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Only With Thine Eyes

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ONLY WITH THINE EYES

An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By

Morgan McIvor Bowser

2021

PREFACE

I moved again recently. As I went through my boxes from my parents' house, I found a notebook full of kindergarten writings. One stuck out to me. In my elementary school every holiday was acknowledged, and the story was written about St. Patrick's Day. The flash fiction piece, aptly titled "My Shower with the Leprechaun," centered around my nameless protagonist finding a leprechaun in her shower after he mistakes her gold bar of soap for real gold. This was my first story. There was dialogue, red slashes intersecting misspelled words, conflict, and character arc. As I continued through school, I turned to writing again and again. Even though I always return to fiction I have at one time or another identified as a poet, a memoirist, and a journalist. When I found and read "My Shower with the Leprechaun" twenty years after its original debut I was questioning which identity spoke to me as a writer. While the ten-page illustrated story is not Pulitzer worthy, it helped me see that fiction may be a good place to return home.

Since kindergarten I of course have written other stories. My career goals haven't changed much either. I am still going to go into academia and become a published writer. These were also included in the journal with "My Shower with the Leprechaun." Until my senior project in undergrad all my stories remained half written. Reading those half-written drafts feels like waking up from a dream and quickly falling back asleep—even when you reenter the same dream it feels like the uncanny valley because minor things have changed. Sometimes I look back on my many finished poetry book drafts and think it would be easier to return to them. My poetry, much like the uncanny valley, is also always half realized. This makes it not only emotionally difficult to return to, but sometimes it is impossible to edit and revise because of how much I have changed from the time I wrote the poems. Fiction feels better to return to.

While still difficult to get in the same mindset, fiction as a genre seems easier to edit and more fun to spend time with. And that last part is especially important to me when revising and editing my own work.

My own work is heavily influenced by some of my own favorite books. A short list of these include: *The Bone People* by Keri Hulme, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë, *Novel with Cocaine* by M. Ageyev, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson, *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, *Stay and Fight* by Madeline Ffitch, *The Sirens of Titan* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Fates and Furies* by Lauren Groff, *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy, *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert, *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck, *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko, *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, *The First Book of Calamity Leek* by Paula Lichtarowicz, and *Dracula* by Bram Stoker. These books, along with countless other works of fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and everything in between, have helped me in finding my own voice and style. My book collection is a source of pride and I have been collecting since childhood. I still read my mom's worn out first-edition copy of *The Phantom Tollbooth* that found its way into my own collection in second grade. I have always been a reader. On all my report cards throughout school my teachers would note the volume of books I would read during class.

All these circumstances, from my kindergarten writing to my growing love of reading and collecting books, led me to choose an academic career in creative writing and English. During my time at the University of Mount Union I took specialized classes such as science writing, Native American literature, Irish literature, film and literature, fiction workshops, professional writing, and poetry workshops. I was also involved in Mount Union's literary magazine, Calliope. I decided shortly after graduation in 2019 that I did not want Mount Union

to be my final stop academically. I applied for John Carroll's English Master's Program in the summer of 2019 and was accepted for the fall semester.

At John Carroll I found a perfect environment for me to take more rigorous coursework that delved deeper into the fields I was most interested in. I have taken classes spanning from 17th century Milton to modern poetry. Surprisingly, I came to love Renaissance literature due to my classes at John Carroll. I have also taken classes focusing on British and American literature. Before graduate school I did not seek out classic American literature. I have found American literature to be a new interest of mine. My time at John Carroll also ignited interest in studying theory, a subject I had little interest in before graduate school. As my first year was ending the COVID pandemic changed how all of academia operated. Quarantine did provide meaningful time exploring my hobbies and interests.

While I have never formally published, I decided to create an LLC and publish my own literary magazine during COVID. The first few issues were handwritten and illustrated by me on the floor of my childhood bedroom. At one point I was writing to thirty paying subscribers. I decided to scale the printing and found a printer that I could buy from monthly. This endeavor taught me a lot about what it means to be a writer, a creative director, an editor, and the business of self-publishing. I had friends and acquaintances submit their short stories and poetry. I also made monthly playlists, book lists, and had a section of books that were to be published in the next month. For some issues I was the only contributor. Quarantine, my magazine, had almost a full year's lifespan. I decided to send the last issue in December and hope to return to magazine making in the future.

My only regret of graduate school is not thinking ahead in undergrad and preparing so I could be a graduate assistant at John Carroll. I instead worked full time throughout the two years

of my program. In the future, I am going to prioritize teaching opportunities while pursuing my doctorate. Beyond my own decisions, my experience in graduate school has led to friendships, newfound academic interests, and a sense of community within academia.

I hope to use my myriad interests to create fun and intriguing lesson plans for my future students. While I was not a graduate assistant, I have brainstormed a few classes I would love to teach in the future: Sex and Modern Poetry, Speculative Fiction Writing, Multi-Modal Writing, and British Victorian Feasts are among the ones that come to mind. My hope is to achieve an MFA for creative writing and a PhD in English so I can teach in both the writing and English departments. I also have plans to further my language learning as I have undergrad experience with Mandarin and would like to also learn French. I have always wanted to be a career scholar and am mourning how being a scholar has gone out of social fashion.

These interests led me to write outside of my comfort zone for my Master's creative project. Before this project, the longest work of fiction I had written reached thirty pages. I am proud of the work I have done with *Only with Thine Eyes* and hope to revisit this story in a longform novel in the future.

The novella *Only with Thine Eyes* follows Celia, a seventeen-year-old recent orphan. The story begins in media res, with Celia's parents already dead. By starting in the middle of the action, the story can immediately focus on her grotesque journey of grief and growth. Celia is joined by her girlfriend, Edwina, and Celia's aunt, Louise. As the news of her parents' deaths fade away from the eyes of the people who live in her town, Celia becomes manic. These rituals take on a whole new meaning when Celia begins to collect her eyelashes in a jar in her bathroom. After sinking further and further into her grief, Celia decides to make a wish on her jarful of lashes—for her parents to be brought back to life. This dream is fulfilled to monstrous

consequences. To rise out of her grief and take responsibility for her actions, Celia needs to rely on Edwina and Louise. *Only with Thine Eyes* is a story of resilience. It is a modern take on classic Gothic tropes, and above all, this is a story that centers around hope and community. The novella is written in the tradition of new adult horror and components of *Only with Thine Eyes* include themes of queer identity, monster theory, and trauma theory. The identities at the forefront of the novella rely on grief, community, and resilience.

Pulling inspiration from multiple genre sources and multiple media forms, *Only with Thine Eyes* is an amalgamation of stories featuring strong magical women. The novella takes a modern lens to long studied theories and tropes. From the Gothic resurrection to the queer representation, *Only with Thine Eyes* is filled with magic, love, and loss. The story of community and family is one that is familiar with or part of the LGBTQIAP+ community. The goal of *Only with Thine Eyes* is to explore the dizzying queer teenage experience by imagining a new conversation between genres and literary theories.

While the novella's main genres include horror and new adult fiction, the tone of the novella hovers between lesbian Gothic and speculative fiction. When considering the identities and weighing the importance of attributes for Celia it became important to recognize the opportunity for queer representation. Horror, Gothic, and new adult are genres that typically follow the norm of representing heterosexual couples. This representation of horror, Gothic, and new adult holds true especially when examining works published in these genres before the United States legalized marriage equality. One of the more shocking aspects to the novel for readers who are seasoned in the horror genre is Celia's sexual identity. As a cisgender woman, Celia occupies a space in the queer community that could be labeled as bisexual or lesbian. Celia herself uses the label of queer. The inclusion of queer identity through the novella is aimed to be

lesbian-utopic-adjacent. What is meant by this is simply, Celia and Edwina are in a relationship that causes neither to be majorly oppressed. The goal is to provide a story that does not rest on the back of queer trauma, but rather the trauma of someone who identifies under the queer umbrella.

This culmination of academic interests and writing has reignited the desire to be a published fiction author in the future. Fiction feels like the correct home for me. The ability to access many sub-genres within fiction and explore lives I may never live has drawn me closer to the fiction community. I would love to know in the future that my book is on someone's nightstand or that they read my books under covers or on the beach. This all started with "My Shower with the Leprechaun" and it will not end with *Only with Thine Eyes*. My hope is that *Only with Thine Eyes* is the catalyst for a long season of inspiration and writing.

CHAPTER ONE

Celia knew her parents' deaths were real. As real as a bruise, or a broken bone, or her kiss with Edwina in the alley behind the school. The kiss was warm and brief, left her heart pumping and her lungs devoid of oxygen. Celia wanted to kiss Edwina since fourth grade. She saw Edwina save a toad from a group of boys in brand new stomping boots from their Christmas spoils. Edwina brought the toad over to Celia and they accounted for all its slimy limbs together. Celia accounted for her limbs—slimy with blood—after the train crash that killed her parents and fifty-three other strangers almost exactly seven years after Edwina had brought Celia the toad. Unlike the toad, however, she couldn't just happily hop away and plop into the nearest pond and call it home.

