



RAVENSONG

A CHURCHILL BRADLEY ACADEMY STORY

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OceanofPDF.com

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*For Bene. Without whom, this story would never have been written.
So, now you all know who to blame.*

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PLAYLIST

I MISS YOU - BLINK 182
BARELY ALIVE - JACK KEYS
WORTHLESS - .ELI
CHALK OUTLINES - REN, CHINCHILLA
DEATH IS A PARTY, INVITE ALL YOUR FRIENDS - PALAYE
ROYALE
DEAD INSIDE - YOUNGER HUNGER
BETTER NOW - ETHAM
WHITE ROSES - GREYSON CHANCE
HOLLOW - BELLE MT.
BABY, YOU'RE A HAUNTED HOUSE - GERARD WAY
DIE A LITTLE - YUNGBLUD
ONE MORE TIME - BLINK 182

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WARNING

If you have not read the Churchill Bradley Academy series:

GO NO FURTHER

This story contains multiple spoilers and will not make sense if you have not read the books first.

Once again.

If you have not read the Churchill Bradley Academy series, **close this book and come back when you have.**

You have been warned.

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I

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KELLAN

Miles: I've found something. Meet me at the chapel.

I ROLL MY EYES AT THE MESSAGE. I'M SUPPOSED TO BE MEETING HIM AT THE hotel in Red Creek, *not* taking a detour to old Churchill's place of worship. Changing direction, I tap out a message with my thumb.

Me: If this is some freaky kink you want to act out, I'm all in!

I snicker, imagining how red he'll probably get when he reads it. Miles is very much *not* kinky, and teasing him about it is a never-ending source of entertainment. For *me*, anyway.

Whistling, I walk past my car, and into the woods. There are three different paths that will take me to the chapel, and luckily, one is close by so I don't have to cut my way through the undergrowth like Indiana Jones.

I purse my lips.

I'd look hot in a hat and holding a whip, though. Maybe we could roleplay. Miles can be one of the bad guys who needs seducing, and I can steal the prize from him.

I'm laughing to myself, deep in a ridiculous fantasy, when I reach the chapel. Pushing the door open, I step inside.

"Miles? I'm here. If you're not dressed up like an innocent priest, waiting to be ravaged on the altar, I'm going to be severely disappointed."

He doesn't answer.

"Miles?" I call again. "Playing hide and seek isn't as kinky as you think it is. Where are you?"

A footstep scrapes over stone, and echoes through the building. I sigh and check the time on my cell.

“Come on, babe. We don’t have time for this. I thought you wanted to have a night away from here?”

A shadow detaches itself from the furthest point, behind the altar. I scowl when I recognize who it is.

“What are you doing here?”

Evan shrugs. “I needed somewhere quiet to study. It was too loud in the common area.”

“Have you seen Miles?”

He cocks his head. “I heard rumors that you fucked him. That true?”

I smile. “Why? You jealous? I’ve always wondered whether you were bi. Where did you say he was?”

“I didn’t, but he’s in the priest’s room behind the altar.” He waves a hand behind him. “Not sure what he’s doing. Said he was waiting for someone. Guess that someone is you?”

“You would be guessing right.” I walk up the aisle between the pews.

When I draw level with him, the hairs on the back of my neck rise. I learned a long time ago to trust my instincts, and my gut is telling me that something is wrong ... but what?

I stop and look at Evan. He’s bouncing on the balls of his feet, hands behind his back. There’s an odd smile on his face, a weird look in his eyes.

“You okay?”

“Me? Sure.” He grins. “Just ...” He shrugs. “You know ...”

“No, actually I don’t. Where did you say Miles was?” I turn to walk around the side of the altar, and as I do, movement catches my eye.

It takes a moment for my brain to decipher what I’m seeing, and by the time it does, it’s too late. I’m hit from behind while I stare at the boy tied up and gagged beside the altar. The shock of seeing my boyfriend slows my reflexes, and Evan’s foot hits me between the shoulder blades, driving me to the ground before I can rally my defenses and roll onto my back.

Scrambling backward, I narrowly miss the foot coming for my face, and twist again so I’m on my hands and knees, then vault to my feet.

“You should have fucking kept your nose out of my business.” Evan’s voice is eerily calm, his expression flat as he stalks toward me.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I risk a glance toward Miles.

“Every time I try to separate Travers from everyone, you’re there to save him.” His fist flashes out and I duck to the side, then throw my own punch.

Unlike his, mine connects and sends him back a step.

“Are you okay?” I toss the question at Miles, who shakes his head.

“Don’t fucking look at him, look at *me*!” Evan launches himself at me, fists flailing.

He’s no fighter, but the sheer amount of punches he throws means I can’t avoid them all, and pain explodes over my jaw when he catches me with a stray left hook.

“Fuck.”

I shake my head, trying to dislodge the pain, and that’s when the dots connect in my head.

“You! You’re the one behind the blackmail, the texts. Fucking hell, *why*? What the fuck kind of game are you playing?”

His smirk chills my blood. “One you’re never going to win. Travers should have protected you. Instead, he focused on her, but *you’re* his weakness, not her. You are the one that can break him. You’re his white knight.”

There’s a flash of silver, and he lunges at me.

Weirdly, the scene from Indiana Jones plays through my head. The one where the guy with the sword does all the fancy moves and then Indy pulls out a gun and shoots him.

“Missed opportunity. Should have brought a gun.” I jump back when he swings again.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I track the movement of the knife, then make a grab for his wrist.

We go down in a tangle of limbs, fighting for control, and then something happens.

There’s a burn along my ribs, white-hot, agonizing in its intensity. The pain expands across my ribs, my chest, until it flows down my arms to my fingers. My hands stop working, and I blink up at Evan, who’s straddling my hips.

“What—” I break off to cough, and it leaves a metallic taste in my mouth.

“Help me move him.” I can’t see who Evan is talking to, and I can’t stop whoever hooks their hands under my arms and hauls me up.

I blink, trying hard to focus, but my vision keeps blurring.

Did I hit my head when we fell?

I roll my head sideways, and my eyes latch onto Miles. His eyes are wide, glassy, full of terror, and I smile at him.

“It’s okay.” I cough again. There’s something wet on my lips. I lick it with my tongue. Weird. Is that blood? “Eli will be here soon. You’re okay, Miles.”

He shakes his head, and tears spill down his cheeks.

“Miles, look at me. It’s okay, I promise.”

Why is breathing becoming an issue? This isn’t good. I don’t feel right.

Wait. The fucker had a knife. Did the bastard stab me?

I try and lift my head to look down my body, but I can’t fucking move.

Why can’t I move?

He fucking *stabbed* me.

Am I dying?

Oh fuck ... am I *dying*?

I seek out Miles again, and force a smile. “Look at me.” My voice is a whisper now. “Miles, I’ll always be around. Tell Eli—” I break off, struggling to suck in a breath. “Tell him—”

The words won’t come.

Eli is going to fucking kill me.

KELLAN

I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH TIME PASSES. I KEEP MY EYES ON MILES. I *THINK* I'm smiling, but I can't say for sure because I can't feel anything and *he's* crying, so maybe I'm not. I can't move my hands to check. I can't move *anything*.

I want to tell Miles that everything will be okay. That Eli won't be far away. He always shows up when he's needed. He has some weird sixth sense for knowing when I'm in trouble. But Eli thinks we're in Red Creek, not still at Churchill Bradley. He's not going to come looking for us. Not until tomorrow when we don't go back to the dorm.

"Kell? Oh my gosh, *Kellan*? Is it really you?"

The voice is faint, but distinctly female and one hundred percent familiar. I try to drag my gaze away from Miles, but it seems my eyes aren't working either.

"Oh no. He got you, too." A shape forms in front of me, blocking my view of Miles, and the figure leans closer, a painfully familiar face filling my vision.

Fingers stroke my face. "Kellan. You need to let go. If you stay there, you'll be stuck."

Let go? Am I holding something?

Her hands drift down over my shoulder, and out of view, and then something cold fills me.

What the fuck is that?

"Stop holding on so tight. You need to let go."

There's a tightening around my heart, like someone has a grip on it, and then a sharp pain. Disorientation makes me dizzy, nausea rises up my throat

and then ...

“What the fuck?”

I’m staring down at myself.

Am I having an out of body experience?

I reach out to touch the body lying across the altar and my hand passes straight through it. I snatch it away, and take a step back.

“What the actual fuck?”

“Kellan.”

There’s movement on my left. I don’t want to turn. Don’t want to look. If I look and see what I think is there, then I have to acknowledge that this isn’t an out of body experience at all. That my body really is lying on top of the altar, lifeless. That I’m—

“I tried so hard to warn you. I left my diary where Arabella could find it. But she didn’t give it to you. And by the time she told you about it, it was too late. You have to believe me. I didn’t want this to happen.”

I fight against it, but my head turns in the direction of the voice.

Her face fills my vision, and I can no longer avoid acknowledging her presence.

We stare at each other for a long moment.

I lick my lips.

“Zoey.”

ZOEY

I STARE BACK AT HIM, SADNESS OVERWHELMING ME. HE LOOKS SO PALE AND confused. I have no doubt, I wore the same expression when my soul detached from its body more than a year ago. But unlike him, I didn't have someone here waiting for me. I'd been lost and alone. Adrift in a limbo I wasn't ready for. Frightened and stuck with no one to explain what had happened to me.

I give him a small smile. "I'm here. You're not alone."

He blinks, then scowls. "What the fuck is going on?"

"You know the answer to that."

"No." There's an edge to his voice. "I don't. So why don't you spell it out to me?"

"You're dead."

"Like fuck."

"Evan killed you. The same way he killed me."

"Shut up."

"No, you need to listen to me."

"I said, *shut the fuck up!*" He slaps his hands over his ears and turns away from me.

"Kell, you have to face it." I keep my voice soft. "If you don't, you'll end up stuck in a loop, reliving the time of your death forever."

"Bullshit." He twists around to glare at me "I'm not dead."

"Yes, you are."

"No."

"I'm high or drunk."

The red light from the stained-glass window splashes over the body spread out like a pagan sacrifice on top of the altar. Around us, the chapel seems to shudder and moan with a life of its own.

Someone is sobbing quietly—Miles. Kellan's gaze swings around to where his boyfriend is sitting, still bound and gagged, and the desperation on his face makes my heart ache.

He drags his fingers through his hair. "I was coming to meet Miles, and then ..." His jaw clenches.

I tried so hard to stop this from happening, but nothing I did worked. I couldn't reach any of them.

"No." He shakes his head. "This isn't right."

I take a step forward. "I'm sorry. I know you don't want to hear it, but you're dead."

"You're wrong. You're just a hallucination. I've lost too much blood, and I'm seeing things. Imagining you."

"I wish that was the truth."

He looks at the altar. At his body lying there. "This isn't happening."

"Let me help you."

