



The Haunting of Annabel (Shadows of Nevermore #2)

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Category: Horror

Description: In the storm-lashed seaside town of Ravensreach on the island of Nantucket, secrets linger like the salt in the air—clinging, corrosive, impossible to escape.

Calum Vey, a reclusive artist, returns to the eerie coastal cottage he once shared with Annabel Dupin, his dazzling muse and destructive love.

Annabel is gone now, drowned under mysterious circumstances, but her presence refuses to fade.

Her perfume lingers, her whispers echo, and her journal—a cryptic map of fear and longing—holds haunting clues about her final days.

But Calum isn't the only one ensnared by Annabel's ghost.

Jonathan Grey, Annabel's childhood best friend, harbors his own dark obsession with the woman who played them both.

As Calum and Jonathan's uneasy friendship fractures, the line between memory and madness begins to blur.

Was Annabel the victim of her own reckless passions, or was something far more sinister at play?

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Calum—past

My love for dark and beautiful things will be the death of me, I think, as I watch her from across the room.

The gallery lights hum softly above me, a buzz just beneath hearing, but enough to set my teeth on edge.

The champagne flutes in everyone's hands catch the light and throw it around the room, fractured and glinting off the polished floors.

They crowd my paintings like supplicants at a shrine.

Critics, collectors, voyeurs, all swarming around the canvases as though they might wring some secret from the brushstrokes.

But my gaze isn't on them. It's on her.

Annabel glides through the crowd like she's part of the art—no, like she's above it.

A living masterpiece. The hem of her dress swishes against her calves, black silk that clings to her like the shadows of a fire-lit room.

Her inky-black hair shimmers under the light, like a raven's wing caught mid-flight. The strands fall in a cascade of iridescent sheen down her back, as if they absorb the light, a veil of night itself. A few stray strands fall loose around her face, like she's spent the night in the arms of a lover. My lover. My muse .

My Annabel.

She stops in front of Falling Sky, the painting I nearly ruined with rage the night we fought over Jonathan. I remember her tears, how they left glistening trails down her cheeks as she begged me not to leave her. “Calum,” she had said, voice trembling, “Please I don’t want to live without you.”

Now she tilts her head at the painting, a coy smile playing on her lips, as if she’s daring it to look back.

Someone beside her—a man, young, eager, and oblivious—leans in too close, pointing at the piece like he understands it.

Her laugh cuts through the din, high and sharp, like glass splintering underfoot.

She leans closer to the man, whispering something that makes him flush red to the tips of his ears.

My hand tightens around my champagne glass.

“Quite the toast you gave,” Jonathan’s voice slides in from behind me, oily and low. “Your muse and future, huh? Bold words for someone who can’t keep her attention for five minutes.”

I turn to face him, and there he is, leaning against the bar like a smirking devil.

His tie is loosened, his jacket slung carelessly over one shoulder.

The glass in his hand is amber with whiskey, and his eyes are sharper than I remember, cutting into me like he’s peeling back my skin to see what’s beneath.

“She’s happy tonight,” I say, keeping my tone even, though the air between us could spark if it weren’t already so heavy with tension. “Something I’m sure you wouldn’t recognize.”

Jonathan’s grin widens, predatory and slick. “Oh, I recognize it all right. She’s got that shine in her eye she gets when she’s playing a game. Tell me, Calum, do you even know the rules she’s playing by? Or are you just another pawn?”

The glass in my hand trembles, but I steady it. “Annabel and I understand each other. That’s more than you can say. ”

His laughter is low, a sound that curls in the space between us like smoke. “If that’s what you want to believe, go ahead. But we both know she’s never belonged to anyone, not really. Not me. Not you.”

“She belongs to herself,” I snap, the words spilling out before I can stop them. “That’s what makes her?—”

“Untouchable?” Jonathan cuts in, and there’s something dangerous in his expression now, the smirk dropping into a snarl. “Or just unreachable? Don’t fool yourself, Calum. You can paint her face a thousand times, but you’ll never own her.”

My fist tightens, but Annabel’s laugh rings out again, pulling both our gazes. She’s moved now, weaving her way toward me, a drink in her hand and that familiar glint in her eye. When she reaches me, she hooks her arm through mine, a casual gesture that sends a shockwave through my entire body.

“There you are,” she says, tilting her head up to me like I’m the only one in the room. “What are you two boys whispering about over here? Plotting my demise?”

“Just admiring your handiwork,” Jonathan drawls, his voice slick again, like he’s

slipped on a mask. “Calum here was telling me all about how you’ve inspired him.”

Her lips curve into a slow smile, but her eyes stay on me. “Is that so? You’ve been singing my praises again, darling?”

“Always,” I say, and it’s the truth. No matter how much she torments me, twists me into knots with her games, she’s the only muse I’ll ever need.

Her gaze flicks to Jonathan, and something passes between them, quick and sharp as a knife. Then she tugs me closer, her body warm against mine.

“Come on,” she murmurs, low enough that only I can hear. “Let’s dance.”

I don’t argue. I can’t. She pulls me away from Jonathan, away from the crowd, toward the open floor where the band plays a slow, sultry tune. The lights are dimmer here, casting shadows that dance across her face as she looks up at me.

“You’re tense,” she says, her voice lilting. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s just jealous.”

“Of what?” I ask, though I already know the answer.

“Of this,” she says, sliding her hand up my chest. “Of us. Of everything we have.”

I study her face, searching for something real beneath the layers of artifice. But Annabel is a mirror, reflecting back whatever you want to see. Tonight, she’s mine. Tomorrow—who knows?

“You don’t mean that,” I say, my voice low.

Her smile sharpens, and for a moment, I think she might agree. But instead, she leans

in, her lips brushing against my ear as she whispers, “Don’t I?”

The memory of our first kiss floods in. We were nineteen, sprawled on the dunes behind her family’s summer house on Ravensreach Point. The wind had whipped her hair into a wild halo, and her laughter like the tide, pulling me under.

“You’re going to be famous,” she’d said then, her fingers tracing idle patterns on my arm. “And when you are, I’ll be right there beside you. Your muse.”

It had felt like a promise. But now, under the lights of the gallery, with Jonathan’s shadow looming and Annabel’s words slipping like smoke through my fingers, I wonder if it was just another one of her games.

By the time the night ends, the gallery is empty save for a few lingering patrons and the staff clearing away glasses and plates. Annabel perches on the edge of the bar speaking to one of my biggest supporters, sipping the last of her champagne, her heels dangling from her fingers.

“Mind if I steal my muse for a while?” The man raises his glass in good humor, retreating with a nod.

“Did you have fun?” I ask .

She tilts her head, considering. “It was perfect. They all loved you, Calum. Loved your work.”

“And you?”

She smiles, slow and deliberate. “I always love your work.”

The words should soothe me, but they don’t. There’s a weight to them, a finality that

presses against my chest like a stone. Jonathan's words echo in my head: You'll never own her.

As if sensing my thoughts, she slides off the bar and comes to stand in front of me, her gaze steady. "Don't let Jonathan get in your head," she says softly. "He thrives on chaos."

"So do you," I say, and the words hang between us, sharp and cutting.

For a moment, her mask slips, and I catch a glimpse of something raw and unguarded beneath. Then she smiles again, bright and unbothered, and the moment is gone.

"Come on," she says, linking her arm through mine. "Let's go back to the hotel."

"Not yet. Come with me." The gallery's hum fades as I close the rooftop door behind us, the heavy thud cutting off the distant murmur of voices.

Out here, it's just the balmy night air and the stars, the city below a dim blur of restless lights.

Annabel steps ahead, her black dress catching the faint glow of the moon, a ripple of silk against the night.

"You're breathtaking, have I told you that tonight?"

"Yes," she says, teasing. "Twice. But you can tell me again if it makes you happy."

"It does." I brush a kiss to her temple. "You make me happy. Come with me."

"Calum—?"