The kiss didn't merit an immediate relationship status change. While they walked discreetly into girlfriend territory, a few girls at school noticed the subtle changes in their relationship. Kira, Nell, and Laine noticed how they now walked in sync, how they stayed longer at each other's lockers, and how Celia had a smile on her face for the first time since the accident. The three girls made it their personal missions to make Celia and Edwina feel unwelcome. They wrote slurs on Celia's locker in permanent marker. This forced Celia to ask the principal for special permission to keep nail polish remover in her locker. Special permission was granted and every few days, Celia was forced to scrub the exterior of her locker clean. Edwina pretended she didn't see what Kira and her friends wrote.

Their relationship continued to evolve despite these developments. Edwina kissed Celia again a few weeks later, after she returned to school from the hospital. That kiss, unlike the one before it, was wanting and lingering all at once. That night, in her sadness and out of place euphoria, Celia went to bed and brought herself to orgasm. She thought of the outline of

Edwina's thighs, the curves of her breasts, the smell of her shampoo, her fingers curving under Celia's jawbone. She touched her body and imagined that she was touching Edwina.

The next day at Poe East High School, Celia was asked to meet her science teacher. She met Mrs. Pfeiffer in the hallway before the scheduled cat dissection. Celia and her lab partner were assigned an orange cat with three little white socks. Celia quietly named her Sandy after Carl Sandberg, her mother's favorite poet. As she made her way to the hallway, Mrs. Pfeiffer started handing out the assignment sheets to the rest of Celia's classmates. Mrs. Pfeiffer approached Celia when she was done explaining how the dissection was going to work.

"If you want to not be involved in the dissection you are more than welcome to go to the library and write a paper..." She trailed off as she said this, as if she were tiptoeing around what she really wanted to say.

"Mrs. Pfeiffer, my parents just died, I get it. You don't have to coddle me." This was Celia's third biology class with Mrs. Pfeiffer. They had grown close during a county science fair that Celia volunteered at a few quarters ago. Celia respected Mrs. Pfeiffer and the way she could quiet down any room she entered, even the gym during pep rallies. Sometimes Mrs. Pfeiffer would bring one of her snakes or dogs or chinchillas to class to teach about behavioral evolution, skeletons, or ecosystems.

"Celia." Mrs. Pfeiffer said Celia's name in the way that someone comforts a sad puppy. "The school counselor asked me to tell you that you are still allowed to participate, if that's what you want to do, but you aren't allowed near the tools. It's still too soon for us to be comfortable with you having that kind of access..." Her voice was soft and compassionate; Celia could tell that Mrs. Pfeiffer was bracing for a rude comment or an emotional outburst.

“No, no, I get it, really, I do. I can label organs, it’s fine. But I’m fine. Counseling is really helping.” Celia told this lie, the one she gaslit herself to believe, easily. It had been a month since the crash or accident or whatever the newspapers were calling it. There were many unanswered questions, most surrounding what to do with all the loose ends and unsaid apologies.

Mrs. Pfeiffer let out a tired sigh as Celia passed her to go back into the classroom. Celia knew that everyone was treading lightly. Edwina treated her differently now, too. Celia often thought about how one day she was normal and unremarkable and the next she was handled like a butterfly. She was barely spoken to. People preferred to ask Celia with downturned chins and watery eyes if she was okay. Of course, she wasn’t okay. What was she to do though? Announce in the middle of her second period art class that she just wanted her mom’s chicken pot pie for dinner? That she wished she hadn’t fought with her dad the day of the crash? How she had dreams of her dying with them and it just being somehow better? She knew she couldn’t do any of that. So instead, she peddled her little lie of being okay.

Celia felt most at home in nature. She loved owl pellets and seeing what the inside workings looked like. She performed amateur dissection on everything from worms to dead fish. The process of dissection felt second nature to Celia. Going on nature walks gave Celia an excuse to grow her relationship with herself and her parents. She never knew the reason her mom and dad took her interests so seriously. When she was in elementary school, she finally figured out why that was.

Celia’s mother wouldn’t have approved of her participating. Even so, Celia was disappointed that she missed out on the actual dissecting part of the dissection. Celia labelled the uterus, the heart, and the lungs. One by one each little organ was plucked from the formaldehyde-laden carcass and laid to rest on a silver tray to be poked at and cross sectioned.

Class ended and Celia was the last out of the room. When she entered the hallway the overwhelming stench of people applying fresh cologne and perfume wafted up her nose. When Edwina saw Celia, she pulled her aside to her locker where she was applying mascara.

“Have you ever thought about putting on makeup? I’ve never seen you wear any,” Edwina was honestly wondering. The only semblance of makeup she had seen on Celia was at her parent’s funeral when she was wearing tinted chapstick. The girls at school would reapply their powder, foundation, and mascara at the end of every period. The bathrooms were always sticky with the residue of forgotten lip gloss on the sides of fingers and hands. Celia was guilty of more than once going to the bathroom during class to meet Edwina in the last stall to continue their kisses that always left them needing more. Her tongue and lips hadn’t been used to the thickness of lip gloss before she had started kissing Edwina a few months ago. The tacky texture stuck to the side of her hands and the side of her jeans long after she swiped her palm across her mouth. Celia had always wanted to be a part of that culture at her school, but her mom was a simple woman who only ever used a swipe of lipstick and a spritz of perfume. She never taught Celia how to craft the perfect winged liner, or how to delicately over line her lips so she had a doll’s mouth. Another unfinished act.

“You knew my mom. I was never really taught, and I wasn’t invited to sleepovers when I was little. Plus, makeup is expensive. I have to save for a car and keep putting money towards paying expenses. Vinny’s only pays so much.” These were all excuses. She could afford a tube of mascara and lip gloss. She worked twenty hours a week at Vinny’s Pizza. The tips were great; the seven dollars for a tube of mascara wouldn’t hurt. Especially while she was living at her Aunt Louise’s house.

Edwina leaned in so that they were nose to nose, “You have such beautiful eyes, though. They would really pop if you used even one coat. Can I put some on you?” Celia slowly nodded her head yes. This was more intimate than they had ever been. Suddenly the hallways were empty and quiet. All that Celia could hear was the ambient thumping of hearts.

“Okay now, I want you to look up. No not with your whole head. Just with your eyes, silly.” Edwina patiently and expertly held Celia’s chin in position. She had Celia open the tube of mascara that had pink calligraphy promising to add length and volume to her already lush lashes written down the side of it. The lightness of the brush felt foreign on Celia’s eyes, the product even more so. Celia was doing this because she secretly wanted to be called pretty. This was a step in that general direction. Everyone always complimented her hair, thick and copper. They also complimented her eyes, which Edwina had first described as, “Mushroom brown...damn what are they called? The fancy ones? The ones that female pigs find? Truffles! Your eyes are truffle brown.” This made Celia roll her truffle brown eyes right to the back of her head.

Celia had stayed mostly silent, enjoying the close contact between her and Edwina. A new kind of intimacy. When Edwina handed her a mini hand mirror she gasped, “Are you sure you don’t know magic? What you just did to my face is witchcraft.”

“How do you feel? Your eyes are so pretty!” Edwina always wanted to press Celia into expressing her emotions so they could have a deep discussion, but in the middle of the hallway at school wasn’t the place for that.

“I feel...weird? I’ll give you an update at the end of the day.” And with that Celia quickly walked away into the crowded hallway, the fluorescent track lights creating an undeserved halo around the top of her head.

CHAPTER TWO

That night when Celia was alone in the guest bedroom of her Aunt Louise's house, she began to wonder if her mom ever wore makeup in high school. It would have complimented her blue eyes and dark hair. Her mother was beautiful in an unconventional way. Yes, her features were striking, but what struck everyone was her personality. Anyone else who looked like her would have been vain and conceited. Not Celia's mom though. She was humble and kind. She used to foster kittens in college. Celia had heard all the stories of how her mom talked her way out of getting thrown out of housing and would feed stray cats on her way to parties. If her mom had been able to save the cat that Celia's classmates were dissecting before it was too late, she would have bestowed a name like Luna or Salem on the little orange cat. She was always into cliché names.

"Well, she isn't here now and the cat's dead. Snap out of it," Celia grumbled to herself. Her relationship with her father's death was a little more complicated. Especially when she passed by a mirror. They were basically identical; her father's plump lips and delicate nose were superimposed onto her body. Their chins were born from identical molds. Even their hair was the exact same shade of copper. The only thing that differed between them was eye color. She stood up, mindful of the fact that if she fell asleep thinking of them, she would have yet another nightmare. She walked to the bathroom that connected her room and her Aunt Lou's room.

She tried turning the handle to her aunt's room so that she could say goodnight, but it was locked. Aunt Lou and Simon, her boyfriend, must have already gone to bed. They had been dating for most of Celia's life. Both were anti-marriage hippies in the sense that they felt that the government and religion had no place in their love life. When she told her aunt about Edwina, she was met with a pile of books on female sexuality, grieving, and a smattering of coos about

first love. Aunt Lou did her best not to mention Celia's mom and dad, probably to allow Celia the appropriate space to grieve. Lou kept leaving little books and notes on Celia's pillow for her to read and to help her process her loss.

