She folds the letter, places it back into the locket, and hands it to me.

“What do I do?” I ask, staring down at the locket.

“Hide it. Hide it good. If they find it, there is no telling what they might do to us.” She looks around, the girls feasting on their meals. None of them are paying attention. I think it’s best to keep it that way. “Ella tried to escape a few days after she arrived here. She took Alec’s cane and tried to make a run for it. He alerted Cordelia with his wrist device and Ella was taken somewhere for a couple of days. She came back different. She was calm and silent for a while. No one knows what they did to her and I don’t think any of us want to find out. Let’s keep this to ourselves. If any of them ask, it’s just a locket. The note does not exist.” Dawn looks over her shoulder. No one is paying any attention to us.

“Okay,” I say, as I walk over to the bathroom door and let myself in.

“Hurry up and eat before it gets cold,” Dawn says as she walks over to the tray and gathers her meal.

I close the bathroom door behind me and search the white room. There is a long banana shaped bathtub, a clear glass sink and a light pink toilet. Above me, is a small rose petal chandelier and the mirror above the sink has a few light bulbs above it. I think hard. Where can I hide this where no one will look? There is no cabinet area under the sink and there is nowhere to put anything. I groan and lean against the wall. My eyes sway over to the toilet and I smile in excitement. I remove the tank lid, placing it softly on top of the sink. The water is light blue and I’m sure no one will find the locket in here. I place the locket into the water and watch as it slowly descends to the bottom of the tank.

. . .

My mouth waters as I fork the last shard of pie into my mouth. I don't think I've ever tasted anything like it. I remind myself that the best meal will always be Ebbie's oatmeal. Now that I know we are not allowed paper or pen, she'll never know how I'm doing. She'll think I've forgotten about her. Her heart will be broken. Tristan surfaces in my head and I smile thinking about him. Will he really come for me? I hope to god he will.

The note's contents reform in my head. How am I supposed to leave? Chloe has tried and has failed. Why should I be any different? So far I've learned that we only have three dresses to wear and one night gown. We are allowed to shower twice a day and are required to be up by eight in the morning every single day.

"So who do you think it's going to be?" Ella places her plate on her dresser and brings her legs up from the ground. She wraps her arms around her legs and rests

her chin on her left knee.

“I hope it’s me,” Chloe says.

“If it’s you and not me, I’ll hand myself by my nightgown.” We all turn to Violet. She eyes Chloe with hatred and the tension is so thick you can practically taste it in the air.

“We shouldn’t be discussing this, it’s just going to lead to arguing and the last thing we need is for someone to be in trouble tonight. You’ll ruin your chance at being selected,” Dawn explains.

“How do you become selected?” I ask. All the girls place their eyes on me. Violet smiles and clears her throat. I really didn’t want to hear it from her, but oh well. I force a smile and turn around in my bed. It’s comfortable but I still miss my own.

“There are hidden cameras. They have

no sound, but that is one way she conducts her selection. If they had sound, we'd be in a lot of trouble *talking* the way we do in here." Violet sneers at Chloe. "The other way is when she picks one of us for tea time. We go to her room and talk with her about our aspirations and hopes for love. She's a very kind person. We can all say that. She's never yelled at us or shown anger in our presence. Even though she has Ivy carry out her instructions, I still see her as motherly."

"Look at you, talking about her like she's Jesus Christ. That bitch, had Ivy execute a girl in the front yard when I arrived here." Chloe turns to me and stares into my eyes while she carries on. "The girl was crying too much and all the way from her window, she gave Ivy the signal. Ivy pulled out and shot that girl in the head. I saw it happen! But these girls never want to hear about it, so I'm telling you. That woman is something hideous and as long as we stay here... it's only going to get *worse*. I've tried to get the fuck out of here, but I

couldn't. That doesn't mean *you* can't. You just have to be smarter than me." Could Chloe be the person behind the locket? Right now, I'm thinking she is. But how did she do it? Without being caught. She tears her eyes from mine and devours the rest of the pie that is left on her plate.

The other girls are silent and I'm surprised to see Violet so quiet. I suppose she now understands a few things and is letting it marinate in her head. I also think about telling them about the girl I saw earlier, and the voice. But I have a feeling that it won't go well for me if I open my mouth about it. The girls might think I'm crazy and I'll really be lonely around here. I look around the room at the girls and think about the selection tomorrow morning. One of us is going to be gone. The question is: Who will it be?