“I’ve wanted to do this for a long time,” I cut in, my heart hammering against my ribs. “And maybe it’s not perfect—this isn’t how it’s supposed to go. But I can’t wait anymore, Annabel.”

Her lips part, and for once, she’s silent. The wind presses against us, and the world seems to hold its breath as I drop to one knee.

I don’t have some sparkling monstrosity in a velvet box. That’s not what this is. What I hold up to her is simple—a gold band with a single diamond, modest but solid. Real. Like the life I want with her.

“I love you,” I say, the words breaking free, raw and unpolished. “I’ve loved you since the first time I saw you almost seven years ago, and I’ll keep loving you until—” My throat tightens. “Until there’s nothing left of me to love you with. Annabel, will you marry me?”

For a moment, there’s only the wind and the faint sound of New York City below. Her expression is unreadable, her eyes searching mine as though trying to decide if I’m serious.

Then she smiles—a real smile, not the coy, practiced one she wears like armor. She drops to her knees, her hands cradling my face.

“Yes,” she whispers, her voice trembling. “Yes, Calum.”

Relief crashes over me, and I pull her into my arms, the ring still clutched in my hand. She laughs, the sound brighter than I’ve heard it in months, and when she kisses me, it’s like the world tilts on its axis.

“I didn’t expect this,” she says when we pull apart, her fingers tracing the curve of my jaw. “Not tonight. Not like this.”

“I couldn’t wait,” I admit, sliding the ring onto her finger. It fits perfectly, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I don’t feel like I’m chasing her. She’s here, with me, real and solid and mine.

She looks at the ring, tilting her hand to catch the light.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmurs, but there’s a faint tremor in her voice.

“Are you okay?” I ask, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “You look?— ”

“Overwhelmed,” she cuts in, her smile flickering. “In a good way. But I think—” She hesitates, pulling back slightly. “I think I need to sit down. I’ve been feeling off all day. Maybe coming down with something.”

Concern flares in my chest, but she waves it off, standing and brushing imaginary dust from her dress. “It’s nothing serious. Just... a lot of champagne and not enough food.”

“We can leave,” I offer, rising to my feet. “Head back to the hotel.”

“No,” she says quickly, her hand on my arm. “Not yet. You should go back down, celebrate. This is your night, Calum. Your moment.”

“It’s our moment,” I insist, but she shakes her head, a playful smirk tugging at her lips.

“Don’t argue with me. Go be brilliant and adored. I’ll meet you back at the hotel.”

Her words should reassure me, but there’s a shadow behind her smile, something I can’t quite place. I hesitate, but she leans in, pressing a kiss to my cheek.

“Go,” she whispers. “I’ll be fine.”

When I return to the gallery, the room feels different. The warmth, the energy—it’s all dulled somehow, like someone’s turned down the brightness. The patrons are still here, still talking, drinking, admiring the art. But without Annabel, it all feels hollow.

Jonathan is by the bar, watching me with that same knowing smirk. He raises his glass in a mock toast as I approach, his eyes gleaming with something cruel.

“Back so soon?” he drawls. “I figured you’d be busy celebrating with your... fiancée.”

The word drips with disdain, and my jaw tightens. “She wasn’t feeling well. She went back to the hotel.”

“Ah.” He swirls the whiskey in his glass, his gaze cutting through me. “And you believed her.”

“Of course I did.” My voice is sharp, defensive, but Jonathan only chuckles.

“She’s a good actress,” he says, leaning in slightly. “Always has been. But you should know that by now, Calum.”

I don’t respond. I can’t. His words dig into my chest, unearthing fears I’ve buried too deep for even myself to acknowledge.

Jonathan smirks, finishing his drink in one long swallow. “Good luck, old friend. You’re going to need it.”

I spend the next few hours speaking with art patrons and donors, all introduced to me by the owner of the gallery. The success of the show has opened doors I never

dreamed possible, opportunities coming at me so fast and furious a strange exhilaration for the future hums through me.

Later, the drive back to the hotel is a blur. My mind is a storm of thoughts, doubts, hope, memories of Annabel's smile and the way it sometimes doesn't quite reach her eyes. By the time I reach our suite, my heart is pounding.

The door is unlocked.

I push it open, the room dark except for the faint glow of the bedside lamp. Annabel is sitting on the edge of the bed, still in her dress, her back to me. She doesn't move as I step inside, her shoulders rigid, her head bowed.

"Annabel?" I ask, my voice low. "You wouldn't believe the conversations I had after you left—the board of directors at the New York Public Library is commissioning a mural and they're considering me for the project."

She doesn't respond. The air feels heavy, suffocating, and when I move closer, I see the tear tracks on her cheeks, glinting in the dim light.

"What's wrong?" I crouch in front of her, taking her hands in mine. "Talk to me."

She looks at me then, her eyes glassy and distant .

"I didn't think you'd actually do it," she whispers, her voice barely audible.

"Do what?" My chest tightens, panic rising. "Annabel, what are you talking about?"

She shakes her head, pulling her hands free. "Nothing. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," I insist, standing. "Tell me what's going on."

Her laughter is soft, bitter. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She stands abruptly, moving to the window. Her reflection stares back at me, fractured and ghostly in the glass. “You’ve built me up so much in your head, Calum. This perfect, untouchable version of me. But that’s not who I am.”

“I know who you are,” I say, my voice firm. “I love who you are.”

“Do you?” She turns to face me, her expression unreadable. “Or do you love the idea of me?”

The question cuts deeper than I expect, leaving me raw and exposed. But before I can respond, she moves past me, her hand brushing mine.

“I’m tired,” she says, her voice flat. “Let’s talk in the morning.”

She disappears into the bathroom, the door closing softly behind her. And I’m left standing in the dim light, the weight of her words pressing down on me like the tide.

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Chapter One

Calum

The rain begins as I pull into the gravel drive of Holiday House.

The cottage looms ahead, its white clapboard siding dulled by the storm, the windows dark.

Ravensreach is all shadows and sharp edges tonight, the kind of place where the sea howls louder than the wind and the trees bend under the weight of secrets.

I cut the engine and sit in the silence for a moment, the rhythmic patter of rain on the windshield the only sound.

My fingers clutch the steering wheel like it might keep me grounded, but nothing feels real anymore.

Not the storm, not the cottage, not the hollow ache in my chest where Annabel used to live.

I step out into the rain, my boots sinking into the soft gravel as the wind pushes against me. By the time I reach the door, I'm soaked, my coat heavy with water. My hand hesitates on the brass handle, the chill of the metal biting through my skin. I don't want to go inside.

But I do.

The door creaks open, and the scent hits me first—jasmine and something floral, faint but unmistakable. Annabel’s perfume lingers in the air, clinging to the walls like a ghost. I close the door behind me and lean against it, my chest tight, my breath coming in shallow bursts.

The living room is exactly as we left it.

Her scarf draped over the rocking chair in the corner.

A wine glass with the faintest trace of red still sitting on the coffee table.

The painting I made of her hangs over the fireplace, her face turned toward the viewer, a smirk pulling at her lips like she knows something you don’t.

It’s as if she’s still here, favorite blanket draped over her lap as she stares out at the churning sea.

“Annabel,” I whisper, the name catching in my throat. Saying it feels like a betrayal, as if speaking it might tether her spirit here, keep her from wherever she’s supposed to be.

The wind howls outside, rattling the windows, and for a moment, I think I hear her laugh. That breathy, careless sound that used to drive me mad, equal parts enchantment and torment.

Let me in. Let me in. Let me in. She seems to call out to me.

But it’s only the storm, mocking me.

I shrug off my coat, letting it fall to the floor, and move deeper into the house.

Every step feels weighted, like I'm trespassing on sacred ground.

Her presence is everywhere, woven into the fabric of this place.

The throw pillows she insisted on buying.

The stack of books on the side table, each with her scrawled notes in the margins.