Celia looked at herself in the mirror, cognizant of the fact that she needed to remove the mascara that was carefully applied only a few hours ago. Silently, she prayed that Edwina didn't use the waterproof kind that gunked up and made the other girls look like they had spiders crawling out of their eyes when they were done crying in the bathroom at school dances. She wet a little pink washcloth that had a cursive L in the lower right corner and tentatively dabbed away at the makeup. The thought of washing away Edwina's soft touches pranced around her mind.

As she looked herself in the eyes, she didn't flinch. The hair that was up in a ponytail was let down in a slow deliberate way, swinging into her face as it brushed her sloping shoulders. She pushed the hair hanging in front of her face behind her ear. Celia imagined looking pretty every day. Celia hoped to look like her mother when she was older.

She whispered under her breath to herself, "If I don't buy my own mascara then maybe she'll keep touching me like that." Celia's heart beat faster. She didn't even necessarily want to admit that the mascara made her feel good about herself. This was the first time since the accident that she felt kind of like a human. The moment in the hallway was important: no one had made her feel small or asked inappropriate or probing questions.

When she pulled away the pink washcloth, she noticed a few eyelashes that had been pulled off while washing her mascara off. She thought back to when she was little. Her mom always told her to make careful wishes on her eyelashes. "No one else will tell you this," her mom would whisper in her ear, "but the more eyelashes you can wish on, the stronger your

wish,” and after saying that to Celia her mom would give Celia her own fallen eyelashes to wish on. An infinite number of eyelashes couldn’t grant the wish she coveted most.

Celia snuck to the kitchen in her fuzzy slipper socks. She carefully walked down the squeaky stairs. Celia’s socks had been a stocking stuffer from last Christmas from her dad, who also loved soft and warm things. When she reached the glassware cabinet, she plucked an ornate vintage jar with a textured exterior and lid.

Aunt Lou, an amateur environmentalist, kept a pantry full of glass jars for homemade—everything. From face wash to jams and honey to clothing dye, Aunt Lou tried her best to make everyday things for her and Celia to use. “Homemade is better, don’t you think?” Lou asked Celia every time she tried a new recipe. Celia opened the bright yellow pantry, which Aunt Lou and her mom had etched with Celia’s childhood height markers.

CHAPTER THREE

The sun shone through Celia's window; she felt the warmth radiating from her hair spread out on her pillowcase. Opening her eyes, she realized she had overslept—it was 10 am and she had missed her school alarm. Celia bounded down the stairs, jumping into the kitchen with an ungraceful thud. Aunt Lou looked up from her newspaper. "You almost spilled my coffee with that jump, which in my opinion would have been worse than missing school." Aunt Lou had made French toast, sausage, and a berry mix from the fruit they grew in their garden. Offering a generous portion of each to Celia she continued, "You don't have to rush, Ce. I called you out of school today. You obviously need a day off; it's been a hard year." Celia relaxed her shoulders with relief. Aunt Lou called random days off school "mom days." She knew Celia couldn't go back to that unnamed cat today.

To Celia, death was not just about the end of life. As a toddler she would have her mom pin dead butterflies to canvasses. Celia found comfort in their bold colored stillness. Death was a continuation for Celia, of everything someone couldn't do on earth. And that's not some Catholic bullshit. Celia didn't know what it was, but she knew there was more, and that life and death weren't the stark beginning and end. The death of her parents buried a question deep in her subconscious: is death real?

While pouring herself a cup of orange juice Celia yawned and said, "The French toast looks delicious. Thank you for letting me sleep. I definitely needed it." Her sleep since the accident had been plagued by nightmares. Another bad habit since the accident: waking up every morning at 3:43 am after she had just fallen asleep at 1 am. She tried going to bed earlier, and still she jolted awake, perturbed and out of breath, at 3:43 am. She could normally fall back

asleep with no problem. She had a heating pad next to her bed that she used to lull herself back to sleep. Last night nothing was soothed, and she was back to having nightmare after nightmare, reliving the accident over and over.

Pulling herself out of that moment she continued, “At least I get to miss the dissection today. You know how mom was with cats. I love how my dad would be into laying out the organs. But it makes me feel icky at the same time to do something mom would be so against.” And it was true. Death was never a subject that her mom brought up. Her dad was morbidly curious and that’s who Celia suspected she inherited her fascination from. When Celia thought about her discussing the dissection nonchalantly in the kitchen after school her palms became sweaty. She used a light pink dish towel to dry up her palms and the coffee that splashed out of Aunt Lou’s cup. She decided that she enjoyed the dissections. Celia would offer extra thanks at her altar tonight to her mother to atone for her curious enjoyment. Aunt Lou had asked several times since the accident if Celia wanted to adopt a cat in memory of her mom. Aunt Lou said it would be “good for healing.” Which gave Celia a wonderful idea of what to do with her surprise day off.

“Aunt Lou?” She asked in a jovial tone and continued impatiently, “What if we just drove by the shelter today? Maybe to see if they had cats in need of a new foster home, or if they have any kittens today that need a home?” She knew Aunt Lou would say yes, it had taken a few months for Celia to agree but Aunt Lou hadn’t been shy about letting her know that a kitten was more than welcome.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later that day Celia and Aunt Lou left the local shelter, Cat Alley, with a bright-eyed grey kitten. The pair settled on the name Smokey, honoring both Celia's love of gems and her mother's love of the cliché. Cat Alley was a short distance from Aunt Lou's house, and they walked back, happily cooing to Smokey in his plastic carrier. Aunt Lou wanted to take the long way home so they would pass the old ice cream shop. Aunt Lou and Celia's mom worked there as teenagers. Right in front of the technicolor picture window at a wooden table sat three girls. Celia knew them from school. They had never truly been her friends.

Before Celia could turn around or cross the street, she heard someone scream her name. "Celia! Hey, is that your emotional support animal? Can't stop trying to grab attention?" The girl got out of her chair; her black leather boots made her look ten feet tall. Kira, the yeller, had been Celia's long time enemy. The two other girls, Laine and Nell, flanked Kira.

"Hey look, Laine! She's such a coward! Poor girl, can't even defend herself." Nell snickered as Celia slowly started to back up, her face still toward the group of girls. Nell continued, "And who might this be? Can't be your mom. How sad." At this, the girls began giggling. Their words were terrible and juvenile. Celia fruitlessly expected more from them.

It hurt Celia even more to have her aunt witness her defenseless reply. Aunt Lou stepped forward. "Are you serious? Celia, you let them talk like that to you? About your mother? That's fucking shameful on everyone's part. Don't ever fucking talk like that about Valerie!" Aunt Lou hadn't displayed this level of anger in front of Celia before.

Kira, never one to back down from a fight, sauntered toward Celia. "Are you going to do something about this barking bitch?"

When the word 'bitch' escaped Kira's mouth, Celia's eyes went fuzzy. She brought her

hands together, as if in prayer. All at once the streetlamps flickered on and off. The chairs slammed into the table. “Kira, if you ever—I do mean ever, talk to me like that, or mention my family in front of me again, I will fucking kill you.”

Surprised by the power rushing through her, her feet turned to cement in her shoes. When Celia saw Kira, she knew something was going to happen. She was too paralyzed to remember how to cross the street or turn around. Most people at East Poe High knew of the girls who had powers. Celia’s powers gained her a fragile notoriety. Not enough to protect her from Kira, but enough that others didn’t really vocalize their hatred. Most people at Poe East High School also knew about her relationship with Edwina. The vast majority didn’t care. Teachers didn’t comment. Sure, when they walked the hallways together while classes were in session, they were sent their separate way. Her parents had been supportive of her relationship with Edwina—they thought they had been together since sixth grade. When Celia finally admitted her feelings to both herself and Edwina, nothing changed between her and her family. Celia and Edwina were both afraid of the potential gut-wrenching consequences they faced as a non-conventional couple in a mostly rural Ohio town. Edwina’s story was not as pleasant.

Kira stared in disbelief. “Do you think I’m scared of you? What power do you think you have? Obviously not enough to do anything about your dead parents!”

The urge to run didn’t outweigh Celia’s urge to curb stomp Kira’s smug smile. Attacking her relationship with Edwina was one thing. Celia prepared herself before they began dating. Celia didn’t expect the attacks on her family. She wasn’t prepared for that. Standing behind a girl attacking her for the death of her parents was an unforgivable and newfound low for Kira.

They had been snack-buddies in kindergarten, both benefitting from the other’s love of snacks their parents wouldn’t buy. For Kira it was Celia’s access to peanut butter crunch cookies;

for Celia it happened to be Kira's pink frosted animal crackers. Once Laine and Nell moved to town in second grade the inseparable Celia and Kira began to drift away.