He laughs. "I'm talking to a fucking hallucination."

I hold out my hand. "It's a lot to process. I was so scared when it happened to me, but I can help you, Kell. Please, let me help you."

A quiet groan interrupts whatever Kellan was about to say, and his gaze returns to his lover.

"Miles."

He strides over to where Miles is sitting and reaches for the ties binding his hands. His fingers go straight through. He curses and tries again.

"There's nothing you can do to help him. All we can do is watch."

"I have to go back." He spins and glares at me. "I need to warn Eli."

"I've tried. So many times. It's impossible."

"I don't believe that. There must be a way."

"There isn't."

"Zoey, you *don't* understand."

"I do. We have front-row seats to their lives, but we can't control what they do now."

KELLAN

I'M NOT DEAD.

I don't believe it. I'm probably in the hospital, pumped full of drugs. But even as I tell myself that, my gaze returns to the body on the altar. *My body.*

And then a voice reaches me. And my heart, the one Zoey claims is dead, skips a beat.

"Kell? What was so mysterious that we had to meet here?"

Oh fuck.

"We have to stop him." I spin and grab Zoey's arm.

She gives me a sad smile. "We can't."

"Kellan?" Eli calls my name again.

"Fuck. Don't come in here."

He doesn't acknowledge me.

"Kellan, stop fucking around."

I move to intercept him and he stops a foot away from me. "Really?"

For a brief moment, hope fills me. "Yes, really. Turn around. Go back to the dorm."

"What did you find? Something else of Zoey's?"

"No, not something of Zoey's. She's here with me."

He sighs. "Enough with the dramatics, just fucking ..."

"He can't hear you, Kell." Zoey's voice is soft behind me.

"He's replying to me. Of course he can hear me!"

She shakes her head.

"Is someone else here?" I gasp when Eli walks right through me.

"Kellan, who else is here? ... Kell?"

I dart back in front of him. “No. No, don’t fucking look. Turn around, Eli. Don’t *fucking* look.”

My best friend frowns in my direction, then turns to walk toward the pulpit.

“Miles? What the fuck?”

Zoey grabs my arm. “Come away. We shouldn’t be here right now. There’s nothing we can do.”

“He’s going to kill Eli.”

She shakes her head. “We don’t know that.”

I pull free. “Did you know he was going to kill me? Did you let it happen?”

“No! I tried to warn you. I *tried*, Kellan!” Tears spill down her cheeks. “I’ve been watching over you both all year. I thought when Arabella found my diary, that there might be a way to reach you ... but ...” She sniffs and wipes her eyes. “I missed you both so much.”

“What did you do?” Eli’s angry words reach me, and I turn toward him.

“You didn’t protect your knight, Eli.” Evan’s words stab through me. “You should have protected your knight.”

“What did you *do*?” There’s fury in Eli’s voice. Fury mixed with fear. He already knows what Evan did. I can see it in his eyes. But, like me, he doesn’t want it to be true.

“Protect yourself. Don’t keep your back to him.” I shout, watching the scene play out before me.

Evan shoves Eli, who crashes into Miles. But his focus isn’t on my boyfriend, it’s on me. My body. He rises to his feet and crosses the floor, step by slow step until he’s standing in front of my body.

“Kell?”

“Don’t look down,” I whisper. “Just leave, Eli. If you leave, we can pretend you didn’t see this.”

“Kell!” He shakes me, and it’s a little disturbing the way my head rolls back and forth. “Kellan, fucking wake up.” His hands hit my chest, and I feel the faintest pressure on my ribs. “Kellan, talk to me? Kell? Don’t do this. Please don’t do this.” His head lowers, tears splashing against my face.

“Eli, please. Walk away.” I reach out to my friend, squeezing my eyes closed when my hand passes through him.

“Please, Kellan. Please talk to me. Don’t do this. Please don’t do this. Wake up.”

I shake off the hand that touches my arm and move to stand beside my friend. “I wish I could, Eli. I wish I could.”

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ZOEY

“WE CAN’T STAY HERE.” THIS TIME, I GRAB KELLAN’S SHOULDER BEFORE he has a chance to shake me off again.

The world dissolves around us, colors draining into gray, and a second later, we are standing in one of the empty classrooms inside the school. It’s dark beyond the windows.

“What the hell? Where did Eli go?”

“Calm down. Please, Kellan. It’s okay.”

“How did you do that? Take me back.”

I shrug. “It’s something I learned to do over time.”

“I need to get back to Eli.” He walks toward the door.

“No, you don’t.” I’m in front of him in three steps, and bar his way.

“Zoey—”

“You’re *dead*.” I remind him. “He can’t see you. You need to stop and listen to me. You don’t know how any of this works.”

He rolls his eyes. “I get it! I’m dead. I’m a fucking ghost.”

“It’s like spectator mode on one of your games.”

“Fuck that shit. I want to interact.”

“Well, you can’t.”

“Then why are we here? Isn’t there some kind of heaven or hell we’re supposed to be in?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen a bright light.”

“A bright light?”

“Yeah, you know like people talk about.” I wiggle my fingers and put on a ghostly voice. “Go toward the light!”

Kellan's expression darkens. "Well fuck. Does that mean Churchill Bradley Academy is where we get to spend our afterlife?"

"God, I hope not." I shudder. "I'm sick of this place."

"But at least we're not alone now." It's selfish, but I'm glad I finally have someone to talk to. Someone I can touch. One of my best friends in the entire world.

An irritable sigh leaves him. "Fine. Give me the rules of the game."

"It's not a game."

"You know what I mean."

"Time moves differently for us." I wave a hand to the window. "When you died, it was early morning. Now it's dark outside."

His eyes widen when he looks outside. "What the fuck?"

"We aren't conscious of it changing."

"So, I've lost time? How long? Hours? Days?"

"I think it's sometime after sunset. You get used to it."

A long wail silences us both. It sends an icy shiver right through me. Stepping closer to my friend, I wrap my fingers around his hand. It's solid, and the first physical touch I've had in over a year. The sensation makes me want to cry.

His fingers tighten around mine. "What was that?"

"Churchill Bradley."

"The *actual* Churchill Bradley?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "But you don't want to hang around to meet him."

My thoughts focus on a safe place, and the room fades away. When my eyes focus again, we're in the graveyard. I sink to the ground to lay flat on my back.

Kellan sprawls out beside me. "Are you okay?"

"Moving myself is easy, moving us both is more exhausting than I expected." My voice is shaky.

The branches of the trees sway above us in the wind.

"Why did you bring us here?"

"We're at our strongest in the place where we took our last breath. We will always return to it. Any time you feel weak, or you're pulled away, you will end up back where you died."

My final thoughts are seared into my mind. The fear I'd felt. The sadness that I would never be with Kellan and Eli again. Everything had been ripped away from me the same way it was stolen from him today.

I've spent so much time alone here, it feels almost unreal to have Kellan beside me.

His hand finds mine.

"Can you teach me how to do that? Moving to different places."

"Sure." I squeeze his fingers. "I'm sorry I couldn't save you."

"It's not your fault."

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KELLAN

“WHY CAN WE TOUCH EACH OTHER?” I ROLL MY HEAD SIDEWAYS TO LOOK at Zoey.

“Because we’re both dead, I guess? I don’t really know. There’s no manual for the newly deceased.”

I laugh quietly at that.

“Is there anyone else here? Other ghosts.”

“A few.”

“Have they caused problems for you?”

She shakes her head. “Most of us just keep to ourselves. Sometimes we find ourselves in the same place, but we don’t socialize. Churchill Bradley doesn’t like it.”

I twist onto my side, prop my head up on my hand and stare at her. “What do you mean, he doesn’t like it?”

“He tries to force everyone to stay where they died. He doesn’t like us walking around his home.”

“Hmm. So the ghost stories everyone tells are true? He *does* haunt the place.”

“Yeah. You heard him earlier, and I’ve seen him from a distance. I get out of the way if I hear him coming.”

“I can’t wait to tell Eli. He’ll get a kick out of that.” And then I realize what I’ve just said. I close my eyes against the stab of pain. “Fuck.”

Zoey’s hand finds mine and she squeezes my fingers. “It gets easier, I promise.”

“No. I don’t accept that.” Pulling free, I sit up. “There has to be a way back.”

“You know there isn’t. Once you’re dead, you’re dead.”

Pushing to my feet, I pace around the graveyard.

“I don’t believe that.” I walk through a gravestone. It sends a ghostly chill through me, and I grit my teeth. “Why can I walk through things but I don’t fall through the earth?”

“I don’t know. Muscle memory, maybe? We expect to walk on the ground, so we do.”

“I guess. Have you been to the tomb?”

“No.”

The odd note in her voice makes me spin to face her. “Why not?”

“It’s Churchill’s resting place.”

“You think that’s where he stays?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

I swing around to look in the direction of the tomb, then set off across the cemetery.

“Kell, where are you going?”

“To see if he’s there.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to introduce myself.”

She appears beside me. “I’d forgotten how stubborn you are. This is a bad idea.”

“What’s he going to do? Kill me again?”

There’s an eerie glow around the tomb when we reach it, and Zoey’s fingers curl around my arm, drawing me to a stop.

“Can you feel that?” she whispers.

I tilt my head. There’s a weird vibration in the air, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Kell, seriously, this is a *bad* idea.”

“I need answers.”

“But not from him.”

“Then who?” I whirl to face her. “Who is going to answer my questions, Zoey?”

She bites her lip, but doesn’t reply.

Squaring my shoulders, I turn back to face the tomb. “Stay out here. I’ll go inside alone.”

ZOEY

KELLAN WALKS TOWARD THE TOMB, BUT I DON'T FOLLOW. FEAR HOLDS ME back.

Not the tomb. Not the tomb.

Even through the stone walls, the insidious presence of the soul it houses bleeds heavy and thick into the air around us. The weight of it is crushing. Kellan hasn't felt it yet, but he will. We may not have been aware of it when we were living and spent hours inside the tomb, eating, drinking, hiding away, but now we're dead, it's a different matter.

He reaches the door.

"Kellan." My voice is low.

He glances back at me over his shoulder, and smiles. "I'll be right back."

Don't go inside. Don't go inside.

He vanishes through the door.

Panic chokes me.

There's nothing scarier than the thought of an eternity on your own. Nothing and nobody to talk to while stuck in the place where you died.

Come back. Come back.

"Kellan?" I take a step toward the tomb.

He shouldn't have gone in there. The first night I was here, I saw Churchill Bradley in the halls of the school. He is the master here, lord of the realm, and his hand is the one that holds the chains of all the souls that are trapped here.

"Please, Kellan. Come back."

There's no reply.

I can't let him do this alone.

Curling my fingers into fists, I walk straight through the solid wood. It sends a disturbing tingle through me. I stop inside the structure. Kellan is standing in front of the coffin, but his gaze is on the wall on the opposite side. A white fog slithers toward him.