The record player in the corner, still cued to one of her favorite jazz albums.

I can almost see her here, leaning against the counter, her hair falling into her face as she teases me about something trivial, her voice light and full of mischief.

"You're staring again," she'd say, her lips quirking into that infuriating smile .

"Maybe I like staring," I'd reply, and she'd roll her eyes but secretly love it.

I set the cup down carefully, as if it might shatter under the weight of my grief. My hand trembles, and I clench it into a fist, willing myself to hold it together. The house is too quiet, too still. It feels wrong, like the world has been muted since she left.

I move to the bedroom, the place I've been dreading most. The door creaks as I push it open, and the sight hits me like a punch to the gut.

The bed is unmade, the sheets tangled from the last night we spent here.

Her robe hangs on the back of the chair, and her hairbrush sits on the vanity, strands of midnight black still caught in the bristles.

I step inside, my chest tightening as I take it all in. The scent of her perfume is stronger here, almost suffocating. I sit on the edge of the bed, my head in my hands,

and let the memories wash over me.

The first time we came here, she was radiant, a sunbeam cutting through the storm clouds of my life. She twirled in the living room, her arms outstretched, her laugh filling the space like music.

“This place is perfect for us,” she’d said, her eyes shining. “Don’t you think, Calum?”

I’d nodded, unable to look away from her. She was the kind of beautiful that left you breathless, that made you question whether you were worthy of standing in her light.

“We’ll make it ours,” she’d promised, pulling me into her arms. “Every inch of it. Just you and me.”

I drag myself back to the present, the weight of her absence pressing down on me. The wind rattles the windows again, and I glance toward them, half-expecting to see her standing outside, her hair whipping in the storm, her eyes bright with some secret she’s dying to share.

But she’s not there. She’s not anywhere .

The sharp crack of thunder startles me, and I stand, unable to stay in the room any longer. I move to the living room, pacing like a caged animal. My thoughts are a jumbled mess, memories and regrets colliding in a chaotic spiral.

I stop in front of the fireplace, my gaze drawn to the painting.

It’s her, but it’s not. The Annabel in the painting is untouchable, immortalized in oil and canvas, her smirk daring anyone to try and capture her.

The real Annabel was softer, more complex.

She was a contradiction, a storm wrapped in sunlight.

“Why did you leave me?” I ask the painting, my voice raw. “Why?”

The wind howls in response, the storm raging outside as if the universe is mocking my pain. I sink to the floor, my back against the couch, and let the silence engulf me. The house feels alive, pulsing with her energy, but it’s not enough. It’s never enough.

I pull my phone from my pocket, scrolling through old messages, pictures, anything that might bring her closer. Her voice echoes in my mind, teasing and playful, but always just out of reach.

“You’re too serious, Calum,” she’d said once, sprawled across the couch with a glass of wine in hand. “Life isn’t meant to be lived like this, all rules and expectations. You have to let go.”

“Not everyone can live like you, living off family money,” I’d replied, my tone sharper than I intended. “Some of us have responsibilities.”

She’d laughed, a sound that felt like both a caress and a slap. “Maybe that’s your problem.”

I toss the phone aside, the screen going dark as it lands on the carpet. My chest feels hollow, like something vital has been ripped out, leaving nothing but emptiness in its place. The storm outside mirrors the chaos inside me, a relentless force that won’t let me rest.

I don’t know how long I sit there, staring at nothing. Eventually, the rain begins to ease, the wind dying down until the only sound is the distant crash of waves against the cliffs.

I stand, my legs stiff, and move to the window. The storm has passed, but the sky is still dark, the horizon a jagged line where the sea meets the sky. I press my hand against the glass, the cold seeping into my skin, and close my eyes.

“Annabel,” I whisper, her name a prayer, a plea. “Come back.”

But the house remains silent, and I know she’s gone. No matter how hard I wish, how desperately I cling to the fragments of her that linger here, she’s not coming back.

The world shifted when she died, like the earth tilted just enough to throw everything off balance. I haven’t stood steady since.

And I’m still not sure I can live in a world without her.

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Chapter Two

Calum

The waves crash against the cliffs outside, relentless and deafening.

Holiday House groans under the weight of the storm, its wooden bones shifting like they're alive.

I sit in the dim glow of a single lamp, staring at the sketchbook splayed open on the coffee table.

The lines blur, smudged by my hand, by the humidity, by my own carelessness.

I haven't touched a pencil since... since her.

The silence between the bursts of thunder is worse than the noise.

It's not true silence—it's her absence, pressing against the walls, filling the spaces where her laughter once echoed.

The air smells faintly of salt and jasmine, her perfume clinging to the fabric of the couch.

No matter how many storms roll through, she lingers.

Annabel would have hated this weather. She hated anything that disrupted her

carefully curated aesthetic. “A storm should know its place,” she’d said once, peering through the rain-specked windows with a pout. “Don’t you think, Calum? It’s so... vulgar.”

I didn’t answer her then, just like I don’t answer her now. But I can still see her, turning to me with that sly smile, daring me to disagree, daring me to ruin the fantasy she painted over every moment.

My phone buzzes on the table, shattering the stillness. I glance at the screen—Jonathan. His name sits there, glowing faintly, a reminder of everything I’d rather forget.

I don’t answer.

The phone goes dark again, leaving me alone with the waves and the wind and the ghosts I can’t seem to exorcise.

Annabel always said I had too many ghosts, even before she became one.

“Your problem, Calum,” she said, sprawled across the chaise in the studio, a glass of wine dangling precariously from her fingers, “is that you’re too attached to the past. You should be like me—live in the moment.”

“You don’t live in the moment,” I’d replied, mixing paint on the palette, the colors bleeding into each other in ways that didn’t make sense but felt right. “You live in the idea of a moment.”

She laughed, her head tilting back, the sunlight catching her hair and turning it a vibrant blue-black. “What’s the difference?”

I didn’t have an answer then, and I don’t have one now.

I leave the sketchbook behind and wander through the house, the floorboards creaking beneath my steps.

The walls are lined with old portraits—ancestors who built this house, this legacy, this burden.

Their eyes follow me as I move, judgmental and unyielding.

Annabel used to call them “the ghosts in the walls.” She said they whispered to her at night, their voices soft and conspiratorial.

“They hate me,” she told me once, her tone light but her eyes dark. “They think I’m ruining you.”

“Are they wrong?” I asked, half-teasing, half-serious .

She didn’t answer, just smiled that secretive smile and walked away.

The kitchen is as I left it, the countertops cluttered with empty wine bottles and half-finished sketches. Her favorite teacup sits in the sink, the lipstick stain on the rim fading but still visible. I pick it up, tracing the edge with my thumb, the porcelain cold against my skin.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I say aloud, my voice barely more than a whisper. It feels foolish, talking to an object, to the ghost of a woman who isn’t really gone, not in the ways that matter.

The storm grows louder, the wind howling through the cracks in the windows.

I grab a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet and pour myself a glass, the liquid amber is sharp against my tongue.

It doesn't dull the ache, but it gives me something to focus on, something other than the memories clawing at the edges of my mind.

Annabel was always the focus. She drew people to her effortlessly, like a flame that didn't know it could burn. She was radiant, maddening, impossible. And I loved her for it. I hated her for it too.

We ran into each other once at one of those gallery openings I used to despise—too much wine, too many egos, too many people pretending to care about the art while caring only about themselves.

She was wearing white, her back held straight like a ballerina, so poised and elegant, different from the laid-back woman I'd been introduced to on the beach earlier that summer.

But her hair—still flowing like a waterfall down her back in that way that looked careless but wasn't.

She stood in front of one of my paintings, her head tilted as if she were trying to solve a puzzle only she could see.

“Do you like it?” I asked, coming up behind her.

She didn't turn around, didn't even flinch. “I haven't decided yet.”

It was the beginning of everything.

