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Shadowlord

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Chapter One

The ruby was missing.

Annaliese froze in the doorway to her father's study. The book she'd meant to replace on the shelves above his desk hung limp in her hand. She crept toward the glass case set against the far wall and laid a hand against the cool glass. Small plush cushions were spaced neatly across the mahogany shelves, each holding a tiny treasure. There was the elephant carved from ivory and there was the miniature gold-plated globe, but the space between them was conspicuously empty.

Annaliese drew in a sharp breath. Had anything else been missing, she would have thought it had simply been removed by her father. But he never took ruby out of its case, and none of the servants would have dared to touch it. Annaliese shut her eyes against the sight of the empty case. She knew where the ruby was. *Micah*, she thought. She cringed.

Her twin brother had always held a strange fascination for the ruby. Annaliese long suspected he had somehow found a way of removing the jewel from its locked case, but she never thought he would take it out of their father's study altogether. After all, if their father ever found out, she shuddered to think of the consequences. Until this very moment, Annaliese had assumed that the mere threat of being caught was enough to keep Micah from ever going that far. But it seemed her brother was bolder than she'd thought. Annaliese bit her lip and wiped at the fingerprints she had left on the glass case. Dropping her book on her father's carved-oak desk, she hurried out of the study.

Out in the hall, the clock chimed five. Her stomach turned in a lazy, sickening swoop. Her father was due home in less than two hours. For now the house echoed, quiet and nearly empty. There would be just enough time to retrieve the ruby and put it back into the case before the household convened for dinner. Just enough time, if she hurried.

Micah's bedroom was located on the second floor, just across from hers. Annaliese rapped three times and, when there was no reply, opened the door and stuck her head inside. The room stood in its usual state of disorder. A riot of books cluttered the desk in the corner. Lucy had obviously come and tidied the bed, but several pillows had been pulled off and flung across the floor. Pale light crept past the half-drawn curtains. Her brother was not here.

Annaliese groaned, but she was not surprised. Micah may not have had enough sense to leave the ruby alone, but he was smart enough not to hide it anywhere too obvious. Gathering the pillows from the floor, she fluffed them and put them back where they belonged. She perched on the edge of the bed, drew the plumpest pillow into her lap, and hugged it. Surely Micah wouldn't have taken the ruby off the grounds. But where in their home could he hope to keep it hidden?

The answer struck her like a flash of lightning.

When their family moved into this house four years ago, she and her brother had set up a secret hideaway in an old potting shed on the farthest edge of the lawn. A new brick shed had been erected two years ago, but Annaliese knew that Micah still went to the old shed sometimes when he wanted to be alone. It was one place where he could be sure no one would bother him.

There was just enough light for Annaliese to find her way down the short dirt path to the shed. It had been over a year since she'd last set foot inside it, and she saw at once that the shed hadn't aged well. The walls sagged and the little glass windows had turned milky. A long crack spidered across the uppermost window. But a dim light shone from inside. Annaliese found the latch and pried the door open. The wood had swelled from the dampness and the door stuck. She pulled hard and with a long squeak the door finally gave. And there, inside the shed and hunched over a rickety little desk, sat her brother. The dying sun streamed through the smudged windows and illuminated her brother's down-turned face. His light brown hair glowed in the light. He would have looked almost angelic except for his cross expression.

“Where is it?”

Her voice rushed out, louder and angrier than she had intended. Micah's head snapped up. He looked around, face almost wild with confusion, before his gaze settled upon Annaliese. Then his eyes steeled, as if he realized what she was here for.

“Don't worry.” He turned back to his book and flicked through the pages with an air of nonchalance. “I'll put it back before anyone notices. Go back inside.”

Annaliese stood up very straight. She braced her hands on her hips and tried to swallow the anger that welled up inside of her. But she couldn't keep it out of her voice.

“I noticed. What makes you think someone else won't?”

Micah pursed his lips and pointedly returned to his book.

Annaliese drew back, stung.

“There’s no one else here.” Micah roughly turned the pages of the book.

“Gabrielle and Ethan are out. They won’t be back until late tonight, and I doubt if Ethan will use his study before tomorrow afternoon. That gives me plenty of time to put it back.”

Annaliese dug her fingers into her dress. Early last year Micah had stopped calling their parents ‘Mother’ and ‘Father’. At the time, she had thought it was simply some passing phase, that he was just trying to sound more adult. She had considered it an immature display of rebellion, but she hadn’t taken it too seriously. Nor had their parents. Perhaps, like Annaliese, they had expected it to stop as soon as Micah tired of his newest method of defiance. But it hadn’t stopped and this habit of her brother’s had begun to grate on her nerves.

“Put it back.” She hadn’t meant to fight with her brother. Not over this. She’d meant to be understanding, or at the very least civil, but Annaliese abandoned that plan in the face of her brother’s bad temper. “Father will kill you if he finds out. Don’t risk it. Just put it back.”

Micah regarded her with something close to contempt and Annaliese shut her mouth so hard that her teeth clicked. She’d seen that expression on his face before but never directed at her.

“No.” He buried his nose in his book again. “I need it. I’ll return it later.” He paused. “I’m busy, Annaliese. Go back inside.”

Annaliese stared at him for a moment, mute with shock. She clenched her skirt in her hands and turned away. She recovered her voice. “Fine. Do what you want. I don’t care. You’re the one that will be in trouble anyway.”

Her voice wavered with emotion and Annaliese clenched her jaw shut. She hated how childish she sounded. Micah buried his nose in his book, plainly snubbing her. His posture seemed to suggest that he had entirely forgotten that his sister was in the room, that he had forgotten that he even had a sister.

Annaliese stomped out of the shed and slammed the rickety door behind her as hard as she could. She tried to push thoughts of Micah and the ruby out of her mind. But they forced their way back in, whispering in Annaliese’s ear. Micah was up to something. That much was clear. Her brother had always kept to himself but these days he drifted around the house like a ghost, appearing only for meals, often disappearing into some forgotten corner for hours on end. Whenever Annaliese hunted him down, she always found him just as she had today: surrounded by books and notes, sullen, and utterly unwilling to tell her what he was doing.

The back door squeaked when Annaliese shoved it open. She balked, but neither the cook nor the maid stuck their head into the hall to see who had come in. Annaliese threaded her way through the halls and into the foyer, careful to remain as silent as possible. A faint clatter echoed from the direction of the kitchen, but the dining room was still empty. She checked the longcase clock that hulked beside the front door. It was nearly five-thirty. Perhaps Micah was right and their parents would be delayed on the

road. Annaliese paced over to the fireplace in the dining room. She ran a finger over the glossy wood of the mantle.

She'd never quite gotten used to living in Boston, not in the four years since the family had left New York. Annaliese wished sometimes that they'd never moved. It wasn't that she had been so very attached to New York. But she'd left all her childhood friends behind and she had made very few new ones since. The girls who numbered among the children of her parents' acquaintances were mostly a few years younger than Annaliese, or else much older. Annaliese's mother often remarked that she did not find Boston society to be quite as stimulating as New York's, but there was nothing to be done about that. Her father was determined that they should stay in Boston, in their spacious home on the outskirts of the city. It was a twenty minute ride into town by carriage, a ride Annaliese did not often have the opportunity to take. Her only chance to spend time in the city came at the price of accompanying her mother on one of her lengthy rounds of afternoon calls to her friends. Her mother would have liked her company but Annaliese found the visits unbearably tedious.

Now, she could only hope that Micah was right about their father's schedule. If he discovered that Micah had 'liberated' the ruby from the case without his permission, he would be furious. More than furious, Annaliese thought. He'd recently begun muttering pointed comments about the virtues of boarding school and a want of discipline to be found in young people today. If he knew what his son had done now, Annaliese doubted that Micah would even have time to construct an apology before he was packed off to the most miserable boarding school the country had to offer.

Annaliese was tempted to settle herself in the hall, to act as a sentinel in case her parents came home early. Maybe she could distract them, draw their attention elsewhere in the event that her father tried to go into his study. But the miserable ticking of the longcase clock was enough to drive her mad, and she couldn't help but watch the polished brass hands drift slowly around the clock's face. The rays of yellow light curved from the painted sun at the twelve o'clock position, spreading all the way down to nine and three. Behind the carved glass window at the clock's center, the pendulum swung steadily.

Annaliese slunk back to her bedroom. She found it cloaked in shadows, and she fumbled in the dark for several moments before she managed to light the gas. Silently she cursed the change in seasons. The long summer afternoons were so much more pleasant than the dark, meager evenings of autumn. Once Annaliese had the gas lit, she glowered at the contents of her room. Her sewing basket sat on the window-seat, but Annaliese ignored it. Instead, she paced over to her bookshelf and ran a hand over the solid oak shelves. She fingered the spines of the books. Annaliese had given her mother the list of new titles she wanted, as she did at the start of every other month. Her mother, after collecting her own list and Micah's, sent the order to a shop in town, and the books were usually delivered the following week, perhaps later if any of the items ordered were out of stock. Their house was not due for a new delivery for some time, but Annaliese had already begun her next list.

Her father had once or twice expressed disappointment that she spent so much time and money on her books instead of on dresses and jewelry as he thought was proper

for young women. Her mother, overhearing this, commented that Annaliese was pretty enough that she could afford to be clever. Annaliese had found the remark insulting, though she hadn't said so. Still, she understood that her mother was concerned by what she perceived to be a certain eccentricity in her daughter's choice of hobbies. Both of her parents seemed to think their children spent entirely too much time wrapped up in their private studies and pet projects.

Their father, in particular, seemed to regard Micah's disinterest in – and, as Micah cheerfully admitted, ineptitude for – business matters as a personal affront. Rarely did a day go by that their father failed to find some excuse to drive into the city to speak to someone about his finances. It was always a matter of bonds or imports, or the price of gold overseas, or some equally tedious thing. Annaliese was quite certain that her father's business affairs did not require quite so much personal attention. He had inherited his fortune from his own father, an English lord who had settled in New York to raise his family. This fortune, as Annaliese understood it, necessitated only modest supervision to ensure its upkeep. But her father, along with all the rest of the men in his social circle, had somehow managed to turn this task into a career that demanded their full attention. Annaliese had never quite grasped the particulars of this business. Neither, she knew, had her mother.

But her father did not seem to care whether his womenfolk knew anything about his finances. He cared very much, though, that his son shared this feminine disinterest. He cared especially that Micah was so frivolous with his allowance, often making purchases at one of the city's secondhand shops and buying up oddities like old glass

bottles and worn leather satchels. Micah had no use for any of these things. But he made a hobby out of salvaging strange, useless old items and attempting to make some use out of them. Sometimes he refurbished useful things. Last month, he'd dug up an abandoned pocket-watch, and he'd replaced the shattered glass face and polished the casing. The watch now kept perfect time. Most often, though, Micah built haphazard devices out of broken shoehorns and discarded tobacco tins, devices that never quite did what they were meant to.

Annaliese slid a finger into the gap between one of the books on the bottom shelf. She carefully shifted the stack aside. Behind this assortment of novels and books of poetry lay the one book she had lifted from her father's study and never bothered to return. She smoothed a thin layer of dust from the cover and settled in the wooden rocking chair to rest the open book on her lap. The neat block script on the front read simply, *Medicine*. Inside, *Gray's Anatomy*. Annaliese didn't know where her father had acquired the volume. It was clear enough, by the fact that he'd never noticed it had gone missing, that it was not a book for which he had any personal interest. She couldn't imagine her father purchasing anything as crass as a book on physiology for himself. Most likely he had inherited it, perhaps from his father or some uncle or cousin.

To the best of her knowledge, she was the only member of her immediate family who had ever read this particular book. It had been so long now that she couldn't remember when she'd first opened it. But the pictures of bones, and the sketches of organs and muscles, and the descriptions of disease fascinated her. She took the volume out on a regular basis, though she had all but memorized half of it. This was another of

her interests that she knew her parents would not approve of. They would find her interest in anatomy unseemly, and her attraction to medical science downright appalling. It certainly wasn't the sort of thing a well-bred young lady ought to study. Some girls of simpler means might hope to work as a nurse in one of the city hospitals, but it was certainly not a fitting occupation for a girl of Annaliese's stature. She'd never need this knowledge, never use it, but Annaliese couldn't help but take the book out every so often and skim through the worn pages. As always, the volume held her interest. Annaliese came back to herself some hours later when she heard Lucy's heavy tread out in the hallway as she prepared the bedrooms before retiring to the maids' quarters downstairs.

Annaliese consulted the brass alarm clock on her bureau, and discovered that it was seven minutes after eight. Time for bed. For a moment her fingers twitched. She considered slipping downstairs, just to see if Micah had put the ruby back as he'd promised. But she swallowed the impulse and tucked her book back in its hiding place. It was no concern of hers, she told herself. If Micah wanted to get himself into trouble, well, let him! The thought of their father's anger, of her brother being sent away, wrenched at her heart. Annaliese stubbornly pushed all thoughts of the ruby away. But when she had changed into her nightgown, turned out the gas, and climbed into bed, she found her thoughts turning toward her brother again, like a lodestone to iron.

When she and Micah were very young, still living at their home in New York, they had shared a bedroom and often stayed up late at night talking. Sometimes they even took a candle and crept out into the halls and down to the kitchen. Their cook at the time had been an aging woman who often went to bed shortly after her small charges did. If

they timed their visit properly, the kitchen would be empty but the wood stove would still be burning low. They liked to huddle around the stove and root through the cupboards for packets of crackers. They often sat there talking until their fire died out. It had been something special, something shared just between the two of them.

After they moved to Boston, that ritual ended. They were old enough, their parents said, to have their own rooms. That wasn't the only change their new home brought. In New York, they'd had a nanny, and then a tutor who taught both of them reading, spelling, and arithmetic. But few months after the move they turned twelve, and on their birthday their father hired a new tutor...just for Micah. The new tutor was supposed to teach him things like math and science and history. Annaliese, in turn, had been assigned a governess, who taught her sewing, French, and the piano.

Lessons were dull and lonely without Micah, but Annaliese had taken some comfort in knowing that her brother was bored without her, too. Or he had been, anyway. Until a few months ago, he had almost always spent his afternoons with her. Sometimes they went for long rambling walks around the neighborhood or played cards in the parlor. Sometimes they just talked. Micah would tell her about what new things he'd found around the house, what gossip he'd overheard during his occasional trips to town with their father, his plans for his next device. There was a man in New York named Tesla, doing things with motors and currents and magnets that had Micah fascinated, though Annaliese could never make heads or tails of the newspaper articles Micah showed her about the man. But lately Micah was withdrawn and immersed himself in some secret project that he refused to tell her about. It wasn't something his tutor had him working

on. Annaliese knew that much. In fact, she suspected it was something that no one was supposed to know about, something Micah was trying very hard to keep secret. But he had never kept secrets from her before. From their parents and nannies and tutors, yes. But not from his sister, his twin.

Their mother had noticed that her children did not spend as much time together as they once did. Earlier in the week, she had drawn Annaliese aside after breakfast and reassured her that it was perfectly normal for brothers and sisters to grow apart as they got older. Annaliese heard in her mother's voice the hope that this separation would awaken in her daughter a new interest in womanly pursuits, or that it would inspire Annaliese to become more social. Her mother had made several offhand mentions of an upcoming tea or bridge to which she had been invited. The suggestion that Annaliese might like to attend as well was always unspoken but clear nonetheless.

The curtains lifted in a gust of wind and billowed into the room. Annaliese followed them with her eyes, gradually drifting into sleep. But she startled awake when the bedroom door creaked open. Lifting her head from the pillow, she squinted at the door. Was it Lucy? Or her mother, coming home late and looking in on her children?

“Lee-lee?”

Her brother's voice was a hoarse whisper in the dark.

Annaliese caught her breath. It was her old baby nickname, the one Micah had made up when they were first learning to talk. He hadn't used it in a very long time.

“I'm here.” She pushed back the blankets and shoved herself into a sitting position.

Micah's shadow slipped through the door as he crept over to her bed. Annaliese shifted aside to make room for him to sit down, and was pleased when he did. Micah was quiet for a moment.

"Hello," he whispered, finally. Annaliese choked down a laugh.

"Hello," she whispered back. He was smiling at her. She couldn't see it, but she could feel it.

"Sorry." He spoke haltingly.

Annaliese huffed a quiet laugh. Her brother was always so laconic. He found her hand in the dark and squeezed it. She knew this was the real apology.

"Yes." She grasped his hand, warm and strong, in hers. "I know."

It wasn't quite true. She hadn't known he was sorry, and that was what had been so upsetting. Annaliese gave his hand another press and tried to think how to phrase all of the questions she needed to ask.

"What's the matter?"

Micah sighed. He didn't respond right away. Annaliese prodded his arm gently.

"Nothing," he murmured after a moment. "I've just been frustrated with something. I was having trouble with a project. It doesn't matter now. I figured it out. I'm sorry, though. I know I've been...well. I'm sorry."

"Micah," she whispered, suddenly and inexplicably afraid. "What's wrong?"

Micah's hand tightened briefly in hers.

“No, tell me. Please. If you’re going to get into trouble…” She trailed off and licked her lips again. Their father’s threats of boarding school rose in her mind. “You know how angry Father will be. At least tell me what you’re doing.”

Micah stayed silent for a very long time. Slowly, Annaliese grew convinced that he wouldn’t tell her, that he’d turn sullen again and refuse to talk. Perhaps it would have been better not to ask him any questions at all. He had been so sensitive to questioning, lately. But at last Micah let out a gusty sigh and slipped his hand out from underneath hers.

“I can’t tell you. Don’t be angry, Lee-lee. Please. I’ll tell you soon, I just want to finish things first. I’m working on a test right now.” His voice brightened and he touched her hand. “Wait until you see! I’ll show you soon, I promise. Just be patient a little bit longer.”

With some effort, Annaliese mustered up a smile. What could she say to that? She couldn’t bring herself be cross with him, not now. At least he was talking to her again, promising to share things with her. That was more than he’d done in months.

“All right. All right, I’ll wait. Just…promise me you’ll be careful, all right?”

“I’m being careful.” Micah shifted on the bed, as if anxious to get moving. Back to his mysterious project. “I am. Don’t worry.”

Annaliese brushed a hand over his shoulder and said nothing. There was an edge to Micah’s voice that made her think there was something terribly important he wasn’t telling her. She had the ruby on her mind when she’d cautioned him to be careful, but somehow she received the impression Micah was thinking about that at all. Annaliese

remembered the time he'd nearly melted the old wood stove when they were ten. He'd been "working on a test" then, too. She pressed her lips together.

Micah slid off the bed. Annaliese blinked at his silhouetted figure, trying to divine something more from the way he stood, or his posture. But she couldn't glean anything.

"I should go," he said.

Annaliese watched his shadow move toward the door. She thought he might pause in the doorway and say something more. But he left as quietly as he'd entered, without a backward glance. Her hand felt cold now that he had let go, and the room seemed even more oppressively silent. Worries crowded inside her mind, thoughts of the ruby and the whole house going up in smoke as the result of Micah's experiment. She shut her eyes and tried not to think about anything at all.

Annaliese jerked awake to the soft thump of footsteps out in the hall. Muffled voices echoed through the door. Annaliese swung her feet over the side of the bed and grabbed her bathrobe. Wrapping herself up tightly, she crept to the door and opened it up partway. She stuck her head out. Then, just as quickly, she ducked back into her room. Her parents were home. Annaliese floundered for a moment, wondering if she should shut the door, dive into bed, and pretend to be asleep in case her parents came into her room. Or maybe she should wait, and see if they had noticed anything amiss. She drew in a breath and opened the door again, just the tiniest bit.