"Stop with the dramatics." Kellan's voice is dry. "I'm not scared of you."

The temperature drops, and although it no longer affects us the way it did when we were alive, I still shiver.

"All I want to know is how I can return to my life. Answer that, and then I'll leave you alone."

His words hurt. I understand that he wants to get back to Eli. Protect him. I also know it's impossible, but the thought of him leaving me here alone still hurts.

"Get out." The raspy voice echoes off the stone walls. "Get out."

Kellan scowls. "Answer my question."

Pain explodes through me. When Kellan gasps, I know he's experiencing it too.

"Get out of here." The words turn into a howl. "You're not welcome. Insolent boy. Leave!"

"No." Kellan snarls.

I grab his arm and yank him back a step, the invisible assault intensifying.

Fog rolls out on either side of the tomb, and a sickly green light forms above the coffin. It coalesces and swirls, until the shape of a man takes form. His eyes burn with rage.

Churchill Bradley raises a long finger and points at us. "Know your place, boy."

Kellan shakes off my hand. "I do, and it's sure as shit not here with you."

A clawed hand wraps around the essence of my being. It squeezes and the pain feels like a metal band crushing my soul. Kellan cries out, clutching his chest, and drops to his knees. My legs fold beneath me.

"You're mine." The old man's voice rises. "You belong to me. All of you do. This is my domain. My home."

"Kellan." I gasp his name.

"There's no escape from here."

A force hits me, and I'm flung backward, through the door, and over the tombstones outside. I hit the ground and tumble over and over before coming to a stop. Rolling onto my side, I search for Kellan. He isn't far away.

An eerie shriek rattles through the cemetery, and my attention snaps back toward the structure. Churchill Bradley floats from the confines of his tomb.

"Run!" I shout.

He doesn't have to be told twice.

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KELLAN

WE STOP OUTSIDE THE CHAPEL'S DOORS, DOUBLED OVER, AND PANTING FOR breath.

"There's nothing quite like being chased through a cemetery by a crazy ghost to make you feel alive."

"Oh my god. That's not funny!"

"It's a little bit funny."

We stare at each other, and the look on her face—a mixture of shock, fear, and exasperation—tips me over the edge. Laughter escapes my lips. Her lips part, probably to tell me to stop, and that just makes me worse. The longer she stands there, just staring at me like I've lost my mind, the harder I laugh. Tears spill from my eyes, I can't breathe, and eventually I'm wheezing instead of laughing, clutching my sides, and pointing at her.

Zoey plants her hands on her hips, and glares at me. "Stop laughing. *Nothing* about this is funny."

"Why ... did ... we ... run?" I manage to force out between gasps.

She scowls. "What do you mean? We ran because Churchill chased us."

I shake my head. "But ... but ..." I suck in a deep breath, fighting to get control of myself. "But we're ghosts. You could have just ... you know ..." I wave a hand. "*Poofed* us out of there."

"*Poofed* us?" The incredulous way she repeats the words sets me off again.

I sink to my knees, hands wrapped around my torso, taking in heaving breaths, and slowly my laughter turns to sobs. I can't stop shaking, my entire body wracked with anger and pain. A hand smooths over my hair, and down until she can squeeze my shoulder.

"I know," Zoey says softly. "Don't fight it, Kell."

"It's not fair."

"I know."

"I shouldn't be dead. Not at that asshole's hands."

Her hand strokes my back. "I know."

"Eli won't be able to deal with it." My head snaps up, and I search out Zoey's face. "You said you watched us. How did you do it? Can you take me to Eli?"

She holds out a hand. "I can try. I just had to think about you both, and close my eyes. When I opened them, I'd be wherever you were. It was harder when you weren't here. The only time I could reach you was if you were together."

I nod, wipe the tears from my face, and stand up. "Okay. Let's do it."

I take her hand and close my eyes. My stomach jolts, the way it does when you go over a bump at high speed in a car, and when I open my eyes again, we're in Eli's bedroom.

I turn in a circle. The place is a mess. Beer bottles everywhere. Dirty clothes strewn across the floor. It tells me everything I need to know about his state of mind. Eli is a neat-freak, I'm the messy one ... *Was* the messy one.

"How long has passed?" I search out Zoey, who's standing near the bed.

She shrugs. "I don't know. I told you. Time passes differently for us. I'll look around and see if I can find out." She disappears, only to reappear a couple of seconds later, her face somber. "I think we should go back."

"Why?"

"Please, Kellan."

I fold my arms and lift my chin. "What did you find?"

"Just once can't you do something without arguing?"

"No."

She sighs. "Fine. They're getting ready to go to your funeral."

My spine snaps taut. "Already?"

"It's been a week for them."

"A *week* and he's living like this?" I spin, and stalk across to the bathroom, reaching out a hand to open the door, then laughing quietly when it passes right through it. Steeling myself for the weird sensation, I step through and into the bathroom.

Eli is walking out of the shower when I enter, his movements slow and jerky. Devastation is clear on his face, from the set line of his lips to the dark shadows beneath his eyes. Wrapping a towel around his waist, he looks around, as though he's trying to figure out what he should be doing.

"Get dressed, idiot." I roll my eyes. "I can't have a funeral without you there, can I?"

"I don't want you to have a funeral at all. I want this all to be a big fucking joke."

My jaw drops. *Can he hear me?*

I follow him through to the bedroom, where he eyes the suit laid out on his bed.

"I'm going to look like a fucking undertaker."

I step up beside him, and let one hand hover above his shoulder. I can't touch him. If my hand goes through him, I don't think I can hold it together.

"But you'll wear it because it's what I want."

His head bows, grief and pain flowing out from him. His thoughts are clear. He might as well be voicing them. He thinks it should have been him who died, not me.

"Stop it. Get dressed, stop fucking moping, and go downstairs."

And, once again, as though he can hear me, he reaches for the clothes.

ZOEY

A SEA OF MOURNERS MILL AROUND OUTSIDE THE SMALL STONE CHURCH. Kellan is silent beside me. This is his funeral, and it must be affecting him. It's the reason I didn't stay long at my own.

He hasn't left Eli's side once since we found him. They've always been joined at the hip and even in death it looks as though that isn't going to change.

I cast a glance toward Arabella. She's pale, dressed elegantly in a black dress. All her focus is on Eli, her expression filled with concern.

She leans into him. "We need to go inside, okay?"

Eli nods.

She leads him toward the steps of the church. He doesn't say a word, his movements slow. The pain radiating off both of them is palpable.

We shouldn't be here.

My attention shifts to my friend. "They love you so much."

"I know." His face is twisted with anguish.

"We don't have to stay for this."

"You don't. I do."

When he moves to join them, I stop him. "It isn't going to do you any good. Believe me."

A nerve ticks in his jaw. "I need to do this.."

"This is only going to cause you more misery."

"Eli needs me."

The mourners walk toward the steps and through the doors in a river of black, oblivious to our presence.

I shake my head. "There's nothing you can do for him now."

He rakes a hand through his hair. "He heard me."

"What?"

"Back at the house. In the bathroom. He responded to me. At least, I think he did."

I frown. "That's not possible."

"Why not?"

"Because ... it's not."

"How do you know?"

"Because neither of you heard me in over a fucking year when I was shouting in your faces," I argue. "Trust me, I tried."

Kellan is silent for a moment. "You shouted at us?"

"More than once."

"That must have been frustrating."

I cross my arms. "Oh, you have no idea. Haunting people isn't as much fun as they make out in the movies."

"I thought I heard you talk a few times. But I put it down to my imagination."

"Because ghosts don't exist?" I deadpan.

His lips tip up into a faint smile. "Yeah, we totally don't exist right now."

My gaze goes to the doors. "You really want to sit through your own funeral?"

"I need to know what they say. It's the one party that I can guarantee is all about me, right?"

"Because speaking badly about the dead is a grave mistake."

He snorts at my attempt to lighten the mood. "That was so bad."

I sigh. "Okay, let's go inside."

We walk up the steps and into the building. Flowers are everywhere, white and stark compared with the guests who are all dressed in black. My gaze is drawn to the stained-glass windows above the altar—angels in golden robes with radiant halos of fire.

Do they exist? Why haven't we seen any? Is this purgatory? What did we do to deserve all this?

The priest's voice washes over me, his tone somber. A black coffin sits to one side, with a photograph of Kellan above it. One I took. Seeing it brings a swell of emotion.

I recognize students, teachers, and other faces packing the seats around us.

Kellan's head moves until he finds Eli and Arabella in the front aisle. We take position beside the wall to their left.

Eli's eyes are locked on the coffin. Arabella is beside him, clinging to his hand, her gaze lowered as she cries silently.

Throat thick with sadness, I stay unmoving.

"I always told him I was going to die before him." Kellan says, shoulders tense and expression tight with grief. "That the pretty ones always die young."

I'm not sure how he finds the courage to listen as they say goodbye to him.

A few people get up to give speeches, but my focus is on my friends. All I want to do is wrap my arms around Eli and let him know we're here. Watching him fall apart piece by piece is an agony I'm going to have to exist with.

This isn't fair.

The coffin starts to move toward a hole in the wall.

A sad smile twists his lips. "Thank you for making sure they burn my body to ashes. You know I don't want to come back as a zombie."

Eli lurches to his feet in a sudden move and pushes past Arabella.

I think he's about to fling himself at the coffin, but he turns in the opposite direction and hurries down the middle of the aisles instead.

Kellan takes off after him.

IO

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KELLAN

ONE SECOND I'M FOLLOWING ELI, THE NEXT I'M BACK AT CHURCHILL Bradley inside the chapel standing beside the altar.

"What the fuck?"

"Your place of death pulls you back. You can only stay away for so long."

I twist around at Zoey's voice. "You knew that would happen." My accusation is sharp.

"Sometimes it takes longer. It seems to be linked to your emotional state. The more upset you are, the quicker it'll drag you back."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You haven't stopped rushing around since you got here. I keep saying you need to stop."

"How am I supposed to fucking stop when I'm stuck here?" My shout echoes off the walls. "My best friend is being stalked by a fucking psychopath, and I can't do anything to fucking stop it!" I take a swing at the altar. My fist goes straight through it. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck! I can't even fucking hit something!" A roar leaves my throat, and an odd pulse goes through the air, followed by a crash.

I stare at the stone cross that used to stand at the back of the chapel, but is now in two pieces in front of the altar.

"Kellan." Zoey's whisper breaks the heavy silence.

I slowly drag my gaze from the broken cross to where my friend is staring at me, lips parted.

"Did I do that?"

She nods.

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

I walk between the pews, weaving my way up and down until I reach the doors, then stop. “Where are the people?”

“What people?”

“Students, teachers, security. I haven’t seen anyone here.”