I finish the whiskey and pour another, the burn in my throat a small comfort. The waves crash louder now, or maybe I'm just imagining it. Maybe everything feels louder in her absence.

The living room feels too small, too suffocating, so I take the bottle and glass and head down the hall to the bedroom. Our bedroom. The door creaks as I push it open, and the scent of her perfume hits me like a punch to the gut.

Her robe is still draped over the chair, her jewelry scattered across the vanity. The bed is unmade, the sheets tangled like they were the last time we slept here. I sit on the edge, the mattress sagging under my weight, and stare at the floor.

She wasn't always like this. There was a time when she was softer, more open. Before the parties, before the arguments, before the weight of everything crushed us.

"Do you think we'll be happy here?" she asked me once, standing by the window, her silhouette outlined against the fading light.

"I think we'll make it work," I said, because that's what you're supposed to say.

She turned to me, her eyes searching mine, and for a moment, she looked almost afraid. "You always say that."

"Because it's true."

She didn't believe me. I could see it in the way her shoulders tensed, the way she looked away, the way she clung to the glass of wine in her hand like it was the only thing keeping her grounded.

The glass in my hand trembles, and I set it down before it shatters. The storm has quieted now, the wind dying down to a whisper, the waves softer against the cliffs. The silence is back, heavy and oppressive.

I lie back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The shadows shift in the dim light, shapes forming and dissolving like they're alive. I can almost hear her voice, soft and

teasing, pulling me back to a time when things were simpler. When we were simpler.

But simplicity was never in the cards for us. Not with her fire, not with my darkness, not with the way we consumed each other like it was the only thing that mattered.

I close my eyes, the whiskey lulling me into a restless haze. The memories come unbidden, sharp and vivid, dragging me under.

“You’re too much, Calum,” she said once, her voice a mix of frustration and something softer. “You feel everything too deeply.”

“And you don’t feel enough,” I shot back, the words harsher than I intended.

She didn’t respond, just looked at me with those wide, unblinking eyes that saw through everything, that saw through me. And then she smiled, that infuriating, intoxicating smile that made me hate her and love her in equal measure.

The storm has passed by the time I wake, the first light of dawn creeping through the windows. The house is quiet now, the only sound the distant cry of gulls over the water. I sit up, my head heavy, my chest tighter than it should be.

The ghosts are still here, lurking in the corners, waiting for me to acknowledge them. I ignore them, for now. There’s work to be done, a life to be sorted, a woman to be mourned.

But not today.

Today, I’ll drink my coffee, stare at the sea, and pretend that she’s just out for a walk, that she’ll come back, that everything will be okay.

Because the alternative is unthinkable.

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Chapter Three

Calum—past

The waves are steady, rhythmic, like the soft percussion of a distant symphony.

My pencil glides over the page, tracing the jagged outline of the cliffs ahead.

Ravensreach's shore stretches endlessly to my left, a rugged ribbon of sand and seaweed-draped rocks, abandoned by all but gulls and whispers of the past.

It's peaceful here, the kind of peace that comes just before a storm. My hand falters, my lines becoming jagged as I glance up. And that's when I see her.

She appears like a vision from my memory—no, like an intrusion, something too vivid for the muted grays and blues of this place.

Her hair tumbles wild around her shoulders, catching flecks of sunlight like a halo.

She's barefoot, her toes sinking into the damp sand as she walks the tide line, occasionally stooping to pick up a shell or a smooth stone.

Her dress is white, too delicate for the salt breeze, and clings to her figure like a lover.

My breath catches, and for a moment, I forget myself. She's like a story half-formed, something I need to finish, to capture before it slips away.

I keep sketching, my pencil now guided by instinct rather than thought. Her form takes shape on the page—a ghost, ephemeral and imperfect. But before I can lose myself in the act, a voice breaks the silence.

“Annabel!”

The name cuts through the air, sharp and warm, like a blade sheathed in velvet.

I turn to see a man approaching from the far end of the beach.

He’s tall, broad-shouldered, and golden, the kind of man who belongs in stories of gallant knights and daring heroes.

He carries a wicker picnic basket in one hand, swinging it lightly as if it weighs nothing.

His smile is easy, disarming, but there’s an edge to his eyes that sharpens when they land on me.

I don’t know him, but I know his type. Charming. Effortless. The kind of man who walks into a room and takes up all the space without trying.

Annabel turns at the sound of her name, and the way her face lights up—like the sun breaking through storm clouds—makes something inside me twist. She waves at him, then turns back to the shore, holding up her latest treasure, a piece of driftwood smoothed into an elegant curve.

“Look at this!” she calls to him, her voice carrying over the waves. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Jonathan laughs, a rich, genuine sound that grates against my nerves. “Beautiful, sure.

But what are you going to do with it? Build a raft?"

She sticks out her tongue, a gesture so childish and unguarded that it takes me by surprise. She turns, her eyes scanning the beach until they land on me. For a moment, she studies me, and I feel pinned beneath her gaze, like a specimen under glass.

Then she grins .

"You there," she calls, pointing at me with the driftwood. "Are you spying on me?"

I blink, caught off guard. "Spying?" I repeat, lowering my sketchbook. "Hardly. I'm drawing."

Her grin widens. "Oh, an artist. How mysterious."

Jonathan reaches her now, setting the picnic basket down and slipping an arm casually around her waist. The gesture is possessive but practiced, as if he's done it a thousand times before. My stomach churns.

"Who's this?" Jonathan asks, his tone light but edged with curiosity.

"I haven't asked yet," Annabel says, stepping forward and leaving his arm to trail uselessly at his side. She approaches me like one might approach a stray cat—curious but cautious. "So? Who are you?"

I stand, brushing sand from my hands. "Calum Vey," I say, offering her a nod. "And you are?"

She tilts her head, studying me again, and I feel like she's peeling back layers, seeing more than I want to show.

“Annabel Dupin,” she says finally, as if testing the sound of her own name.

Her name fits her—light and lilting, with a hint of sharpness beneath the surface. She gestures to Jonathan. “And this is Jonathan Grey.”

I glance at him, noting the subtle tension in his jaw. He doesn’t offer his hand, and neither do I.

“A pleasure,” I say, though it isn’t entirely true.

Jonathan smirks, a flash of white teeth. “You live around here, Calum?”

“My family owns Holiday House,” I say, gesturing vaguely toward the cliffs. It’s a statement of fact, not a boast, but I see his smile falter slightly, and it pleases me more than it should.

“Ah,” he says, recovering quickly. “That explains the brooding artist act.”

Annabel laughs, a sound like bells, and my irritation deepens. She looks at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “So what are you drawing? Me, I hope.”

“Of course,” I say, meeting her gaze. “How could I not?”

Her laughter fades, and for a moment, something passes between us—an understanding, an unspoken challenge. Then she steps closer, leaning in to peer at the sketchbook still clutched in my hand.

Jonathan watches her, his expression unreadable.

“Well?” she says, tilting her head. “Are you going to show me?”

I hesitate, then hold out the book. She takes it, her fingers brushing mine briefly, and the touch lingers longer than it should. She flips through the pages, her expression shifting from amusement to something more serious.

“You’re good,” she says softly, almost to herself.

“Good?” Jonathan cuts in, stepping closer. “Let’s see.”

Annabel hands him the sketchbook, but her eyes remain on me. Jonathan flips through the pages, his brows furrowing.

“Impressive,” he admits grudgingly, though his tone suggests he’d rather say anything else.

I smile faintly. “High praise.”

Annabel steps between us, taking the sketchbook back and holding it against her chest. “You’re both ridiculous,” she says, her tone light but with an edge.

“Men and your egos. Jonathan is a writer—he’s working on the next great American novel.

He’s three years in and at this pace he’s at least a decade away from writing the end.
”

Jonathan laughs, but it’s forced. “Says the girl who lives off daddy’s oil money. So what’s your story, Calum? Just another summer in paradise?”

I shrug. “Something like that. And you?”