Middle school brought a dark time for Celia and Kira's friendship as she became closer to Edwina. She was helplessly in love with Edwina since the toad incident in fourth grade. If other people at school or in her personal life had problems with Celia and Edwina they were never brought up as more than schoolyard taunts. This felt different.

Celia stood tall. "Really fresh material guys. I'm so glad that your English tutoring sessions during lunch are paying off. You're finally trying to understand comedy." She knew it wasn't her best work. They had taken the side of her brain that formed thoughts and turned it into pink mush.

Aunt Lou had always been the quiet sister. She was crafty and cunning in her teenage years. Living with Celia since the accident helped to bring out that side once again. She was used to giving advice to Celia about her school life and had never liked Kira. Aunt Lou's personality shifted after the accident. Living with an orphan made her more secure in her convictions. Lou knew she needed to put up a strong exterior to protect her remaining family. This shift created an Aunt Lou that wasn't afraid of conflict. And she wasn't one to back down when someone tried to destroy someone she loved. "I think this has been quite enough. Come on, Ce," as she continued her tone shifted to a dark timbre Celia had never heard before.

As she grabbed Celia, Aunt Lou got close to Kira's face. She held the girl's chin in her hand and lifted Kira's head, so they were looking in each other's eyes. In a strained voice Aunt Lou murmured a Latin incantation that Celia couldn't decipher.

Celia's darkened eyes stared into Kira's. "You've been warned." In an instant Aunt Lou

was looping her arm through Celia's and dragging her away from the ice cream shop, and the icy girls standing watch over the scant patio.

CHAPTER FIVE

At 4:50 am, on the frosty morning of January 13th, Celia, Valerie, and Darren Hadden boarded a train headed to Washington D.C. Once there, after their almost twelve-hour journey, the trio would meet Darren's family at the station and begin the second leg of their trek. The trip's end destination was a small Georgetown apartment belonging to Celia's grandmother, Darren's mother. There they would see the rest of Celia's father's family who resided in the area and sightsee around the city. The D.C. Haddens were a lively family, always taking the out-of-towners to local concerts and the newest restaurants. They were wealthy, too, which added mystique and fun for Celia. To put it simply: they spoiled her. As such, Celia, the only grandchild, always looked forward to their trip. This trip would be different than the others they had previously taken as they would be celebrating a late New Year together. Celia had always remembered the annual D.C. trip happening in the fall before she went back to school.

Valerie had been worried about the frost for days. Celia watched as her mother fluttered around the house collecting every scarf, hat, and glove available to pack for their ride. The snow refused to stop; inches were collecting below the windowsills of her house. The morning of the trip she took an hour to scrape the snow off Darren's car while he shoveled the driveway.

Valerie and Darren met in college and were freshman sweethearts. They were in the same classes and tried as hard as they couldn't to be together; they ended up dating by the end of October. Darren needed a date to his fraternity's Halloween party and Valerie said yes. They made their first trip to D.C. as a couple the weekend after this Halloween party. Since Valerie's only family was her sister, she also looked forward to the trip. She loved the lights during their walks through the city at night.

The yearly D.C. date nights continued into their marriage and once Celia was born,

Darren insisted that the couple take his mom's offers of babysitting for date nights seriously. At first the conversation made Valerie uncomfortable. After all, they were on a family vacation. Isn't it inappropriate to go out all night with a baby at home? Darren reassured her that his mother wouldn't offer if she didn't mean it. After the first date night, Valerie saw the importance of nights spent away from Darren's family and Celia. They had late night plans for Celia, too, once she reached eighteen. Darren and Valerie sat Celia down the year before and laid out grand museum gala nights and painted a picture of fun she thought to be forbidden. This was to be their last normal trip.

The morning's drama had not subsided once the family packed and loaded the little white Honda. Every time the car slid, or the brakes clicked, Valerie sucked in her breath, only sighing once she realized the car hadn't rolled and crushed them in a ditch. Celia sat in the backseat, witnessing the almost silent ways her mother and father communicated. When Valerie sighed, Darren squeezed her hand over the center console. When Darren muttered under his breath about traffic in hushed tones, Valerie looked at him and touched his face. Celia took note of the loving gestures. She also took note of the couple's shared frustration at the snow. Celia wasn't nervous. She had been in the car while her parents drove through the snow countless times. This day was no different. Sure, the ice had settled in beneath the thick layer of powder. Sure, the snow kaleidoscoped the view out of the front windshield. None of this rang alarm bells for Celia, although now she wished it would have.

Arriving at the RailTrak station felt like destiny. The station was about an hour's drive from Celia's house. The Ohio snow made the car ride double in time. Luckily, Valerie's latent anxiety over the entire ordeal put them on the road three hours before they had to depart. The station was quaint. The big metal doors opened into a square lobby. On one side there were

benches with crushed velvet cushions. The other side held the help desk. The exiting doors faced the track. Inside the ill-insulated structure, they had a hot chocolate vending machine, which Celia had specifically packed a bag of quarters for. Celia fished out the bag while her parents checked with the front desk to make sure the train was still running on time.

The lobby was quiet. Celia was conscious of her shoes squeaking as she walked to the bathroom. Her parents draped a blanket around their shoulders while Celia was doubled up in coats and hats. While in the bathroom Celia thought about the upcoming trip. She knew her grandmother would give her a new mini-sculpture for her collection. This year Celia hoped for a model of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. She had spent many hours there sketching the monument. She took special interest in the families who were there to see loved ones. Celia made sure to sketch the part where their family's names were and return the sketch to the family of the deceased. Every visit she spent at least an hour in uninterrupted solitude. Celia found the monument to be beautiful because of its silence. The monument held space for grieving and silence, just as the city surrounding it held space for pleasure and sound. Accidentally tripping and landing on the automatic hand dryer, she was brought out of the moment. Splashing cold water on her face in the cold bathroom felt like the wrong thing to do. Her mom would surely yell at her about catching a cold or going into shock, both seeming like unlikely consequences from such a small action.

Huddled under the baby blue fleece blanket her parents were reading books to pass the time. Only three other people were in the lobby, Celia, one person at the help desk, and the doorman. It seemed the weather had kept the other passengers away. Maybe the vacant benches could be attributed to the early hour. Regardless, the Haddens were to board a train that was inbound from Chicago. Online at least the train looked full.

Celia hoped to have a prime people-watching viewpoint. In her bag, besides her spare change, were a few books, a sketch book, and plenty of pencils. She had some snacks and her phone, but she wanted to look out the window as the sun rose. The metal box lobby shook with the seismic vibration of the train pulling into the station. Valerie and Darren stirred and began lifting the blanket from their shoulders, breaking the spell cast upon Celia. She gathered her bookbag onto her shoulders and clutched her pillow and blanket in one hand while holding tightly onto her ticket in the other.

CHAPTER SIX

The conductor met the family at the side, explained the weather conditions, and took their tickets. Once aboard, they walked single file down the aisle to their row of seats. They whispered as they divvied up the seating arrangements: Darren on the end, Celia in the middle, and Valerie at the window. As much as Celia begged to be next to the window Valerie wouldn't allow it with the temperature. If it were up to her, Darren would replace Celia in the middle for the exact same reason. As if there were a thirty degree difference in the six inches between Celia and either of her parents. She didn't complain. As she got settled, she looked around the train car, noticing the full seats of sleeping passengers. Celia thought to draw them at once as not to miss the rare peaceful instant. Instead, she tucked her pillow behind her head and shut her eyes, hoping for an hour long nap. Confident that when she woke there would be plenty of natural light. The window her mother was leaning against had perfect positioning of natural light so she could draw to her heart's content. Her mother and father kissed the top of her head as she fell asleep. Celia was soon lulled into a trance by rhythmic churning of wheels beneath her.

Suddenly, Celia was thrown from her seat. Unaware of how much time had passed Celia woke up to a scene of hysteria. No longer were the passengers sleeping peacefully within their neat rows. The soft jazz music that was playing throughout the train had ceased. Or was buried. Or was loud. She felt that she were drowning. Smoke filling her tear ducts as she looked to her parents. Her parents screamed for her to get to the middle of the train car. The entire train in a panicked frenzy. Celia's eyes were still foggy from sleep. She didn't notice the smoke filling the passenger car. She tried to pull her parents up from their seats but couldn't unbuckle them. Celia did what she was told and moved to the center. She mustered the strength to catapult her way up the aisle. Realizing too late what was happening Celia wailed for her mom and dad to find her. It

was no use. The train was sliding off the track and the entire car erupted into dissonant screams and cries. Everyone attempting to clamor over one another toward the coveted middle aisle away from the windows. The once relaxing sounds of the wheels were replaced by the high pitch screeches of metal on metal. Celia tried to climb on top and over head rests to reach a handle near the ceiling for the emergency exit. Everytime she was close the train fishtailed in a new direction. The ice on the rail made it impossible for the behemoth to gain traction; the unreported power outage at the station made it impossible for remote control of the engine. Celia wished her father had taken her mom's concerns of snow seriously. While Darren had thought there may be a delay, this was never a possibility in anyone's mind.