“Oh ... We have to think about seeing them. I was never into science fiction or paranormal stuff, but I think it’s like a different dimension or something. We can only see them if we concentrate or if there’s strong emotions. That can sometimes force us to see them. It’s how I first saw Arabella.”

“So someone could be here right now and we wouldn’t know?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I don’t like this. There has to be a way to change it.”

“How many dead people do you know that have come back to life?”

I know she’s being logical, but I can’t allow myself to believe that there’s no way to turn back the clock. I don’t *feel* like I’m dead.

“Maybe I’m in a coma.”

“You’ve just watched your funeral.”

“Maybe it wasn’t me.”

“There was a photograph of you above the coffin.”

“Maybe it’s a trick to draw Evan out. That’s something the police do.”

“Kellan—”

“There has to be some way.” I throw my head back and stare at the ceiling. “You hear me?” I shout. “I know someone out there is listening. Tell me what I need to do to go back.”

Her sigh is soft. “You’ve reached the third stage of grief.”

“What does *that* mean?”

“Bargaining. There’s no one to hear you. I’ve been here for a year. If there was someone who could change things, don’t you think I’d have found them and come back?”

“You’re not me.”

“What does *that* mean?” She throws my words back at me.

“If there’s a way back, I won’t rest until I find it.”

II

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ZOEY

SPRAWLED ON THE GRASS, I STARE UP AT THE NIGHT SKY. THE STARS SHINE above me in the dark like diamonds spilled over black marble. This is where I find calm. Where everything fades away, and I can clear my head. Something that Kellan refuses to even try to do.

An explosion rocks through the silence.

Peace shattered, I sit up and look toward the school. Wisps of white smoke drift up from one of the windows on the second floor. A second later, a form floats through the broken glass to drift down onto the ground.

I roll my eyes and lay back down onto the grass. It doesn't take long until I sense his presence beside me.

Turning my head, I find Kellan sprawled out beside me. "What did you destroy this time?"

He grins. "Science room. I think the security guards pissed themselves when they heard the bang."

"They already think the place is haunted."

"That's because it is."

"Is your plan to take the school apart piece by piece?"

His gaze moves over my face. "I'll burn the entire fucking thing to the ground until the universe listens to me."

"All you're doing is annoying Churchill Bradley." I sigh. "Don't you think it's time to stop? It's been years."

Years since he died. Years since the school was closed and abandoned. Its halls are empty, filled with nothing but ghosts and memories. The only living beings we see nowadays are the security guards who are paid to

monitor the buildings. Yet my friend's anger hasn't dimmed. It still burns as hot as it did the day he died.

"I don't give a fuck about that bastard."

"You should. You know what happens when you wind him up."

"He hasn't caught us in months." Kellan stares up at the night sky.

Silence falls, and my attention returns to the stars.

"I saw Eli earlier." Kellan's voice is soft. "He's at the cabin in the woods."

"Is he still talking to himself?"

"To *me*."

I groan. "Kell—"

He rolls onto his side to face me. "We have conversations. He's aware of me."

"Let's say I believe you ... Even if he *can* hear you, it's not good for him. People will think he's crazy. He'll get locked up for hearing voices that aren't there."

Eli seems as trapped as we are, but at least he's alive. From what Kellan has said, it's a life he's willing to waste, hiding away in the woods, avoiding people. He might as well be just as dead as we are.

Oblivious to the direction of my thoughts, Kellan scowls. "What are you, a spectral therapist now? Someone needs to look after him now he's fucked everything up."

"Arabella is still in L.A. I checked on her earlier. She's still making art out of stained glass. Her latest one is of the chapel."

"The pair of them are a fucking mess without me there to fix things. We need to do something about it."

A low, eerie shriek rings from behind us in the woods.

"Churchill is awake." Kellan jumps to his feet.

I scramble upright. "Fuck."

"I guess he heard the explosion." His lips twitch.

"He's sick of you trying to demolish his home."

Kellan shrugs. "He knows how to stop me. All he has to do is give in and tell me what I want to know."

Anger washes over me. "Your body was cremated. There is no going back. My body is in the ground, riddled with worms. I hate that we're stuck like this, but maybe it's time you accept it."

"Never."

“Kell, you need to stop. “

“That’s never going to happen.”

“You’re so fucking stubborn.”

A sudden gust of wind picks up around us, ripping at our clothes. Raising my hand to shield my eyes, I glimpse the creepy greenish light illuminating the dark. Pain hits me, icy claws squeezing around my soul.

“Zoey, run.”

My legs won’t work.

Images fill my head.

I’m back in the cemetery. The moon is full, its light bathing everything in silver. I can feel the cold October air prickling against the bare skin of my arms. I’m trembling, fear trapping me in place.

My stomach drops when I realize where and when I am.

Halloween.

No, no, no.

“Zoey.”

A skeletal mask looms into my vision, and a pair of eyes glare at me.

Evan.

“Open your eyes.”

I recoil from the hate spilling from his lips.

“Don’t let him get you stuck in a loop.”

His rough hands grab at my shoulders.

“You need to snap out of it.”

I claw at him, but he’s too strong.

“Please, Zoey. I can’t do this without you.”

He shoves me backward and pain radiates through the side of my skull as it strikes something hard.

“I can’t lose you again. I need you.”

I2

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KELLAN

“FUCK. FUCK. FUCK.”

I’m losing her. It’s clear in the blankness of her gaze, the way she’s fading in and out, to the point where I think my hold on her will break and she’ll disappear completely.

This has happened twice before in all the time we’ve been trapped here. Both times because I’ve goaded Churchill Bradley to the point of him wanting to hurt us. When he targets me, I take it. It’s worth the pain because it reminds me of what I’m fighting for. But when he targets Zoey, it makes me question my motives. Makes me wonder if my inability to let it go is selfish and causing more harm than good.

But I’m not a quitter, and I refuse to be stuck haunting Churchill Bradley Academy for eternity.

There *must* be a way out.

“Zoey, fight it. He’s only strong if you don’t fight him. Come on.” One of my hands passes through her shoulder. “Fuck. Zoey. You can’t leave me here alone. I’ll destroy the place. You’re my anchor. *Fight* it. Who knows what stupid plan I’ll come up with next, if you’re not here to stop me.”

Her body solidifies, and her face turns toward the sound of my voice.

“That’s it. Come on. It’s bad enough I can’t have sex. If I can’t have someone to be sarcastic with, I might as well hang myself. Which won’t go well because I’ll fall through the fucking rope.”

She laughs, and blinks.

“There you are!” I sag, relief turning my legs unsteady. I run my hands over her face, down her arms, and link my fingers with hers. “You okay?”

She nods.

“Where did you go?”

“My death.”

“Same old. He needs a new script.” I turn my head in the direction of the tomb. “You hear that, dickhead? Try something new.”

A faint howl is my only response.

“Fuck you, asshole. You need to go and get laid.”

“Stop antagonizing him.” She punches my arm.

Hand in hand, we cross the cemetery and walk toward the chapel.

“I can’t. You know I can’t. He has answers. He wouldn’t behave the way he does if he didn’t know something.”

“Or he just wants you to stop disrupting his resting place.”

I shake my head. “You know that isn’t—” I stop, a ripple of *something* going through me. “I need to go.”

Zoey sighs. “Kell, you have to stop going back there.”

“He needs me.”

“He needs to move on. Sometimes I wonder if you holding on is stopping him from getting on with his life.”

“If I wasn’t keeping an eye on him, he’d be all alone.”

“He *is* alone! He doesn’t know you’re there.”

I shake my head, already reaching out with my mind to where Eli is. “You know that isn’t true.”

I close my eyes, and when I reopen them, I’m in the cabin that Eli calls home, and it’s immediately clear why I felt drawn back. Eli is calling my name.

“Kellan? Where’s Kellan? I’ve got to find him.”

Surprise holds me still at the female voice that replies to him.

“You need to rest.”

Arabella is here?

I step through the door into Eli’s room and my gaze locks onto the blonde girl leaning over the man on the bed.

“The chapel. He’s in the chapel. I have to go and get him. Before Evan ... No, I can’t be late ...”

Her eyes close, and her head bows, grief twisting her lips, but none of it shows in her voice. “Kellan is right here with Miles.”

I step up behind her and look down at my best friend. He’s naked, covered in sweat, his head thrashing from side to side, as he tries to climb off the bed.

"I need to wash my hands. They're stained. I can't get rid of the blood. So much blood."

I bite back a humorless laugh when Arabella goes for the most effective method to keep him in bed. She climbs on top of him and straddles his hips.

"Kellan is safe. He's safe."

"Why can't I find him?"

My heart twists at his plea.

"He's right here with us, and he wants you to get better."

I cast her a sharp glance. *Does she know I'm here?* No, she can't. She's just saying whatever she can to calm him down.

"I've got you ... please stop. Please, Eli."

"Kellan!"

I feel the call like an arrow to the chest. It drags me forward another step, and I reach out a hand, wanting to touch him, to tell him I'm here. That I haven't left him. That he's not alone.

"Let me die. Then I can be with Kellan, and my parents. There's nothing for me here. Just let me die."

Fuck. The true desire in his words cuts me deeper than the knife Evan used to end my life. He means every single word. And it drives me to do something without thinking about whether it's even possible.

I reach inside his chest, close my eyes, and force my body into his. We gasp in unison, and there's an audible click.

When my eyes snap open, I'm inside a room, and Eli is standing beside me. It takes me a second to get my bearings, but once I do I turn in a slow circle.

"I always wondered what the inside of your head looked like. Should have guessed it'd be an art studio." I grin at him and flick a finger against the easel holding a half-finished painting of me.

"You're dead." His green eyes bore into me. "This isn't real."

I roll my eyes. "I'm aware of that, thank you very much. Do you think Miles ever thinks about me?" I look around for somewhere to sit, form an oversized bean bag in my head, and flop onto it. "I was sure he'd pine after me for a while."

"It's been ten years." There's a bite to his voice.

"Huh. Doesn't feel that long."

"No, it doesn't."

"So, what are you doing?"

He turns his back on me and picks up a paintbrush, swirling it in green paint. "What do you mean?"

"I'm the one who died, not you."

"I know that."

"So, why are you behaving as though *you're* the one who's dead?" I smirk at the glare he angles at me.

"I'm not."

I snort. "Sure. You're out here in the middle of nowhere, looking like a fucking yeti, and pushing away all the people who care about you."

"*All* the people. Because there are so many, right?" Bitterness taints his voice.

"More than you think."

The new voice startles me, and I twist to see Elliot Travers in the doorway. He throws me a small smile. "Kellan's right. What are you doing, son?"

"What is this?" Eli's voice is angry. "I can't even have people see my side of things inside my own head?"

"We see your side; we just don't think it's right. And, as you rightly pointed out, this is all in your head, so *you* feel the same way."

"Bullshit."

"Seriously?" I stand up, my own temper rising. "You're arguing with your own subconscious now?"