“Passing through,” he says, his tone clipped. “Spending time with Annabel. ”

His words are pointed, a clear claim staked in the sand. I glance at her, but she's looking out at the waves, her expression unreadable.

"Well," I say, my voice steady. "You're lucky to have such good company."

"I am, aren't I?" Jonathan says.

The tension eases slightly, but it's still there, an undercurrent beneath the surface. Jonathan steps closer to her, his hand brushing her arm. She doesn't pull away, but she doesn't lean into him either.

"You should join us," she says suddenly, surprising both of us. "We have enough food for three."

Jonathan frowns, but I nod before he can protest. "I'd like that."

The picnic is a strange affair. Annabel chatters endlessly, her words tumbling over each other like waves.

She talks about everything and nothing—her love of storms, her hatred of conformity, the time she almost drowned trying to rescue a dog.

Jonathan watches her with the same intensity I feel, though his is tinged with something darker.

I can't take my eyes off her. The way she tosses her hair, the way she gestures with her hands, the way her laugh bubbles up like champagne. She's magnetic, a force of nature, and I can already feel myself being pulled into her orbit.

Jonathan feels it too. I can see it in the way his jaw tightens when she laughs at one of my jokes, the way his eyes narrow when she leans closer to me to reach for the wine.

Annabel seems oblivious—or maybe she isn't. Maybe she enjoys the tension, thrives on it. She's like a flame, and we're both moths, drawn to her light even as it threatens to consume us.

As the sun sinks lower, painting the sky in shades of gold and crimson, Annabel leans back on her elbows, her eyes half-closed. "This," she says, her voice soft, "is perfect."

Jonathan glances at her, his expression softening. "It is."

I look at her too, but my gaze lingers on her face, memorizing every detail. The curve of her lips, the line of her jaw, the way her lashes cast shadows on her cheeks.

She opens her eyes and catches me staring. For a moment, neither of us looks away. Then she smiles, and it feels like a challenge.

"Careful, Calum," she says, her tone teasing. "I might start to think you like me."

"Maybe I do," I say, my voice steady.

Jonathan stiffens, but Annabel just laughs, her head tilting back as if the idea is the most absurd thing she's ever heard. "Oh, Calum," she says, shaking her head. "You're trouble."

"Am I?" I ask, leaning forward. "Or are you?"

Her smile widens, and for a moment, the world narrows to just the two of us. "There's a festival next weekend, you should come to the masquerade ball."

"Should I?" A smile curves my lips.

But then Jonathan clears his throat, breaking the spell. “It’s getting late,” he says, his tone clipped. “We should go.”

Annabel pouts, but she doesn’t argue. She stands, brushing sand from her dress, and offers me her hand. “Thanks for the company,” she says. “I hope we meet again. Maybe at one of your gallery openings.”

I take her hand, holding it a moment longer than necessary. “I’m sure we will.”

Jonathan doesn’t say goodbye. He just gathers the basket and walks ahead, his shoulders tense.

As they disappear down the beach, I pick up my sketchbook and stare at the page. Annabel’s face looks back at me, her expression caught somewhere between a smile and a secret.

I close the book, the edges of her laughter still echoing in my mind.

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Chapter Four

Calum

The memories cut like a weapon. They come back in waves, leaving a lasting ache that reminds me she was real.

That our connection was honest and pure and not just a figment of my mind.

I'm choosing to drown in the pain because it's the only reminder of her I have left.

She's burrowed into the very marrow of my bones.

Love is the most destructive force of all, I think, as Annabel stares back at me from the canvas, her eyes accusing even in the smudges of wet oil. My brush hangs limp in my hand, the strokes half-hearted. Something about the storm feels different tonight—more alive, more... aware.

Then it starts.

A sharp, violent thud rattles the window to my left. My first thought is a branch from one of the old oaks outside, but another bang follows, then another. Each strike is rhythmic, purposeful. I glance toward the pane, dread slithering up my spine.

Hands. Pale, translucent, clawing at the glass.

Let me in. Let me in. Let me in .

I freeze, the brush slipping from my fingers and clattering onto the wooden floor. The hands move with an unnatural fluidity, their movements jerky and frantic, pressing harder against the glass as if trying to break through. They leave streaks of moisture—no, blood—smearing the window.

The air grows colder, thickening with an unnatural chill. My breath fogs as I stumble to my feet, my pulse pounding in my ears. I move toward the window, my steps hesitant, my body trembling with something primal. As I approach, the hands vanish, leaving only faint, bloody streaks behind.

A loud crash echoes from the other side of the house. My head snaps toward the sound, the hairs on my neck standing on end. I rush through the narrow hallway, my bare feet slipping on the floor as I round the corner. Another crash, louder this time, reverberates through the house.

The shutters. I need to lock the shutters.

I grab a lantern from the kitchen counter and make my way through the cottage, fastening the locks on each window.

The storm roars louder as I move, as though trying to drown out my thoughts, to shake my resolve.

The hands return, pounding against the glass wherever I go.

I refuse to look at them directly, focusing instead on the locks and bolts, my hands fumbling in the dim light.

Then I hear it—footsteps. Heavy, deliberate, coming from above.

My blood turns to ice. There is no “above.” Holiday House is a single-story cottage,

save for a cramped storage space in the roof's peak. I force myself to move toward the source of the sound, each step a battle against the rising tide of panic.

The ladder to the storage space groans as I climb, the flickering overhead light casting eerie shadows on the walls. My hand trembles as I push open the hatch, peering into the darkness above. The air smells damp, like rotting wood and saltwater.

A sudden rush of cold water cascades over me, drenching me from head to toe. I nearly lose my grip, gasping as the icy deluge soaks into my clothes. I clamber up into the space, my knees splashing into ankle-deep water that seems to be pooling from nowhere.

The walls. They're bleeding.

Words scrawl themselves across the wooden beams, dripping red as if written in fresh blood.

You did this. You did this. You did this.

Over and over, the accusation wraps itself around me, choking the air from my lungs.

I reach out, my fingers grazing the dripping letters. The liquid is warm, sticky. Real.

The water rises faster now, climbing up my calves, then my thighs. My paintings, stored here for safekeeping, begin to float, their edges curling as the water warps the canvas. I lunge toward them, grabbing as many as I can, desperate to save them. They're all I have left.

But as I gather the paintings, another figure rises from the water, her silhouette impossibly tall and terrible.

Annabel.

Her face is wrong, twisted with rage and hate. Her eyes burn with something otherworldly, her once-delicate features now warped into a grotesque mask of fury. She steps toward me, her movements jerky and unnatural, the water parting around her as though she commands it.

“It should have been you,” she hisses, her voice a venomous whisper that slices through the roar of the storm.

I stumble back, clutching the paintings to my chest as she points a skeletal finger toward the cliffs. Her words echo, reverberating in my skull, drowning out the storm, the water, everything.

“It should have been you.”

I open my mouth to speak, to plead, but no sound comes out. Her gaze bores into mine, searing with accusation and despair. My knees buckle, and I collapse into the rising water. It surges over my head, filling my nose and mouth, dragging me under as her voice crescendos into a deafening scream.

And then, silence.

I jerk awake, gasping for air, my body soaked and trembling. The room is dry. The water, the blood, the storm—all gone. The paintings are stacked neatly against the wall, undamaged. But the memory of her face, her words, lingers, a phantom weight pressing on my chest.

A loud knock at the door shatters the stillness.

I stagger to my feet, my body heavy with exhaustion, and make my way to the door.

My fingers fumble with the latch, my mind screaming for me not to open it. But I do.

Jonathan stands on the threshold, his clothes soaked through, his hair plastered to his forehead. The storm rages behind him, the wind whipping at his back.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his voice tight with concern. “I saw the lights on from down the shore and thought I’d check on you.”

I blink at him, struggling to process his presence. “Jonathan... What are you doing here?”