Looking over to where her parents should have been, Celia only saw her father's hands gripping the window ledge from the outside; her mom was nowhere to be seen. Celia's head filled with high pitched ringing. The burning train continued to slide down the track.

CHAPTER SEVEN

There were fifty-three casualties from the crash, including Celia's parents. She spent the next six months in a blur of hospital stays and meetings with her parents' lawyers. Aunt Lou stayed with her in the hospital for every surgery and physical therapy appointment. Celia refused to speak for a week after the crash. She refused to read the papers or watch the news.

Instead, she busied herself by sketching and journaling. Every memory was painstakingly drawn or written about. Her sketchbooks quickly filled, and when she was nearing the end of her fourth, Aunt Lou bought her Sennelier French watercolors. Aunt Lou also slid her a permanent housekey and a key to the spare bedroom's lock. She was to officially move in that weekend.

Celia made sure not to fall behind in school. She knew her parents would be disappointed if that were to happen. Edwina had brought her all the assignments she would have missed. She returned to school two months after she was finished with physical therapy. Everything had changed and nothing had changed. It became hard for Celia to reconcile the mundanity of days passing with the universe shattering death of her parents.

Aunt Lou's house was the best thing to happen to Celia after the accident. She finally had a stable warm place to stare at the ceiling and cry instead of a cold hospital room. Celia slowly stopped replaying the crash. Her skin eventually healed. She didn't feel the cold snow on her face anymore. Nighttime was the worst. Nightmares and sleep paralysis were constant. Celia felt well rested if she slept for three hours in the night.

The normalcy of returning to school and making a new routine with Aunt Lou helped. And every second focused on something that wasn't related to the accident allowed Celia to enjoy the moments in between the anguish. Celia vowed to live a full life; one her parents would have wanted for her. Starting with not blaming the accident on anything other than the weather.

Just as her mom had predicted.

Getting back in tune with school proved difficult. Kira, Nell, and Laine were unsympathetic from the start. Edwina seemed to be the only person she was close to at school who spoke to her with kindness. Her other friends drifted away. Four months after the accident, Celia's only confidantes were Edwina and Aunt Lou. Kira's treatment was surprising to Celia. In elementary school Kira's dad died from a heart attack. The entire school signed cards and picked flowers at recess. When Kira returned, her cubby was filled with notes and snacks from her classmates. When Celia returned, everyone seemed to move on as quickly as the news. Her teachers were lenient with due dates. They were less attentive with how long she stayed out on a hall pass. Even more surprising, her boss at Vinny's gave her two weeks off. She was still paid, and her coworkers still gave her the cut of the tips she would have been paid if she worked.

Celia began to think that Kira had done her a favor in treating her so poorly. The attitude of the people who sympathized and cried at the beginning turned less sympathetic as more time passed. When Celia noticed how compassions changed, she withdrew further and further into her relationships with Edwina and Aunt Lou. She no longer felt the need to accept the pity of her classmates and teachers.

Thinking back on these times made Celia ill. She wanted a quiet revenge. Or maybe, what she wanted was more complex than that. Celia wanted her parents.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the inky moonlight, Celia chose to seal her fate. She sealed the top of the lash jar closed with candle wax and held it up to the sky. Her heart, still palpitating out of her chest, seemed to calm with this motion. Celia had texted Edwina to see if she would come over. Even though Aunt Lou didn't care if Edwina slept over sometimes, it was just easier to sneak her in through the window above Celia's bed. While Smokey snored on Celia's plush duvet, she opened her long-kept diary. Since she was a child Celia kept a diary about her relationship to nature. She had always been pulled by rocks and leaves, setting them methodically out on her windowsill. When she turned twelve her mom gifted her smokey quartz and a tarot deck. When Celia looked up at her mother, confused and fascinated, her mom said, "This has been in our family for years. And you've been showing an interest." When her mom's voice trailed off, she knew that she needed to keep these gifts a secret. Celia's father, too, showed a closeness with nature that she hadn't dully understood as a child. She had never believed in witches or magic, but she did know that her body felt more at home in the forest than it did in her own house. From that day on Celia became a borrower of nature. Mushrooms, acorns, found bones, everything that caught her eye on her daily walks found a new resting place in her room. At some point, Celia wasn't sure when, she became obsessed with journaling her findings and writing out her own spells and incantations.

Inspiration normally struck at 3 am. The irony was not lost on Celia. The only person outside of her family that knew was Edwina. Celia's window had a big enough balcony for one person to stand on and turn around. It stuck out about three feet from the walls of Aunt Lou's house and expanded five feet in either direction. When the sky looked velvety and the stars came out, the girls would scrunch up side by side on their backs and just stare up. Occasionally they

would speak of the accident, or what their life plans were, or how happy they were to have found each other. But mostly, Celia texted Edwina to come and silently offer company. Edwina always said yes without hesitation. Edwina's house was loud and about a block away. It was easy for her to sneak out, as her parents were either yelling at each other or cheating on each other. They paid little attention to Edwina, especially since she told them about her relationship with Celia. They had a date posted to the fridge of when Edwina's 18th birthday is, and an eviction notice below it. Her present already lovingly laid out. And while this was scary to Edwina and to Celia, they tried not to acknowledge it. Aunt Lou had offered for Edwina to move into the basement, but Edwina's parents wouldn't allow it. As if they wanted her to suffer as they made themselves suffer. Regardless, Celia invited Edwina to lay on the balcony and help her bring her parents back to life.

The full moon and the stars and Edwina saying yes all made the ritual seem, well, real. Celia fought for a while with Aunt Lou after the bathroom incident. There were words that were said that both immediately regretted. Aunt Lou had never been into witchcraft. The earth called to her in different ways. Celia believed that Aunt Lou knew how to use magic. Her mom had alluded to as much when Celia was a child. No one ever told her why Lou had stopped trying or believing. For all Celia knew Aunt Lou could still believe and practice in private. Celia didn't know what Lou knew about her belief in witchcraft—she didn't care to have that conversation. While Celia and her parents weren't religious, both her mother and father were attuned to the occult. Valerie and Darren founded a coven together in college that still met. Celia had attended meetings throughout her childhood; the last meeting her parents went to occurred the week before the accident.

Jolted out of her journaling Celia heard a pebble hit her window as her phone made a

hollow buzzing noise on her mattress. Celia whispered in a tone that was just under talking volume, “Be right there, Edwina!” And with that she rose from her tarot card blanketed floor and grabbed the fire ladder from behind her bookshelf. It amazed Celia how many items of contraband were held between the shelves in her room. Not that Aunt Lou was strict, in fact she was the opposite. Celia hid things because Aunt Lou was too open. She didn’t want to have to explain every little trinket or illicit item she had come to possess.

With the fire ladder silently unrolled, Edwina threw her fanny pack to Celia and started the climb up to the balcony. Once the pair settled together on the balcony, Edwina looked over to Celia. “Hey, Ce. Are you sure you want to try this? I mean, what if it...works? What do we do?” Celia had tried to think of what would happen if her incantation and spell were to work. The thoughts had been painful, but she needed to make an informed decision on if this was safe.

“Well,” Celia bashfully looked at Edwina, “I don’t exactly know. I came up with two options: either it doesn’t work, or it works too well and our entire town dies as a result.” She knew this answer wasn’t true or satisfactory. It was just a little ritual to make herself feel better. Nothing bad could come out of it. She was wishing on eyelashes, not Dr. Frankenstein. She had come up with the idea, actually, while reading *Frankenstein* in Mr. Hijik’s English class. The plot felt comforting. “I’m hoping it works a little bit like *Frankenstein*? I mean, I know that I don’t have a lightning storm or anything. Maybe it’ll just help me get over it.” Obviously, Celia ignored the points that the novel was making about humanity imitating god and the ethicacy of bringing a dead person back to life without their consent. Nevertheless, she had paid attention to the ritualistic aspects of Dr. Frankenstein bringing to life his monster. And while she didn’t have physical bodies, she did have her the urns of Valerie and Darren to work from. She hoped that would be enough.

Celia was approached by Edwina about how her eyelashes had grown sparse over the past few months. She told Celia that she believed it was due to stress and made sure that Celia didn't feel insecure about it. Edwina gave Celia a few pairs of false eyelashes to wear just in case. When Celia had tried them on, her eyes felt scratchy and foreign. She put a pair on before Edwina arrived. "Celia, how are we doing this? Would they even want to come back? Your dad was always so, like, open about how he wanted to be buried and..." Edwina trailed off, realizing the magnitude of what had been said a moment too late.

Tears gathered in the corners of Celia's eyes. "Well, the plan is already fucked then, isn't it? There was hardly a body to cremate. So, here we are." Bringing her knees to her chest, Celia rocked herself forward and up; she made sure to help Edwina to her feet as well. They climbed in through her bedroom window and crawled onto Celia's bed. Her room was in a calming disarray. A teenage girl lived here. Books were strewn on all flat surfaces, clothes dotted the floor, and magazine cut-outs collaged on the walls. There were six candles lighting the room. Celia gathered all the things she found on her walks into a pentagram on the floor. One candle per point and one in the middle.