Out in the hall, her father was speaking to her mother in low tones. Annaliese angled herself against the door frame and tried to catch a better look at his face. Her

parents stood just outside the door to their bedroom, haloed in the light of the hall sconces. Her mother fussed with her earrings while her father complained about something. His words, though indistinct, were sharp and clipped. Her father shook his head and tapped a foot, clearly irate about something. Annaliese sucked in a sharp breath.

But her mother seemed undisturbed. She finished adjusting her jewelry and unbuttoned her gloves, clearly listening to her husband with only half an ear. Annaliese watched as her father rubbed a hand over his neatly-clipped beard and shook out the sleeves of his suit. Annaliese knew these gestures. She knew the way her father moved and sounded when he was truly angry. Now, he was merely irritated. Annaliese exhaled slowly. If her father had noticed the ruby missing, he wouldn't bother to keep quiet. He'd be rousing the whole household, banging on her door and her brother's, marching everyone into the front hall for an interrogation. Instead, he stood in the hall, his hand on his wife's arm. He clearly didn't know.

Her mother let herself into their bedroom and her father followed. They were talking still, but the door shut behind them with a satisfying click. Annaliese sagged, and then crawled back into bed. Tonight, it seemed, Micah been lucky.

Chapter Two

Annaliese slept poorly that night. She drifted in and out of agitated, nonsensical nightmares. Several times she woke with a start, thinking she'd heard a noise coming from outside. Each time she sat up in bed and listened anxiously, and each time she heard only silence.

The next morning, she found herself jittery with fatigue, muscles tense and ears straining. At any moment she expected to hear yelling or some sort of explosion. She flinched when someone rapped on her door. But it was only Lucy bringing a fresh jug of water. Annaliese ignored her and climbed out of bed. She peered out the window while Lucy set the pitcher on the washstand. Lucy usually opened the drapes, but this morning Annaliese drew aside the curtains before Lucy had the chance. She settled onto the window-seat, still in her nightgown, and tied the drapes back. Then she pushed the window wide open and slipped a hand out to test the temperature. The sky was dark and mottled, like a wad of dirty cotton. There was a nip in the air. It had been an unseasonably cold September. Annaliese stuck her head out the window and squinted up at the dark sky. The day seemed ominous, somehow. The knot in her stomach, the one that had unraveled itself the night before, returned with a vengeance. Annaliese scowled and slammed the window shut.

Lucy had already opened Annaliese's wardrobe and was sifting through it with a confidence Annaliese knew she would never have seen from any of the other servants.

“The brown dress today, miss,” Lucy declared, shaking out the soft muslin housedress and draping it over her arm. Annaliese stood still, and allowed Lucy to wrestle her into her petticoats as if she were still a child. Lucy’s broad hands pulled the dress over Annaliese’s shoulders and tugged it into place, tightening the laces with methodical precision. Annaliese was struck by a memory from several years ago, of Lucy scolding Annaliese for staining her pretty lace gown with mud. Annaliese couldn’t remember how old she had been at the time. Ten, perhaps? She’d been perpetually muddy at that age, always getting into puddle-jumping contests with Micah and seldom winning.

Lucy had come to accept Annaliese’s disinterest in all matters of couture, and had happily taken on the task of choosing Annaliese’s clothing for her, even when she’d become old enough to dress herself. Over the years, she had finally come to terms with the fact that Annaliese would never be the sort of young lady to wear white lace, for which Annaliese was deeply grateful. Her mother had never quite accepted it, herself.

Once Annaliese was dressed, Lucy seized up her favorite boar-bristled brush and attended to Annaliese’s hair with vigor.

“Ow,” Annaliese muttered, when Lucy hit a snag. Lucy made a tutting sound.

“If you’d only let me brush it before you went to bed...”

Annaliese squirmed free before Lucy could develop that thought and braided her hair herself.

The hall clock chimed seven times as Annaliese made her way downstairs. When she reached the dining room, she wasn’t surprised to find it empty. Her parents often

failed to appear at breakfast after a late night. In the last week or so, even Micah had taken to skipping. Annaliese dropped into her chair and picked at the linen tablecloth. Bridget emerged from her kitchen and laid a plate heaped with poached eggs and buttered toast on the table. Annaliese mustered up a smile for her, and was surprised when Bridget did not smile back. Bridget was perpetually plump and rosy-cheeked, and usually had a kind smile for everyone, particularly Annaliese and her brother. But today Bridget's round face was set in a scowl. She placed Annaliese plate before her, then paced over to the window. She gave a wrathful glance to the gathering clouds, and then disappeared behind the kitchen doors, muttering to herself. Annaliese couldn't make out what she was saying.

She slumped in her chair and picked at her eggs. Outside the window, the bleak sky seemed to echo her mood. The weather certainly wasn't improving. Perhaps it was the weather that had Bridget so out of sorts. Or perhaps it was something more? Micah, with his nose for gossip, would have known. But he wasn't here to share his knowledge, and Annaliese found herself resenting him for it.

By the time she'd finished eating, Annaliese spotted streaks of lightening flickering across the sky. The clouds, gray and soupy-looking, hung heavy overhead. It was obviously going to rain. Annaliese polished off her eggs in a mood of acute self-pity, and watched Lucy gather up the empty dishes once she was done. She drummed her fingers on the table. She always had a few free hours in the morning, before Miss Buckley arrived to take command of her pupil. Usually she spent the time lingering over breakfast with her brother, or her mother on the days she decided to rise early. Sometimes

Annaliese read the newspapers or played cards. On days when she was feeling particularly studious, she practiced her piano lessons, or finished a bit of embroidery. But she had no patience for such things today. At a loss, Annaliese wandered back upstairs, vaguely intending to find the piano piece she'd meant to practice the night before. She'd been so distracted by Micah's strange behavior she hadn't even touched the music book. She hoped Miss Buckley wouldn't know. Perhaps she'd attribute this particular display of incompetence to her pupil's general lack of musical talent. She certainly wasn't about to mistake Annaliese for a virtuoso; Annaliese honestly wasn't sure which of them despised her lessons more.

As she passed her parent's bedroom, Annaliese hesitated at the threshold. The door was open. Her parents were awake, then. And if her father was awake there was a good chance that he would head into his study sooner rather than later. Had Micah put the ruby back yet? She turned on her heel, intending to sneak downstairs to check. But before she had a chance to slip away, her mother's voice floated out.

“Annaliese? Is that you?”

Annaliese shut her eyes. Somehow her mother always knew when she was lurking nearby. It was too late to make her escape. She squirmed, but slipped into the room.

She found her mother perched on a cushioned chair in front of her vanity table, swathed in a soft lilac peignoir. Her golden hair curled around her shoulder, and her gray eyes were bright and alert. She caught Annaliese gaze in the mirror and smiled. Annaliese gave what she hoped was a reasonable facsimile of a smile in return. Her mother set down the tin of powder in her hand and beckoned Annaliese over.

“Sit.” She pointed at the carved oak rocker beside her vanity. Annaliese slunk into the chair obediently and watched her mother open the tin and shake pink powder onto a chamois skin. Her mother paused and reached out to rest cool fingertips on Annaliese’s cheek.

“You ought to take more care with your appearance, darling.” She tipped Annaliese’s face up and powdered her cheeks. “If you’d only put in a little more effort, you could be really quite stunning.”

Annaliese nodded and settled herself in for the long litany of instructions and critiques that was sure to follow. She received such lectures at least once a week, and she’d grown accustomed to letting her attention drift elsewhere while her mother moved about her, fussing over her daughter’s hair and clothes.

“Are you using that cream I gave you? It will make your skin softer. Oh, and I just got a few new things when I was in town on Monday. I found the loveliest soaps in one of those shops Julia is always talking about.” Julia was one of her mother’s newer friends, a stout blonde woman who regularly stopped by the house to play whist. Annaliese wasn’t fond of her. She tended to squint at Annaliese whenever she was in the room, as though she were cataloguing her flaws. “I’ll have the maid put some of them in the bath for you to try. Now tilt your face down for me.”

Annaliese obeyed as her mother took up a comb and undid her braid. She focused her attention on the polished marble vanity, scattered with tiny bottles of perfume and petite glass jars of creams and lotions. She tried not to wince when the comb encountered a snag.

“Did you have a nice evening, darling?”

Annaliese picked at a loose thread on her sleeve and shrugged. Too late, she remembered that her mother despised it when people shrugged.

“Yes. It was fine.” She winced as her mother’s fingers worked out another knot in her hair before smoothing it back and drawing it into a neat chignon. Her mother drew a handful of pins out of a small dish on the vanity and began fastening Annaliese’ hair into place.

“What did you do with yourself?” she asked. Annaliese stifled the urge to shrug again.

“I read?” She hadn’t meant to phrase it as a question.

Annaliese licked her lips, and hoped her mother wouldn’t ask what she’d been reading. She rarely took an interest in such things, but when she did, Annaliese had to come up with the name of a nonexistent novel, or make up a story about an article in the latest *Lady’s Home Journal* so that she could satisfy her mother’s curiosity without scandalizing her with talk of bones and organs. “And I practiced my piano lessons,” she added hastily. A lie, of course, but her mother wouldn’t know it.

“Did you? Lovely.”

Her mother gestured absently for her to stand. When Annaliese did, her mother reached out to tug the creases out of her dress. It was clear that she wasn’t terribly pleased with what she saw. For the last year, she’d been trying hard to persuade Annaliese to transition from her formless girlish dresses to more restrictive and, allegedly, more flattering shirtwaists and skirts. Annaliese had evaded her so far, but she

knew her mother had not given up on the idea. She bit her lip as her mother cast a disapproving look at Annaliese's fraying hemline. She should've worn something else today. Whenever her mother was freshly returned from a party, she was always fussier about clothing. She didn't like to be confronted with her daughter's plain muslin housedresses.

Disappointment, and then perhaps a weary sort of acceptance flickered across her mother's face. Her mother sighed heavily as she tugged at the waistline of Annaliese's dress, but she managed a smile.

"You're wearing that new petticoat I bought you, aren't you? I just knew that would be perfect on you. I'd love to see how it looks when you have a proper corset on. Come over here." She moved across the room to the broad, three-way mirror that stood in the corner. Across from it stood a large chest of drawers that held her mother's underthings.

"Here! I just ordered this for you last week." She produced a slender corset from the drawer. It was a soft pink with white embroidery and tiny rosettes along the edges. Annaliese regarded it with a swell of dread. Her mother rarely insisted that she wear a corset, and though she had turned sixteen over the summer, Annaliese had hoped to be spared this sort of gift. Her mother laid the corset on the bed and smoothed it with a satisfied hand.

"It's only proper that you have one of your own, now that you're a young lady." Annaliese had the feeling she was speaking as much to herself as she was to Annaliese.

"Come here and take that off, and let me put this on you."

Annaliese allowed her mother to unbutton her dress and strip it from her body. Once the dress had been spread neatly over the duvet, she held up her arms so her mother could slip the corset around her chest and settle it into place over her chemise. Then her mother tugged at the laces and Annaliese drew in a deep breath. The fabric constricted around her chest. Annaliese chewed her lip and consoled herself with the fact that at least her mother was not in the habit of tight-lacing. She had heard horror stories from maids and dressmakers about girls whose mothers laced them so brutally that they collapsed or turned blue. Perhaps they were only stories, but even so it was enough to make Annaliese count her blessings. The corset shrunk until the pressure around her chest became just this side of uncomfortable. Annaliese resisted the urge to squirm, knowing that it would do no good. She would just have to wait until the stays loosened themselves.

Her mother adjusted the corset and tugged her petticoats back into place. Annaliese shifted her weight and studied the mirror with a surge of distaste. She'd always thought that she looked a bit like a sausage when she wore a corset. Unfortunately, her mother did not agree.

"Shall I put on a dress, too, so you can see if they fit properly?" Annaliese ventured. She thought that perhaps, if they got that out of the way now, her mother wouldn't fuss at her about her clothing for the rest of the week. Perhaps she could find an excuse to leave as soon as they were finished here. Her mother's face brightened and Annaliese's stomach twisted with guilt over her eagerness to leave her mother's presence.

"Yes, of course!" Her mother turned to her immense wardrobe, which stood in the opposite corner. She tugged down a large navy dress box that lay across the top shelf. "I

ordered you a new gown when my dressmaker came a few months ago. She only just sent it over last week. I was going to save it for the party the Harrisons are having on the fourteenth, but I think I'll show it to you now." A thick white ribbon encircled the box, fixed into a festive bow. Her mother set it down on the long chaise beside the window and loosened the bow with her slender fingers. The dress inside lay in a thick nest of tissue paper. Her mother unfolded the wrappings slowly before shaking the dress out. Thick, silky fabric glinted in the sunlight and her mother held the dress up proudly.

Annaliese stared. Her mother usually bought her the sorts of dresses she preferred herself, gowns in bright pastels and swathed in ruffles and ribbons. These dresses often languished in Annaliese's wardrobe, worn only once or twice to the rare parties that required the presence of the whole family. But the dress her mother held now was a dark matte blue and cut in a long clean line. Unlike most of the clothes her mother gave her, Annaliese thought this dress looked like something she would have chosen for herself.

"Isn't it lovely!" Her mother beamed. Annaliese nodded absently, her eyes still caught on the discreet scalloping along the dress's hem. "The latest style. Look at the neckline! That sweeping style is all anyone is wearing today. And look at this embroidery! No one can do that sort of thing the way Johanna can." Johanna was her mother's favorite dressmaker.

Annaliese reached out and fingered the heavily-embroidered hem. The dress was long, long enough to sweep the floor, even if she wore heavy petticoats. She ran her hand up the skirt and along the sides. The fabric was deliciously soft.

“What do you think?” Annaliese caught her mother’s eye. Her mother’s mouth was pursed in a knowing smile, and Annaliese felt briefly embarrassed for petting the dress the way a child would a dog. She withdrew her hand, and let her mother unbutton the back. “Stand up, darling. Let’s put this on.”

Annaliese held still as her mother carefully lifted the dress over her head and settled the swirl of silk around her hips. The skirts fell around her legs, so much heavier than her usual dresses. The added pressure of the corset made her catch her breath as she was hustled back in front of the mirror.

“Oh.” Her mother made a soft, pleased sound and touched Annaliese’s cheek. “You look so beautiful.”

Annaliese gave the mirror a cursory glance. Then she paused. She looked back at the mirror and blinked. For a split-second she was startled to see the strange girl in front her blink, too. Then it registered that she was looking at herself and she couldn’t help but stare openly at her reflection. She spent so little time looking into mirrors that she only had a vague idea of what she looked like. And even then, the mirror usually showed her an ordinary-looking young girl with plain braided hair, dressed in clothing of excellent quality but muted tones. The young woman she saw in the mirror now, draped in an exotic dress, her hair elegantly brushed back and cheeks flushed with color, was a stranger. An attractive stranger, but a stranger nonetheless. Annaliese lowered her head and plucked her skirts, feeling suddenly foolish. She felt her mother’s eyes on her back, clearly awaiting her reaction.

“It’s very nice,” Annaliese managed.

“Yes.” Her mother heaved a contented sigh. “Well, you look so pretty I hardly want to take that off of you, but I suppose we don’t want to ruin these nice things, now do we? Here, you just slip these off and I’ll put them away. Won’t you look lovely at the Harrisons’ party!”

With her mother’s help, Annaliese hastily divested herself of the gown and slipped back into her old dress. The corset gone, she allowed herself the luxury of a deep breath.

“Well, I think that’s enough for now.” Her mother turned away, already occupied with studying her own reflection. “Where is that brother of yours? He wasn’t at breakfast with you, was he?”

“No.” Annaliese swallowed, last night’s anxiety returning. Where was Micah? For that matter, where was her father? Had he gone to the study yet?

“Well, he’ll turn up. When you see him, dear, tell him to come and find me after lunch. I wanted to have him try on the suit I bought for him to wear to the party.” Her mother studied her face in the mirror contemplatively. She pinched color into her cheeks and reached for the tin of powder before waving at Annaliese. “Run along, now, darling. You don’t want to be late for you lessons.”

Annaliese backed out of the room and shut the door behind her. She knew that she ought to follow through with her lie and practice her neglected piano lesson. Miss Buckley had given her parents a disappointing report after her recital last month and Annaliese knew she had made precious little progress since. But Annaliese told herself that she was obliged to pass on her mother’s message to her brother. And perhaps while

she was there she just might find an excuse to ask if he'd put the ruby back where it belonged. She crossed the hall to Micah's room and tapped on the door lightly, but there was no response. When she peered downstairs, the dining room and parlor were empty as well. Annaliese didn't dare enter her father's study. If her father was inside, if he'd somehow missed the empty spot in the glass case, she certainly didn't want to draw his attention to it.

There was nowhere else to look but the old shed. Annaliese let herself out the back door. Her shoes crunched over a thin carpet of fallen leaves. The wind had picked up. She rubbed her arms briskly. The shed sat underneath the old elm tree. Annaliese pried open the door and let herself in. She squinted in the dim light. Micah was not there. Annaliese picked her way over the half-rotted floorboards. She hoped this meant that Micah had already returned the ruby and was inside somewhere, perhaps working on his lessons. She scanned the rickety shelves and the little desk. She didn't see the ruby anywhere.

Gingerly, she circled the long, low workbench that took up half the shed. She felt a twinge of guilt. Just last night, Micah had asked her to be patient with his secrecy, and here she was poking around in his things. But she couldn't help herself. She picked up her skirts to climb over the edge of the bench. Scrambling back onto the ground, she tugged her dress back into place just as her foot hit something heavy and soft. She looked down. What she saw there froze her blood in her veins.

Micah lay on the floor, frighteningly still.

Chapter Three

Annaliese's screams brought the whole house running.

First the gardener rushed in and then, when he saw what had happened, he dragged her away from her brother's body and shouted for help. And after that, everything was chaos as the servants carried Micah into the house and someone hurried off to send for the doctor.

Their mother came flying down the stairs in her dressing gown and everyone was talking very fast, asking Annaliese question after question, and all Annaliese could see was her brother's pale face. Then the doctor finally arrived, a small, stern man in a dark suit. Everyone was sent from the room so he could examine the patient.

Her mother went off, supported by Lucy, to go dress properly. One of the servants led Annaliese into the upstairs sitting room and brought her a cup of tea. Annaliese marveled over their efficiency, but let the tea go cold on the table. Fixing her eyes on the cup, she listened to the occasional shuffling sounds of the servants moving about in the hallway, whispering among themselves.

The door to Micah's bedroom at the end of the hall remained stubbornly closed. Annaliese knotted her hands in her lap and waited.

After a time, she heard the rattle of an approaching carriage from below the window. Her father, undoubtedly. Dimly, she recalled the business of the ruby, but she couldn't muster the will to get up and look for it. She sat very still.

The servants were speaking again, and her father's voice carried from the downstairs hall. Her mother's voice joined his, and Annaliese supposed that he was being apprised of the situation. Their footsteps echoed on the stairs, and she heard the door to Micah's room open.

She wanted desperately to go into the room and see her brother, but couldn't bring herself to move. When she'd found her brother lying there on the filthy floor of the potting shed, she hadn't had the presence of mind to touch him, to see whether he was still breathing. If something had happened, she didn't want to know. She couldn't put off the knowledge for long, she knew that much. But no one had come looking for her, and the servants hadn't started drawing the drapes or performing any of the other rituals that traditionally accompanied, God forbid, a death. Annaliese drew some measure of comfort from that. The doctor, she knew, would be speaking to her parents now. There had been no screams or wails of grief from her mother, and Annaliese took courage from that as well.

Some twenty or thirty minutes later, when Annaliese had been about to rouse herself from stillness and get up to pace the room, the door opened. Colleen, the newest parlor maid, stuck her head inside. She seemed surprised to find Annaliese there, where she'd been placed over an hour ago.