FIVE

The hallway is deserted as I make my way down. I slither against the walls afraid that Remy will see me and fly off to inform Cordelia. The cool air tickles my ankles as I descend down the stairs, keeping my feet light on the steps and holding my breath. I'm closer to the front door now. I'm almost there. When my foot touches the cold floor of the front hall, I remember that there is no way out. Why am I even trying? I listen for anyone coming and turn back to the staircase. Just then I hear soft whispers and slowly turn my head to the living room. Without a second thought, I walk into the living room, but see nothing. The whispering has ceased and all I can hear is my heart beating heavily in my chest. The blueness of the night sky is shining through

the parted curtains and I walk over the window. I lightly peel the curtains back a bit more and stare out into the night. The woods that surround the manor are dark and eerie and remind me of horror movies. The small courtyard is deserted and further off into the woods I can see the sparkling of water. There must be a lake in the middle of the woods. I hear the crackly groaning of the floorboards and prepare myself to be caught. Someone is coming and from the amplified sound of the floorboards, they are right behind me.

I turn around, my eyes half closed hoping that it's not Ivy. I will myself to open my eyes and choke on air as I rapidly breathe it in. I attempt to move but my feet feel as if they are plastered to the ground and my eyes suddenly fill with tears. The girl from earlier in the day is standing before me. I can smell the strong scent of dust coming from her and her breaths are cold and rise in the air like smoke. Her eyes are concealed but I can tell she's staring directly into mine. There is dry blood

around the rims of the gauzes and her mouth looks dry and pale.

“Who are you?” I push the words out of my mouth. The tears sting my eyes but I can’t seem to close them. Who is she? What does she want from me?

“You must go. You cannot be here much longer; terrible things will happen if you continue your stay. Go Leah, *escape*.” She whispers aloud. Her voice is raspy and the emphasis on *escape* sends cold chills down my spine.

“I can’t leave. There is no way out,” I explain.

“There is a way.” Her voice becomes louder.

“What way?” I say aloud.

“She’s here. She knows...” The girl grabs me by both of my shoulders and screams into my face. Her scream is so high it could shatter a window and I feel my eardrums ready to burst.

My eyes fly open and I quickly sit up in bed, the rim of my nightgown’s neck soaked in sweat. I control my rapid breathing and attempt to calm myself down. It was just a dream. A nightmare is more like it. I haven’t had a nightmare since I was a child. I’ve never had a dream that felt so real, the smell of the dust coming from that girl and the feeling she gave me. I can still feel it now, crawling beneath my skin like tiny ants. I lean my head to the side and see Ella sitting up, her chin resting on the palm of her right hand. She’s watching me and she looks awfully concerned.

“You heard it, didn’t you?” She whispers to me.

“What?”

“The screaming, you heard it. I know you did because you woke up when it stopped. I thought I was the only one who could hear it. I thought I was going crazy. But you heard it.” All I can do is stare at her. *Screaming?* Could it have been the same screaming I heard when the girl grabbed me and hollered in my face? I look into Ella’s eyes and can see that she hopes to god that I heard it. But before I can open my mouth to speak, the screaming begins again. She claps once with her hands and gets excited.

“You heard it huh?”

“Yeah,” I nod. But I can’t believe it. It’s not too loud, and it sounds like it’s coming from the vent next to Ella’s bed. What could it be? There aren’t any other girls in the house, as far as we know. I think it’s time to open up about the girl.

“Have you ever seen a girl- well

ghost? Her eyes are covered and she's got a raspy voice." I explain. Ella shakes her head lightly and looks at me like I'm crazy.

"No ghosts for me. I don't believe in that stuff."

"Well what about the screaming? Where do you think that is coming from?" I quickly change the subject. I'm not going to pour everything on her and have her look at me like I'm insane for now on. Hopefully she picks up the change of subject and just goes with it. I don't have it in me to explain every single thing to her just to have her tell me that she still doesn't believe me.

"I don't know. But I've heard it off and on since last week. None of the other girls can hear it and when I wake them up, the screaming stops and they don't stay up long enough to listen." She turns to Dawn, but she's sound asleep.

“Well I heard it, so I can back you up now.” I smile. It’s a fake smile, since I’m still reeling over the nightmare and the screaming.

“Thank you. I just wish I knew what the hell was going on around here. I mean, I believe that we are given away to men and stuff, but being here is what gets to me.”

“Can you guys shut up? I’m trying to sleep and all I can hear is yapping.” Violet snaps from across the room. Even in the dark I can see her face and she looks to be fully awake. I wonder if she heard what Ella and I were talking about.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Ella whispers to me.

“Okay. I’ll see you in the morning,” I reply, pulling the comforter up to my chin and exhaling. Am I going crazy? Or is this place haunted? None of this is placing itself

correctly in my head. The raven, the ghost, the screaming, and the girls, something is off. No more thinking about it for me. I've been here one day and things are already going weird. I just want to go home. I want to be with Ebbie. I'm not sure how much longer I'll last. But Ebbie has always told me to be strong. But how can you be *strong*, when everything around you is falling apart?