CHAPTER NINE

Edwina propped herself up on the floor waiting with her hands under her chin for instructions. “So, when do we start?” Her eyes nervously darted across the room, finally landing on Celia’s face. “You know, I won’t think you chickened out if you say you want to stop. We all get a little too into our own heads sometimes.” Celia sat cross legged on the floor next to Edwina. Celia’s breathing was erratic but constant. In her head she had already counted to 300. She was about to start all over again when she realized she was missing the quartz that her mom had gifted her.

“I can’t start without my quartz! I’ve charged it every new moon since the accident. You’ve been here for most of them. Do you know where it is?” Frantically, she scooted over to her bedside table and ransacked her drawers. Celia began tossing pens and notes and knickknacks onto the floor in a panicked flurry.

Edwina sat and stared, wide eyed. “Celia, you throwing things around isn’t going to help. We’re looking for a rock, not a boulder. You normally keep your stones in your ballerina music box.” Pointing to Celia’s music box on her bookshelf, Edwina looked pleased with herself. Edwina prided herself on being a fixer and a finder. Even when her parents hadn’t talked to her in days or had kicked her out, they would call her to find missing items in their house. Celia asked Edwina to darn her socks when they acquired holes; Edwina loved helping.

Going over to her music box, Celia found herself hesitating at the clasp. “Do you think I should try?” Her eyes were glossy with unshed tears. She rolled her hands up into her sweatshirt and moved back and forth on her toes. Celia didn’t think it was wrong, per se. Edwina, however, had brought up some good points about why it may not be the best idea. Celia wanted her parents back. She knew it was selfish. She knew she shouldn’t act on it. She wasn’t sure if she should

care.

“Ce, listen,” Edwina took in a shallow breath. “I don’t think you should. I’ll stay if you decide to do it. And I’ll obviously support you and love you. But you’re going crazy over here. You don’t have eyelashes anymore. I think that you feel that you need to try, and when you feel better because it doesn’t work, I think you need, like. Therapy. A lot of it, actually.” She twirled a long strand of hair between her fingertips, refusing to make eye contact with Celia.

Placing both urns in the center of the pentagram after finding her quartz, Celia walked back to Edwina. The spell journal was open to a page covered in black ink and scribbles. The words were indecipherable to Edwina in the candlelight. Each looked like one long curly and unending line. Celia unsheathed a long knife. “Gods, tonight I offer you my wishes. I pray this sacrifice, sanctified by my blood, and witnessed by love is enough to grant me new life from old. Valerie and Darren both rest in urns. I lay out their ashes.” And with this, she sprinkled their ashes into two distinct piles. “They rest here, for you to resurrect. They rest here, to serve you. They rest here, to witness. Here is my blood.” Celia slashed into the skin of her right palm and let the blood drip onto her mother, father, and lashes.

As soon as the last drop of blood fell, all candles in the room went out in a huff of smoke. Edwina was speechless. Celia had made it seem like it would be a normal balcony night. She didn’t know this was the truth. Edwina had no idea that Celia was capable of such power. “Ce, what did you just do?” The center candle relit. The flame reached four feet high, singing the bottom of Celia’s hair. The smell was overwhelming.

“They rest here, for you to resurrect. They rest here, to serve you. They rest here, to witness.” Celia repeated over and over. Edwina grabbed Celia’s hand for comfort which only made Celia’s powers stronger. The ashes started to dance in the smoke. First making dense

clouds. Then thinning out and conjoining. “They rest here! For resurrection! They rest! For service! They rest! For witnessing!” Celia collapsed back first onto her bed. Edwina’s hand was numb from Celia’s grip. As she fell back, wind came through the open window and breathed life into the ashes. All at once, Celia’s greatest wish and worst nightmare came true.

CHAPTER TEN

The ash came together in the starlight. All of Celia's thoughts left her mind as she struggled to stay on the bed. The wind funneled the flames. The ashes of Celia's parents resembled the pinpoint stars above. Suddenly, they appeared.

Flesh began to freckle together. The red wax of the candles mixed with Celia's spilled blood and began flowing between the cracks of their skin. The skin of her mother and father was thin enough to see the sky behind them in the window. Moonlight shone through them onto the molten liquid made consecrated blood. The hinges of her father's jaw went slack, and he fell with a thud to the floor. Celia's mother toppled over him. They lay askew in the middle of the pentagram—unbreathing but alive.

The girls stared at each other silently. Celia opened her mouth and closed it, unsure of what to say. "Celia. What do we do when they wake up?" Edwina's normally bright eyes were dull and frightened. As if she didn't believe what had just happened. Celia pondered this question. She had not prepared for this. The ritual was supposed to fail. The girls were supposed to laugh and cry and move on. Now, they had Celia's half decomposed parents slumped over one another. This shouldn't have been possible.

"I don't know. I hadn't seen anything in any of my books about this working. I—I'm really scared." The tremble in Celia's voice broke into a cry. "I didn't want them to leave but look at them. Look at how much pain they're in. It looks like they're resting but their bodies are writhing." Her parents reminded her of half-baked earth worms on a hot sidewalk. The mass on the floor looked like a heart pumping blood. One part of their body would squirm and re-inflate while the other parts would cease movement and deflate. "There isn't an instruction book, Ed." Celia's cool tone cut through the heat of the room.

At that Edwina sat up on her elbows. “You know, Ce, you don’t have to act like that. This was all your idea! I tried to give you a way out. I told you I would still love you if you wanted to stop, but you didn’t. This is on you. There isn’t another way to say it.” They had arguments. None of this magnitude before, though. Edwina’s family was confrontational. She was comfortable expressing her anger even if it meant losing her composure. Celia talked calmly but tried not to stir up many negative emotions. Now, all conflict resolution skills went out the window.

“Excuse me for wanting to see my dead parents one more time! I already said it wasn’t supposed to work, okay. I don’t understand what you aren’t getting.” Celia’s hushed whisper strained in the back of her throat. If Aunt Lou weren’t in the next room over, Celia would be screaming and thrashing out.

The question of if those bodies on the floor held Celia’s parents as they were before the accident didn’t immediately register. Celia wanted to touch them, but she was afraid of what her touch would mean. It could wake them. Or dissolve them. Or some combination of both. She didn’t know which form she preferred them in.

This is not what Celia wanted. Celia wanted closure. She wanted the failure to bring her closer to Edwina. The failure would have finalized their deaths. The grieving process could start, or stop, or continue. Celia didn’t know if it would ever end. She hoped this would be the final step. “I just wanted them to hug me again.”

Edwina’s face softened at Celia’s confession. They had talked about the accident before, but Celia had always kept the conversation at a surface level. Edwina knew better than to force her to discuss her feelings. They walked in the woods and to the ice cream shop in silence many times while Celia debated whether to bring up her inner thoughts or not. She always chose not to.

She knew Edwina would have loved to help her and would have supported her and told her it would be okay eventually. But that isn't what Celia needed, really. Celia needed an out. A way for her parents to be real again.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Everyone seemed to move on from the accident as soon as the papers stopped reporting on it. And that was the biggest conundrum for Celia. She hadn't wanted to talk about it; she was still angry about not being approached by reporters. The attention would have at least validated her feelings. She suspected it was because she was still a minor. Aunt Lou would have shut the interview down before it even happened anyway.

Edwina took Celia into her arms and hugged her close. Celia's lavender shampoo wafted into Edwina's nostrils. "You know, it's real to me. I miss your parents too. I mean, hell, I called them mom and dad more than I did my own parents. They were special to me and I'm just glad that the accident left you here. I know you don't feel it. It sucks. This whole thing sucks." Edwina tried to stay strong for Celia. Tears rolled from her eyes as she pet Celia's hair. All the while the mass in the middle of the floor sat pulsing.

"Ed, I really didn't expect it to work. I mean, what the hell just happened. If I touch them, it becomes real. If I don't maybe, it'll all just go away. Maybe we're dreaming." Celia hoped the latter was the case. She knew it wasn't. A muted light still passed through the window, illuminating the shapes on the floor. The smell of the candles thankfully hid the smell of rotten burnt flesh. Celia rotated her smokey quartz between her thumb and index finger. "Do you think that whatever is here is in pain?"

Celia bit her lip as she looked to Edwina. Tears formed in the corner of her eyes and she wiped them on Smokey's back. The cat's large eyes were fixed to Celia's parents in the middle of the floor. His fuzzy tail swished along the side of Celia's pillow. He allowed Celia to cry onto his back and curled into her head. Smokey seemed to be the only being who wasn't alarmed by what was happening. Maybe he knew this would happen all along. Maybe Celia's mom sent him

and told him the plan. Maybe this entire year had been a nightmare. Celia was doing well. She had a job and was still in school. She got along with Aunt Lou and was dating her best friend. The universe needed payment for that, Celia guessed.