He steps inside without waiting for an invitation, his gaze sweeping over the room. “These old cottages flood so easily. I wanted to make sure you were—” He stops, his brow furrowing as he takes in my disheveled state. “You look like hell, Calum. Are you even sleeping?”

“No,” I admit, my voice hoarse. “I’ve been painting a lot at night.”

Jonathan’s eyes land on the stack of paintings. “Of her?”

I nod, glancing toward the canvases. My heart lurches as I realize the blood and messages are gone, replaced by the serene, lifelike portraits I’ve been creating for weeks .

“Jonathan...” I turn back to him, the words catching in my throat. “Did you see—” But he’s already gone.

The door swings gently on its hinges, the storm having eased to a quiet drizzle. I step outside, searching the shore for any sign of him, but there’s nothing. Just the endless expanse of dark sand and the faint outline of the cliffs in the distance.

I return to the cottage, locking the door behind me. My limbs feel like lead, my thoughts fractured and spiraling. I collapse onto the couch, the weight of the night pressing down on me until I can't keep my eyes open any longer.

As I drift into a restless slumber, her voice returns, soft and haunting.

“It should have been you.”

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Chapter Five

Jonathan—past

The moon hangs low and swollen over Ravensreach Point, its light washing over the hydrangea bushes that line the sprawling lawn of my parent's house.

I stumble up the gravel drive, the crunch of stones under my boots echoing louder than I'd like.

My head swims, a heady cocktail of cheap whiskey and adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I'd stayed too long with the guys, let the bottle pass around one too many times.

Now the night feels slippery, unreal, like a dream I'm halfway inside.

"Woh!" I call out, narrowly dodging Annabel's little cousin on a bicycle. The rambunctious twelve-year-old yanks the handlebars of her pink bike to the side, skidding out in the gravel. She instantly begins to wail, tears surging down her cheeks. "Britt—"

Her watery blue eyes cast up to meet mine. Moonlight glints in her irises and I think for a moment how she looks so much like Annabel.

"J-jonathan?" she stutters through her tears .

“You okay, kiddo?” I kneel, catching sight of her scraped and bloody knee. She sniffs, nods, then bursts into more tears. “Do you think you can walk back to the house?”

She shakes her head, tears flowing faster as she catches sight of the fresh blood.

“Okay—would it be okay if I carry you to the house?”

“Y-yes.” She sniffs. I gather the little girl in my arms and walk on swift strides to the small cottage she’s been staying at for the summer with her family. When we walk through the front door, her mom rushes to us with worried eyes.

“What happened?”

Britt cries harder. “I fell on my bike and J-jonathan rescued me!”

I smile at her innocence, then deposit her on the couch. Her mom vanishes down the hallway for a moment then returns with a first aid kit. She kneels, wipes at the wound with a damp rag, and then covers it with giant bandages.

“Thank you for carrying her home,” Britt’s mom’s eyes catch mine a moment, “you’re a Godsend.”

“My pleasure. What kind of gentleman would I be if I didn’t carry the princess home after a fall from her noble steed?” I bow and wink at Britt.

My act stops the tears from flowing a moment. A small smile spreads across her face.

“Until next time, Ms.” I grin back at her, then turn to leave.

I’m out the door and walking down the path that splits the two cottages a moment

later when a rustle to my left pulls me up short.

I squint into the shadows, trying to focus through the moonlit haze.

The hydrangeas shiver, but there's no wind.

I lean in, squatting slightly to peer into the dense blooms, their white petals ghostly in the moonlight.

That's when I see her.

"Annabel?" My voice comes out hoarse, cracking on the second syllable.

She doesn't answer, but I'd know her silhouette anywhere.

She's crouched low, her knees pulled to her chest, arms hugging herself tightly.

Her raven hair spills over her shoulders, a tangled halo against the dark.

She looks younger than her seventeen years and there's something about the defeat lacing her features that makes me sad.

"What are you doing out here?" I ask, moving closer. My footsteps are deliberate now, careful not to startle her. Something about the way she's folded into herself, so small and still, sets my pulse pounding for reasons I don't fully understand.

She snuffles, and that tiny sound slams into me harder than any drunken stumble. "Go away, Jonathan."

"Not happening." I kneel beside her, the damp grass soaking through my jeans. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

She shakes her head, her face buried in her arms. “You’re drunk.”

I almost laugh, but the sound dies in my throat. “Yeah, maybe. Doesn’t mean I can’t listen.”

For a long moment, she doesn’t move. I’m about to press her again when she lifts her head. Her eyes are glossy, rimmed red, and swollen. She’s been crying for hours. I can see it in the way her mascara smudges across her cheekbones like war paint.

“It’s nothing,” she says, her voice thin and brittle. “Just go back to your party.”

“Annabel,” I say softly, her name a plea. “Don’t lie to me. I’ve known you too long for that.”

Her lips tremble, and for a second, I think she’ll push me away again. But then her shoulders sag, and she lets out a shaky breath. “My parents,” she whispers, the words almost swallowed by the night. “They’re fighting again.”

That much I could’ve guessed. The storm clouds over the Dupin household have been gathering for years. But the way she says it, the hollow edge to her voice, makes my stomach drop.

“Tell me what happened,” I urge, reaching out to brush a strand of hair from her face. She flinches at first but doesn’t pull away.

Her gaze fixes on the ground, her fingers picking at the hem of her nightgown.

“I was in my room,” she begins, her voice flat, detached.

“I heard them yelling downstairs. It’s always about the same things.

Dad's affairs. Mom's temper. But tonight...

"She falters, her throat bobbing as she swallows hard.

"Mom threw a vase at him. It shattered against the wall. And then he... he hit her."

My breath catches. I've seen the Dupin's dysfunction from the sidelines for years, but this—this is new.

"I didn't know what to do," she continues, her words spilling out now in a rush. "I just ran. I couldn't listen to it anymore."

I don't realize I've moved until my hand is on her shoulder, squeezing gently. "Hey," I murmur. "You're safe out here, okay? They can't touch you."

She looks at me then, her eyes wide and desperate. "But what about tomorrow, Jonathan? Or the next day? It doesn't stop. It never stops."

Her words hit like a gut punch, and for once, I don't have anything clever or reassuring to say. Instead, I slide closer, wrapping my arm around her shoulders and pulling her against me. She stiffens at first, but then she crumples, her weight sagging into my side.

For a while, we just sit there, the damp seeping through our clothes and the storm brewing far out at sea casting an eerie stillness over the Point.

Her breathing slows, the tremors in her body easing as I stroke her hair.

It's soft and tangled, smelling faintly of salt and lavender.

I lose myself in the rhythm, in the quiet intimacy of the moment.

“You’re not them, you know,” I say finally, breaking the silence .

She tilts her head to look up at me, confusion creasing her brow. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not your parents,” I explain. “You’re not doomed to end up like them. You can have something better.”

She snorts, a bitter sound that cuts deeper than any outright sob. “Better? Like what? Marriage? Commitment?” She shakes her head, pulling away slightly. “It’s all a trap, Jonathan. A lie. People make promises they can’t keep, and then they destroy each other trying to live up to them.”

“That’s not true,” I argue, my voice rising. “Not for everyone.”

“It’s true for me,” she snaps, her eyes flashing. “I’ll never trust anyone enough to let them in like that. Never.”

Her words hang heavy between us, the finality of them sinking into my chest like stones. I should let it go, respect her resolve, but something in me refuses to give up that easily.

“Maybe someday you’ll change your mind,” I say quietly, my hand finding hers in the dark. “With the right person.”

She lets out a humorless laugh, her fingers twitching beneath mine. “No, Jonathan. Not even then.”

The conviction in her voice silences me. I study her face, the set of her jaw, the fire still burning in her tear-streaked eyes, and I realize she means it. At least for now.

But I can't help hoping—praying—that one day, someone will prove her wrong.