"There you are, miss! The master's been asking after you." She bustled into the room to gather the untouched tea tray. Annaliese swallowed and rose to her feet.

"Where?"

The china clattered as the maid stacked it on the tray. Her mother, Annaliese thought faintly, would have something to say about that, if she saw the careless way her china was being handled. But of course they had greater worries now.

“The parlor, miss. Never mind,” she added encouragingly, when she saw how Annaliese was hovering at the table. “The doctor’s been and gone already.”

That was cheering news. If the doctor had left, if the servants were tending their usual chores, if her parents were sitting downstairs, rather than at her brother’s bedside, it couldn’t be so very bad.

The maid gathered the rest of the tea things and shooed her gently from the room. Annaliese eyed her brother’s door, but the maid nudged her away.

“Best not, miss.”

Of course. Perhaps it was contagious, Annaliese thought. That wouldn’t matter to her; she’d rather see her brother anyway. But the maid was watching. Annaliese turned away and went downstairs. The parlor door was open and her parents were seated inside, another pristine set of tea lying in front of them.

“Annaliese.” Her mother motioned to her from the chaise. She had a handkerchief in her hand, but she didn’t look like she’d been crying. Her face was pale, but composed.

Her father’s face, as always, was inscrutable.

Annaliese edged over to the chaise and laid her hand on the arm. Her mother’s cold hand covered hers.

“Are you all right, darling?” Her mother’s face twisted briefly with emotion before smoothing out again. “It must’ve been a terrible shock, finding him like that.”

Annaliese nodded, before she realized what she was agreeing to. “I’m fine.” She paused and swallowed. “How...?” She couldn’t make herself ask the rest, too afraid of what the answer might be.

Her father cleared his throat and Annaliese flinched. She’d nearly forgotten he was there, and wasn’t *that* odd. Her father’s presence was not easy to dismiss.

“The doctor wasn’t able to make a clear diagnosis. There’s no fever, so he believes there’s no threat of contagion.”

Her father sounded relieved at that, almost unbecomingly so. Annaliese supposed that it was only right that he concern himself with the safety of the rest of the household, and yet, for that to be his first thought...

Her mother’s hand gripped hers gently before withdrawing.

“The doctor thinks it was some sort of temporary fit, brought on by overexertion, perhaps.” She folded the handkerchief into neat squares, then unfolded it again. “He hasn’t woken yet, but the doctor thinks with rest and quiet...”

Annaliese folded her hands awkwardly on the arm of the chaise. Her palms were damp. Her mother gazed into the unlit fireplace, and her father glared at nothing in particular.

“He didn’t say anything to you, did he, darling?” Her mother paused, hesitating. “He didn’t mention that he felt ill?”

Annaliese swallowed hard, remembering her last conversation with her brother. The way he’d clutched her hand as if he could barely feel it, the distant, almost feverish

look in his eyes as he spoke of his experiments. It was a fever that had nothing to do with the body, but it still unnerved her.

“No. He...he said he’d been working on some things?” Again, her words came out tremulous, questioning. She swallowed again, and tried to steady her voice.

“He said he’d had an experiment that was giving him trouble, but he was fine.”

Her father made a brief, irritated sound and touched the small glass table beside him in a way that suggested that he would like to smash his fist down upon it, and would do so if the thing weren’t so fragile.

“His damned experiments.”

“Ethan,” her mother hissed, quiet but pointed.

Her father glanced at Annaliese briefly, and then looked away.

Annaliese stared at the carpeting. She couldn’t remember the last time her father had knowingly sworn in her presence, but she remembered overhearing one of his arguments with her brother months ago. Their father had uttered the same phrase then.

Those damned experiments, as her father called them.

“What was he doing?” Her father’s voice was sharp-edged and full of impatience. “What was he trying to achieve? Do you know? He was probably meddling with poisons of some sort, stupid boy.” He seemed to be speaking almost to himself.

Her mother’s knuckles whitened around her grip on the handkerchief.

“There’s no reason to think that. He’s probably just overtired. You know how he gets when he’s wrapped up with his studies...”

Annaliese watched her father's jaw tighten. That, it seemed, was his entire point: he knew only too well what his son was like, and he didn't approve in the slightest.

Annaliese's mother smiled at her, her face strained.

"I'm sure he'll be well soon, dear." She didn't look quite as if she believed it, but she kept the smile determinedly on her face. "Go and rest now, you've had a shock."

In truth, the raw shock had passed and in its place a sort of numbness had settled over her, but Annaliese didn't argue with her mother. Instead, she left her parents to speak privately and she slipped out into the hall.

It was perfectly quiet. Lucy and all the others seemed to be occupied elsewhere, and now that the doctor had gone, the house felt like a tomb.

Annaliese gazed at the front door. Her governess should've arrived hours ago. Annaliese supposed she'd come in the midst of the confusion and been sent away. Along with Micah's tutor, presumably.

It was an annoyance, her father had often protested, to have the governess and tutor constantly coming and going. He disliked the commotion occasioned by what he considered to be unimportant visitors. Why couldn't they simply live in the household, as one might expect the teachers of wealthy children to do?

But Annaliese's mother disapproved of the idea, for no reason Annaliese had ever been able to tease out. The tutor was a stout, elderly man and the governess a dour-faced woman in her forties. Hardly a threat to the stability of the household! But her mother felt they would be an encumbrance, and so they lived in the city and came by horse-carriage every day to tend to their charges.

Now, Annaliese wondered how much longer that arrangement would hold. If Micah truly had become ill as a result of his personal studies, as their mother euphemistically liked to call them, then Annaliese didn't dare to hope that he would be allowed to remain in their home. Their father had long wished to see his son installed in some proper sort of school where he could be groomed to take his place at a university, preferably Harvard, in another year or two.

Once again, it had been their mother's wishes that had stayed their father's hand; she insisted she couldn't allow her children to be sent away, not when she only had a handful of years left before Micah went away to study. As for Annaliese, she knew her mother hoped she would be married in a few more years.

Her frequent absences from the home, in favor of attending parties or visiting with friends, made Annaliese wonder at her mother's proclaimed reluctance to be parted from her children, but her father had not questioned his wife's wishes. And so her children were kept at home. Annaliese didn't want to think about how that arrangement might quickly be coming to an end.

The back hall was as empty as the front. When Annaliese dared to put her head out the back door and glance outside, the path to the potting shed was clear. She hurried over to it as quietly as she could. Keeping her father's words in mind, she kept a sharp eye out for anything that might resemble poison. The gardeners, she knew, sometimes left arsenic out for the rats. But her brother wasn't stupid enough to ingest any such thing, and Annaliese couldn't think how he'd come into contact with it anyway. When the new

shed had been built, all the supplies had been moved into, and the old shed had been left empty.

Yet it wasn't entirely empty now. Clutter was spread across the floor, along with a thick layer of dust. Annaliese recognized her own footprints and the marks from one of the gardener's hands as he tried to lift Micah. She looked away.

There was an odd pattern on the floor, sketched out in chalk. Annaliese bent down and smudged the edge of a line with the tip of her finger. It looked as though someone had been writing on the floor. Drawing rather, in big swooping circles and geometric patterns.

Odd. But perhaps Micah had taken a fancy to drawing? Why he would do it on the floor of the shed, Annaliese couldn't imagine. They had plenty of parchment in the house. But she supposed it didn't matter.

The shelves lining walls of the shed were empty, but there was a small schoolroom desk crammed in the corner. Annaliese ran a hand along the edge carefully. Distantly, she remembered that this desk used to be in the nursery, in their old home in New York. She and Micah had used it, when they were first learning to write. She couldn't remember it being brought up when they moved. It certainly hadn't been in the shed before. There was a little groove in the top right corner where the wood had been scratched with something sharp, perhaps a penknife. Annaliese ran her thumbnail over it, then lifted the top of the desk.

She hadn't expected to find anything inside. Of course, there had always been some papers and things around the shed when Micah was inside, but they seemed to

disappear whenever he wasn't there. She assumed her brother squirreled them away somewhere where they couldn't be found in his absence. But when she opened the desk, she found a small, leather-bound journal and a book with a tattered cover. A stub of chalk rolled against her fingers when she pushed them aside. And there in the corner, nestled in a pile of pencil shavings, was the ruby.

Annaliese snatched it up and shoved it in the pocket of her dress. Her father surely hadn't noticed that it was missing yet. She had to put it back before he saw that it was gone. Annaliese gave a distracted look to the journal and the book, less important when paired with the ruby. But she gathered them up anyway and tucked them into the crook of her arm.

A quick sweep confirmed that the rest of the shed was empty of all but dust, and a bottle of half-dried ink and a little pile of ashes in the corner. Annaliese eyed the pile dubiously and gave it a tentative poke with the stick of chalk. But it seemed to be nothing more than the curled, delicately charred remnants of leaves or burnt paper. Some type of kindling.

Perhaps Micah had been building a fire? But it would be foolish to build a fire inside the shed. Or perhaps he'd been trying to destroy something, some type of document? That was a disquieting thought. But Annaliese swiftly decided that there wasn't much point dwelling on it just now. She had the ruby to return.

Her father's study was blessedly empty. Annaliese opened the glass case. Withdrawing the ruby from her pocket, she polished it with the edge of her sleeve. For a moment, she simply gazed at it as it lay in the palm of her hand.

Originally, of course, it had come from India. Her father's father, an Englishman, had traveled abroad for some years, having many adventures. He'd married and settled briefly in New York, producing three children, one of whom died in infancy. Then he'd returned to England and died there suddenly. That was all Annaliese knew of him. Her father did not speak of him often; Annaliese gathered that they had not been close. How funny, that her father's father had been this great adventurer, someone fascinated by the world abroad, just the way her brother was. How funny that her father was not like that at all, content for the most part to remain in the city he lived in, tending to his business affairs and his social obligations.

Annaliese had never known her grandfather. He had died well before her father met her mother. She wondered now what it would have been like if he'd lived. Would she have grown to love him? Would he have taken interest in her, in her brother? Would he have taken them to travel with him? Would her parents have allowed it?

The jewel looked like a fat drop of blood, crystallized and suspended in the light. For a moment, Annaliese almost thought that she could smell it, the coppery tang of blood at the back of her mouth. She put the ruby back in its case.

Once she turned the lock and returned the key to its hiding place, she heaved a sigh. The relief she thought she'd feel once the ruby was back in its proper place was chased away by the memory of her brother's pale, still face. The doctor had said it wasn't a fever, and surely it wasn't, as her father had suggested, any type of poison. Micah wasn't a small child who might accidentally poison himself, and there was certainly nobody who would want to poison him deliberately.

What could have made him so sick? Exhaustion, as their mother had thought? But Micah had never been the sickly kind. He'd always had plenty of energy. Too much, their father had sometime complained. Aside from the usual childhood ailments, they'd both always enjoyed good health.

He hadn't awoken, their mother had said. The doctor didn't know why. Annaliese swallowed.

She climbed the staircase to her room and secreted her brother's book and journal in the hiding place that housed *Gray's Anatomy*. The items disposed of, Annaliese knocked lightly on the door to her brother's bedroom and then opened it.

Lucy sat by the bed, methodically darning a lapful of stockings. She smiled when Annaliese came in.

"Hello, miss. Come to see your brother, are you? Mistress says the doctor said it's not catching, there's a blessing. And there's no fever, so I'm sure he'll be well soon." The brief tightness around her lips and the furrowing of her brow as she glanced at the patient on the bed belied her words. But when she looked at Annaliese, she smiled again.

"Come and sit with your brother now, there's a good girl. I need to go see to Mistress." Annaliese sat, reflexively obedient.

Lucy had been with their family a long time. She had come with them all the way from New York. An extravagant gesture, but one Annaliese's mother had generously paid for. She didn't like upsets in the household, and disliked having to change servants. And Lucy had been with her for so long that Annaliese supposed that she had become her mother's friend, after a fashion. But neither Lucy nor her mother ever forgot their

respective stations. If her mother disliked changing the household staff, what her father couldn't stand was over familiarity with the servants. To Lucy, Annaliese's mother remained 'Mistress'.

Lucy vacated her chair swiftly, gathered up the mending basket and carried it away. She shut the door behind her. Annaliese stared at the closed door and then at her brother, lying on the bed.

He was so pale. She smoothed away a wrinkle in the bedding to avoid looking at his slack face. Micah was never so still or so expressionless when he was awake. Even when they had shared a room and slept in beds side by side, he'd always been a restless sleeper. It was unnatural for him to be so motionless. Annaliese found his hand under the bedding. It was cold and she squeezed it hard, hoping he'd jolt upright. But he didn't move.

"Micah?" she whispered, leaning over him. She reached out her other hand and grasped his shoulder. She shook it gently. "Micah?"

Nothing. She shook him again, somewhat less gently. He didn't move.

It wasn't natural, that kind of stillness. She touched his brow. As the doctor had said, there was no fever. She ran her hand carefully over his scalp feeling for bumps. Perhaps he'd fallen and hit his head? But there had been no blood when she'd found him, and she saw no trace of an injury now.

Unnatural. The word whispered again in her mind. She shook her head. She was being foolish. There must be a perfectly rational explanation for all of this. But then, why had her mother's face been so pale? Why had there been such tension around her father's

eyes? The doctor had evidently given them no diagnosis, other than to assure them that the rest of the household was unlikely to fall similarly ill. But if it was no fever and no injury, what else could it be?

Annaliese stared intently at her brother's face, trying to detect any scrap of consciousness. She remembered reading that sometimes a jolt of pain could awaken the unconscious. After a moment's hesitation, she dug her nails into her brother's limp hand, but even that didn't produce the slightest flinch. Ashamed, she tucked his hand back under the blankets.

It was odd to sit there with her brother so quiet. She didn't know what it was like, to be in Micah's presence when he wasn't talking about this or that, something he'd read or some idea he'd had, or something he'd overheard. He had the most remarkable ability to discover secrets. He delighted in discovering even the most trivial details about the servants, or about the neighbors or their parents' friends. He always gleefully brought these tidbits to Annaliese. The last one had come two weeks ago, before Micah had stopped speaking to her altogether. Colleen evidently had a paramour, the young man who brought the weekly deliveries from the butcher. It seemed that whenever he made a delivery, Colleen slipped away to tryst with him behind the carriage-house. Annaliese had been embarrassed to learn something so private about a girl she hardly knew, but Micah so rarely sought her out these days that she had been glad for the chance to laugh with him over Colleen's affair. It was a constant wonder to her that Micah always seemed to find out these sorts of things. She'd asked him once how it was he gathered all his information and he'd only shrugged.

I listen, he'd said.

She'd been a bit piqued, not so much by the response itself, but by the tone, the roll of the shoulders that accompanied it. In addition to having a talent for finding out secrets, her brother also had a talent for unspoken sarcasm.

I listen too, she'd protested.

No, you don't. Then, seeing her open her mouth to fire off some rejoinder, he'd amended, *You listen, but you don't care*.

It had been an odd response, and Annaliese hadn't known what to make of it. Her brother didn't care either, not really. He couldn't have cared less about who this or that servant was trysting with, or how much this or that neighbor had inherited from her late husband. It might've amused him to find such things out, but Annaliese had always supposed that was because he knew he wasn't supposed to know, and Micah always enjoyed flouting expectations. It was odd for him to suggest that she, the sister he sometimes mocked for her circumspection, didn't care, or rather, that he cared more.

Annaliese looked at Micah's eyelashes, pale against his wan face.

If he'd been awake, she would've asked him what he meant. She hadn't had a chance at the time. They'd been interrupted, or their conversation had denigrated into an argument, or Micah had shifted the topic. That was always the way their discussions ended. If he'd been awake, she would've asked him what he meant. Or she would've offered to read to him, or brought him some of his books and things, or let him send her on errands to find something to amuse himself with.

Micah was a terrible patient, but an entertaining one. When he'd sprained his ankle the summer before last, the two of them had rigged up a system he designed, made of string and bits of wire and one of the small bells from the butler's cabinet, so that he could ring for her when she was in her bedroom. He'd rung the bell so many times that she'd threatened to throw it out the window. Annaliese drew the blankets gently up to her brother's chin. The bell system had been dismantled long ago, but she wished they had left it up. It would have made it easier for her to leave Micah alone.

For a moment she considered bringing the journal into Micah's room, so she could examine it and still stay at her brother's side. But it was far too risky; anyone might drop in at any time to look in on Micah. With a long backward glance, she left her brother lying quietly on the bed that suddenly seemed far too large for him.

Back in her room, she shut the door tightly and jammed her desk chair beneath the handle. She drew the drapes. Once Annaliese was certain that the room was as secure as she could make it, she dug the journal and book out of their hiding place and carried them to her bed. The book was easily set aside, but Annaliese spent several minutes sitting with the journal clutched tightly in her lap. It was a terrible invasion of privacy, to snoop through her brother's journal like this. He valued his privacy just as much as Annaliese did, and she hated to think of prying into something he'd clearly never intended anyone else to see. But what if there were some clue that might help him? Perhaps he'd mentioned in his journal some type of symptom that would help the doctor make a diagnosis. Annaliese was sure Micah would forgive her for invading his private thoughts if it was necessary to restore his health. She ran a finger of the journal's cover.

It had no lock. The journal was bound only with a thin strip of leather. The edges were soft and worn. While the journal itself might've been of good quality, it had obviously seen heavy use. The pages were tattered and Annaliese could see that some of them were faintly stained, from water or tea. A few had been ripped out altogether. She lifted the cover with a careful hand.

On the first page, Micah had written his name. But it didn't look quite right. He had used too much ink, too heavy a hand, and the effect was almost clumsy. It took Annaliese a moment to realize what was wrong. This wasn't Micah's handwriting as it was now. It was his handwriting as it was years ago. She turned the page.

There, at the top: *May 14, 1893.*

Annaliese rubbed the softened edge of a page and furrowed her brow. She hadn't thought Micah was the sort of person to keep a journal for a week, much less for four years. It seemed like such a sentimental thing to do, and Micah was the least sentimental person Annaliese could imagine.

Anxious to avoid prying too deeply, Annaliese flipped to the back of the journal. It didn't matter what Micah had written about four years ago. What she needed to know was what he had written over the last few days.

His last entry was dated the previous day.

Almost finished. X-reference text notes with Aenid. See letters from George?

Underneath that, he'd made a list of what appeared to be the names of plants. Below that, he'd sketched a small diagram, and a picture of something Annaliese couldn't recognize.

She skimmed backward through the journal, but much of it was the same. Obscure lists and sketches, and entries that were strangely abbreviated and written almost in code. Almost all referenced some kind of text, or letters. Annaliese even shook the journal, but nothing was hidden away inside. Wherever these letters were, they weren't here.

Annaliese rubbed a hand over her temples. This clearly wasn't Micah's personal journal, but rather some sort of notebook that documented some sort of personal research. One of what their father so contemptuously referred to as his "experiments". But it was painfully unclear what the notes were actually for, what the experiment was meant to uncover.

She turned to the book that had been hidden away with the journal. That too was old and well-worn. The cover bore no title. Its binding was cracked and bent, and the pages, which had once been leafed with gold, were tattered around the edges. When she opened it, she was greeted with the smell of must and mold. The pages were thin as vellum. Annaliese turned them gingerly. The edges were full of woodblock carvings, and while the book had been properly printed, rather than handwritten, there was something about it that suggested that someone had taken rather a lot of trouble in putting it together.

The book, she saw, was fully of fairy stories. Or not fairy stories, precisely. Over the years, Annaliese had had plenty of books like that. These weren't quite the same. Like her old childhood books, this book had stories about strange, dark creatures that crept from the darkness and feasted on human souls. But there was no structure to these stories,

no moral, no definite ending or beginning. It was as if the writer had proceeded without any notion of what he meant to say, going on and on as ideas occurred to him, without trying to form an actual story. The margins and tops of the pages were crammed with illustrations, but they were of no help in decoding the story. Macabre images of dismembered bodies and skeletons danced around the page, wreathes in haloes of blood. Black, shapeless forms lingered like shadows.