"I need everyone to just leave me the fuck alone!"

"She's not going to do that, Eli." I will do everything in my power to make sure she doesn't leave him again.

He glares at me. "Of course, she will. She was good at leaving me alone." His head tilts, listening to something that I can't hear. "Do you hear that?" He looks directly at me. "She was so happy with me that she never fucking smiled unless she was leaving the house to spend time with someone else."

"Eli—" I want to tell him this isn't a fever dream, that he's really talking to me. That he's not alone. But something is pulling him away. Pulling *me* away.

I reach out to grasp his arm, and my hand goes right through him.

Fuck. Too soon. Let me stay longer.

"I miss you, Kell. So fucking much."

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ZOEY

THE AIR BESIDE THE ALTAR SHIMMERS, AND A SECOND LATER, KELLAN materializes. Curses fall from his lips, and he throws his hands up in frustration when his gaze lands on me.

“You have to be fucking kidding me.”

“How was Eli?”

His gaze shifts away from me. “Arabella was there.”

The news surprises me. “*What?*”

“He was sick, and she was at the cabin.”

I frown. “But they haven’t been around each other in years.”

He drops down beside me onto the dusty wooden bench. “We can’t let this opportunity go to waste.”

“What opportunity?”

“Getting them back together.”

“Kell—” My tone is wary.

He raises a finger to silence me. “I spoke to him.”

I roll my eyes. “Not this again.”

“Seriously. I jumped into his brain.”

“Into his *brain*?”

“His consciousness, then. He *saw* me.”

I press my hand to his forehead. “I don’t think ghosts can get sick, but are you sure you haven’t caught something?”

“Ha, ha. Very funny.” He slaps my hand away. “If we can get Eli and Ari back on track, maybe that’s how we get to move on.”

For a second, I’m not sure I’ve heard him right. “Move on?”

“Move on. Go back.” He shrugs. “Same thing.”

“No it’s not.”

“You know you can’t fight me and win. Just roll with it.”

He’s not going to let this go. I can see it in his expression.

“There is nowhere to go.”

“Just because we haven’t gone anywhere yet doesn’t mean there’s nowhere to go.”

I tilt my head and study him. “And what if they aren’t meant to be together?”

His laugh is derisive. “If there’s one thing that I’m one hundred percent certain of, it’s that Eli and Arabella are meant to be together.” He rises from the bench. “And *that* will never change.”

Joining him, we leave the chapel and head toward the school. There are three large, white vans parked out front of the dorm building, and people carrying boxes inside.

I stop and stare. “What’s going on?”

Kellan halts beside me. “Does the building look strange to you?”

My gaze roams over the structure. “It’s different.”

“Someone’s started renovations.” He frowns. “How long have you been waiting for me in the chapel?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s find out.”

We cross the grass toward the dorm building. The place is a hive of activity. Dust no longer covers every surface. Cleaners move from room to room while decorators paint the walls. It makes my heart ache when I walk into my old room and discover the artwork Eli had covered the walls with are all painted over. Kellan avoids the one he shared with Eli while alive. He hasn’t stepped foot in there since his death. Instead, he prowls around the rest of the floors.

“Are they turning this place into a hotel?”

He shakes his head. “No, I don’t think so.”

“Then what are they doing?”

Kellan doesn’t reply.

Leaving the dorms, we venture into the main part of the school. There’s more evidence of changes here. The classrooms are clean and smell of paint and disinfectant. New desks and chairs replace the old ones. The old wooden floors have been replaced. New blinds cover the windows. It’s as though someone has come along and wiped away the past.

I stop in front of a glass trophy case in one of the hallways. “They’re going to reopen the school.”

Kellan peers at the photographs in silver frames inside it. “Impossible.”

“It’s obviously not.”

“We would have noticed.”

“But we didn’t. The veil between the limbo we are stuck in, and the world isn’t always thin. How much have we missed and not even realized it?”

We’re forever young. Stuck in the same clothes we died in while the world around us continues.

What else has changed while we haven’t?

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I4

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KELLAN

I POP IN AND OUT TO VISIT ELI OFTEN AFTER WE DISCOVER THE PLAN TO open the school. Every time I visit, he talks to me, and no matter how much Zoey claims otherwise, I'm one hundred percent certain he's aware of my presence.

On one of my trips, the cabin is empty. That's not unusual. Eli often travels for art shows, and I've discovered that no matter how much I try to jump to wherever Eli is, if it's not the cabin then I fail. It seems I'm stuck at Churchill Bradley or the cabin and nowhere else. I *think* it's to do with the glass raven Eli has on the mantelpiece. My theory is that it's because the ornament has my ashes in it.

"Honey, I'm home."

I spin to face Eli as he comes through the door. He looks directly at me.

"Miss me?"

"You have no fucking idea how much."

But he's not talking to me. He's talking to the glass raven. "I should take you with me next time I travel, instead of leaving you here."

"Yes, you should. Being stuck in two locations is boring the fuck out of me. Take me with you. I like traveling."

"I brought some more of my shit back from the Hamptons. Found a couple of sketchbooks from when I was a kid. I'll show them to you once I'm unpacked. Speaking of ... I better go get the cases out of the car."

I follow him, and stop in the doorway to watch while he unpacks. I know from experience if I step outside I'll be back at Churchill Bradley, and it takes energy to bring me back and ... I'm not ready to leave just yet. It feels like it's been months since I last saw Eli, and I want to stick around

for as long as I can. I pace the floor while Eli does whatever shit he does outside when he first comes back from a trip.

“Can you believe fucking Churchill Bradley is reopening. *And* they invited our entire senior year to attend some kind of reopening celebration event? Are they fucking insane?”

He sinks onto the couch, and rubs a hand down his face. He looks exhausted. Tipping his head back, he closes his eyes.

“Who in their right mind would want to go back to that place?”

I move closer. “Maybe you should go. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I’ve discovered that when he’s tired or he’s feeling down, it’s easier for me to reach him. And this time is no different.

“The worst is already happening. They’re talking about reopening the fucking place.”

“Is that such a bad idea? The school was ranked as one of the best educational institutions in the country.” Plus, I’m there, and I’m confident that if Eli comes back to the school, I’ll be better able to reach him and find a way to reverse this stupid fucking situation I’m in.

“And both of my friends were murdered there.”

“It wasn’t the school that did it.”

“Shut the fuck up. I don’t want to hear your logic about this.”

I don’t know whether it’s his mood, or I’m just getting stronger, but I’m not dragged back to Churchill Bradley and I get to spend a couple of days with Eli. Sometimes I forget I don’t have a body anymore, and try to touch things, turn on the radio, hand him paints or brushes, and it’s only when my hand passes through things that it reminds me of our reality.

But Eli talks to me. *Every. Single. Day.*

And I’ve fucking missed that.

It also means I can bug him about the school reunion. Usually when he’s sleeping, and his mind is more receptive to suggestions.

“Shut the fuck up.” Eli’s voice cuts through the silence of the room after I’ve spent an hour in his dreams listing the pros of why he should come back.

“Or what? You’ll stop speaking to me?” I snort. “Never gonna happen.”

“Seriously, I don’t want to do this right now.”

“You realize you’re talking to yourself, don’t you? I’m not really haunting the inside of your head.” *Sarcasm, thy name is Kellan.*

“I’m aware.”

“It’s because you’re out here alone. Did you notice how little you spoke to me when you were in New York? You didn’t need me there.” It’s a guess that he doesn’t speak to me when he’s not here, mostly because he always asks if I’ve missed him when he returns.

“Please shut up.”

“You should go to the reunion.”

“I said no.”

“You can change your mind. I bet Elena didn’t throw the letter away. She probably picked it up after you left.”

“I have no interest in going back there.”

“Not even to see me?”

“You’re not there.”

If only that were true. “Most of your memories of me are, though. Eli, it could be good to face it.”

“Just let me sleep, Kell.”

ZOEY

I SPIN IN A SLOW CIRCLE AND TAKE IN THE BEAUTY OF THE COLORED GLASS as it spills out in a rainbow onto the floor. Arabella's stained-glass art depicts so much of the past it's like a story woven into each piece. The cemetery and a girl in white. A knight on an altar. An angel in the dark. I could stand here for days and lose myself in their beauty and hidden meanings.

Noise from somewhere else in the apartment distracts me from my admiration.

Arabella is in her bedroom. There's an open suitcase on the bed in front of her, and Miles is perched on the end of the mattress.

"What am I supposed to take?"

He shrugs. "Clothes? We're spending a week at our old school. I don't think they expect anything fancy until Prom night."

They're coming to Churchill Bradley Academy? They must have gotten the same invitation as Eli. The thought fills me with excitement.

"Yoga pants, T-shirts, and hoodies it is, then." She dumps an armful of T-shirts into the suitcase.

Miles rolls his eyes. "Maybe something more elegant and casual? You don't have to look like a homeless person all the time."

She chews on her bottom lip. "Are you sure you want to go?"

"Are *you*?"

Sighing, she moves around the bed to sit beside him on the mattress. "Ivan is convinced we need to face the past, but I still think this is some cruel cosmic joke."

He hugs her. "My fiancé means well."

“What if this causes more damage than good?”

“And what if it helps us overcome all the shit that happened?”

His words remind me of the anguish I’d felt watching all the pain and trauma they suffered—a silent witness who’d been unable to warn or save them as their fate unfolded.

I move closer to Arabella.

“Kellan died there.” Her voice is low. “So did Zoey.”

She talked to me in the cemetery and brought flowers to where I died. Throughout her ordeal under Eli’s hands, she’d gravitated toward me. In return, I ensured she found my diary, hoping that it would connect me to Eli and Kellan somehow..

Reaching out, I brush my hand over the curve of her cheek. She shivers, a small frown creasing her brow. I wish that, just once, she could see me.

Miles frowns. “Hey, are you okay?”

Arabella nods. “I feel like someone walked over my grave.”

“I hope you’re not coming down with something.”

“It’s probably just stress.”

Or me.

A familiar tug inside my chest warns me my time is short.

“What about Eli?”

Arabella glances at him. “The last place on earth Eli would ever return to is Churchill Bradley Academy.”

The pull is harder this time, and I don’t bother trying to fight it. I don’t have as strong a connection to Arabella as Kellan does to Eli. I can’t stay away from Churchill Bradley as long as he can.

My being is bounced from one location to another, and when I look around, I’m back in the cemetery.

Kellan is sitting on one of the gravestones. “Well?”

I grin. “Arabella is coming to the reunion.”

He nods. “Thank fuck for that.”

“What were you going to do if they said no?”

“Find another way to get their asses here.”

A ghostly moan emanates from the crypt, and we both turn our attention in that direction.

“Is it me, or does old Churchill seem a little mellow lately?” Kellan hops off the gravestone.

“What do you mean?”

“Since there’s been more activity at the school, he’s not been as easy to annoy.”