We stay like that until the first hints of dawn begin to creep over the horizon, the sky bleeding from black to a pale, bruised gray. Her breathing evens out, her head resting against my shoulder, and for a fleeting moment, everything feels still and right.

When she finally pulls away, there's something softer in her expression, something almost like gratitude.

“Thank you,” she whispers, her voice hoarse from crying .

“For what?” I ask, genuinely confused.

“For not leaving,” she says simply.

“Never, Annabel.” I say, before she presses a quick, fleeting kiss to my cheek. Then she's gone, slipping back toward the house like a shadow, leaving me alone with the dawn and the lingering warmth of her touch.

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Chapter Six

Calum

The storm outside rattles the windows of Holiday House, its relentless fury clawing at the old wooden frame like it wants in. Inside, the air is damp, heavy with salt and the faintest trace of her perfume. She lingers in the fibers of the drapes, the upholstery, even the walls.

I lean against the fireplace mantle, its granite surface cool under my palm, and let my gaze drift across the room.

Her presence is everywhere. One of her silk scarves is draped over the back of the couch, the deep crimson a splash of color against the muted tones of the room.

A part of me wants to grab it, bury my face in it, inhale what's left of her.

But I won't.

Instead, I turn back to the easel in the corner. The painting I'd been working on—the two of us, caught in an endless summer—sits unfinished. Her face is only a suggestion of a face, lines that imply her cheekbones, her eyes, her mouth. I can't bring myself to finish it. I'm not sure I ever will.

The storm grows louder, a roar that vibrates in my chest. I grab the first canvas leaning against the wall and pull it out of the pile.

It's one of hers, one of the abstract pieces she dabbled in when she was bored or restless.

Bold, chaotic strokes of color, a mess of emotions she never admitted to.

I hated these paintings. I told her once they looked like something a child would smear across the walls.

She just laughed, tipping her head back so her black hair caught the light. "Art isn't meant to be understood, darling," she said. "It's meant to be felt."

"Is that why you feel nothing?" I asked.

Her smile faltered for just a second before it snapped back into place. "Careful, Calum," she warned, her voice sweet and sharp as honeyed glass. "You're sounding a little jealous."

Of course I was jealous. She never gave herself fully to anything—not to her art, not to this house, not even to me.

She flitted through life like a butterfly, beautiful and ephemeral, leaving wreckage in her wake.

I've long since realized my tendency to love things that need love, not the ones that are available to love me back.

My love for her was often bitter and painful but somehow still necessary, the ultimate expression of my humanness, my own miserable mortality.

Falling in love with Annabel was easy, falling out of love impossible.

I set her painting aside and reach for another.

This one is mine—a portrait of her, painted early in our relationship when her laugh still felt like sunlight and her touch like salvation.

Her eyes are too large, too dark, her mouth curved in a way that feels more cruel than kind.

Even then, I must have known. Even then, I was trying to capture the part of her that would destroy me.

I flip the canvas over, intending to set it aside, but something catches my eye. A slip of paper, yellowed and brittle, wedged between the canvas and the frame. I pull it free, careful not to tear it, and unfold it slowly .

The handwriting is unmistakable. Loopy and dramatic, her penmanship as theatrical as everything else about her.

Calum, it begins, I'm not sure if you'll ever find this, but I hope you do. I hope you're looking for me.

My hands tremble as I read, the words blurring together. The letter is short, no more than a few paragraphs, but every sentence is a dagger to the heart.

I know I've been cruel to you. I know you think I don't care, but I do. You're the only person I've ever truly cared about. That scares me, you know. Love like this isn't supposed to exist. It's too big, too consuming. It'll swallow us whole.

I sit down hard on the floor, the letter clutched in my hand.

The storm outside seems to fade, its howling winds muffled by the pounding of blood

in my ears.

This is her voice, her thoughts, her soul poured onto the page.

But it doesn't make sense. Annabel was never one to admit vulnerability.

She wore her aloofness like armor, her indifference a shield against anyone who dared to get too close.

You've always seen through me, though. That's what I hate most about you. That's what I love most about you. You see me, and you stay anyway.

I laugh, the sound hollow and bitter. Stay? She's the one who left. She's the one who slipped away in the dead of night, leaving nothing but an empty bed and a phone call from the police hours later.

The letter slips from my fingers, floating to the floor like a dead leaf. I stare at it, the words burned into my mind.

I'm sorry for what I've done. I'm sorry for what I'll do. But you have to understand—some things are bigger than love. Some things are bigger than us.

The room feels colder now, the chill seeping into my bones. I pick up the letter again, scanning it for some hidden meaning, some clue that will make it all make sense. But there's nothing. Just her words, her confessions, her lies .

Because that's what this has to be, right? A lie. Another one of her games, her manipulations. She knew how to play me better than anyone, how to twist the knife just enough to hurt without breaking me completely.

But this feels different. This feels real. Too real.

The storm has calmed by the time I stand up, the winds reduced to a whisper, the rain to a soft patter against the windows. I fold the letter carefully and slip it into my pocket. I can't leave it here, not in this house, not with the rest of her ghosts.

The painting stares at me, her half-formed face a mockery of the woman I thought I knew. I pull it from the easel and prop it against the wall, turning it to face the corner like a child being punished.

"I hate you," I whisper, the words tasting like ash. "I hate that you're gone. I hate that you're still here."

The silence that follows is deafening.

The fire has burned itself out, the embers glowing faintly in the hearth. I pour myself a glass of whiskey and sit in the armchair, the letter heavy in my pocket. I don't take it out again. Not yet.

Instead, I stare into the dying fire, the orange light flickering across the walls, and let the memories wash over me.

Her laugh, sharp and wild, cutting through the stillness of a summer night.

The way she looked at me when she thought I wasn't paying attention, her eyes soft and unguarded.

The way she tore me apart with a single word, a single glance.

I loved her. I still love her. I'll always love her. My love is irrational, unreasonable, forever bittersweet.

And that's the problem, isn't it? I will love her to the edge of my own doom. Not

even the decay of our passion was reason enough to forget. But maybe the exquisite torture is a torture worth bearing.

The storm has passed completely by the time I climb the stairs to bed, the house eerily quiet in its wake. I pause in the doorway of the bedroom, my gaze falling on the unmade bed, the scattered clothes, the faint outline of her body still imprinted in the mattress.

I lie down on my side of the bed, the letter still in my pocket, and close my eyes.

I dream of her that night, as I always do.

She's standing on the cliffs, her hair whipping around her face, her arms outstretched like she's about to take flight.

She turns to me, her smile wide and wild, and then she's gone, swallowed by the sea.

I wake with a start, my chest heaving, my heart pounding. The house is silent, the shadows long and deep.

And I know, in that moment, that I'll never be free of her. Not while I'm alive. Not even after.

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Chapter Seven

Calum—past

The festival feels like a fever dream. Lanterns swing from poles, their amber light flickering against the black velvet of the night.

Laughter rises in waves, mingling with the crackle of the bonfire at the heart of the square.

The air smells of roasted chestnuts and salt, carried in by the sea.

Ravensreach dresses itself in this annual spectacle as if to forget its perpetual gloom, even if just for a night.

I stand on the edge of the crowd, the outsider looking in.

Always the observer. I'm wearing the suit Annabel liked—black, slim-cut, too formal for this town but just ostentatious enough for her tastes.

She said it made me look like a painter who'd stumbled into high society.

The irony wasn't lost on me then, nor is it now.

A band strikes up a lively tune, fiddles and tambourines rattling the air. Couples take to the makeshift dance floor, spinning and stomping as though the night might swallow them whole if they stop. I should leave. The lights, the noise, the sea of

faces—all of it presses against me, suffocating.

And then I see her .

Annabel.

She steps into the square like a flame in a sea of shadows.

Her dress is deep green, shimmering like wet leaves in moonlight.

Her hair falls in loose waves over her bare shoulders, catching the lantern light with every turn of her head.