Annaliese thumbed through the book before snapping it shut. She dropped it to her bed and stared at it. Where had Micah found such a book? She couldn't imagine. It was old, yes, and strange, but nothing like the books in her father's study, which were also old and strange. The books her father had were kept chiefly for their value. She couldn't imagine a book like this one being worth much to anyone, other than collectors of the obscure.

Where, then, had this book come from? Micah ordered books now and again, as she did, as their mother did. But such orders always went through their tutors or their parents. Annaliese could not imagine her mother, nor Micah's grim-faced tutor, approving the order of a book such as this. She and Micah went so infrequently to the city and were so well-chaperoned when they were there that Annaliese thought it unlikely Micah had managed to somehow slip away and find some sort of place that sold books like this.

Annaliese stood and paced across her room. Outside her window, the sky had cleared and night had come on with a chill. The waxing moon gave some light, but

Annaliese could only vaguely see the shapes of other houses down the road, visible only by the pinpricks of light at their windows.

She wondered, if she shouted, if the people from the other houses would hear her.

Annaliese left the window open. The breeze made the flame in her lamp flutter, but she shifted it to the other side of her bed, where the wind would be blocked by her body. She opened the book again.

This time, she studied the pages more carefully, and was disturbed by what she saw. There were passages that didn't seem so much like stories by instructions. Incantations. Like passages from a prayer book, but a corrupt one. Instructions on how to summon, or perhaps worship, the dark creatures the book spoke of, the ones that stripped flesh from bone and held humans prisoner inside a world of endless darkness.

The book spoke of the Shadowmen, the strange people who were made of darkness, were darkness, who lived the world in between worlds, between the world of the living and the dead. They were not spirits, were not the souls of the deceased, but were something else, something dark and strange, something dangerous and unknown. They demanded sacrifices, and wreaked horrors upon those who summoned them without paying them their due. They demanded a price, of course; this was to be expected.

Annaliese had read enough fables and heard enough stories to know that in circumstances like this, where one made bargains with djinns, or fairy people, there must be a price paid for their services, an equal exchange. But in those stories, the price was less cruel. One's hair, one's voice, one's firstborn child to be raised in secrecy by

another. The price demanded by the Shadowmen was far more dire. The book did not speak of it, not in words, but it was shown in the pictures.

Blood scarifies. Skeletal bodies, their lifeblood pouring into a circle where the shadows gathered, one's spirit, depicted by a faint wisp emerging from the corpse, welcomed into the realm of shadows and held there for eternity.

Annaliese shut the book again, this time almost fearfully. She pushed herself back from the desk and glanced out the uncovered window into the blind darkness, suddenly unnerved. It was all foolishness, she reminded herself. What Micah wanted with such a devilish, *blasphemous* book, she did not know. He shouldn't have it at all.

It was not, she thought, that their family was so very religious. They attended church on Easter, at least, and on some of the other feast days. In the old days, back when she and her brother had had a nurse, they'd done some rudimentary study of the Bible. Their nurse had taught them the Psalms. Their religious education, scant as it was, had never contained much information on the Devil, or damnation, or Hell, and Annaliese had found little reason to think on it. There were those who said that anyone who didn't practice constant piety would be damned forever, but that sort of thinking seemed to belong to an earlier age, an age where women were burned alive as witches and people were put in the stocks. It all seemed very far away, the sort of thing that was only done by uncivilized, unenlightened people.

She'd never seen such a gruesome text. Now that she thought about it, she didn't think it was all that strange that Micah had found it. He was always interested in such things. Not seriously, of course. Annaliese reached out to touch the book. Her brother

wasn't the fanciful sort, not the kind of person who hung scarves in their parlor and pretended that they could communicate with the spirits of the dead. Annaliese had read about people who did that sort of thing, people who claimed that they could see into the afterlife and send messages to departed loved ones in exchange for a few coins. She supposed that if there were people who practiced that sort of thing merely for show, there must also be people who truly believed that they could summon strange, dark forces.

Her brother wasn't like that, of course. This book must just be an oddity he had found somewhere, and object of interest because it was so strange and gruesome.

But what, she thought, of the text? What of the painstaking little notes in the journal? This couldn't be the text that had held Micah's attention so thoroughly that he'd taken the trouble of writing down notes, even cross-referencing it with other items, other letters. Letters from whom? The journal didn't say.

Annaliese reached out to snap the book shut, but before she had a chance, something on the page caught her eye. She reached out and brought the book closer. One of those odd little drawings showed a loose, spiraling circle. It was much like what she'd seen chalked on the floor of the shed. A little pot was drawn in the middle, sending off smoke, and amorphous figures drifted around the circle. *The Summoning*, the caption read.

But there was something else. A disembodied, skeletal hand reached out from the side, open, palm facing up. And inside the palm there was drawn a multifaceted jewel.

It looked, Annaliese thought, much like the ruby.

Chapter Four

Night bled slowly into dawn. Annaliese woke before sunrise once again and dressed in the cold autumn darkness. The days were growing short, the night coming on too quickly and lingering for too long. She always found the autumn depressing, as her mother did, but Micah loved it.

Micah. She couldn't stop thinking about him, about the book and the journal, about the odd, almost glassy look in her brother's eyes when he'd spoken the night before last. He'd said he was working on something, something that wasn't going right, something he'd almost sorted out. He'd said he was being careful.

Annaliese felt haunted by a creeping sense of dread, one that had surrounded her even before Micah had become ill. It was like the pressure in the air before a storm, the sudden drop in temperature before the season's first snow. A pervading, all-encompassing sense that something was wrong. She wanted, more than anything, to ignore it. She wanted to believe that this was just a sudden fever that had taken hold of Micah, a fit of exhaustion that would pass with a little rest. Too many hours spend out in the chill of the shed, too many long hours working on whatever it was he had been working on. It wasn't important. Some flight of fancy that would be forgotten as soon as he woke, something to be stuffed into a drawer and forgotten.

Annaliese dressed in long underwear and pulled on a woolen dress, layering herself against the chill that hung like a miasma over the house. The hall was dark, but

Annaliese lit the lamp and carried it out, carried it up to her brother's room, where the door stood shut.

The room was empty now, aside from its sole occupant. Micah lay under a pile of blankets. Annaliese peeled back the blankets and held the lamp carefully over her brother's face. It was wretchedly pale, even in the thin light, and there were circles under his eyes. His lips were parted slightly, and Annaliese was seized with the sudden fearful thought that perhaps he had died in the night when no one was watching.

She wrenched her sleeve up and stuck her wrist under her brother's nose. She didn't relax until she felt the soft, warm exhale of air against her skin. Even then, the relief was fleeting. The darkness seemed to press in. Annaliese moved around the room swiftly, lighting all the lamps and setting her own on the bedside table, as if the thin circle of light could protect her brother somehow. Her stomach was in knots, her heart pounding as if she'd run half a mile as fast as she possibly could.

Something was wrong. Something was wrong, and *strange*. Annaliese knew it, deep down in her bones. She'd never been taught rhetoric properly, not like her brother, but she'd helped herself to his books when he wasn't using them and he showed her his notes. She knew well enough how to set up an argument, back it with facts, line everything up in a neat little line and bring the argument to a logical conclusion. She tried that now, but it didn't work.

She wished that her brother was awake. She wished it was midday and they were away from this cold darkness that crept into her blood, into her lungs, and made her feel that nothing would ever be all right again. She wished she was somewhere else.

The blanket had fallen away from her brother's face, and something glittered around his neck in the lamplight. Annaliese reached out to touch it, half expecting that it was some trick of the light and shadows, but when she pushed aside the collar of his sleep shirt, she found a thin chain. In the hollow of Micah's throat lay a small key. Annaliese pulled it away from his skin, into her palm. Her fingers tugged the chain, seeking the clasp. The key was very small and made of iron. It wasn't nearly as handsome as the chain itself; the two didn't match, and Annaliese supposed that he'd taken the chain from someplace else. She fingered the key and looked around the room. What would be so important that Micah would make a point of carrying the key around with him? What would he have to hide?

Plenty, she supposed, if the book and journal were any indication. She wondered why he hadn't locked them away. Perhaps he hadn't had a chance. Perhaps the fit had come upon him before he'd had a chance to put his things away.

She stood up. Whatever lock the key went to, it had to be somewhere nearby. She tried the desk first. The drawers themselves had no locks, and there was nothing inside that held a lock. There was a clock on the shelf in the corner, but nothing underneath it. She even opened up the back of the clock to check if Micah had hidden something inside the gears and springs, but it was empty.

Nothing inside the wardrobe, nothing in the cupboard under the washstand, nothing under the bed. Nothing behind the curtains. Desperation crept up on Annaliese. The house was large and it would take too long to search everywhere. And perhaps Micah had found a way to smuggle something outside of the house altogether. But where

he would take something, Annaliese didn't know. She might search forever. She might not find it in time.

In time? Annaliese hesitated, one hand clutching the frustratingly empty drawer at the bottom of Micah's wardrobe. In time? Surely it had nothing to do with time. Surely there was no urgency in her errand. Annaliese slid the drawer shut.

She left the room with the lamps blazing. She couldn't bear to leave Micah in the darkness, even if he couldn't tell the difference. She squeezed his hand, the way she had the night before, but he didn't stir. She kissed his cheek carefully, hoping that he'd somehow feel it, hoping that it would remind him that he was not alone, that there were people waiting for him to get better. Annaliese returned to her room to wait for sunrise. The waiting left her nerves raw and the feeling of urgency that had seized her before still lingered. She wanted to take action, to do something, but she didn't know what to do. She thought of her brother and what he might've been doing with this book, with the chalk outline she'd found on the dirt floor of the shed. She thought of the ruby, the pictures in the book the summoning circle and Micah lying in his bed now, cold and unresponsive. She thought of the journal entries she could not understand, abbreviated and written almost in code. The key that had no lock, the key that he felt was so important that he must carry it around on a chain, that he couldn't be separated from it for a moment.

Then she knotted her hands together and tried not to think about anything at all.

Annaliese spent much of the day in her room, lingering over Micah's journal and stealing back to his room every half-hour to look in on him. Every time, she hoped that this would be the moment when she discovered her brother had awoken. Every time, there was no change.

The doctor came and went, and when he spoke to Annaliese's parents on the way out, she listened from outside the door.

A strange case. He had never seen anything like it. No fever, no sign or injury or infection, yet the patient remained insensate. Was there any history of such things in the family? No? The doctor didn't know what to tell them. He regretted that he could be of no more help. He'd done all he could; they could do nothing more now other than ensure that the patient was comfortable and pray for a full recovery.

Annaliese lingered in the hallway, eavesdropping, and waited until the doctor left. The parlor door had been shut behind him and there was a long silence before her parents began to speak in hushed tones. For a moment Annaliese thought about going inside. But instead she crept back up to her bedroom. Then, she turned suddenly and went back outside, down to the shed. She didn't know what she hoped to find. She felt like her feet were operating independent of her body, moving her around when she didn't even know where she wanted to go.

There was nothing the doctor could do. Annaliese stopped outside the shed and lifted her face to the sky. It was cloudy again, overcast. The sky was the color of a dark, fresh bruise. Rain was on the way. Wind stirred the branches of the trees, and the green of

the leaves was fading, the color beginning to deepen. She wished she had brought her coat. She waited for the cold fear of last night to descend on her again, but it didn't come.

The thought that Micah might die entered her mind and lingered there the way it hadn't before. When he'd first fallen ill she'd thought about it, but only vaguely, peripherally, with the vague acknowledgement that sometimes when people fell ill, they died. But, she had thought, that only happened to other people. Not her family. Not her brother.

The doctor had not used the word 'death'. Annaliese had noted that; he'd been very careful to couch his terms, very careful not to make any proclamations. But the prognosis was clearly much worse than it had been the day before. Micah had not woken up. Not when he was shaken, not when the servants tried to feed him broth. Not when the doctor examined him. And he was cold, all the color and warmth draining out of him. Annaliese remembered his hand, icy underneath hers, and the waxy tone of his skin.

Annaliese unlocked the shed and shut the door behind her. She sat down on the floor and wrapped her arm around her knees. After a moment, she pressed her face against her skirts, her thoughts turning back in on themselves like an angry snake.

The book. That cursed, stupid book. Annaliese wished she'd never opened it, wished she'd never found it in the old desk! She wanted so badly to forget about it, to blot out the memory of everything she'd seen inside. The cold weight that had settled in her stomach refused to go away.

An idea was forming in her mind, coalescing even as she tried to beat it back and tear it to pieces. Micah had done something, something with the book, one of those awful

rituals. That much was clear. Annaliese wanted to believe that his illness was a fluke, a coincidence, but it was too much to be believed. A mysterious illness that followed a dark, dangerous ritual couldn't be easily explained away. Of course, it wasn't as if the Shadowmen actually existed. It was all just some heathenish fable. But perhaps Micah had believed it? Perhaps the book had worked some spell upon his mind, the same way Annaliese had to admit that it was working upon her, making her almost willing to believe that there was something dark and evil nipping at her heels.

Who could help him, then? The doctor had already said there was nothing he could do. No doubt her parents would refuse to believe that. They would find another doctor, someone, anyone who claimed they could help her brother. That was what people traditionally did when a loved one was ill, wasn't it? They clutched at straws; they sought out anyone who might help, even if there was only the slimmest of chances. Perhaps she should do the same. But who could help her? Who would believe her? Perhaps she could call a priest. Would he believe that there was something evil that had taken hold of her brother? Could he help, even if there was? Perhaps she should show her parents the book she had found, explain her suspicions. Instinctively Annaliese drew away from that thought. She couldn't go to her parents. They would think she was hysterical, irrational. They wouldn't believe that there was some supernatural cause behind this illness.

Giving over to her feelings of helplessness, Annaliese lay down on the floor of the shed and sprawled out with her head on her arms. It was a pitifully melodramatic pose but she didn't know what else to do. Lying there like a dead animal seemed as productive an action as anything else.

Then, a glint of metal caught her eye. Annaliese lifted her head slightly, then lowered it again, peering into the corner. There was a low shelf on the far side of the shed, empty like all the rest. But there was something underneath. Carefully, Annaliese reached out until her fingers knocked against something solid. She drew the object out. It was a metal lock-box. She pried it out, dusting off a thin net of cobwebs. The box was small, little bigger than her jewelry box. She touched the lock, then fumbled in her pocket for the key on the chain. The key was exactly the same shade, the same material, as the box itself. She fitted the key into the lock and it turned smoothly. A startled laugh broke from Annaliese's chest.

How many secrets did Micah have, hidden around this old shed? How was it that she had never known these things about her brother, that he had never shared them with her? He had become a stranger to her in the last few months. His eyes were always distant, impatient every time she tried to talk to him. Now she had some idea what he had been doing all that time, but she'd never felt like she knew her brother less.

The box was crammed full of letters, stacks of them bound with twine. Annaliese undid the tie and thumbed through the pile, noting the postmarks. There were some postmarked from the city. Some from New York. One from Virginia, two from London. Different handwriting, but one person seemed to have written most of them. It was a slightly shaky hand, the scribbling of a man who had never taken penmanship classes. The letters were all addressed to her brother, but not to their home. They had clearly been sent to the local post office and held there. Annaliese sucked in her breath. Oh, Micah had gotten himself into something much larger than she'd ever thought. He'd found a

way to smuggle things into and out of the house without their parents suspecting a thing.

But how? And why?

Annaliese picked up the letter at the top of the pile, one written by the shaky-handed man. There was no return address, but the postmark dated it at three months ago. She opened the envelope and shook out the letter. Written at the bottom was the name *Cirkos Curiosity Shoppe*. There was an address, someplace at the other side of the city. The proprietor of the shop had a recent import that the recipient of the letter might like to know about. It was a volume that might assist in his studies. If he would like to know more, the recipient should respond by letter or visit in person. She read through the letter twice, looking for clues but finding none. She shoved it back into its envelope. She went through the rest of the letters one by one. Most were along the same lines, regarding the sale of books or volumes of notes, naming prices and instructing the interested party to wire the payment and specify where they would like their purchase delivered.

Business, most of it. Anyone who read the letters would not think much of it. There was nothing strictly suspicious about most of the letters, nothing to indicate that the material was in any way illicit. But what would Micah want with such books? Annaliese knew that everything her brother did, he did for a reason. He wouldn't have bought the book just for amusement, or because he thought it held some mercenary value.

The chalk outline was still visible on the floor. Annaliese bent down and rubbed her thumb over the edge. He'd performed the rituals in the book. And he'd done it believing that something would happen if he did, because Micah wouldn't go through

with something like that just for amusement. There was a purpose. He'd intended for something to happen. And something had.

Annaliese clutched the letters in her hand and left the shed. She went up to her room and stuffed the packet of letters, the journal, and the book into a small satchel, without allowing herself to think about what she was doing. A plan had begun to unfold in her mind, but she couldn't look it in the face yet. She let it linger at the edge of her thoughts as she folded up two dresses and put them in the satchel, along with a few small pieces of jewelry and the little pouch where she kept her pocket money. She looked around the room thoughtfully. Then she added a few sheets of parchment and a pencil. After a brief hesitation, she removed her copy of *Gray's Anatomy* from its hiding place and stuffed it into the satchel. She put the bag into her wardrobe and draped a heavy winter coat over it.

Then she sat down on her bed to think. Cirkos's shop wasn't very far away. If she took her father's carriage, she could ride there in half an hour. But, of course, her parents would never allow her to go. If she went, she'd have to sneak out and suffer the consequences later. The consequences would be harsh, Annaliese knew that already. But the fear she expected to feel at the thought of angering or disappointing her parents simply wasn't there.

She had to try, for Micah's sake. The chances that this Cirkos knew anything, or would even be willing to help her, were slim. She knew that. But if there was even the tiniest chance that this could help Micah, she had to try. If he didn't get better, if the

doctors couldn't help him, if he died and she hadn't taken the chance to do something that might've saved him, she'd never forgive herself.

There was a tap on the door, before it opened. Colleen stood in the doorway.

"Your mother and father would like to see you, Miss."

Annaliese rose and followed the maid downstairs without hesitation. She schooled her expression, hoping there wasn't anything in her face or bearing that might give away her plans. She kept her back straight and her head up high as she met her parents in the dining room.

They weren't eating, and though it was suppertime, the table was bare. Annaliese went to her mother's side. Her mother reached out and touched her hand. Her fingers were almost as cold as Micah's had been.

"Sit."

Her father's voice, as always, brooked no argument. But for once, Annaliese found herself untroubled by his stern face. She sat. A brief look passed between her mother and father, but Annaliese paid it little attention. Tomorrow, she thought. She'd have to be up and out before dawn, before the rest of the household began to stir. She'd wear plain clothes and put a scarf over her head, so she'd look like a servant. She couldn't afford to have anyone identify her or send word back to her parents.

"Have you been up to see your brother, dear?" Annaliese's mother watched her carefully. Annaliese nodded.

"Yes," she said, then blurted out, "He's not getting any better, is he?"

Her mother's face grew strained, and Annaliese instantly regretted her words. But perhaps it was for the best that she said it. Her parents were surely as desperate for a miracle as she was. Perhaps they'd understand, later, why she'd done it.

Another sharp glance passed between her parents.

"No. He's not." Her father straightened. "I've sent for another doctor, one who's been properly trained..." His voice trailed off.

Annaliese swallowed. She knew, as her father must, that the problem was not the doctor. Her mother lifted her head and laid a hand on Annaliese's arm.

"You're not feeling ill, are you dear?"