“Yeah ... I guess so.”

“You’d think he would be mad about all these people being here. All the noise and things changing.”

“Maybe he likes it?” I fall into step with him, and we walk closer to the tomb.

Kellan’s expression is thoughtful, but he doesn’t reply.

“Arabella and Eli will be here in a few days. We should focus on getting them together.”

“Leave that to me. I have a plan.”

“She’s coming with Miles and his fiancé.”

That gets his attention. “Miles is engaged?”

“It sounds like it.”

“Why didn’t you mention this before?”

“Because I didn’t know. The few times I’ve checked on her before, she’s been alone. She might have mentioned Ivan’s name, but I thought they were just friends.” I curl my fingers around his arm. “Come on, let’s go and check out the school.”

We weave our way through the headstones toward the gate.

I wonder how much everyone changed? It’s been ten years for them. I can’t help but feel excited to have the living back within the walls of Churchill Bradley Academy once again.

KELLAN

“THERE’S JACE.” I BUMP ZOEY’S SHOULDER. “AND THERE’S BRAD. STILL with Lacy, as well. Why the fuck he didn’t dump her ass years ago, I’ll never understand. He looks rough.”

“It’s been ten years.”

“We don’t look rough.”

She shakes her head. “We’re *dead*. We don’t age.”

“There’s Eli’s car.” I hop down off the wall. “You coming?”

“No. You go and meet him. I want to wait here and watch for Arabella.”

I don’t need to walk to the parking lot, I could just *think* myself there, but I don’t want to. I’ve avoided that particular area the entire time I’ve been here. By the time I arrive, Eli’s car is parked, and he’s climbing out.

“Fuck.” The guttural curse reaches me and I hurry closer, reaching Eli just as he sinks to his knees and leans his head on the grill of my car.

I rest my hand on his shoulder, taking care not to let it pass through him.

“You’ve got this. Get up and go into the cafeteria. That’s where the invitation said to go when you arrive.”

“I can’t do this, Kell,” he whispers.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I summon up a smile, not that he can see it, and force a light tone to my voice. “Of the two of us, it’s me who can’t do it. No physical body, you see. Hard to socialize when no one can see you.”

His laugh is choked.

“I love you, Eli, but it’s conditional. If you’re going to sit out here in the dark, crying on the hood of my car all night, I’m going to have to reevaluate whose head I’m haunting. I might have to hop over to Arabella’s instead.”

“You’re not even fucking in my head. I’m just imagining what you might say to me.”

“It counts.” I don’t bother trying to persuade him otherwise. I’ve learned that if I push the fact he can hear me, it makes it harder to get through to him. “You know it’s what I’d say if I was there.”

“If you were here, this wouldn’t be such a fucking problem, you idiot.”

“Stop swearing at me. Get up, wipe your eyes, and remind the assholes inside who you are.”

He looks down at his fingers, surprise clear on his face.

“Suck it up, buttercup. Admit it. You love me. You miss me.”

“You already know I miss you.”

“Then get your ass inside, unpack, then come and visit me in the cemetery.” I don’t think he’s ready to go to the chapel, but the cemetery is close enough.

“You’re not fucking here.”

“As good as. Stop the fucking pity party, get up and walk in there. You owned the hallways of Churchill Bradley. Remind them!”

His chest moves with the lungful of air he sucks in. “You’re right.”

I keep pace beside him as he walks toward the building. His eyes move back and forth, pausing on the wall where we used to sit, and he shakes his head.

When we reach the cafeteria, I touch his arm.

“You can do this, Eli. You’re stronger than you know.”

I don’t go inside with him. I’m not ready to see everyone in one place. Instead, I go in search of Zoey.

ZOEY

“DID YOU KNOW ELI IS HERE?” MILES GLANCES AT ARABELLA.

Shock ripples over her expression. “He is?”

I glance back toward the cafeteria and see Kellan headed toward us. My pace slows, and I let them walk ahead while I wait for him to catch up.

“Did you see him?” I ask the second he stops beside me.

“Yeah.” His gaze is locked on the retreating figures of Arabella, Miles, and Ivan as they enter the dorm building.

“She didn’t know he was coming.”

“He knows she’s here.”

I tilt my head at the confidence in his voice. “How do you figure that?”

“Because there’s no way he would set foot in this place without her.”

He moves toward the building, and I fall into step beside him. We don’t speak again until we’re inside. People mill around—there are lots of familiar faces in the crowd.

“They put everyone in their old rooms.”

“That’s fucked up.” Kellan floats upward. “I’m going to see what Miles is doing.”

Drifting up through the floor beside him, we arrive in a dorm room just as the door swings open.

Miles enters first, and looks around nervously. “This used to be home sweet home.”

The older man behind him scans over the interior, his expression cautious. “*Da*, it’s just how I imagined it.”

“We can push the beds together.”

“Which one was yours? When you lived here.”

“The one by the window.”

Kellan stands in the center of the room, watching as Ivan enters the room and closes the door behind him. His gaze moves to Miles.

“Have you already forgotten about me?” He reaches out, but his hand goes through Mile’s jaw.

“It’s been years for them.” I remind him.

“He looks older.”

“They all do. He’s twenty-eight.”

He shakes his head. “I never noticed with Eli. He looks the same to me.”

“Because you are with him most of the time. You haven’t seen Miles since your funeral.”

Kellan swallows, and licks his lips. “He watched me die.”

I reach out and squeeze his shoulder gently. “I know.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, he sighs and turns his attention to the other man. “I guess this is Ivan.”

“From the conversation I overheard, he’s Russian, rich, and owns a bunch of art galleries.”

“Hmmm.” He walks in a circle around the other man. “I suppose he’s good-looking, if you like older men.” He turns to the desk beside the window. Energy prickles around him, and with a flick of his wrist, he sends the chair toppling onto its side.

Miles jumps. “What the hell was that?”

Ivan spins in the direction of the sound but shows no sign of being flustered by it.

“Kellan.” My tone is a warning.

“What?”

“Scaring the shit out of them isn’t going to make you feel better.”

“You don’t know that. It might.”

“You don’t want to hurt Miles.”

“He could do a whole lot better. Maybe I’ll just possess his lover instead, and remind him of what he’s missing.”

The older man walks over to the chair and puts it back in position. “The leg must be unstable.”

Miles gives a little laugh. “Yeah. Of course.”

“There are no ghosts here,” Ivan continues. “It’s your memories making you twitchy.”

Kellan snorts. "Oh, you have no fucking idea." He focuses on the blinds and they shoot up.

I roll my eyes. "We're supposed to concentrate on Arabella and Eli, not prove to your ex's fiancé that we exist."

"But this could be so much fun."

"Kellan!"

"Okay, Okay. I'll just watch them fuck tonight instead."

I punch his arm.

"Fine! But when I find my way back, he's going to pay for cheating on me with someone old enough to be his dad."

Ivan moves up behind Miles, wraps his arms around his waist, and hugs him from behind. "I'm here if you want to talk."

Miles closes his eyes and nods. "I know."

"You loved Kellan."

He stills beside me, his eyes intent on the couple in front of us.

"With all my heart."

"It must hurt to be here."

"Yes." Opening his eyes, Miles turns around and presses his face into Ivan's chest. "But I need to say goodbye to him properly. You're right about that. It's time for me to let him go."

"Fuck." Kellan huffs out a ragged breath. "I'm going to find Eli."

I turn my head to answer him, but he's already vanished.

KELLAN

I STEP INTO THE ROOM I SHARED WITH ELI ALL THOSE YEARS AGO, JUST AS he comes out of the bathroom. For the first time since I died, I really pay attention to my friend's appearance.

Zoey is right. He *does* look older. There are fine lines at the corners of his eyes and mouth, and a faint shadow of stubble coats his jaw. His green eyes are tired.

He presses the heel of his hand to his forehead and closes his eyes.

"Pull yourself together. Open the boxes. Let's see what shit we thought was important to our eighteen-year-old selves."

"I don't want to." His voice is ragged.

"Don't be a pussy, Eli. It's just stuff." That's why I haven't visited this room since I died. Because it's *just* stuff.

He pulls open the door to the closet and picks up the first box. I perch on the bed and watch as he empties it.

"I miss you, Kell." His voice is soft. "Even after all this time."

I ignore the pain in my heart. "Your favorite hoodie isn't here."

His eyes close and he sighs.

"Now open the other box."

His eyes snap open, and he gives a tiny headshake.

"Fuck that shit. Just open the fucking thing."

His hand hovers over the top.

"There isn't a fucking snake in there, coiled and waiting to bite you."

His laugh is soft and he folds the top back to look inside. My gaze remains fixed on him as he looks through the items inside, his eyes soft

with memories. Then his head lifts, and he packs everything away and stands.

I follow him as he strides out and along the hallway, down the stairs and outside.

“You fucking coward.”

He’s so focused on where he’s going, he doesn’t hear me *or* see the woman coming toward him.

As though it was fated, Arabella bounces off his chest. Ignoring the awkward words between them, I lean close to Eli.

“It’s a shame you can’t go back and have a fresh start.” I push as much energy into the words as I can, and hope he hears them. “That first meeting for you both set the tone for your entire relationship.”

I can see the second my words slip into his mind. Eli throws his shoulders back, and slides his hand down her arm to take her fingers in his and lift them to his lips.

“I don’t believe we’ve had the pleasure,” he says softly. “My name is Eli. Eli Travers.”

I’m smiling when I fade away.



SOMETHING IS SHIFTING, changing and whenever I pop in to see Eli, it feels like more time has passed for him than it has for me. I feel like I’m losing my grip on the reality around me.

But, on the flipside, it looks like my suggestion took root, and Eli and Arabella are working things out. They’re always together, they’re smiling and touching, and kissing, and hopefully, fucking.

“You need to let them go, Kell.” Zoey appears in the doorway of the chapel. “And when are you going to stop lying across the altar in your death pose? It’s creepy.”

“It’d be creepy if someone other than *you* walked in and saw me.” I sit up. “Although, that’d be funny as fuck.”

“Could you imagine?” She giggles.

That’s something else that’s changing. Zoey seems lighter, less serious since our senior year returned to Churchill Bradley for the reunion. She

denies it, but I think she likes people being here. It makes her feel less ... well ... dead.

"How much time do we have left with them?" I sit up and face her. She's better at judging how time passes for us than I am.

"A couple of days." Her head turns toward the door. "I can hear voices."

Hopping down off the altar, I walk to the doors. I know I don't *have* to walk anywhere, but I prefer it. It makes me feel alive. I do, however, walk *through* the wood instead of trying to open the door.

Arabella and Eli are standing outside, talking quietly. As I watch, he drops her hand and steps toward the chapel. "Could you give me a minute?"

It's written on his face what he's thinking and I snort.

"You're such a fucking idiot. The girl isn't going to fall out of love with you just because you shed a tear or two. I'm going to haunt you for the rest of your fucking life if you don't cry over me."