SIX

Staring down into the garden, I watch the rain fall hard. Tristan loves the rain. He'd purposely go to the apartment on rainy days and force me to run the streets with him in the pouring rain. I miss him so much. This morning has gone by slowly and no one has been selected yet. It's my second day in this house and I'm already slowly planning my escape. The nightmare, the screams, the ghost, it's all happened so quickly. I honestly don't know why I'm so scared of the girl. She seems to be trying to help me, but you can't help being frightened of something you didn't think existed. And who was she so scared of in the nightmare? *She's here. She knows*, she said. *Who knows?* I don't understand. All I can do right now is wonder. But I also can't

help that a part of me wants to understand. The other part wants to plan my escape and run as far away as I can get from here. The locks click in unison and I turn away from the window.

“Relax,” Dawn whispers and takes my left hand into hers. Her hand is clammy and cold and I’m not sure I’m the one who needs to relax. Ivy walks into the room, the same electronic tablet in her hand and a smile on her face. She keeps her eyes locked on the tablet, but clears her throat to speak.

“Cordelia is not feeling well, so no one will be selected this morning. But today you will have free time in the library. So change your clothes and Mrs. Cain will retrieve you all in ten minutes,” Ivy explains. I look at all the girls in the room and see them all stare at the ground. Violet begins crying and Ivy finally looks up from her tablet.

“When will she select?” Violet asks.

“I’m not sure, now get ready.” Ivy snaps as she exits the room and the door locks behind her.

“I can’t believe this! I wanted to get out of here!” Violet yells, raking her hands through her hair as if she’s going to rip it all out.

“What the hell made you think it would have been you?” Chloe turns to Violet and crosses her arms over her chest. Oh god, here we go again. Do these girls ever not fight? I haven’t even been here long enough to get to know them and I already want to smack them both.

“I just know.” Violet storms off into the bathroom and slams the door. She looked as if she were about to explode. I’m glad she’s out of sight right now because I don’t feel like hearing drama over and over.

“Everyone should get ready,” Dawn says. “Mrs. Cain won’t be happy if we aren’t dressed by the time she gets here.” She looks at me and smiles. Her eyes look glossy, as if she is about to cry, but holds it in. Secretly, I think everyone was hoping to be selected, except for me. The girls separate and begin changing. I turn around and head for the closet, but am stopped all of a sudden. I can’t move my feet and my mouth is going numb. I move my eyes around the room as a black smoke creeps out from under the wardrobe our clothes rest in.

The smoke quickly wraps itself around the legs of the girls and I attempt to throw my hands up to warn them. *What is it?* And why can’t I move? I hear a door and out of the corner of my left eye, I see Violet heading over to the closet. She’s wiping tears from her eyes and the smoke is wrapping itself around her waist. Can’t they see that I can’t move? And why can’t they see the smoke? I stare back down at the

smoke as it trails along the ground and slithers like a snake over to Violet's bed. The smoke engulfs the bed and before I can see what it does next, the girl appears at the foot of Violet's bed.

“There,” She says. “It’s in there. Look hard enough and you will see.” The girl’s voice tickles my ears as she turns to me. What’s in there? Just then, the photo album pops up in my head and I recall Violet taking it out from between the mattress. I stare at the girl, as the black smoke clears and she walks over to me. A few seconds later we’re standing face to face and I can feel my mouth again.

“See what?” I ask.

“A clue to your way out,” She rushes into me like a tidal wave and I feel as if someone has knocked the air right out of me. I breathe in steadily and turn to the girls. It’s like they couldn’t even see what was happening to me. As If I was invisible

for a couple of minutes. I don't get it. What is supposed to help me in a photo album?

. . .

Mrs. Cain strides in with a silver clipboard in her arms and Alec right behind her. The room goes silent as Mrs. Cain types down a few things before she returns her attention to us. Alec is silent and looks to be afraid to even breathe. I attempt to smile at him, but then I remember that he can't see and I silently curse myself.

“Today you will have free time in the library. You will have four hours to either, rest, chat, or read. Come girls, I'm going to be busy all day and I need to get this over with.” she looks around the room and smiles at each of us. I get up from my bed and follow Chloe as the rest of the girls place their hands behind their backs and exit the room in a line. Before Ella walks out of the room I hurry over to Violet's bed and retrieve the photo album. I grip it

against my chest and follow Dawn out of the room. She stares down at the photo album and makes a face that seems to ask why I have it? I just smile and direct my eyes to the ground. I'm not sure if I should tell her what has been going on. But she's been great to me, and I somehow feel obligated to release it from me. Oddly, Mrs. Cain doesn't say a thing about the photo album and we head down the stairs. I suppose this is the only thing the girls are allowed to have in the room.