"No." Annaliese smoothed her skirts. "You don't know what's the matter with him?"

Her mother licked her lips, briefly, an odd gesture that Annaliese had never seen before. "The doctor thinks, perhaps, a fit of exhaustion, or some trouble in the blood. A lack of heat..."

Annaliese's mother knew little about medicine, but she still sounded dubious, as if she didn't believe the doctor. And she shouldn't, Annaliese thought. It wasn't anything to do with exhaustion, or circulation. She knew that now, knew it no matter how absurd the truth sounded. But she only nodded tightly as her parents murmured about the new doctors they would bring in and how a proper doctor would sort everything out. Annaliese didn't argue. She nodded, and agreed to their plans, and bided her time.

Long after nightfall, Annaliese sat awake, listening to the house settling down for bed. She crept into the hall and waited by the staircase as the servants doused the lights, drew the rest of the drapes, and slowly shut up the house for the evening. She waited until everything had been dark for a full fifteen minutes before she slipped downstairs. The foyer was pitch-black, and Annaliese moved slowly, hand stretched in front of her, shuffling along so that she wouldn't trip.

For a split-second she felt a wash of cold, as if she'd been dipped in ice or a sudden draft had found its way into the house. She jerked upright, and shivered. But the chill vanished as soon as it had come, replaced by the last pulses of heat leached into the air by the banked fireplaces. Annaliese stood still, waiting, half-expecting that surge of cold to come again. The room suddenly seemed very dark, and she felt as if she were blind.

Annaliese moved again, slipping into the kitchen. There was a basket by the kitchen door where one of the maids had left a stack of clean uniforms. She snatched a uniform from the stack before sneaking back up to her room. She'd examined her own clothing earlier, looking through her plainest, most-worn dresses. But even those looked too neat, too obviously high quality. Her mother didn't allow any sloppiness in dress; if a dress was in need of darning, her mother would rather give it away to the servants or to charity than allow her daughter to be seen in a mended dress. Even the dresses, skirts, and blouses that were the plainest and most muted in color were too obviously well-made.

She needed to hide, to make it so that she could pass unnoticed through the streets of downtown Boston, into the lower city where Cirkos' shop was meant to be. There was

too much risk that she'd be recognized if she went looking like herself. Even if she tried to disguise her hair and face, someone might remember her if she went into the working-district looking like a lady.

The maid's uniform, while clean, was plain and showed evidence of mending around the hem. Annaliese put it on and studied herself in the mirror. It would do. She bound her hair up in a length of white cloth and put on her coat. She scrutinized her reflection and frowned. The coat, too, was nice and obviously fairly new. It didn't fit with the rest of her workwoman's attire. Stymied, Annaliese scowled down at herself. It was too cold to go out without a coat, but she didn't have anything more tattered than this. Then, she was struck by a burst of inspiration. There were a few old things in the attic, things of hers and Micah's from when they were much younger. Annaliese remembered her mother mentioning that she really ought to go through them and decided what she wanted to keep and what should be thrown out or given away.

It wasn't easy to get up to the attic without making any sound. The floorboards squeaked and the ladder knocked against the floor when Annaliese pulled it down. After each noise, she held her breath and waited for the sound of approaching footsteps. There would be no possible way to explain what she was doing, if she was caught. Carrying a satchel, dressed up in a maids' uniform and lurking in the attic, picking through old clothing, it would be hard to disguise her intentions.

Annaliese couldn't imagine anyone thinking it was anything but a runaway attempt, and for a moment she was sure she would be caught. She'd never done anything like this before. Surely she couldn't actually get away with it, pull it off. But the house

remained undisturbed. Annaliese found an old coat, and brought it down in triumph. It was worn, but still a step above what a maid would be expected to wear. But it would have to do. Perhaps, if she was questioned, she could pass it off as a secondhand gift from her employer.

She tucked the satchel under the coat and left on her desk the letter she'd spent the afternoon carefully composing. She couldn't imagine what her parents would think when they noticed her gone, and she didn't want to dwell upon it. To have their daughter run off when their son was so ill, perhaps on his deathbed made Annaliese's heart ache, but she shut those feelings away. She'd tried, in the letter, to alleviate the worst of their worries, to assure them that she would return as quickly as she could, but that she must go on an errand that she couldn't tell them about yet. She couldn't begin to guess what they'd think she was doing. Trysting with a lover, perhaps?

The idea made her smile in spite of everything. That would give her parents a shock, indeed. But no, they would know she'd never run off for that while Micah was sick, and if that was what she was about, why would she promise to return, rather than admit to an elopement? No, she couldn't imagine what her parents would think. But she would be able to explain it all when she returned, or so she hoped. If she wasn't successful, though, if she couldn't find a way to heal her brother then perhaps there'd be no point in returning. Annaliese shut those thoughts away.

She was nearly at the front door, nearly free, when she passed the door to her father's study. She paused. The ruby. What if she needed it for something? Whatever was ailing Micah, whatever he'd done, it had to do with the ruby. That picture in the book.

The ruby was part of the ritual, somehow. What if she needed it, to perform some sort of counter-ritual? Annaliese hesitated. It was bad enough that Micah had taken it in the first place. Their father would've been furious if he'd found that Micah had taken it out to the garden shed. For her to take it out of the house altogether was so much worse.

But there was no help for it. It wasn't, Annaliese told herself, like her father would need it for anything. With any luck, Annaliese would be back in a day or two, ruby safely in hand. He'd be angry, angrier than Annaliese wanted to think about. She'd be locked in her rooms for years and years. But once again, if there was even the slimmest chance that it would save Micah, she had to do it.

She took the ruby. She wrapped it in a handkerchief and hid it at the bottom of her satchel. She wished she could hide it in her skirts, or in a pocket, but that seemed too much of a risk. If she were caught with the ruby on her person, she'd have a hard time explaining how it got there. With it in the satchel, she had a better chance of it passing unnoticed, even if she was caught.

The front door was heavy oak and Annaliese had to pull hard to open it. She glanced back into the dark hall, the stairway curving gently upward to where her parents were sleeping, where her brother lay, insensate, and she his only hope. It was too quiet, and Annaliese felt the darkness press in around her once again. She gazed around the hall, and then made herself turn and pull the door shut behind her. She stood on the stoop, shivering in the September night. Then she tugged her coat tightly around her body, hiding the satchel, and set off down the packed-earth road. She wished it didn't feel so much like she was never going to return. More than that, she wished the idea didn't give

her such an inward thrill. Annaliese tamped her feelings down. She thought about her brother, about his pale face, and set her gaze on the horizon.

It was a long walk to town, and sunrise was still two hours off.

Chapter Five

It wasn't as easy as Annaliese had hoped to make her way downtown. Of course, she'd been to the city before, but never like this. Never on foot, in the cold light of dawn. Never by herself. Walking down the dusty road alone, the world seemed empty and unfriendly. There was a nip in the air, and Annaliese huddled deeper into her borrowed coat. The sky loomed overhead, ash-gray, and Annaliese quickened her pace as the road widened. She passed the large red-brick mill and granary that marked edge of the city.

She walked far enough that she could get a streetcar without arousing suspicion. She hadn't dared to try it too near to her home, too afraid that someone would recognize her, or remember her if asked later. But once she was well inside the city proper, she found a car and climbed on board. She leaned on the brass railing and watched the city roll by as the streetcar rattled along. The streets were already crowded, despite the early hour. Shopkeepers gathered outside, sweeping off the sidewalks, dousing the streetlights, carrying their wares out, and bringing milk bottles in. Here and there people hurried along, carrying boxes or stacks of newspapers, rushing up and down the streets. Annaliese watched the display with a sense of wonder. Here was a side of the city she'd never seen before.

But soon she had to stop watching the gathering rush of people and pay attention to the business at hand. Navigating the network of streetcars required a savvy that she had never had to develop. After a while she jumped off and doubled back, afraid she'd gone too far. She edged off to the side, away from the bustle of the crowd and studied the letter

and the address at the bottom. Annaliese thought she knew where it was, at the south end of the city. She'd taken a peek at one of the maps in her father's study. It had seemed straightforward enough, but now that she was in the middle of the bustling city, she found herself unexpectedly turned-around.

Annaliese tilted her head back and stared up at the sky. The sun had crested the horizon and risen fully, and it seemed to be the cue everyone needed to leave their homes and head to work, or to the shops, or wherever they were meant to be. She hadn't bargained on the crowds. She wandered the streets for a moment, terrified and enthralled in equal measure. Terrified, because didn't know quite where she was and she was alone. Enthralled, because she was *alone*. She could go anywhere she wanted, anywhere. No one was watching her. If she wanted to go into that shop over there and examine the laces and buttons and bits of fabric, she could. If she wanted to stop at the stand on the corner and read through the stacks of yesterday's newspapers, she could. She didn't know where she was, but that meant she could be anywhere.

Exhilaration choked her, but it disappeared when she remembered the reason for her errand. Micah didn't have time for her to be wandering around, amusing herself. When he was better, Annaliese promised herself, they would come back to the city, just the two of them. They'd do whatever they wanted, together. She squared her shoulders and looked around the street, seeking landmarks. Across the street, she spied a post office just across from a dress shop. Annaliese had been there once, with her mother. She thought back to the map, tried to remember that long-ago carriage ride to the dress shop. If she remembered correctly, she was very near the middle of the city. And if she wanted

to head south...Annaliese squinted up at the sky and gauged the buildings around her. South was to the left. She was nearly sure.

Catching another streetcar, she let it take her part of the way, until it started to turn right. She jumped off and looked around. This part of the city was unfamiliar and considerably more disreputable-looking than the places she was used to. She smoothed her borrowed maid's uniform and reassured herself that it was still early in the day, full daylight. Women lined the streets, hauling baskets, chattering with each other. Annaliese drew herself up. She was in the right general area. She was almost sure of that. But where to go from here? Cirkos' shop might be on the next corner or it might be two miles away. All at once, Annaliese felt young, unprepared, and foolish for thinking she was up to this task. She quashed the feeling as best she could and unfolded the letter again.

The shop was supposed to be located on Polke's Street. At the corner, a woman with rough hands and a lye-stained apron was shaking out a pile of rugs. Annaliese edged over and asked her in an undertone where she could find Polke's Street. To her relief, the woman didn't bat an eye, just pointed down the road, in the general direction of the waterfront. Annaliese thanked her and hurried off.

Conscious of her satchel and the packet of money and the ruby hidden inside, she tried to walk as if she knew where she was going, tried to walk like she assumed a lady's maid would. Confident enough, but not too haughty. Not too hurried. She tried to project that air that she had a place to be, but was in no great rush to get there. She kept her chin up and walked as quickly as she dared. But no one gave her much of a second look.

She kept a careful eye on the street signs as she walked but she didn't see any street named Polke's. She wondered if the street was even marked and wished she'd thought to ask when she'd stopped that woman. The buildings turned from clapboard houses into worn, nondescript brick facades that might have held shops or might have been houses. Some had glass windows in the front that were open wide, but most were shut up tight. Garbage and discarded newspapers crowded the edges of the roads along with piles of manure. The road rambled along, dusty and ill-kept, and the people no longer looked like honest washerwomen and shopkeepers.

Annaliese began to feel nervous again and out of place despite her pilfered uniform. Studying the few people she passed, she became aware that she was still too clean, too well-kept for this part of town. She straightened her shoulders again tried to assume a posture that suggested that, appearances aside, this was exactly where she meant to be.

The waterfront was close. She could smell it, could hear the dull shouts of the dockworkers in the distance. Annaliese passed down another road. No sign of Polke's Street. She hated to ask again, to make it still more obvious that she was out of place. But she didn't know where to go from here or if she was even in the right place.

A man slouched by the side of the road, a bottle in his hand despite the early hour. Annaliese regarded at him doubtfully. Sprawled as he was against the wall, he looked quite at home. He wasn't the sort of person she'd have ever approached in the past, that was certain. She'd rather not approach him now, but his boneless slump told Annaliese

that even if she could rouse him from his stupor enough to speak to him, he couldn't pose her any threat. She could certainly outrun him, if it came to that.

She edged over to the slouched figure and looked around. There was no one on the street that she could see. She poked the man in the side with her foot. He didn't respond. She tried again, and this time she kicked harder. Annaliese felt hot with shame but she couldn't bring herself to bend down or get close enough to touch his shoulder. She could smell the alcohol even from where she stood, and it made her eyes water.

After another toe wedged itself against his ribcage, the man jerked upright. His bleary eyes settled on Annaliese.

"Where's Polke Street?" she asked hurriedly, before he could gather his wits enough to look at her properly or ask her any questions. The man blinked, and jerked his head to the left. Annaliese dug her fingernails into her palm.

"Where exactly?" She tried to throw into her voice the same matter-of-fact authority that she'd heard the cook use with the more recalcitrant servants. It seemed to have a suitable effect on the man. He straightened a little and swept out a hand.

"Two blocks. Wha's a pretty girl like you doin' there?"

Annaliese ignored his slurred question and hurried off, careful to circumvent the piles of garbage and manure in the gutter. Two blocks. She measured them carefully and when she got to the area the man had indicated, she stopped.

There was still no street sign, but she wasn't deterred. She hadn't seen a single street sign for the last twenty minutes. She supposed most of the people who walked these streets knew well enough where they were going, and weren't expecting outsiders.

That made it all the more remarkable that Micah had managed to find his way here in the first place. Annaliese began to understand why it had taken her brother years to do whatever he was doing. It couldn't have been easy, seeking out sources for material all alone, without any connections. He certainly couldn't use the family name, not unless he wanted to risk word of his exploits getting back to their father. And there was no way her brother would take that chance.

She looked around. The street was empty, but she still had that fearful prickling sensation of being watched. She tried to shrug it off. She was in a new place, under false pretenses. But it was likely enough that the people on this street were mostly like the ones she'd already passed, too occupied with their own lives to pay much attention to a young girl.

Annaliese trotted down the road, circumventing small piles of rubbish, heading vaguely in the direction of the waterfront. The shop had to be somewhere close by. But by the time Annaliese reached the end of the road, she still hadn't seen anyplace that looked like the purported Curiosity Shoppe. There were a few signs in the windows, though, and Annaliese wondered if she walked past it without even knowing it. On a hunch, she turned on her heel and retraced her steps. This time, she paused and peered into each of the narrow alleyways that jutted off from the road. Mostly, she encountered garbage and the occasional stray cat feasting on a rodent. But in the fourth alleyway she spotted a sign tacked above a door at the far end. The wood was pale and dull around the edges, like driftwood, and painted in red: *Curiosity Shoppe*.

Annaliese's heart soared, even as she noted that it was more decrepit than she'd expected. Still, she put the thought of her brother at the front of her mind and strode toward the door. She tried the knob but it was bolted, as she'd expected. She knocked.

Nothing. She waited a few minutes before knocking again. Still no one came. Annaliese's spirits sank. Maybe there was no one there. Maybe they'd moved out, or gone away somewhere. Maybe this Cirkos wasn't even living there anymore.

She stepped back from the door in dismay and tried to think what she could do now. She couldn't bear to go home in defeat, but she couldn't think of many other options. She had to find a way to help Micah, but the rest of the people who had sent him letters lived far away. She didn't have the time, or the resources, to go searching in New York, much less in England. And she couldn't go home only to watch her brother get sicker. He was fading and she knew it. So did her parents, even if they wouldn't say so. The doctor didn't know what to do. She was Micah's only hope. She couldn't fail.

Annaliese glared at the closed door. With nothing left to do, she settled for working out her anger on the stubbornly-closed door, pounding until her knuckles ached.

Then, without warning, the door swung open. Annaliese jerked her hand back and a man shoved his head outside. Several days' growth of beard lined his jaw and his shirt was stained and tattered. He rubbed a hand over his lined face. He looked as though he'd just woken up.

"Yes, what do you want?"

He had a faint accent, one Annaliese couldn't place. She gaped and tried to formulate an answer. The man's eyes sharpened and he looked her up and down.

“Yes, what do you want, little missy?” He produced a toothpick from somewhere and began cleaning his teeth. “Lost, are you?”

Annaliese felt a pulse of fear, but the man sounded irritated and disinterested. He seemed more intent on picking his teeth than examining her. She bit her lip and took a deep breath.

“I’m looking for Cirkos.”

The man paused in his hygiene and looked her over again, more carefully this time.

“And what do you want with old Cirkos, eh? You looking for herbs, go find Madame Minkovski. You know where she is?”

“No. Not that.”

Annaliese shook her head for emphasis when the man looked at her doubtfully. She wished she had planned what to say when she found Cirkos, but she hadn’t. She had supposed that he would somehow know instinctively what she was seeking as soon as she found him, like some sort of wise man. Now, he seemed about ready to shut the door in her face, so she pulled out Micah’s letter from her skirts and shoved it in his face. She held it out until he finally took it.

He looked it over once, carelessly. Then his shoulders tensed. He darted a glance at her, all boredom and grogginess gone, and looked at the letter again. After a moment, he reached out to hand it back to her. Then pulled it back, like he wasn’t sure he wanted her to have the letter again.

“Where’d you get this, huh?” His eyes darted to the back of the alley, toward the street, like he was expecting to see someone coming up behind her. He shifted his weight and adjusted his grip on the door, and Annaliese prepared herself to lunge forward if he suddenly tried to shut it.

“You sent it to my brother.”

The man, who Annaliese supposed to be Cirkos, raised an eyebrow. He gave her yet another once-over and this time he seemed amused by what he found. Annaliese touched her skirts, aware that the man had probably figured out that she was in disguise.

“He’s ill,” she pressed on, before Cirkos had a chance to speak.

He lifted a shoulder in an elaborate, careless shrug. “So get a doctor. What you come to me for?”

Annaliese gritted her teeth. The man knew. He knew something, or at least he must suspect. “He’s had a doctor. They can’t help him. There’s something else wrong with him.”

The man rubbed a hand over his unshaven jaw and drummed his fingers on the door.

“You think I’m some kind of medicine man, missy? I don’t heal people. I don’t work miracles. Go see a priest.”

He shifted his weight again and Annaliese knew he was about to close the door. She grabbed at it. The man startled back.

“You gave him something. A book. Or you knew about the book, even if you didn’t give it to him. It doesn’t matter. He did something, worked some kind of...I don’t

know. There was a chalk circle on the floor, and I found his journal, and now he's asleep and he won't wake up. He's cold and the doctor can't help him, and he'd getting worse, and I need you to *help me.*"

Annaliese was forced to pause for breath.

Cirkos stared at her. Annaliese wondered if he thought she was some kind of madwoman. Perhaps she was. She hadn't meant to blurt it out like that. But she knew that she couldn't let him close the door on her. She couldn't let him walk away. He might be Micah's only chance.

Cirkos looked at her intently for a long moment. Then he stepped back and opened the door wider, beckoning her inside. Annaliese went in without a moment's hesitation.

The inside of the shop was dark and musty. It smelled of dust and dry things, of paper and tobacco and something sharp and acidic. Some kind of smoke. Beyond the door there was a long hallway that let out into a small room. There was a stairway at the far side and a curtain blocking the upper story. A long counter ran along the side of the room, and there were shelves behind it, full of boxes and glass bottles. The rest of the room was crammed full of odd objects, some made of metal, some of glass or wood, and some cluttered items that Annaliese couldn't identify.

Cirkos limped over to the counter and found a small lamp. He fumbled with the match, held it until the wick caught. He rounded the counter and came back into the room. Annaliese stood in the middle of the floor, her hands tightly clenched into fists and

tucked into the pockets of her coat. Cirkos set the lamp on a small crate and eased himself into a rickety chair beside it.

“Sit wherever you like.” He gestured expansively to the cramped room.