His lips twitch, but he doesn't reply.

I trail behind him as he walks inside and goes directly to the altar.

There's nothing to show that anything bad ever happened here.

His thought reaches me.

"Did you expect there to be?"

"There's not even any bloodstains." He leans on top of the stone, and talks out loud. "The only reason they haven't removed the altar is because Churchill Bradley had it carved out of stone instead of it being wood."

"Maybe he was sacrificing people." From the howls and curses I've heard, it wouldn't surprise me. "Aren't most of the sacrificial altars made from stone?"

Eli laughs softly. "Maybe. Is that how you want me to tell the story? That you were a sacrifice to gods unknown?"

"Sounds better than the second-prize target of a psychopath."

"Yeah, I guess it does."

He bows his head. "I miss you, Kell. I wish you were here. Things would have been different."

"You need to stop blaming yourself." I step up beside him and stare down at the place where I took my last breath. "It's not good for you."

"I never should have agreed to you keeping the phone. It was dangerous, and we were fucking reckless. Maybe if we'd been able to figure out what was happening to Ari sooner, this could have been avoided."

I laugh. "Right. Sure. Because *that* would have stopped me."

"Yeah, there was no stopping you when you got something into your head."

"Exactly, and I always said I'd die young. I just thought it'd be in some kind of blaze of glory."

"I'm so fucking sorry. You and Zoey didn't deserve this. You both should be here."

"We *are* here. But you shouldn't be thinking about us. You should be living your life. You can't stay hidden in the woods forever."

"I got lost. So fucking lost without you."

"I'll never let you get lost, Eli. You'll always be my best friend. Not even death can change that."

A shudder passes through me when Arabella steps through my body to wrap her arms around my best friend.

I move away to give them some privacy, following behind them when they walk toward the exit. The closer we get, the heavier my footsteps become.

Zoey is right. I can't carry on this stupid quest.

I'm fucking dead. I can't help him from here.

But Arabella can.

"I love you, Eli."

He stops to look back, eyes searching the shadows. Searching for *me*.

"It's time to say goodbye," I continue, forcing the words past the lump in my throat. "You don't need me here anymore."

I'll always need you. His thought drifts on the air to me.

My gaze shifts to Arabella.

"No, my shift is over. It's Arabella's turn now. Live well, my friend. Let me go."

Please let me go. Because if you don't, I won't be able to. I leave the words unsaid.

His eyes meet mine, and I'm certain, for just a second, he *sees* me, then Arabella says his name and the moment breaks.

"I'm okay." He wraps his arm around Arabella's shoulders. "Let's get out of here."

ZOEY

MY GAZE ROAMS OVER THE PEOPLE DRESSED IN GOWNS AND TUXEDOS. THE reunion prom is in full swing, and everyone appears to be having a good time. Kellan is beside me, his attention on one of the couples on the dance floor. Miles is wrapped in Ivan's arms, and they sway gently to the music.

Tomorrow, everyone leaves.

The thought makes me sad, but at the same time, I'm excited for the school to reopen. It means the hallways will no longer be empty. I may be dead, but I can pretend to be part of the living, when the students and teachers return.

"Where did Arabella and Eli go?"

Kellan pulls his attention away from Miles. "I don't know."

"Is it me, or is Bret acting weird?"

"Maybe all the groping and making out in the dark corners is making him rethink his vows." His voice is dry.

"No. The emotions he's giving off are strong. It's not lust. He seems on edge."

Kellan studies him for a moment. "Hmm, you're right."

Standing up, I pass through the crowd. It's a weird sensation having people walk straight through me, but I've grown accustomed to it. I stop in front of Bret and watch while he scans the room.

Why is he so tense?

"What's the matter?" Kellan comes up behind me.

"I'm not sure." The sense of foreboding surrounding me grows.

Something is wrong. Something is here. I can *feel* it.

"Zoey?"

“Oh god, no!”

Turning, I pin Kellan with a wide-eyed look. My gaze locks onto his concerned expression for a second before I vanish. The ballroom melts away, and I’m back in the cemetery in the woods.

Why can’t I stop shaking? What’s happening?

Movement catches my eye. A figure in black is standing in front of the little plaque the school made to mark the spot where I died. White lilies wrapped in black paper have been placed at the base, their white petals a bright beacon in the darkness.

My favorite flowers.

“I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long, but I’m back now. And I’m ready to finish things.”

The raspy voice of the man crouched beside them makes my skin crawl.

No, no, no.

It can’t be him.

He reaches out and runs his fingertips gently over the name etched into the metal. *My name.*

“I promise you won’t be alone much longer. There’s one more life to take.”

Dread burns like acid in my stomach.

Evan.

Evan is here.

The man who murdered me. Murdered Kellan.

Why is he here? What does he want? To torment me even in death?

Silver glints in the moonlight and my gaze fastens on the knife in his gloved hand.

“Eli will join you tonight. And then you’ll be silent. You’ll stop tormenting my dreams. I’m giving you what you want. Giving you the ones you chose over me. Surely that’s enough to prove my love?” Leaning forward, he places a kiss on my name.

He’s going to murder Eli.

My terror morphs into molten hot rage.

He can’t kill my last living friend.

Not when he’s just found Arabella again. Not when Kellan and I have worked so hard to ensure they’ll have a future together.

Evan rises to his feet.

I let the fury I've been suppressing for the last eleven years build until I can't contain it anymore. Energy crackles through my form, and I rise off the ground. My rage comes crashing out in an unearthly scream. He may not be able to see me, but this man *will* feel my wrath.

Kellan materializes beside the plaque. "What's going on?"

Ignoring him, I send an icy blast at Evan. A ghostly wind whips at my dress and hair as my gaze bores into the man who murdered me, Kellan, and plans to do the same to Eli.

The color drains from Evan's face, and his eyes pop wide with alarm. "Z-.Zoey?"

I don't care how he's able to see me, just that he *can*. And that's all I need to exact my revenge.

Screaming, I lunge at him.

"You killed me."

"What the fuck?" He jerks backward and slashes the knife wildly through the air.

My fingers twist into claws as the blade passes straight through me. "I'm here for your soul."

His back hits one of the gravestones, face contorted in panic.

I fly at Evan again, aiming for his face.

The knife slips from his fingers. "No. No. Zoey, please. I love you!"

"I want you to die."

Evan pales further, turns, and runs.

To my left, Kellan is laughing hysterically.

Ignoring him, I take off after my killer. He darts through the woods. The sound of his frightened breathing plays a rhythm through my ears. Every instinct drives me to rip him to shreds for what he's done. We plunge through the night, him running while I fly behind him through the trees. When we reach the wall surrounding the Academy, he slows his pace.

Evan darts a look in my direction. His expression is twisted with terror as he drops down to the ground. When I arrive at the spot where he disappeared, it's to find a hole leading underground.

Another tunnel?

Without hesitation, I descend into the darkness. Evan is somewhere up ahead. I chase after him, and smash into a barrier.

What the fuck?

My hands touch nothing but air.

This must be the school boundary.

Bellowing in frustration, I pound my fists against it.

He's getting away.

I slam my hands into it over and over until my rage dies, and a shudder runs through me. Tears spill from my eyes, and I sink down onto the dusty stone floor, weeping for what was stolen from me.

Strong arms wrap around me. "I got you."

I twist around so I can bury my face against Kellan's chest.

"He wants to kill Eli."

"You stopped him."

"I-I got s-so angry."

"You were so fucking badass. Pretty sure the fucking asshole needs new underwear."

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KELLAN

THE TOMB IS SILENT. I'M SITTING ON TOP OF A GRAVESTONE NEARBY.

There's no glow surrounding it. No noises coming out of it.

"Do you like people being here?"

I don't really expect an answer. The only time Churchill Bradley acknowledges me is to howl, scream threats and chase me away. He's got the whole old person '*get off my land*' attitude down perfect.

And like any proper teenager, it just makes me want to antagonize him more. Much to Zoey's disgust.

Focusing my energy, I lift a stone from the ground and send it hurtling toward the doors. It smashes against them and drops to the ground.

Nothing. Not a single response.

I do it again, this time with a handful of rocks.

"Go away." His voice is a low rumble.

"I really want to, but I can't."

His sigh is like a breeze, making the leaves on the trees flutter.

"You're young and impatient." A fog forms in front of the doors and I sit up straight.

This is new.

The fog coalesces into the shape of a man. Heavysset, wearing dark gray pants and a white shirt.

The shock of seeing him makes me lose my grip on my thoughts and I sink halfway through the gravestone before I regain control. I step out and move toward him.

"To what do I owe the honor?"

Steely gray eyes pin me in place. “You think I can’t hear your sarcasm, boy?”

“Oh, I *know* you can.” I fold my arms and lift my chin. “What are you going to do about it?”

“*Do*? His laugh echoes around the cemetery. “Boy, I don’t need to *do* anything.” He walks closer, and circles me. “You think you know everything. You come here and make demands. You think you can just go back and everything will be as it was before your death.”

“There has to be a way.”

“And you think you’re the first to believe it? Or do you think you’ll be the first to succeed where millions have already failed? Are you so egotistical that you think you’re the special one?”

“I *am* special.” I smirk. “Far too special to be stuck here for eternity.”

He laughs again, the sound sending a chill through me. “You have no idea, boy. No idea at all.” His head turns toward the moon. “You don’t have the time you think you have.”

“What does that—”

The cemetery fades away, to be replaced by a room.

“What the fuck?” I turn, just as someone claps their hands.

Eli is strapped to a chair, his face a bloodied mess. A woman, blonde ... *Linda* ... stands in front of him and beside her ...

“What the *actual* fuck?”

It’s like watching a movie.

Evan lifts a gun, aims it at Eli. I launch myself forward, my only thought to put myself between Eli and the bullet hurtling toward him. Of course, it goes straight through *me*, and hits *him*. Blood soaks the front of his shirt. The impact sends him backward, tipping over on the chair and he hits the ground, his head connecting solidly with the floor.

I dive forward ... and then I’m falling ... *falling* ... and land outside the cafeteria.

Shaking my head, I look around.

Eli is sprawled on the ground in front of me, eyes dazed as he blinks up at me.

“You’re such a fucking hot mess,” I snap, fear that he’s dead too strong for me to control my anger. I reach down to help him up. “Why can’t you do anything without me needing to save your ass?”

“I was doing fine until you died.”

“Which proves my point.” I nod toward the door. “Want to grab a seat, and I’ll get our food?” I need a moment to figure out if he’s dead or if I can send him back. I fucking hope he can go back. He can’t be dead, too. I won’t allow it.

“Sure.”

I push open the door of the cafeteria and lead him inside. It’s packed, as usual, but everyone seems quiet and upset. I split away to pick up our lunch and meet him at our usual table.

Placing a mug of coffee in front of him, I sit down.