Edwina fixated on the hair she was twirling between her fingers, mirroring the crystal twirling of Celia. “Celia, what happens when they wake up. We need to decide. They can’t just hide in your room for the rest of eternity. And Aunt Lou shares a bathroom. I don’t imagine you can just, like, keep both of your doors locked twenty-four-seven.” This was a valid point. Aunt Lou was a barger; yes, she would knock, but only while she was already turning the doorknob.

Celia’s parents could wake up at any second. Their body parts had stopped completely deflating as they pulsed. The inflation of an arm didn’t take anything away from a leg anymore. Celia had to think fast. “Could we just see what happens? Maybe?” She knew that wasn’t the answer. Her face gave her terrified confusion away.

Edwina knew at once that she needed to bring out the only ultimatum in her arsenal: “I mean, Aunt Lou is in the other room. I’ll go see what she thinks. I guess that’s really our only option at this point.” She shifted her weight away from Celia waiting for the pushback that came almost immediately.

“Are you fucking kidding, Ed. Really? That’s what you want to do. What are we even going to say? ‘Hey, sorry I totally threw a fit tonight and should be locked up in a psych ward, but we just brought my parents back to life. So, I don’t know how you want us to handle that!’ Edwina. Are you literally insane?” Celia was beyond reasoning. She couldn’t believe that Edwina threatened her with tattling to Aunt Lou. That was the absolute last resort.

“Celia,” Edwina sounded more confident than she felt. “If you don’t decide what to do in the next thirty seconds I will scream for Lou and she’ll come. I’m not threatening you, well,

actually, no. I am threatening you. We need to plan our next move. We needed to plan it before I came over, to be honest.” Celia knew Edwina was right. She didn’t want to fail her parents for a second time. And worst of all, she knew Edwina wasn’t joking about calling Aunt Lou into the room. It was amazing that she hadn’t already knocked on the door to check on Celia.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Celia began to speak but was cut off by a strange gurgle emanating from the throbbing heap on the floor. The bodies began to separate, inch by inch. “Okay, okay. Why don’t you throw down some blankets and pillows? I’ll stuff the left-over towels under the doors.” As they left the bed, Smokey moved from his post to a pillow higher on the bed and curled up again.

As they were laying out their pillows and blankets there was a soft knock on the bathroom door. “Celia? I know you’re probably going to pretend you’re asleep, and that’s okay, I guess. I just heard some crying and wanted to check on you.” Aunt Lou was awake. Celia was sure that she would be asleep by now and that they hadn’t been too loud. Celia threw the remaining pile of blankets over the bodies on the floor; unfortunately, it was too late to silence them completely.

The long knife that Celia used during the ritual poked into her thigh. “Thanks, Aunt Lou. I think I’m fine now. Just trying to go to bed.” Celia and Edwina exchanged worried glances across the room. Neither girl made a sound nor took a step.

“Alright, Ce. I think it’s time we both went to sleep. It’s been a long night. Come get me if you need me. Know I love you?” The question put a somber smile on Celia’s face. That was the question her parents asked her at bedtime. Aunt Lou had only recently adopted it.

Celia sharply inhaled and pressed the side of the blade further into her thigh. “Yes. Know I love you?” The question was answered with a quiet yawn followed by Aunt Lou pressing her palm flat against the door. “Yes, Ce. Always. Goodnight.”

Smokey looked at the knife, Celia thought it was an odd expectant look for a cat. Celia’s thigh throbbed. The pocketed blade was almost through the thin denim of her jeans. She was surprised that Aunt Lu hadn’t tried to push her way in. Aunt Lou hadn’t invaded Celia’s thoughts

or feelings. And to be completely transparent, Celia was sort of hoping Aunt Lou would act more like Aunt Lou. Celia wasn't the one to ask for help. She hardly knew how to ask Edwina for help opening her locker, but suddenly she felt like a child. Her mistakes bred consequences she wasn't prepared to face.

Wondering how selfish she needed to be in her life for even an ounce of happiness gave Celia pause. Celia regretted inviting Edwina. She knew that Edwina would have said yes. She didn't want to feel this way. The power she had wasn't because of her; it was a gift from the women in her family before her. Her parents were dead, and she should have left them to rest. Edwina was deserving of a better partner—one who wouldn't spring necromancy on her as if it were a surprise hike in the woods after school.

Those hikes were some of their favorite memories together. While walking, they would gather acorns, mushrooms, bones, and whatever else they could find, stashing it all away in Edwina's fanny pack. When they returned to Celia's house, they would bless all the items and rearrange Celia's altar. Edwina wasn't a witch by blood. She may not have even been a witch in spirit. But she became the ultimate companion for Celia on long journeys into the woods. Edwina always found the most beautiful specimens. The sound of their sneakers clomping in the dirt became the soundtrack of Celia's best days.

The soundtrack to tonight was a cacophony of caterwauls and pained moans. The half-existence of her parents was almost more painful than witnessing their deaths. Even under the blankets Celia could see them writhe. English class hadn't prepared her for this. She thought it would be instant. She imagined that her parents would wake up and run over, telling Celia how much they loved and missed her. She wanted them to take her in their arms and kiss the top of her head. Instead, they were more reminiscent of nightcrawlers than her mom and dad. The

bodies were right; the brains weren't. And isn't that always the problem?

While Celia considered her options, a quick movement from the center of the room distracted her. Smokey had jumped on the pile of blankets that covered Celia's parents. Edwina lunged toward them to grab Smokey but tripped on the mound of blankets that Celia had dropped.

In a strained whisper Edwina called out to Celia. "Celia! Get your cat off them!" Smokey sat, staring between the two girls, seemingly unbothered. Celia slid in her slipper socks and snatched Smokey mid jump. Already unbalanced, her ill-thought-out movements caused her mother to fall from her father's back. The bodies lay there, both face down with slowed breathing. All was still in Celia's bedroom.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Celia and Edwina slowly backed away from the bodies on the floor. They came together and held hands. Only stopping so they didn't run into the wall. A loud hollow *snap* was heard from the center of the room. Celia gripped the knife in her pocket. Her parents synchronously turned their faces toward hers. What Celia had expected was an "I love you." What Celia heard was a pained gargle.

Her parents tried to speak, a guttural sound that made Celia as nauseous as their smell. The scent of bog filled Celia's bedroom. Mossy and earthy sweet smells mixed with the stench of death and decay. Celia expected the ashes to not have a distinctive smell. Or maybe the magic was responsible. The candle flames reignited and sent smoke billowing to the ceiling. The curtains parted and the windows thrust open. Celia and Edwina stood to the side facing away from each other. Afraid to say out loud what they both knew. The prone bodies contorted and stood, shaky and ungraceful. Celia noticed that her parent's eyes were gone. Their faces, in horrified pain, turned once again toward Celia. Her mother's mouth was the first to move. She didn't sound human to Celia.

Her mother panted and hooted, moaning all the while. Once, when Celia was four, she had seen a Jane Goodall documentary. She had been amazed that Jane Goodall could mimic and communicate with the chimpanzees she studied. Celia's mother sounded much like if that documentary's audio had a paper shredder in the background. If her mom were to communicate, what would they talk about?

Interrupting her thought, Edwina yelled. "Celia!" Celia looked to her right and immediately felt the air of her father diving, mouth first, toward her throat. Edwina unlocked the bathroom door that was at their backs and pulled Celia through. Edwina locked the bathroom

door and as the girls turned around, they saw Aunt Lou in the doorframe.

“Girls? Are you okay? What’s going on in there?” As she finished her question Celia’s dad thumped against the door. Over and over the hollow thumping continued. The girls were silent. Edwina unlocked Celia’s door and Aunt Lou pushed her way in. Darren’s body was against the door along with an array of pillows and blankets. Aunt Lou stared wide eyed into the velvet darkness. The candles, no longer aflame, emitted thin spirals of smoke into the air. Celia’s mother wasn’t visible from the door. The blankets in the middle of the room were flat. After the trio exchanged anxious expressions, they heard a rhythmic pounding against the balcony. The windows shook.

Aunt Lou’s face looked as pained as it did when she picked Celia up from the hospital after the accident. Her expression mirrored how she looked when asked to identify what remained of Valerie and Darren. There was a glimmer of betrayal that flashed in her eyes whenever she looked at Celia and the abominations at the center of the room. Aunt Lou took hold of Celia and Edwina’s hands. “I thought I was done using magic. I hate that side of myself.” Aunt Lou thought for a second and exhaled loudly.

“We should collect them and put them back in the center. We should join hands.” Celia said as she inhaled her sob and wiped the tears from her eyes with the edge of a fleece blanket. “And then, we should kill them.”

“Celia! What the hell? Why did we even try this then? What was the point?” Edwina was angry, rightfully so. Loving Celia meant loving her impulsiveness and her inability to check her own selfishness.