Annaliese surveyed the room and tried to decide which piece of furniture was least likely to collapse if she sat on it. Finally she settled onto a box of what appeared to be books. It creaked underneath her and she leaned forward, resting her weight on her feet.

Across from her, Cirkos watched with a keen eye. He waved the letter she’d given him.

“Your brother,” he began. Then he paused. “You’ve seen the book, yes?”

“Yes.” Annaliese fumbled with the satchel and shed her coat so that she could slip the bag off and open it. She tugged the book out and held it out to Cirkos.

He seemed surprised, but took it and ran his fingers over the cover. He muttered to himself in another language. Annaliese tucked the satchel under her feet and put her coat over her knees. Cirkos open the book and thumbed through the pages. He made a face.

“Shouldn’t have sold that book. Stupid children, don’t know what they’re fooling around with.” He seemed to be talking to himself more than Annaliese. His voice was gruff, but Annaliese thought she could detect a hint of guilt in it. After a moment, he set the book aside.

“What do you want me to do about it, huh?” His voice wasn’t unkind, and he looked at with something like pity. But Annaliese saw at once that he did not intend to help her. She lifted her chin.

“Tell me how to fix this.”

Cirkos scoffed and waved a hand. “You think you’re some witch-woman, huh? You gonna drive off the dark ones and purify your brother?”

“Purify?” Annaliese seized on that last word. “What do you mean, purify?”

Cirkos eyed her speculatively. Then he sighed.

“Your brother...ehh. He’s, what would you call it, possessed. They have him, there in their kingdom. They’re not gonna let him go, now.” He muttered, almost to himself, “That’s what comes of playing around with dark things, that’s what happens.”

“They.” Annaliese cleared her throat and tried again. “Who’s they? Where do they have him? What do you mean?”

Cirkos waved the book and tossed it aside. He stared at it like he half expected it to sprout legs and chase after him.

“You saw the book. You read it, yes? You know what I’m saying. The dark ones.”

“The Shadowmen,” Annaliese echoed. Cirkos shrugged.

“They got a lot of names. Whatever you wanna call them. People try to summon them, try to control them, think they can boss them around. Stupid people.” He scowled, but again the sympathetic look in his eye eased his harsh words. “You try to play around

with the dark ones, they're gonna play around with you. You don't know what you're doing, they'll take something from you. Payment for disturbing them."

Annaliese shut her eyes. It was exactly what she didn't want to hear. She'd hoped so desperately that when she found this man he'd laugh at her and tell her it was just a foolish book, nothing but children's stories. That it had nothing to do with her brother's illness and she might as well go home. She'd hoped that he would tell her that Micah's sickness was a matter for a doctor or a priest, that there was nothing unnatural or supernatural about it. Of course, it would have been a devastating answer, because it would mean that there was truly nothing she could do to help him but pray. But at least it would mean that there was nothing corrupt or evil about this sickness. That Micah hadn't foolishly brought it on himself.

"How do I fix it?"

Cirkos shook his head. He said nothing, but his meaning was clear. Annaliese narrowed her eyes.

"Don't tell me there's nothing I can do! There's always something. Micah did something to bring this on; there must be something I can do to take it away."

Cirkos gave her a look she couldn't quite decipher, thoughtful but resigned.

"You got fire, little missy. Like your brother. See where it led him?" He paused for a moment, as if to give his words time to sink in. "You want to help your brother, okay. I understand. I had a brother once, too. See? I understand. But this is something you can't fix. Get a priest. Maybe it'll help. Probably not."

"I can't accept that."

Cirkos raised an eyebrow. Annaliese swallowed and forced herself to meet his gaze. She hadn't thought far enough ahead to wonder what she would do if this man couldn't, or wouldn't, help her. She had supposed, without truly thinking about it, that she would return home. What else could she do? But now, Annaliese's inside rebelled at the thought of returning home to do nothing but watch her brother sicken further.

"I have to do something. Try something." She leaned forward. "If you won't help me, I'll find someone else who will. Just tell me where to look, and I'll go away."

Cirkos watched her for a long moment. His eyes darted over to the book, then back to her. He lifted his gaze to the ceiling, perhaps seeking strength or patience. Then he sighed, long and heavy.

"Stupid children," he whispered. He was silent again. "Okay. You want to be stupid like your brother? Not my fault. You understand? Not my responsibility. You...your mother and father, your friends, don't come back blaming me when you end up like your brother. Okay?"

Annaliese nodded and shifted forward on her box. "Nobody else knows about you. Or Micah. At my house. I only know because I found Micah's journal, and I have it with me. No one else knows I came here." She realized belatedly that it might not be the smartest thing to say. Cirkos might decide that the best way to avoid liability would be to dispose of her. She gripped her satchel and prepared to run. But Cirkos only threw up his hands.

“Fine. Fine!” He blew out an exasperated breath and went behind the counter. He came up with a pipe, which he stuffed full of tobacco and lit. “You know what your brother did then, eh. He did the...what do you call it. The ritual. The summoning, yes?”

“I saw the book.” Annaliese leaned forward again. “And the chalk drawing on the floor. And he used...” she trailed off. Perhaps she shouldn’t disclose the existence of the ruby.

Cirkos didn’t seem to notice her sudden silence. “Okay. So, he did the ritual, it worked out like I might have suspected.” He stopped and inspected his pipe. Annaliese thought she detected a hint of guilt in his face.

“Listen, I didn’t know what your brother was going to do. You understand? I’m a businessman. People ask for books, I get them books. I don’t ask questions.”

Annaliese pursed her lips and nodded. She didn’t know where the book had originally come from, but she found it easy to believe that it hadn’t been obtained through strictly legal means. She glanced around the shop and noted the bits of clutter and broken down crates. She’d never seen a smuggler’s shop, but she thought this might be what one looked like. Then, a thought occurred to her.

“But...you say you’re a businessman. Then how do you know so much about this? This sort of thing?”

Cirkos puffed on his pipe and examined the scratched countertop. “Ehh. I dabble, you know? I know some things, a little bit. I know about what I sell. I have to know, to know where to get things. See?”

It didn't particularly answer her question. What she wanted to know wasn't why or how Cirkos knew what he did, but rather, how much he knew. He seemed to read this in her face and sighed.

"I'm no magic-worker, little missy. No shaman. I know a little of this and that, but I don't go meddling with things like the dark ones. You want someone who can help you with that, well, I don't know. Most people willing to try aren't to be trusted, you see? Only stupid people meddle with that. You don't go trusting stupid people."

Annaliese frowned, and Cirkos sighed again.

"Okay. Okay. You're set on it, you're gonna be stupid too. Okay." He tapped the ash from his pipe and pointed it at her. "That book, that's all I got, best I've seen for what you wanna do. Maybe, you look through there more, you find something that'll help. But you shouldn't do that. Not alone. You're brother tried it alone, see where it got him? You got to find someone who knows more about this than an old businessman. Understand?"

"Who?"

If Cirkos didn't know anyone, then there was no hope. Annaliese couldn't exactly go wandering the streets, asking for people to help her. She couldn't stand on a street corner and beg people to help her fight the Shadowmen. Then she really would be branded a madwoman.

"Gypsies, maybe. Fortune tellers. Sometimes they can help a little. Give you charms, give you a little protection. Tell you some of the right words to say. But listen." He pointed his pipe at her again and his voice grew serious. "Something you need to understand. These, ehh. The dark ones. They're not human. See? Never were human.

You wanna talk to them, well, they won't talk to you. They don't talk to anybody. They don't care about us, unless we got something they can use."

Annaliese blinked. She had the sudden feeling that she'd stepped into something she wasn't ready for. It was the same feeling she'd had when she'd opened that book, opened Micah's journal. It was all very well for her to pretend, when she'd been packing her things as setting off, that she had a plan, that there was something she could do. And if it was a matter of finding or talking to the right person, she probably could do it, given the right information. But as to the business of talking with sprits, she wasn't quite ready for that. Instead, she seized on the salient bit.

"They're not human. Then what are they?"

Cirkos looked away and shrugged. "Who knows? Demons, maybe. Things made of darkness. Evil things. But don't go thinking you gotta stick your brother's face in a bunch of holy water and that's gonna fix him. It doesn't work that way."

"How do you know?" Annaliese pressed. Cirkos glared.

"I told you I know some things, I know some things! I told you I know about what I sell. That book, I read it. Some of it. And I hear stories. Your brother's not the first person I seen go toying with things he don't understand. Dark things."

He drew in a breath and examined his pipe again. "If it was that easy, if you just had to hang a cross over his bed, then there'd be no stories. Priests would know what to do, they'd be able to fix it. But it don't work like that, missy. These things, they don't care about priests, they don't care if you pray against them. We're human, they're not. They don't play by our rules. They don't care about us. You wanna get their attention,

well, I say that's a bad idea. They're strong, these things. You don't want them to notice you."

"Why? What would happen?" Annaliese rose to her feet, gathering up her coat in her arms reflexively, like it could shield her.

Cirkos chewed on the end of his pipe. "Like with the old stories. You get their attention, they take you to their home, where they can play with you. But these things, they don't play nice. They eat you up and spit out the bones."

"But Micah's still here. He hasn't been taken anywhere." Annaliese dug her fingers into her coat, into the straps of her bag. Cirkos removed the pipe from his mouth and looked at her disparagingly.

"No? I said they spit out the bones, didn't I? What do they want with human flesh? They're not dogs! What do you think they eat? They like the insides. The, ehh. What do you want to call it? The soul, the spirit. That's always what dark things want."

He was silent for a minute and then clapped his hands in a brisk fashion.

"So. You want to know what happened to your brother, I'll tell you. He's smart, huh? He finds out about this thing, he gets curious. Thinks, hey, I can talk to them, I can talk to something that's not human, I can do a trick where I spill a little blood and they'll come and do my bidding. That's not what happened. These things, they say, hey, some stupid little human thinks he's gonna call us over and tell us what to do. We don't care about humans unless they get our attention, like this one does. Maybe it's been awhile since our last human, maybe we're a little hungry. We gotta eat something, hey? So why not this little one? We don't need the body. We leave that. He thinks he's gonna call us

over, well, we'll call him over and keep him there. Maybe we'll eat him up. Maybe we'll just leave him here with us and play with him.

“But I'll tell you what, missy. The body don't last long without the spirit. I seen that before, with my own two eyes. You ask anybody who knows a little bit of magic, a little bit about spirits and things, they tell you the same thing. You take away the spirit and the body sleeps. Then it gets cold and then it stops breathing, and then the spirit can't come back, and it's gotta stay wherever it went. Sometimes that's someplace good. Sometimes it's not.

You want to help you brother, you got two problems. First, you gotta get these things to give your brother's spirit back. That's not gonna happen, I tell you right now. But you wanna try, okay. Second problem: you gotta get his spirit back before the body figures out it's gone and says, might as well die. You don't got a lot of time for that, so I say you should hurry.”

Chapter Six

In short order, Annaliese found herself on the street once more. The book was back in the satchel and the satchel was under her coat, along with the letter from her brother. Cirkos had returned it, along with a scrap of paper with several names and addresses written on them. Spirit-women and shaman in the area, he said. A Vodoun priest or two. There weren't too many, but she could try them and they might be able to help her.

Annaliese saw in his eyes that he didn't believe it. She thanked him anyway, and tried to offer him a few coins for his trouble. He waved her off.

“Don't thank me, missy. I didn't do anything to help you.”

Annaliese saw, or thought she saw, a glimmer of guilt in his face, in the set of his mouth. He had told her again and again that it wasn't his fault, that it wasn't his responsibility what people did with the things he bought from them, but Annaliese wasn't sure whether he was trying to convince her or himself.

While she was on her way out, Cirkos stopped her and offered her something, a little coin made of copper with some sort of sigil carved on it.

“They say they're supposed to ward off evil spirits. It probably won't work, but I thought, hey.” He shifted awkwardly.

She slipped it into her coat pocket and thanked him for his help. He watched from the doorway as she left. She glanced back when she turned into the street and gave him one last wave before slipping into the crowd.

While she'd been in the shop, it had gone from morning to midday. People thronged about her in the streets. Carriages rattled along and people shouted out from houses to one another. The sun was high in the sky.

Annaliese squinted up and realized she was hungry. Unable to think of eating in her rush to get out of the house without being seen, she'd forgone breakfast. She fingered the scrap of paper with the names written on it. Food, she thought. Food first, then she would try to find some of those people. It wouldn't be easy going. She might not have time to visit more than one before nightfall. Annaliese swallowed. She might not be able to find even one. Cirkos had seemed dubious when he gave her their locations, warning her that these were not the sort of people who were apt to stay in one place for long.

She caught another streetcar back uptown, thinking that she could stop in a small tea shop, or at least buy a bun or something from a vendor. Annaliese counted her funds in her head. She had enough for a meal or two, and a night at a small, out-of-the-way inn. But not enough for much more. If any of the people on her list charged a fee for their services, she'd have to get creative. When she'd been packing, she'd thought of breaking into the desk in her father's study where she knew he kept cheques and cash. But she couldn't bring herself to take anything. She'd already taken the ruby, and run away to boot. That was theft enough for one lifetime.

She was thankful, now, that she had the foresight to slip a few smaller pieces of jewelry into her satchel. She had a pair of garnet earrings, a gold bracelet, a silver hairpin, and a jade ring. There were a few nicer pieces in her jewelry box, birthday gifts from her parents and from relatives who never seemed to remember that she didn't much care for

jewelry. But Annaliese feared that trying to sell anything too nice would only arouse suspicion.

And she had the ruby, of course, but Annaliese knew that if she so much as showed it to anyone, they'd have the police down on her head before she could blink. Even now, she remembered that she had to be careful. She glanced around as she hopped off the streetcar. She was in a nicer part of town, not quite the most upscale district, but pleasant enough. It was probably not the first place her parents would look for her, if they were already out searching, but she couldn't afford to become careless. She touched her headscarf self-consciously, and turned a corner.

Distracted as she was, she didn't notice another figure moving into her path. She collided with enough force that she went stumbling backward into the brick wall, knocking her shoulder hard enough to bruise.

The woman she collided with was about her mother's age. She stumbled and dropped her packages.

"I'm sorry!" Annaliese staggered to her feet, rubbing her bruised shoulder. She reached for the packages, but the woman waved her off.

"That's all right, dear. Don't worry. No harm done."

Annaliese shuffled back against the brick wall and watched the woman gather her things. She was tallish and slim, her thick dark hair carefully pinned back from her heart-shaped face. Annaliese darted a glance at the woman's elegant navy-colored dress. The woman straightened and smiled at her. Annaliese flushed again with embarrassment, remembering her maid's uniform.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” The woman reached out and touched Annaliese’s hand solicitously. Annaliese shook her head and tucked her hands into her coat. The woman looked at her oddly, and Annaliese hunched her shoulders. She might be able to fool strangers like Cirkos into thinking she was something she wasn’t, but there was a keen intelligence in the woman’s face, and she examined Annaliese from head to toe.

“Are you sure?” The woman tilted her head, evidently trying to catch Annaliese’s eye. “You look upset, dear. I don’t mean to pry, but are you sure nothing’s wrong?”

Annaliese swallowed, her throat locking up. She wanted to nod, mumble some sort of agreement, and duck away into the crowd. But she was tired and hungry, and all she could think about at the moment was the resignation in Cirkos’ eyes as he wrote out the names and addresses for her, the way he didn’t mince his words when he told her that there probably wasn’t any hope for her brother. Annaliese swallowed again, and the woman reached out for her arm.

“Why don’t you come with me? I was just going to get a cup of coffee.” She linked her arm through Annaliese’s, and turned her gently to the side, drawing her away.

Annaliese knew she could pull free and slip away if she wanted to. But she risked making a scene. The streets were crowded; there was no way she could escape without someone taking notice. Her plans hinged upon her ability to move through the city unnoticed. Annaliese took a deep breath and forced herself to relax as the woman steered her along the sidewalk. The woman capably directed her way through the crowds. She was just a bit shorter than Annaliese and delicately formed, but there was strength in her hands, hidden as they were beneath white gloves. Her grasp was firm and gentle, and she

carried herself very upright, chin lifted, confident without being supercilious. After a moment's walking, she led Annaliese into a small coffee shop on the next road.

Annaliese recognized it from her trips to the city, but she had never been inside.

A man at the front door took the woman's packages and led them to a small table, near a window. He brought coffee and the woman ordered for both of them, glancing at Annaliese afterward, as if to ask if what she had ordered was all right. Annaliese nodded dumbly. For no logical reason, Annaliese suddenly found herself fearfully convinced that this woman would somehow see through her, see what she'd been doing, and take her directly home.

The small scrap of paper with the half-dozen addresses on it was still tucked inside her coat pocket. Annaliese slipped her hand into her pocket and touched it carefully, protectively.

The woman poured two steaming cups of coffee and slid one in Annaliese's direction. Annaliese carefully added cream and sugar before wrapping her cold hands around her cup. She didn't take a sip. While she usually liked coffee well enough, she found that her previous appetite had vanished. She glanced out the window and tried to think of a way to leave as quickly as possible without arousing suspicion.

"There. Nothing like coffee to warm you up after a hard day shopping!" The woman cheerfully added a liberal amount cream to her coffee. "It's awfully tedious to go in for fittings, but the weather's gone cold now, so I need a new dress. New gloves, too, though I think I'll save those for another day." She took a sip of her coffee and tilted her

face up, watching Annaliese. “Excuse me, dear. I’m sorry, how rude. I’m Nicole.” She extended a hand, and Annaliese took it reflexively.

She didn’t think there was anything rude in forgoing your name when you were treating someone else to lunch, but she didn’t say so. Instead, she ran a nervous thumbnail over the edge of her cup and wondered if she should give a false name. Perhaps the woman wouldn’t know the difference, but it seemed both foolish and ungracious, particularly when the woman looked at her with such a kind, open face.

“Annaliese.” She clasped the woman’s hand and then dropped it. Nicole smiled and stirred her coffee.

“And what are you doing today, Annaliese?” Her voice was admirably light and casual.

Annaliese shrugged. She flicked a glance out the window, at the lines of people trotting to and fro across a city that was so much bigger than she’d ever understood. It had taken her long enough to find Cirkos. How was she supposed to find anyone on the list of people?

“I’m looking for someone.” She stared at the table and fiddled with her teaspoon.

Nicole lifted a slim eyebrow.

“Oh? A friend?”

“No.”

It was horrifically rude to be so tight-lipped around a woman who, from all appearances, was taking an interest in her solely out of kindness. Annaliese remembered her worn and soiled maid’s uniform and compared it mentally to Nicole’s dress, which

was subdued in color but undeniably well-made. It was particularly nice of her, then, to offer lunch to a girl who seemed to be a servant.

Annaliese shivered, suddenly cold although the restaurant was perfectly warm. She wished she had her coat, but of course the man at the door had taken it, along with her satchel. Annaliese had been loath to let that out of her sight, but she couldn't think of any logical excuse to keep her bag with her while she ate.

Nicole put her coffee cup down and laid a hand on the table between them, not touching Annaliese, but reaching out nonetheless. She pitched her voice low, although no one seemed to be listening to them.

“Are you in some kind of trouble, Annaliese? It's all right. You can tell me if you are.”

Annaliese felt a rush of mortification at the thought that she looked shifty enough that Nicole assumed she was in trouble. Her mortification deepened when she realized that by anyone's standards she was indeed in trouble, though not the kind of trouble Nicole was probably thinking of.

“No,” she muttered. But Nicole cast her a look of such understanding that she revised her answer. “A little. But I'm...it's all right. I'll be all right. Thank you,” she added, belatedly. It really was very nice of Nicole to ask, and Annaliese felt a small prick of shame for her previous eagerness to leave the woman's presence. At the very least, Nicole was offering a free meal, and while Annaliese wasn't anxious to accept charity, she knew she couldn't afford to refuse it at the moment. More than that, Nicole's

presence was comforting. She regarded Annaliese with gentle concern, but didn't press the subject. Their food arrived soon after that.