“We should probably talk about what happens next.”

“And what’s that?”

His body fades in and out.

“Fuck. Hold on. I think you’re going back.”

“Kellan?” His eyes widen and he reaches out to grasp my hand, only for it to go right through. “Kell?”

“You’re not dead.” But he doesn’t hear me, because he’s gone. “Fuck!”

I narrow my eyes, focus my thoughts on where I want to be. The room where Eli was shot appears around me. It’s chaos inside. Arabella is on her knees beside Eli. Evan is behind her.

“Fuck. No! Arabella, look!” I shout as loud as I can, knowing in my heart that she can’t hear me. But she looks up, just as Evan turns to face her.

He raises his gun.

In my head I see a repeat of what just happened to Eli. Having them both together in the afterlife is *not* what I had in mind. I’m trying to build up enough energy to throw things, when Linda attacks Arabella from the side. They fight, with Arabella getting the upper hand. She shoves Linda into Evan, knocking the gun from his hand.

“Oh my fucking god. Get the fucking gun!” I’m shouting like it’s a fucking movie and I’m watching it on television, knowing she can’t hear me but unable to stop myself.

Arabella scrambles forward, wraps her fingers around the gun and lifts it.

“Fucking shoot him!”

She does. The fucking idiot taunts her. Goads her into shooting him again. She doesn’t falter.

I’m so fucking proud of her. I want to hug her and spin her around and kiss her—not in a tongue-down-her-throat kind of way because Eli would

kill me, but in a brotherly ‘you’re fucking amazing’ kind of way. But I can’t do any of it.

And then the hairs stand up on the back of my neck.

Whispers, scratches, followed by shadows detaching themselves from the walls and floor. They float toward Evan, who is standing there looking down at his body. At the sounds, his head lifts and his eyes meet mine. A smile pulls his lips up and he steps forward, then frowns.

The shadows weave around him, tangle around his legs, wrap around his arms. The smile drops from his face, and his lips part.

“Stop them!” He throws the plea toward me.

I shake my head. “Fuck you.”

The shadows tighten their grip, the whispers grow louder, as they smother his body and spirit and slowly, so fucking slowly, drag him down. He shouts, screams, fights, but to no avail, and eventually there is only silence.

I stare at the spot on the floor, and then take a slow look around the room. It’s empty. It looks like it’s been empty for a while. How long have I been standing here?

How much time has passed?

I gather my thoughts, visualize where I want to be, and disappear.

When I reappear inside the tomb, I throw myself at the man whose back is to me.

“Tell me how to fucking go back!” I snarl, shoving at him. “I need to make sure he’s okay. I need to go fucking back. You have answers. Fucking tell me. I *need* to know.”

A bolt of energy knocks me back and through the doors. I scramble up and dart forward again, only to find the way blocked by Churchill Bradley, his eyes burning like fire.

“Know your place, boy,” he roars.

“My place is *not* here. It’s back there. With my friends. I won’t rest. Not until I can make it back there. I’ll destroy this place. I’ll terrify everyone until no one wants to come here. I will make sure you’re alone forever. Tell me how to fucking leave.”

Instead of the expected blow, he throws back his head and laughs. “You’re so busy fighting and shouting, you’re not paying attention to what’s happening around you. Do you really want to know, Kellan Fraser? Do you really want the answers you demand?”

“Of course I fucking do.”

“Then start paying attention to your surroundings. The answer is in front of you.”

“Stop talking in riddles. For once, just *tell* me!”

“Then stop talking and *listen*!”

A bolt of energy hits me in the stomach, sends me across the tomb and pins me to the wall. When I open my mouth to shout, another bolt of energy gags me.

“Finally, blessed silence.” Churchill Bradley stalks toward me. “Eleven years you’ve been here, throwing tantrums and demanding answers. But not once did you ever stop and *listen*. Not once did you bother to learn about your surroundings. You’re so full of your own self-importance, you missed the obvious.”

I glare at him.

“This isn’t heaven, boy. Nor is it hell. It’s where you come to wait. But you lack patience or understanding. Thankfully, your time is coming to an end.”

An end? What does he mean?

“*Listen!*”

I don’t have much choice since he’s got something blocking me from talking, and I tilt my head and listen, not really expecting to hear anything.

But then I *do* hear something. I frown.

“There you are. Do you hear it now?”

I nod.

“But you still have no idea what it means, do you?”

I narrow my eyes.

Churchill Bradley smiles. “What it means, *boy*, is that I’ll finally get my peace back. It’s time for you *and* your sister to leave this place.”

Whatever was holding me in place drops away, and I fall to the ground.

“Leave?”

“Look at your hands, boy.”

I look down, and my eyes widen as my hands fade in and out.

“What’s happening?”

“You’ve gotten your wish. It’s time for you to return. You have just enough time to say your goodbyes.” He throws out a hand. “Now collect your sister and leave my home.”

I'm thrown backward, tumbling over and over. Sounds rush past my ears. Lights blind me. And then my hand curls around someone else's.

Warmth surrounds me.

And then I'm floating ...

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EPILOGUE

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ARABELLA

A DULL RIPPLE OF PAIN THROUGH MY ABDOMEN WAKES ME. EYES SNAPPING open, I place a hand on my stomach and receive a sharp kick in response.

What was that?

For a second, I lie there, trying to work out what is happening. There's wetness between my legs and beneath me on the sheets.

Oh god, it's time.

"Eli." My free hand gropes across the mattress to the man beside me. "My water broke."

"Hmm?"

"The babies. Eli, the babies are coming."

"What?" Confused green eyes meet mine.

I squeeze his arm. "We need to get to the hospital *now*."

My words sink in, and he snaps fully awake. "Fuck."

Carefully, I push back the covers and edge myself off the mattress.

"Wait." Eli leaps off the bed and rushes to join me. "Let me help you."

Everything has been packed and ready for days—all I need to do is get dressed. He's gone over the plan to get me to the hospital multiple times over the past few weeks. I'm pretty sure he's driven our staff crazy with all his fussing and preparations.

He helps me into my clothes with strong, capable hands and eases my sneakers onto my feet, then takes my hand and helps me up.

"Let's go."

Another wave of pain washes over me, and I cling to his arm until it fades.

“You’ve got to get dressed first. I don’t think they’ll let you into the hospital naked.”

“Fuck.” He scowls down at his body. “Hold on, Kitten.”

“I’m holding.”

Letting me go, he grabs the clothes he discarded on the floor last night.

“I don’t think they want to wait any longer.” I give him a tight smile.

He shoves his legs into his jeans, not bothering with underwear. “Just until we get to the hospital.”

“You want to tell them that?”

Eli pulls a t-shirt over his head and then bends to kiss my stomach.

“While we can’t wait to meet you guys, you have to be patient. Like your mom. I’m not in the least bit patient. Don’t take your cues from me, kids.”

The seriousness of his tone makes me laugh.

“Oh my god!” Another painful contraction hits me. “Hurry up.”

He grins and grabs his sneakers. “Let’s go, Mrs. Travers.”

I cup his jaw, stopping him as he turns to the door so I can kiss him. “I love you, Mr. Travers.”

His arm wraps around me. “Let’s get these little monsters to the hospital before you deliver them on our bedroom floor.”



ELI

I park my car, turn up the collar on my coat, then climb out and walk around to the other side, so I can open the door. Reaching in, I hold out one hand and help Ari out. Once she's standing beside me, she rests her fingers against my forearm and squeezes.

"Are you ready?"

I nod, covering her hand with mine. She smiles up at me, then turns to the back of the car. I admire her ass as she stoops to lift out a blanket wrapped bundle, and her eyebrow arches when she turns and catches me staring.

I shrug. "What? I like your ass. Especially now. It has more padding." I wink at her. "Something nice to hold onto when I can finally get inside you again."

She rolls her eyes. "Not in front of the babies!" She holds out the wriggling bundle to me. "Take him."

I do as she says, and smile down at my son.

My son.

The awe I feel over those two words hasn't left me since the first time the doctors told us we were having a boy and a girl. Having children was never something I imagined would be in my future, yet here I am. A beautiful wife that I adore, and two children who own my soul. They're not even a week old yet, and I already know that I will die before I let anything harm them.

"Ready?" Ari asks me again, and my attention returns to her.

She's standing beside the car, her eyes soft and full of memories, as she looks at me.

I nod. "It's time. He's going to be pissed we waited this long. You know he'd have wanted to be the first to see them."

"I know, but I'm sure he'll understand."

I secure my son in the crook of my arm, place my other hand against Ari's back and we set off across the grass.

A marble statue comes into view ahead of us. I don't need to look at it to know what it is. Two people, a girl and a boy. They're sitting on a wall, heads close together as they point at something ahead of them. There's a

space beside the boy, and in the gap lies an open sketchpad. There's a pencil on top of it, as though its owner has moved out of view for a second.

The boy is smiling. A smile full of knowing, as though he has secrets that he has no intention of sharing. The girl has a gentler smile on her lips, and she's holding a flower up, waiting for someone to take it from her.

We stop in front of the gravestone the statue sits behind, and I reach out to cup the girl's cheek, then rest my hand on the boy's shoulder.

"I brought someone ... two someone's, in fact ... to meet you."

I swallow against the lump forming in my throat. Even now, almost eleven years later, it still hurts my heart knowing that my two best friends will never be here. That I'll never hear their voices again.

Arabella slips her arm around my waist, and leans into my side. Together, we peel the blankets back from the faces of our children and tip them up slightly to face the statue.

"Zo-Zo, Kell—" My voice breaks and I stop, closing my eyes against the tears threatening to fall.

A gentle breeze rustles the leaves, and I swear I hear soft male laughter.

"I miss you both so fucking much," I whisper, then suck in a shuddering breath, and start again. "Zo-Zo ... Kell. I want you to meet my children. Zoey ... and Kellan."

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS

We never intended to write a short story about Kellan. But then we never expected the outpouring of despair and love for him, either.

So, when we were asked by Bene if we would ever consider writing a story about Kellan in the afterlife our answer was no. But then she offered a deal. She'd spend time building a world bible, and in return she wanted a short story about Kellan.

When we started to write Churchill Bradley Academy, it was supposed to be a 30K novella for Halloween 2022. It turned into a huge four-book series. The more we thought about it, the more it made complete sense to follow through on that original concept, and write a short story for Halloween. So ... that's what we did.

We're not sure it's the story Bene wanted. But once we got started, Kellan knew what story he wanted to tell, and that's what you hold in your hands right now.

We'd like to thank everyone who took a chance on Churchill Bradley Academy, and fell in love with Ari, Eli, and Kellan. Your support has blown us away, and we appreciate each and every message we receive, even if most of them are saying you hate us and crying about what we did to Kellan ;)

We'll see you inside the next book, or if that's too long a wait, you can come and talk to us in our reader group -

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Lee & Claire

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