With the dead girl lingering in my head, we enter the library and each find a suitable place to sit. I chose the window seat. Mrs. Cain doesn't speak as she closes the doors and a set of locks go off. It's silent and everyone is either playing with the lace trim of their day gowns or biting their nails. Ella sits up in the leather chair she's chosen and decides to open her mouth.

“How long do you think it'll be until

she selects?" Ella turns to Dawn. Dawn smooths out her dress and exhales before answering Ella.

"A week at most." Dawn turns in her chair to Ella and they begin a conversation about the selection. Chloe decides to prop her legs on a bookshelf and sleep and Violet is staring at me, her eyebrows arched in curiosity.

"What are you doing with the photo album?" she asks. I do remember her showing it to me and gloating. So why is she so interested in why I want to look through it.

"I wanted to look through it, if that is okay?" I smile at her, hoping she doesn't become angry with me swiping it from her bed. Weirdly, she sits up in the loveseat she's taken over and a smile grows on her face.

“Oh. Well, enjoy it.” she says as she reaches behind her and retrieves a book to read. I wait for her to become engrossed in the novel before I venture into the album. I slowly untie the tassel and take a deep breath before I turn to the first page.

The girl in the first photo looks awfully familiar. It takes me a bit to realize that this is the girl I’ve been seeing. She was beautiful and her eyes were so green. The man sitting below her in the loveseat is holding their baby and they look so happy. I wonder how she died. And why she’s chosen me to haunt? There are four other girls in this house, so why me? I flip through the rest of the album, seeing these girls smiling and at the same time wondering what will happen when I’m selected? I still think something is up, but I’d rather leave than stay here. I’m supposed to be looking for a clue, but it’s just an album of photos. I close the book and start over, looking over every detail as I scan the entire book. Finally I notice something that sends chills down my spine.

The baby is the same in every photo. It's in the same blanket and in the same exact pose. Why would they need a fake baby? Unless these photos are all fake and played out to look real. Then what *really* happens to the girls that are selected? I look up from the album, I need someone else's opinion. Dawn looks up at me and I wave her urgently over. I lay the book out and turn to the first page once again. She has to see the clue, she has to believe me.

“Are you okay?” Dawn whispers as she stops in front of me. I point to the album and tap on the first photo.

“Look at the baby,” I command. Dawn picks up the album and stares at the photo.

“What's wrong with the baby?” she asks.

“It's the same baby in every photo,” I

say, hoping she doesn't think I'm crazy. I just hope she can see what I see. I wait for a bit as she skims through the album, her eyebrows furrowed. When she is done with the final page, she looks at me as if she wants to cry.

“You're right; I can't believe I've never noticed that before. But why have a fake-”

“Because it's not real, everything in the photo is false.” I cut her off.

“This is too much for me right now,” she drops the album and attempts to walk away. I grab her and turn her to me.

“Don't tell anyone about this yet. I have to figure out a lot more before we say anything to the rest of the girls.”

“Fine, but everything you find out, let me know about it all. This is massive; this

means that what we've been told is all a giant lie." Dawn says as the library doors click open. We all turn to the doorway and see Ivy, standing with the taser gun in her left hand and something else in the other.

"Who does this belong to?" she holds up the locket I hid in the toilet tank. I swallow hard and my heart beat quickens.

"We didn't have anything when we came here, Ivy. So where the hell would we get that?" Chloe snaps. If Ivy goes to Alec, he'll tell her he found it and gave it to me.

"It was hidden in the toilet tank and I'm not an idiot. One of you is lying and Cordelia wants to speak to all of you about it later tonight. For the first time in years, you will have your dinner in the dining room... with Cordelia." Ivy explains. Everyone looks around at each other like they can't believe what is going on. How long has it really been since it last happened?

“This is wonderful,” Violet says.

“I will escort you all back to your room to get ready for tonight,” Ivy says as she leads us out of the room and up the stairs. If Ivy finds out that the locket belongs to me, I can expect the worst from her. She doesn’t like me anyway. I also have to find out what is going on around this house. Everyone is lying to us and I want to get out of here before something tremendously terrible happens. I hope Tristan keeps his word and comes for me. I’m going to need his help more than anything.

.end of manuscript.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Richard Denney lives in El Paso, Texas. He loves reading, writing, ghost hunting, & watching his favorite television series "*The Vampire Diaries*" & "*House Of Anubis*".