While they ate, Nicole kept up a light stream of chatter about herself, her new fall clothes and her son, who was evidently an officer in the military and home for the time being. Annaliese gathered that Nicole was a widow, though she didn't say as much outright. But she wore no wedding ring Annaliese could see, even under the gloves, and any talk of a husband was absent from her discussion of her son, her sister, and her acquaintances. Annaliese said little, but Nicole didn't seem discomfited by this, and talked enough for two.

After the food had been taken away, Nicole seemed content to linger over another cup of coffee, and Annaliese began to wonder how she could get away discreetly, without causing offense. It wouldn't be polite just to run off, not after Nicole had paid for her lunch. And, truth be told, Annaliese didn't particularly want to leave. It was reassuring just to sit there, listen to Nicole talk. It eased the desperation that had been Annaliese's constant companion for the past three days. There was kindness in Nicole's face and she had a relaxed, pleasant demeanor, as if she couldn't possibly find a reason to upset herself about anything. It was soothing, and Annaliese wanted to just shut her eyes and stay there for a while.

But time was short, very short. Annaliese felt a stab of guilt when she considered what this leisurely lunch might have cost her, what it might have cost Micah. Cirkos' warning rang in her ears. *The body couldn't survive long without the spirit.* She was running out of time, laying all her hopes on the slim chance that one of the people on the

list might be able to help her. And she didn't really know where to find the people on her list, having only a handful of names and general locations.

Annaliese wanted to put her head down on the table and shut her eyes against the growing feeling of despair. It whispered in her ear that her errand was hopeless, useless, that her brother was going to succumb to this sickness, this evil influence, because she wasn't strong or smart enough to save him. Her throat closed up, and she swallowed hard to keep herself from crying. After a few agonizing seconds, Annaliese realized that Nicole had stopped talking. Annaliese opened her eyes and found Nicole staring. She felt her face grow hot with humiliation. What must this woman think of her, this odd, mute young girl in a maid's uniform who denied that anything was wrong with her and then sat there at a public table, looking like someone was beating her?

"Annaliese." Nicole pursed her lips. Her own fine brows drew together. "I don't want to press you. Your business is your own. But are you sure you're all right? If you say you're not in trouble. Perhaps you need a doctor?"

Annaliese hunches her shoulders and shook her head miserably. "No. I don't..." she paused, and then blurted. "My brother. He's sick. He's not, I don't think..." She couldn't go on, but Nicole seemed to understand. She reached out and took Annaliese's hand again.

"I'm sorry," she said. She sounded it. "Has he had a doctor?" Annaliese nodded.

"They can't help him."

Mortifyingly, Annaliese found tears rushing to her eyes. She was so tired and she felt, as she hadn't before, that there was truly no hope, that she might as well go home

now and suffer her parents' wrath. If there was no hope, if Micah was going to die, she didn't want it to be alone. She wanted, at least, to be there to hold his hand. But the idea was too awful, and she couldn't bear it. Nicole hastily passed her a handkerchief and Annaliese pressed it to her eyes, let it soak up the tears and wished that she could blot out the rest of the world the same way.

"I'm so sorry," Nicole said again, when the silence stretched on. "Why aren't you with him?" she asked, after another awkward minute.

It was a fair question. She obviously wasn't at work, as one might expect from a maid at midday. She might've made some excuse about being sent on an errand, but Annaliese was too exhausted to try to come up with a lie. In a torrent, she found the words rushing out.

"I was looking for someone who could help him. I don't think they exist. I mean, they do, the person I was looking for. The people. They're alive, I think. But I don't think they can help. It was a slim chance. It was stupid. But I had to try?" Her last words ended on a question, though she hadn't meant them to. They dangled there, seeking affirmation, seeking assurance that she had done the right thing, reckless and useless as it had been.

"Of course." Nicole pressed her hand compassionately. "Of course. We all do desperate things in times like these. When my own husband was...well." She stopped there, uncharacteristically sudden. "Well. Never mind. I understand. And I'm very sorry for your brother. But I think perhaps you should go home to him now. Would you like me to take you there?"

Annaliese shook her head quickly, dismayed at the idea of Nicole finding out how foolish she'd been, running away from home in a stolen dress. She'd said she understood, about doing desperate things, but Annaliese didn't think she'd understand this.

"Well," Nicole said, after Annaliese had finished frantically shaking her head. "Why don't you come home with me, then. We'll figure out what to do next."

It was another reckless decision, but when Nicole stood, paid the bill, gathered their things, and ushered her toward a hired hack, Annaliese entered it. But she spent the entirety of the short ride convincing herself that she hadn't just done something incredibly foolish. Nicole seemed very kind. Perhaps it was a kind of fate that she should meet someone who could help her at the moment when she needed help most. Annaliese slipped a hand into her coat pocket and ran a finger over the coin Cirkos had given her. Perhaps it had brought her luck, after all.

Nicole's home was not far from the street corner where they had met. It was a handsome modestly-sized brownstone with potted flowers near the porch. There was no porte-cochere. The driver brought them right up to the door. Nicole paid the man, then let herself and Annaliese inside. The foyer was small, but homelike and full of soft carpeting and tasteful wall-hangings. Annaliese admired it at once. It was so unlike the stiff, formal foyer in her own home.

A maid came to take possession of Nicole's packages and their coats. She looked askance at Annaliese's uniform, but she said nothing. Nicole directed them both to a small sitting room near the entryway and pressed Annaliese into a broad wing-backed chair.

“Now.” Her tone turned businesslike and Annaliese looked up warily. Nicole perched herself on the edge of a chaise and folded her hands in her lap. “Now we can talk a little more privately! You said you can’t go home. Or you don’t want to,” she amended, when Annaliese looked as if she was about to speak. “Did you run away? It’s all right, I won’t make you go home,” she added quickly.

Annaliese started at her lap. The hem of her borrowed uniform was stained with mud, she noted, presumably acquired in her search for Cirkos. She felt guilty about bringing it into Nicole’s nice clean parlor. And she felt ashamed and embarrassed that Nicole had seen through her so easily. She could lie, of course, but what was the point? She’d never been a very good liar anyway. Micah was so much better at that.

“Yes,” she whispered, and stared at her shoes like a guilty child.

“That’s all right,” Nicole said, absurdly. When Annaliese looked up, she smiled.

“I ran away too, when I was about your age. Though for a different reason, I think.” She smiled broadly, showing white teeth and a small dimple. “I met a man. My parents didn’t want me to marry him.”

Annaliese started. She could hardly imagine the cultured, gracious woman in front of her running off scandalously with a man her parents didn’t approve of.

“What happened?” she asked, in spite of herself. Nicole laughed.

“I married him, of course! My parents came around in time. A long time,” she added, with a small wince. “But, you see, I understand why a young woman might run away from home.”

“I’m not eloping,” Annaliese muttered, and stared at her shoes some more. Foolishly, she almost wished that were what was going on. Scandalous as it might be, there would be an edge of romance, of merriment to that.

“I didn’t think so,” Nicole assured her. “And you’re not running away from a bad job, because I can tell you’re not a maid.”

Annaliese brought her head up sharply at that. Nicole smiled.

“Your hands, dear. They’re too nice, too well-kept. As is your coat, and your shoes.”

Annaliese grimaced. It hadn’t mattered now, but she was still chagrined that her disguise had been so easy to see through. She wondered if anyone else had notice. The waiter at the restaurant? The people on the street?

“So. You come from a nice home, I think. A nice family. And your brother is ill, and you’ve run away to try to find something that can help him?” She moved a little closer, and lowered her voice. “You know, Annaliese, the things they might sell in shops, little charms or tonics or things, they don’t work, really. If the doctor can’t help him, you shouldn’t waste your money on those things.”

Her voice was very kind, as if she were afraid she was puncturing Annaliese’s last bubble of hope. But that had been punctured long before. Annaliese shook her head unhappily.

“It’s not...I wasn’t doing that. Not really. It’s not...” she sighed, frustrated. She could hardly tell the truth. Nicole would think was deluded, driven mad by grief. Perhaps she’d go back on her promise not to send Annaliese home.

“You can tell me, dear.” Nicole was still looking at her kindly, trustingly.

Annaliese had meant to keep her secrets. But now they frothed inside her, like a pot about to boil over. She swallowed, but discovered she couldn’t keep them inside any longer. Before she had a chance to think about it any further, she found herself telling Nicole everything.

The explanation took quite some time. Nicole’s brow furrowed, and the furrow grew deeper as Annaliese went on. She said little and Annaliese found her own explanations growing more frantic as she sought to assure Nicole that she wasn’t insane, she truly meant what she was saying. In desperation, she finally brought out the book and showed it to Nicole. Nicole accepted it with careful hands and turned the pages one by one. Annaliese told her about Cirkos and showed her the paper with the names and locations. Nicole inspected it gravely.

Finally she fell silent, exhausted and near despair. Nicole’s expression hadn’t changed much over the course of the tale and Annaliese was afraid that Nicole was trying to think of a kind way to express her skepticism, or thinking about throwing Annaliese out of her home altogether. Perhaps she was even thinking of calling the police to have Annaliese removed back to her home. She had said it was all right if Annaliese had run away, but surely she was regretting that now.

Annaliese watched anxiously as Nicole paged through the book, lingering over the same page Annaliese had, the one titled *The Summoning*. Finally she closed the book and laid it on her lap.

“I believe you, dear,” she said, after a long moment of silence.

Annaliese thought for a few seconds she had misheard. Then, when she realized she hadn't, she was staggered by a rush of bewildered relief.

"You do?" she asked dumbly.

Nicole smiled faintly and nodded.

"Of course. I've seen strange things in my life, you know. This isn't so farfetched. And anyway..." She trailed her hand over the cover of the book, her expression growing serious, almost grim. "This isn't the first time, it's not the first time I've heard of...beings. Like this."

"It's not?" Dimly, Annaliese was aware that she probably didn't sound very intelligent, sitting there like a lump and repeating everything Nicole had said. But this was an unasked-for blessing; it was incredible. For a nice, respectable, sensible woman like Nicole to actually believe her!

In truth, Annaliese had almost begun to wonder about her own sanity. She had started doubting her memories, her thoughts about Micah and his journal. She'd been wondering if she weren't, perhaps, possessed by some sort of mania. She had seen with her own eyes the chalk circle, the book, the ruby. She knew that there was something wrong with Micah, something the doctor couldn't diagnose or treat. And she'd felt that palpable air of wrongness that surrounded her brother, that had spread to the whole house when she'd left that morning. The shadows had seemed heavy and full of dark promise. For a wild moment Annaliese had thought there was someone, or something, there, but had forced herself to think otherwise. She had told herself she must be imagining things.

But now, all of her suspicions and fears seemed validated, and it was reassuring rather than frightening.

Nicole inspected the list of names again while Annaliese sagged against the chair, still choked by fear, but feeling for the first time in days that she wasn't wholly alone. But her relief was short-lived. Nicole grimaced as soon as she examined the list.

"You can't possibly go to these places. Not alone, anyway. And, dear, please don't take this the wrong way, I know you want to help your brother, but I suspect some of these people may be little more than charlatans. I don't doubt that there are people in the world who know about these things, or at least more than you or I, but I don't think it's a coincidence that so many of them are poor and half-mad. Do you understand?"

Annaliese nodded miserably. The thought had occurred to her, too. She was short of not only of time, but of resources; she knew it would be difficult enough to find anyone who so much as claimed they knew about the dark forces. Even if she found such a person, she had no way to vet their claims, and little money to offer them in return for their help.

"I know. But I don't know what else to do. I don't know anyone else who can help. And I can't exactly put an ad in the paper for this kind of thing, can I?"

Nicole nodded. "I understand. But why don't we wait for my son to come home, and see what he has to say about all this?" She raised a hand, as if expecting Annaliese to protest. "I promise you, he won't interfere with your search in any way. He'll help you if he can. And he's a soldier, he's seen strange things. I know he has a few friends

who...well. I think he might have a few more reliable connections than this.” She waved the paper. Annaliese nodded fervently.

“Yes. Anything. If you think he can help...”

Nicole looked at her sympathetically and reached over to squeeze her hand.

“I do. Now, why don’t you get some rest? You’re welcome to stay here while we sort this out. William won’t be home for several hours yet, but I’ll speak to him as soon as he returns.” Nicole touched the book that was still on her lap. “May I show this to him?”

Annaliese nodded again, suddenly exhausted at the prospect of rest. “Yes, of course. Yes. Thank you.” She faltered. It had never been easy for her to express strong feelings, but she wished now she had some way of communicating her desperate gratitude. She felt for the first time a thin ray of hope. She wasn’t the only one shouldering this burden now. If a woman like Nicole, and her son, knew of these things, and could help, then maybe there was hope for her, and for Micah.

Nicole touched her arm again, and summoned the maid to lead Annaliese upstairs to a small, clean room that smelled of pine and lavender. The bedding was soft and thick, and there was a washstand in the corner. The maid had supplied it with hot water and a cake of soap. Annaliese stripped off her soiled uniform and sponged herself down before crawling into the bed.

She fell at once into an exhausted slumber and did not wake until it was nearly fully dark outside. For a moment she couldn’t remember where she was, swathed in darkness in an unfamiliar room. It was cold, even under the thick bedding, and Annaliese

stared at the shadows gathering around the edges of the furniture, and the gray mist of twilight outside the small window.

For the first time since she'd set foot out her front door, she allowed herself to wonder what her parents were thinking, if they were thinking about her, wondering where she was. They must be, she thought. Her disappearance couldn't have gone unnoticed for so long. One of the maids would have gone into her room to clean and discovered the note. Annaliese imagined her parents reading it and pictured their reactions with a sort of guilty pleasure. She had never done much to garner her parents' attention, and for the most part that was how she liked it.

She had always trusted that they loved her. All parents must love their children. Mustn't they? If her own parents didn't take pains to show their, well, that was all right. There was no reason to be sentimental over little things. Annaliese had never been a sentimentalist herself. But that meant that she'd never really been treated to her parents' concern, and she wondered what it might be like. Were they wondering if she was safe, or on the streets somewhere? Where did they think she'd gone? She had been deliberately vague in her note, stating merely that she intended to go on an errand that she hoped would be of some help to Micah.

What did they make of that? What did they make of their son's illness? They had said so little to Annaliese about it. Surely after the doctor had been and gone again they'd realize how strange his illness was. What did they think was causing it? Did they have any notion that there might be something unnatural or sinister behind it? Had they called a priest, hoping for divine intervention? Would that even help?

Too many questions. Annaliese head pulsed with them, and when she reached up to rub her forehead she realized she was terribly thirsty. She crawled out of bed and fumbled to light the candle on the washstand. The maid had brought her bag up and set it just inside the door. Annaliese checked to make sure the ruby and her other things were still inside, before selecting one of the two dresses she'd taken with her. She dressed and combed her hair as best she could, and splashed her face with water that had gone ice-cold.

She examined herself critically in the small mirror that hung over the washstand. She hoped she at least looked presentable. It was one thing to go around mud-spattered in a maid's uniform when she was wandering the streets, but Annaliese didn't want to disgrace Nicole's home by forcing her to host a guest who looked dirty and unkempt.

When she was satisfied that she looked as neat as she could, Annaliese went downstairs and found her way to the parlor again. She didn't expect Nicole to still be there, and intended to wander around until she found a servant or a servant's bell. But Nicole was there, sitting on the chaise again, or perhaps still. A tea set was spread out on the table in front of her. A low fire burned in the grate and in the chair Annaliese has so recently vacated, there sat a young man.

Chapter Seven

He was situated facing the door and spotted Annaliese before Nicole did. He stood, prompting Nicole to look over her shoulder. When she saw Annaliese standing there, she smiled.

“Come in, please. We were just speaking of you. This is my son, William. William, this is the young lady.”

William gave her a small, very correct bow, and Annaliese returned with a shallow curtsy, feeling unaccountably awkward. It was as if she'd vacated her social circle for a day or two and was suddenly thrust back inside it, having already forgotten all the lessons and mannerisms that had been drilled into her for most of her life.

Nicole motioned her to a seat, and Annaliese went obediently and let Nicole pour her a cup of tea. William reassumed his seat as well, and Annaliese noticed that the book was lying open on the table in front of him.

“We were discussing your situation.” Nicole passed her the cup of tea, which Annaliese took mechanically. “Just I thought, William thinks he knows someone who can help you. Don't you, dear?”

William frowned slightly.

“I can't promise anything.” His eyes darted to Annaliese, and he turned slightly to face her. “I'll try, of course I will. But, you have to understand...” He looked faintly uncomfortable, and Annaliese was reminded of Cirkos' reluctantly-given advice, the

resignation in his face as he sent her off. Her hopes sank again. She wiped suddenly-damp palms on her skirt.

“I understand,” she said, quietly. “I hate to trouble you. But I have to try to do whatever I can.”

“Of course we’re happy to help in any way he can.” He gave her a gracious nod and returned his attention to the book. Annaliese took the opportunity to study him covertly.

His bearing was that of a very polite, well-bred young man. He didn’t look much like his mother, Annaliese thought. His hair was a sun-bleached blonde and he was slightly tanned, though his hands suggested that his natural skin tone resembled his fair-skinned mother’s. Nicole’s eyes were dark while his were blue, and while he shared some of his mother’s classical features, Annaliese could not honestly say that he resembled her. She supposed he took more after his father, but knew that it would hardly be polite to say so, given the circumstances.

Still, he was well-built, as one might expect from a soldier, and well-formed. Had he somehow met her parents at a party, Annaliese suspected her mother would look upon him very favorably, despite that fact that he was not precisely a wealthy man. The position of an officer was, of course, perfectly respectable, but most of her parents’ friends and most of their social circle was made up of men and women who had inherited their fortune, and had little need of a profession, aside from a nominal one. Her father was acquainted with an admiral, Annaliese believed, and she had once been introduced to a senator at one of her parent’s affairs. But an officer was unlikely to make the guest list.

William studied the book and his mother examined her tea. Annaliese watched them both. After a few seconds, an awkward silence fell over the room. Annaliese stared at the wallpaper and tried to think of what to say.

“You...excuse me, William? Your mother said you know something about all this?” She made a gesture that she hoped encompassed the entire situation. William nodded.

“Yes. This isn’t the first I’ve heard of these creatures. I know a few people, one in particular, who has made a study out of this sort of thing. I’ll try and contact him for you, and see if he can be of any help. He’s quite knowledgeable, so I’m sure he’ll know something.”

Annaliese nodded slowly and stared at her hands, folded upon her lap. She didn’t know what to think. She had never believed in destiny before, but what else could this be but destiny, when she found herself suddenly thrown into the path of someone with an experience so similar to her own, someone who might be able to help her? Annaliese swallowed hard. She didn’t know whether it was the coin that had brought her luck, or if some angel had finally taken mercy upon her, and she didn’t care. She was afraid to examine her luck too deeply.

“Thank you. I would,” she stopped. “I would appreciate that.” She didn’t mean to laugh, but a high, startled giggle escaped her. “I’m sorry. It’s just that...I didn’t think anyone would believe me. I didn’t know, well, I couldn’t blame them if they didn’t, I probably wouldn’t believe anyone who told me about this two months ago.” She shut her mouth. She was rambling, and she wasn’t making much sense. But William nodded

solemnly, as if he understood. Annaliese fought to bring herself under control once more. She closed her eyes until she felt she could speak again without her voice shaking.

“Excuse me, but may I ask how you came to know about all this? For me, it was my brother, but you...” she trailed off.

William’s eyes darted to his mother. She met his gaze for a moment, and then looked away. She smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle from her sleeve and rose to her feet, her shoulders suddenly tense.