Celia’s shoulders shook. “You know I never meant for this to happen! I wanted this to fail. I wanted to see the ashes. I wanted to ritualize my pain. I didn’t expect it to work!” She

couldn't bring herself to admit to her own failure. But she didn't want to admit her success, either. Without a word, Aunt Lou quietly sobbed and nodded her head. "Please help me drag Darren. Could someone take a pillow out of its case and bring just the case to me? Maybe he'll be more relaxed in the dark." Celia did as she was told and took her pillow out of her parent's old pillowcase. "Celia. I can't...I can't do it from this angle. Can you please put it over his head?"

Celia swallowed and gripped the end of the pillowcase. She looked at her father's face. His eyes were nowhere to be found. She said a quiet "I love you. I'm—sorry." And covered his face. Edwina and Aunt Lou took him under the arms and dragged him back to the pile of blankets. He seemed to quiet. His breathing evened and his muscles felt relaxed. He struggled half-heartedly to get away from the blankets but resigned himself to lying there as he had before.

Edwina and Celia made their way to the balcony. Celia's mom squirmed. Her feet partially off the balcony. The girls looked at Valerie. "Ed let's grab her arms and pull her up. Aunt Lou can cover her head and help us get her on the bed. We can wrap her in my duvet and pull her off, I guess."

Edwina placed her hand on the small of Celia's back and kissed a tear on Celia's cheek. "Okay, Ce. Can do." They reached down and grabbed Celia's mom's arms. Her flesh was cold and slimy. Nothing remained of the woman Celia knew in life. Even her hair was dull and lifeless. Valerie's screams had died down, but she still moaned in pain. The girls groaned while hoisting Valerie over the window ledge. They quietly let Aunt Lou place a pillowcase over Valerie's head once inside. Celia and Aunt Lou wrapped the body in the duvet and gently slid the body to the center of the room. Everything looked in its place, except the crystal.

Celia saw a glint from the balcony. "My crystal! We need it if the spell is going to work!"

Celia tromped over to the window from the foot of her bed. The crystal was sitting between the slats of the balcony, perfectly suspended. One wrong move and it would fall. Celia turned around and scooted out of the window as slowly as she could. Any movement would have to be saved for snatching the crystal. Once she had her second foot on the iron balcony, she used all her core strength to stabilize her breathing. All she could hear was her own heartbeat. As soon as her breathing was stable, she harnessed her remaining energy into grabbing her crystal. The quick arm movement sent vibrations through the slats of the balcony. At the last second, the crystal was stowed safely in her palm.

Once back inside, Celia headed toward her parents. She got on the ground and looked at both of their faces. There was no semblance of memory on Darren or Valerie's part. Their face muscles only danced in pain. Soft whimpers escaped their mouths. Celia collapsed on top of her parents and allowed herself to sob. Celia apologized repeatedly for putting them through so much pain, for disappointing them, and most importantly, for not allowing herself to move on. Edwina and Aunt Lou stood in front of Celia's bookshelves and made soft shushing noises to calm Celia. It didn't work. Celia bent down and kissed Darren and Valerie's foreheads, brushing their unkempt hair from their lifeless eye sockets.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“I’m ready now.” Celia looked down at her feet. Edwina and Aunt Lou came to Celia and hugged her close.

She had been naïve, yes. She had also gone after what she wanted. If it hadn’t worked Edwina would have been making fun of her for her ill-fated “girl boss energy.” And even though had it worked, she was still loved. Celia would be allowed to face the consequences of living without her parents. Aunt Lou understood the grief and sadness—something that Celia never imagined.

After relighting the candles and once again grabbing her knife from her pocket Celia gathered Aunt Lou and Edwina near the bodies. “Please give me your hands.” The three clasped hands over Darren and Valerie. As the final pair’s hands closed, the flames once again grew higher.

“Dear gods, please allow these lovers to pass painlessly into the night. Dear gods, forgive me for my selfishness and failure to accept your plans for my parents. Dear gods, please allow Edwina and Aunt Lou to forgive me. Dear gods, please allow me to grow in love and light. I sacrifice my blood,” Celia sliced her opposite palm and rejoined Edwina’s hand to her left. She then, mercifully, brought the knife’s blade to Darren’s chest. She did the same to Valerie. She said a silent prayer to her gods and to her parent’s souls. “I will sacrifice to make things right. For love, for life, for light.”

The trio chanted. “For love, for life, for light. For love, for life, for light. For love, for life, for light.” At the final pause of the last chant, they lifted their hands, palms up, to the moon.

Aunt Lou was the first to speak. “You’re doing the right thing. This is exactly why I don’t practice magic anymore. I tried to bring back dad when I was fifteen. Well, Val and I both

did. We almost died. And we didn't speak for years after. But you have Edwina. And you have me. Celia, honey, it's really damn hard to be you right now. Look at how strong you were tonight. Look at your power." Celia brought herself to smile.

Celia wiped her blood on Edwina's left cheek and Aunt Lou's right cheek. Celia took notice of the constellations watching them from out the window. She smiled when she saw Smokey watching from her windowsill.

The bodies on the floor returned to spilled ash.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A month after the resurrection, Celia finally felt ready to lay her parents to rest. She realized, after collapsing on the floor with Edwina and Aunt Lou, that the adage of killing your darlings was painfully real. In some ways, the pain she experienced after the accident died with her parents when she killed them. Her parents were in pain. Celia was in pain. And that night hadn't served anyone well. Celia envisioned a homecoming. She wanted hugs and I love yous exchanged on her bedroom floor. The reality harrowed her.

Edwina called Celia the morning after the resurrection and decided the couple needed a break. They were back together three weeks later. The break let Celia think about what she wanted in her own life though. It made life truly hard. She no longer had a distraction from her pain. Facing the new deaths of her parents wasn't a consequence Celia prepared herself for. Even Aunt Lou needed a break from Celia for a few days after that night. Simon rented a room in a bed and breakfast a few cities over so Aunt Lou could escape to the lake. The time away from her only confidantes forced Celia to reckon with herself. She didn't need her parents back. She needed to realize she was strong enough to survive without them.

Although everyone seemed to return to normal in that short span of time, Celia made a silent vow to not practice magic until she no longer felt overwhelming negative feelings. She didn't need a lecture from Aunt Lou on the importance of good intentions—she experienced firsthand how out of control her emotions spiraled. Instead, Celia picked up her habit of collecting in the woods again. When Simon and Lou came back, Celia asked for a custom altar to be built to display her findings. She collected everything: birch tree bark, antlers, wildflowers, exoskeletons, leaves. All her treasures had a place on her new altar. In the center she kept the smokey quartz as a reminder to surround her feelings of anger and sadness with items of

happiness and peace.

As Celia and Edwina walked home from the ice cream shop after school let out, they took a detour into the woods. They climbed a path marked by stacks of rock and reached a clearing full of dandelions and purple ground covering. The girls bent down and laid their jackets out beneath them. Celia hugged her backpack to her chest.

“Whatcha got in there?” Edwina nosily asked as she poked her finger into the bulge at the back of Celia’s backpack.

Celia sat for a second. She took her shoes and socks off and plunged her toes into the tall grass. “I thought we could have a ceremony.”

Edwina’s eyes grew large as she fully comprehended what Celia said. “Ce, no! We literally just talked about how awful that was. Are you serious? You can’t be serious.” Edwina grabbed for her bag and moved to her knees to stand.

Unzipping her backpack, Celia grabbed the two urns out of the big pocket. “No, Edwina. A ceremony to peacefully return my parents to the earth. They deserve to rest. No magic, just us, them, and the wildflowers.”

“Are you sure you want to do that? What will you have if you spread their ashes here?” Edwina’s concern couldn’t be hidden. She had a slight tremble in her voice.

Celia pointed to a necklace that was hidden under her sweater. “I mixed their ashes together in this pendent. I also crushed some healing crystals and muddled petals for them. I’ll have this, and then they can have this place of peace.” What Celia chose to keep to herself was the plan to approach the city to protect this patch of land. That was a conversation for another time.

Edwina rocked on her heels. “That’s really sweet, Ce. I don’t know if I would be able to

like, completely part with them like this. Do you want me to give you a minute alone?"

"No. I wanted you with me. I always wanted you with me." Celia grabbed Edwina's hand and they stood up together. Barefoot in the grass the girls walked toward the center of the field.

"You ready, Ce?" Edwina nudged Celia forward with a hand on her lower back.

"I don't know if I am. But I think my parents are. It's been a long time of unrest." Celia spun under the sunlight as she hugged both urns to her chest. Celia opened each urn. The inside was dark. She no longer knew who was who. The day after the resurrection she put them in identical urns and burnt the artisanal terracotta urns she bought after the accident to cleanse their home. She wanted her parents at peace.

The wind picked up. She spun again as the ashes of her parents danced in the wind. Tears gathered in Celia's eyes as she wished her parents a final goodbye. Staring at Edwina, Celia noticed she was also crying. It finally felt that their lives were lighter. Celia no longer wanted to be alone in her grief. Instead, she wanted to invite Edwina in. They walked back to their jackets in silence. As they lay on the ground facing each other, the world felt small. Celia gathered Edwina's face in her hands and closed her eyes. It was as if she were feeling the sun on her skin for the first time.