“I’ll go check and see how supper is coming along. Excuse me, Annaliese.”

Annaliese watched her go with a sinking heart. It was a flawless exit, but she’d clearly been discomfited by something.

“I’m sorry,” she began, but William shook his head.

“Please don’t. It wasn’t you.” He frowned slightly, and glanced down at his hand resting on his knees. “It’s a fair question. But the answer is a bit complicated.”

Annaliese nodded encouragingly when he paused. After a moment, he took up the thread again.

“My father died almost fifteen year ago. He was a soldier himself, he died in one of the training camps.” He paused again, and Annaliese tried awkwardly to school her face into an appropriately sympathetic expression.

“He died of fever, in one of the camps. But I thought, for a time...my mother doesn’t agree.” William fell silent, but Annaliese could see where he was going. She straightened.

“Do you think it was the same thing? That he had, that is was one of these creatures that somehow...?” *Killed him*, she thought, but she couldn’t say it out loud. William gave her a lopsided smile.

“He used to tell me the most fanciful stories, about shadow creatures and demons that came out at night. I always thought they were just children’s stories, that he was just trying to get me to go to bed without a fuss. But there was a time...” His voice fell off again and his face grew tense.

“There was another soldier, a friend of his. My father told me there was a demon after him, that he helped his friend drive it off. My mother didn’t like him talking to me about those sorts of things.” William glanced briefly at the doorway through which Nicole had disappeared.

“She didn’t believe in them, of course. My father was a very religious man, and my mother wasn’t.” For a moment, his smile grew more sincere. “They clashed about it now and then. But they never fought about it seriously. I always thought that my mother just didn’t like my father making up stories, or she thought they would scare me.”

“But you think now there’s something to it?” Annaliese pressed, when William paused for breath. He nodded.

“If it was just that, just children’s stories, it wouldn’t matter. But a few years ago, I was in New York, and I met a man. It’s hard to explain what happened. What I saw. I don’t know how to describe it, and even if I did, you wouldn’t...”

Annaliese thought of her own experience, that ephemeral sense that the shadows were pressing in around her, that she was being watched, that unnamed malevolence lurking around her brother's bed.

"I understand. I think I understand. I felt something, with my brother. I don't know how to describe it either."

William nodded more vigorously. "But it's there, isn't it? It isn't a trick of the mind. And when I spoke to this man about it, he knew about these things, these shadows. He'd studied them, hunted down information about them from all around the world." William tapped the book. "He'd be very interested to see this, I think."

"But," Annaliese interjected. "I'm sorry, I'm very grateful for any help you can give me, I'm sure this man knows more than I do. But the man I talked to...I don't know if your mother told you about him? Cirkos? He said these shadows aren't human, that there isn't really a way to communicate with them. So how?"

It was a question that had dogged her footsteps since she left Cirkos' shop. She'd tried to put it out of her mind and focus on the task of finding the people on the list, a job that seemed insurmountable enough. She'd hardly dared to wonder what she might have to do once she found someone who could help, what they might have to do in order to somehow help Micah.

William hesitated.

"That, I don't know. I'm not," he looked briefly embarrassed, "I don't pretend to be a scholar of that kind of thing. And I'm no priest, either, so I can't say exactly. But it seems to me that things I've seen and heard..." He took a deep breath and leaned

forward, elbows on his knees. “I believe there are people that have the power to see things beyond this world. People who can somehow use that knowledge, or communicate with the sort of forces you or I can’t understand. I’ve met people who claimed they could see into the future or the past, people who said they could speak to the dead.”

He was silent for a moment.

“I know there are plenty of people who make their living by telling people what they want to hear, and I’m sure there are more charlatans out there than people who genuinely have strange and special powers. But I do believe that those people exist. And the man I want to contact, the man I’ll put you in touch with... I believe he’s one of them. Though,” he added after a moment, “I don’t know how he does what he does.”

Annaliese nodded slowly. She realized that she was, by necessity, beginning to believe as William did. She had never before put any stock at all in self-proclaimed mystics, but she was forced to admit now that there was something more to the world that she’d previously thought, or something beyond it.

It was a discomfiting thought. Up until this moment, everything she could have wanted to know lay more or less within her grasp. Whatever information she wanted, she was always sure she could uncover it, could understand it, given enough time. There was nothing she believed to be truly beyond her abilities or intellect. She did not consider herself arrogant, but she had always believed that every sort of understanding was ultimately attainable; it was all just a matter of finding the right books and working hard enough at studying. But now, she wasn’t so sure. The right books, yes, undoubtedly that would help. Though it hadn’t done poor Micah much good. But this might perhaps be

beyond her abilities. Even if she had the right information, perhaps this task would require some inborn talent she did not possess; perhaps it was a matter of natural ability.

Were people simply born with these talents, or was it possible to acquire them through study? She put the question to William, but he merely shook his head.

“As I said, that’s really beyond my ken. I never tried to make a study of this sort of thing. I don’t know.”

His jaw tightened briefly and he stared into the fire.

“There’s something else, though. My father, I do believe that he encountered one of these creatures. Or something like it. He knew something about all this, though I’ll never know how much. But I think it’s possible that something... attached itself to him.” He glanced up at Annaliese warily, as if to gauge her reaction. “I can’t be sure of any of this, please understand. I’m not trying to frighten you.”

Annaliese shook her head, and William went on carefully.

“I believe he found something, or something found him. You said that your brother performed some ritual, and that’s how he caught this thing’s attention.” He drew a breath. “My father told me he helped a friend drive off an evil spirit. Three weeks later he was dead. They said it was lung fever.” William went silent. “He was never sick a day in his life,” he added, almost to himself.

After a time, during which Annaliese watch the firelight flash over him and expressions play over his face, he went on.

“Since his death, I’ve sometimes felt a presence. Something there, even when I was alone. Have you ever felt you can see something flickering in the corner of your eye, but when you look, it’s gone?”

Annaliese had, many times in the last few days. She nodded.

“Sometimes I wake in the night and feel that there’s something there. Even when I’m camping with other soldiers, there’s something more to it.” He frowned at his lap and his hands gripped the arms of his chair. His voice lowered. “I’ve never told my mother any of this. Please don’t. It would only upset her. She prefers to think my father’s death was of natural causes, and I don’t want to...”

“I won’t say anything.” Annaliese settled her hands on her lap. She realized she had been leaning forward almost anxiously, as if she were afraid to miss a single word. She forced herself to sit back.

“Thank you. But the reason I’m telling you is this: I think it’s possible that if someone is contacted by one of these creatures, they can spread it to their loved ones, like a contagion. I don’t know how it happens. But I think maybe that’s what happened to me, and perhaps it’s happened to you, too.”

Annaliese turned that thought over in her mind slowly. It was true that she’d felt something, that last night in the house, like a miasma hanging over every room. And if she was honest with herself, that feeling hadn’t entirely dissipated. She’d ascribed it to anxiety over Micah, fear over leaving home, fear over being caught or getting lost, her confusion, her grief.

But when William spoke of it as a foreign presence, when he struggled to describe it in further depth, something prickled in Annaliese's mind. The memory of a cool wash of air that had hit her as she lingered in the alley outside Cirkos' shop. The palpable sense of darkness when she'd woken in the spare bedroom. There was something there, something nameless and ephemeral and ancient.

She didn't know how to describe it either, and mere days ago, she would've dismissed it as a flight of fancy, a childish fear of the dark. She was still reluctant to believe that she was sensing the same malevolent entity that had captured Micah and had caused him to sicken. But what else could she believe? What else could she believe, when she'd found that book, and spoken to Cirkos and William and Nicole, all of whom had confirmed her suspicions? William's explanation made far too much sense for her to try to deny it. Perhaps it wasn't destiny that had driven her into Nicole's path but these evil creatures, driving their prey together like hounds on a chase.

Annaliese knew she wasn't mad, though she half-wished she was. She knew this wasn't all a dream that she'd woken from it only she waited long enough. Nobody was going to come running through the door, crying out that Micah had miraculously recovered and all danger was gone. Though she'd left the house with every intention of seeking out help for Micah, though she'd tried to be as active in her efforts and possible, Annaliese realized that she had still been nursing a small hope in the back of her mind that everything would resolve itself quickly and easily, that she wouldn't have to search too hard, wouldn't have to confront any painful truths or make any difficult decisions.

It was time, she decided, to put that hope aside. She didn't know how Micah fared at the moment, and her mind shied away from wondering. Perhaps he was worse. Perhaps – she forced herself to acknowledge the possibility – he was dead. But there was nothing she could do about that now. The only think she could do was move forward with all purpose and intent, and hope that whatever she did was enough.

Besides, there was her own safety to think of. It paled in comparison to Micah's precarious position, but if this thing had transferred itself to her from her brother, the way William seemed to feel it had transferred itself from his father to him, then she had to find a way to banish this specter for both their sakes. Perhaps William was content to live with that shadow hanging over his head, but Annaliese knew she could not. She had to fight now, not only for her brother but for herself. She put her shoulders back and leaned forward.

“How will you get in touch with this man? Your friend?”

William, who had been staring deeply into the fire, lifted his head. “I'll telegraph him tomorrow.”

It was a very long night.

The supper was meticulously prepared and very appealing, but Annaliese had little appetite, and Nicole and William seemed similarly afflicted. Conversation was stagnant. Nicole made a valiant effort to keep things moving and spoke about her new

dresses and a new play that was showing at one of the local theaters. Annaliese, having heard all of this over lunch, was unmoved. And though William listened politely to his mother, Annaliese could see that the topic held little interest for him. Eventually, they all withdrew to other rooms in silence.

Annaliese returned to the parlor and examined the book more critically. This time, she didn't allow herself to be put off by the macabre pictures or feelings of skepticism. She studied each page carefully, reflecting on everything Micah had said to her in the last few days, searching for a clue. She even dug out his journal, but it was of as little help as it had been before. She realized now that it wasn't in code, merely abbreviated in such a fashion that it was impossible to decipher. Micah obviously knew what he meant when he referred to the "MF letters", for example, but Annaliese hadn't the slightest clue.

The only parts of the journal that were not cryptically encoded were simple expressions of pride and delight: *I'm getting closer. Nearly there. One more trial.* Annaliese could feel his mounting excitement almost radiating off the page, and for a moment it made her angry. Why did Micah have to get involved in something so foolish, so dangerous? It was clear to Annaliese now that Micah truly believed that something would happen when he performed this ritual. He believed in it; it wasn't merely a lark to him. He wouldn't have put so much effort into it if he believed it was just a game. He'd knowingly tried to summon some sort of demonic entity, some sort of malevolent force. Annaliese could hardly wrap her mind around that. Micah had always been too reckless, too pleased with his own intellect, too convinced of his own infallibility. Annaliese knew that, and because she loved him, she'd largely turned a blind eye to his faults. He had

many good points to balance them. He was funny and clever and charming, that much was true. The trouble was that he knew it all too well.

Annaliese sighed and snapped the journal shut. She reviewed the book one more time. It was less an instruction manual for summoning the shadow people, it seemed, and more a tribute to their powers. There were some details on the page titled The Summoning, a list of herbs to be burned, directions for the summoning circle, instructions for spilling the blood of a chicken. Annaliese chose to believe Micah had foregone that bit. There was reference to some other part of the ritual, some words to be spoken or promises to be made, but they were not specified. How had Micah known them, then? Perhaps he had found them somewhere and committed them to memory, not trusting it enough to put them to paper. Perhaps they were part of the encoded journal. Or perhaps Micah hadn't known exactly, and had simply done the best he could with what information he had.

Her thoughts echoed with the memory of Cirkos' rough, accented voice. *Stupid boy.*

She shut the journal and went up to bed, but she couldn't sleep. She'd slept too long in the afternoon and now she found herself wide awake. She lay in bed for hours, the lamp guttering. She hated to waste the oil, but the thought of plunging herself into absolute darkness made her feel almost sick with dread. But after a while, darkness seemed preferable to watching the gold-tipped shadows flicker and dance along the wall, along the bed, along Annaliese's hands when she held them up in front of her. The lamp

gave off a small pool of light, and everything beyond it was all chiaroscuro. She blew out the lamp and lay there in the cold darkness until morning.

The next day dawned cold. A white blanket had unrolled itself in the sky, blotting out every speck of blue. It didn't look like rain, but it was decidedly gray. Nicole remarked over breakfast that it was to be an early winter. Annaliese pushed her eggs around her plate and drank her coffee. William, his mother reported, had gone to the telegraph office bright and early. He was to send a telegram to Jacob – that, Nicole explained, was the name of his acquaintance – and ask for assistance. Nicole seemed enthused by the prospect of another houseguest, particularly since William had assured her that this man was young, handsome, and wealthy. Annaliese listened with amusement as Nicole pondered what he might be like. She had evidently never met him, and her thoughts were whimsical.

Annaliese cheered up listening to them, but just when she had begun to forget the long, cold, dark night she had passed, William blew in, his eyes stormy. Without speaking or responding to his mother's greeting, he laid down a newspaper in front of Annaliese's chair. Bewildered, she scanned the advertisements and personal ads, unsure what it was William wanted to show her. Then, she saw it.

Missing: young lady, aged 17 years.

Her name, in print. A short description of her appearance: brown hair. Hazel eyes. Slender, greater than average height. The supposition that she was being concealed somewhere in town, perhaps held against her will. A reward offered for any information leading to her recovery.

Annaliese sucked in a breath. Nicole, who had circled the table to see what they were looking at, made a similar sound when she saw the ad.

“Oh dear,” she said, after a moment, when neither Annaliese nor William spoke. Annaliese’s thoughts were racing. She hadn’t expected this. She’d supposed her parents would look for her eventually. But she hadn’t thought it would be so soon, or in this manner. She’d counted on her father’s vanity, and his concern for their social position, to keep the search quiet. But perhaps her mother had prevailed upon his to put all that aside. She wouldn’t like it any better than he would, advertising for their own daughter like she was a runaway horse or a lost bracelet, but with one child on what might be his deathbed, Annaliese guessed that they were more willing to bend their own, self-imposed rules. Again, she felt a surge of guilt, but tamped it down. She couldn’t let herself get distracted, not now. She would explain to her parents, someday. But it couldn’t be now, couldn’t be until she’d finished her search and found a way to save her brother and herself.

Nicole rested a cool hand on Annaliese’s shoulder.

“Perhaps you should contact them,” she ventured. “Just to let them know you’re safe.” Annaliese shook her head at once.

“No! I can’t. If they knew where I was, if they had even the slightest idea, they would make me come home. And I can’t. Not yet. I’m sorry.” She glanced at Nicole, uncomfortably aware that the woman was likely speaking as a mother. But Nicole only sighed and shook her head.

“It’s your life, dear, you have to live it as you see fit. I certainly did, when I was your age,” she added wryly. William smiled a little and took his mother’s hand.

“You did. And did you regret it?”

His mother’s face softened and she leaned up to kiss his temple.

“Not for a moment, love, not for a moment.”

Annaliese felt an odd pang of longing as she watched this exchange. At last, Nicole drew back and straightened her shoulders.

“Well! If you’re not going home, what are we going to do with you? Do you think your parents will be searching for you? On the streets, I mean? Sending police around?”

Annaliese hesitated. Yesterday, she would’ve said no. But that had been before the ad. The ad that had implied that she had been spirited away against her will, though Annaliese knew she hadn’t given that impression in her farewell letter. A young heiress, possibly kidnapped...yes, it was entirely possible that the police would get involved.

“I don’t know.”

Nicole nodded, and then paused.

“I think you should take her out of the city.” She turned to her son. “Could you take her to your friend, instead of the other way around?”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking.” William darted a glance at Annaliese, almost apologetically. “I saw the paper before I got to the telegram office, so I sent a message to Jacob that we would meet him in New York. I didn’t like to presume,” he nodded at Annaliese, “but I knew you wouldn’t want to return home, and it’s too risky for

you to stay here. Besides, it will be quicker if we go to him, rather than ask him to come to us. He might not be able to leave, at least right away.”

Annaliese took a deep breath and set her thoughts in order.

“Yes. That’s fine. Thank you.” She hesitated. “But I can’t ask you to come with me. That’s too much.”

“It certainly isn’t!” Nicole interjected, before William could respond. “He doesn’t have any prior engagements, do you, dear? And it’s less noticeable, if you go with a man. People would question a young girl like you traveling on her own. But with your ‘husband’...” She cast a mirthful glance at her son, who looked slightly chagrined.

“Yes,” he said, eventually. “That would probably be best.” In an undertone to his mother, he added, “Must you try to turn everything into an elopement?” But he sounded fond, amused rather than annoyed.

His mother grinned, slyly. “I can’t help it, you know my romantic streak!”

At the same moment, they both seemed to remember Annaliese’s presence. William sobered first.

“Do you mind? That is, if word got out, your reputation...” he trailed off uncomfortably, but Annaliese knew what he was implying. No one who heard this story would suppose that it was a false elopement. A wealthy young woman with a handsome young soldier? Her reputation would indeed be ruined if anyone found out she went on an overnight journey with such a man and didn’t return home married. But that wasn’t important, of course, given the circumstances. Annaliese had never much cared about preserving her reputation in the eyes of others. She told William and his mother as much.

“Well,” Nicole clapped her hands. “That’s that, then. You two should start off as soon as you can. Pack your bags, dear.” She shoed William out of the room. “I’ll lend you some things, Annaliese. I’d rather take you shopping, but obviously that’s not an option! Never mind, I think I have some things that will fit you.” She took Annaliese arm and drew her upstairs. Annaliese tried to protest.

“That’s really not necessary. You’re doing too much. I already have a dress or two.”

“Nonsense! What’s an elopement without a trousseau?” She winked. “In all seriousness, dear, I understand this Jacob is a wealthy man. You may need to dress up a bit when you find him, and who knows what circumstances you’ll find yourself in between now and then? Besides, it looks too suspicious, a young couple traveling without any luggage.”

With a smile, she herded Annaliese upstairs and into her own bedroom. Annaliese tried to insist that she had enough of her own clothing to manage the trip, but her protests fell on deaf ears; Nicole insisted upon packing a large suitcase with dresses, petticoats, stockings, and even scarves. Annaliese only just managed to talk her out of filling a trunk. At last, she gave up and sat in a rocker to watch Nicole’s slim fingers tidily fold dress after dress. She slipped sachets in between the layers of clothing, and soon the suitcase was full of sweetly-scented clothing that Annaliese could not imagine she would ever need to wear.

She didn’t finish any too soon. Nicole had scarcely finished adding a vanity bag to the suitcase, one she assured Annaliese that she would certainly require at some point,

before Liam rushed in. Their neighbor had spotted a police-man pacing up and down the street, knocking on doors and questioning inhabitants. There was no time left. He had called for a hack. They had to leave at once.

Within seconds, Annaliese found herself caught in a flurry as Liam took up her suitcase and Nicole bundled Annaliese into her coat and rushed her downstairs. The maid, clearly bewildered, nevertheless helped Nicole wrap Annaliese in a scarf and buttoned up her coat. Then, Annaliese was standing on the front steps, clutching Nicole's hand as Liam carried the bags to a waiting carriage.

Nicole tried to slip something into Annaliese's pocket. Annaliese looked down, and saw a wad of bills being tucked inside.

"No," she cried. She tried to hand them back, but Nicole shoved them into her pocket with unexpected force and gave her a look that dared her to argue. Annaliese bit her lip. "I'll pay you back," she said.

"You certainly won't!" Nicole declared, and kissed Annaliese's cheek. And then Nicole was kissing her son, and they were both helping Annaliese into the carriage. The driver snapped the reins, hurrying them away from the red-brick porch where Nicole stood, pale but smiling, watching until they turned the corner and fell out of sight.