She's wearing an emerald mask with shimmering black gems at the eyes and she's laughing, her mouth red like a wound.

She clutches Jonathan's arm, leaning into him in a way that feels deliberate. Proprietary.

He stands taller next to her, his face a mask of pride and unease. Jonathan Grey—the golden boy of Ravensreach, or so he likes to believe. His easy charm and affable grin are dimmed tonight, though. His eyes scan the crowd, hunting. When they land on me, his jaw tightens.

But it's Annabel who notices me next. Her laughter falters, then resumes, softer, more calculated. Her gaze locks onto mine across the square, slicing through the crowd like a blade.

She doesn't look away.

I don't know how it happens, but suddenly she's before me. Jonathan is nowhere to

be seen. Her perfume wraps around me like smoke.

“Calum.” Her voice is silk with an edge of steel, a blade sheathed in velvet. “I didn’t think you’d come.”

“I didn’t think you’d care.”

Her smile is sharp, the kind that cuts you without drawing blood. “I care about lots of things.”

She steps closer, tilting her head to study me like a painting. The music shifts to something slower, more sensual.

“Dance with me,” she says.

“Annabel—”

“Don’t be boring, Calum.” She holds out a hand, her fingers pale and perfect. The kind of hand you’d see painted on a Renaissance woman, reaching for God. Or maybe the devil .

I hesitate, but only for a moment. Her pull is magnetic, gravitational. I take her hand, and she leads me to the dance floor, past the murmuring crowd. My other hand finds her waist, and the music swells.

At first, it’s awkward. My steps are too stiff, hers too fluid. She laughs, soft and low, her breath warm against my neck. “Relax,” she whispers, her hand tightening around mine. “You’re supposed to be the artist, remember? Where’s your sense of rhythm?”

“Buried under all the eyes watching us.”

“Let them watch.”

She pulls me closer, her body a mere breath away from mine. The crowd blurs, the bonfire a distant glow. All I can see, all I can feel, is her. The curve of her waist beneath my hand, the faint flush on her cheeks, the way her lips part as if to say something but think better of it.

For a moment, it feels like we’re the only ones here, suspended in the glow of the lanterns and the haunting waltz. My heartbeat stumbles, caught between the past and the present.

Her laughter, light and airy, pulls me back. “You’re getting better,” she teases. “Almost like you’ve done this before.”

“Once or twice,” I reply, my voice lower than I intend.

She tilts her head back to look at me, her eyes sparkling with something unreadable. “See? Not so hard.”

“Dancing with you is hard,” I murmur, barely loud enough for her to hear.

Her lips curve into a smirk. “Flattery will get you everywhere, darling.”

The music ends too soon, and applause ripples through the square. Annabel steps back, her hand slipping from mine. The absence is immediate, like the sudden loss of warmth. Before I can say anything, Jonathan reappears, his presence cutting through the moment like a knife .

He’s holding two cups of cider, one of which he hands to Annabel. His eyes flicker to me, his smile tight. “Enjoying yourself, Calum?”

“Immensely,” I say, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

Annabel takes a sip of cider, her gaze darting between us. The tension is palpable, electric. She thrives on it—I can see it in the way her eyes shine, the way her lips twitch as if suppressing a laugh.

“Shall we?” Jonathan says, his hand resting on the small of her back, steering her away from me.

She glances over her shoulder, her smile coy. “Don’t be a stranger, Calum.”

I retreat to the edge of the square, watching as Jonathan and Annabel weave through the crowd. He’s speaking to her, his expression tight, but she doesn’t seem to be listening. Her gaze flits from face to face, restless, searching.

It doesn’t take long for Jonathan to lose his composure. They stop near the bonfire, and though the flames distort their features, I can see the tension in his posture, the frustration in the way he gestures.

Annabel tilts her head, her body language casual, almost dismissive. I move closer, staying in the shadows, the murmur of their conversation just within reach.

“You’re playing games,” Jonathan says, his voice low but sharp.

Annabel laughs, the sound light and airy. “I’m always playing games, darling. You knew that when you met me.”

“This isn’t funny, Annabel. You pull Calum into this—into us—and what? Expect me to just stand here and watch?”

Her smile fades, her eyes narrowing. “Into us? Don’t flatter yourself, Jonathan. There

is no 'us.' There never was."

His hand twitches, as if resisting the urge to reach for her.

"You and Calum both want me, but neither of you truly understands me," she says, her voice cutting through the night like glass.

Jonathan flinches, but she doesn't stop. "You think you can pin me down, define me by your terms. But I'm not yours. I'm not his. I'm not anyone's."

The words hang in the air, a challenge and a warning. Jonathan stares at her, his expression a mix of anger and hurt. She turns away, walking toward the bonfire, the flames casting her shadow long and distorted.

I stay rooted in place, the weight of her words pressing down on me. She's right, of course. Annabel has always been an enigma, a puzzle with missing pieces. But that doesn't stop me from wanting her, from trying to solve her, even if it destroys me in the process.

The festival continues around me, but it feels distant, surreal. The music, the laughter, the glow of the lanterns—it's all a backdrop to the storm brewing inside me.

And Annabel is the eye of that storm, calm and chaotic all at once.

I know I'll go to her again. I always do.

And I always will.

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Chapter Eight

Calum

The sea air is thick tonight, salt and brine clawing at the windows of Holiday House.

It shouldn't be this quiet. The storms that usually pound Ravensreach Point this time of year have been replaced by an unsettling calm.

No howling wind, no crashing waves. Just stillness.

Except for the sound of waves that somehow seem to echo inside the cottage—soft, rhythmic, and impossibly close.

I shake the thought loose. The sound is in my head, a phantom noise from nights spent staring out at the surf with Annabel draped across my lap. Her laughter, soft and cruel, a melody undercutting the ocean's roar. The memory pulls like a riptide, dragging me under.

Not tonight.

I set a blank canvas on the easel in the corner of the studio, forcing myself to focus.

My hands move mechanically, laying out paints and brushes.

The smell of turpentine bites at my nostrils, sharp and grounding.

I've been avoiding this—the act of creating, of confronting her absence head-on.

It's easier to let the house swallow me whole, let the weight of her ghost press against my chest like a stone.

But tonight, I need the distraction.

The first stroke feels wrong, the blue too bright.

I scrape it off with a palette knife, cursing under my breath.

The second attempt is no better—a jagged line that cuts across the canvas like a wound.

My frustration mounts, bubbling hot and unchecked.

I slam the brush onto the table, sending a spray of crimson paint across the floorboards.

The smell hits me before I register what's happened—jasmine. Light and heady, curling around me like smoke. My stomach drops. I twist around, my eyes darting to every corner of the room.

“Annabel?” My voice cracks, absurd and desperate.

The studio is empty. The air feels heavier now, oppressive. The jasmine scent lingers, growing stronger, until it's suffocating. My pulse thrums in my ears as I step into the hallway, scanning the shadows that creep along the walls.

“Stop this,” I mutter, clenching my fists. “You're not here.”

But she is. She always is.

The dining room is colder than it should be. The windows are shut tight, but the curtains ripple faintly, as if brushed by an unseen hand. Her favorite perfume bottle sits on the sideboard, though I distinctly remember locking it away in the attic weeks ago. It's impossible. I know it's impossible.

I reach for it, the glass smooth and cold under my fingers. The stopper slides out easily, releasing a fresh wave of jasmine that sends my mind reeling. Her voice is there, a whisper just out of reach, playful and cutting all at once.

You always did love to torture yourself, Calum.

I slam the stopper back into place, my breath coming in ragged gasps. This is grief, I tell myself. It's grief and guilt and exhaustion. It's not her .

Back in the studio, the canvas glares at me like an accusation.

I grab the brush again, forcing myself to work through the unease.

The lines come easier now, the colors blending into something close to her likeness.

Her face takes shape beneath my hand, delicate and perfect, just as I remember.

But something shifts as I work. Her eyes are wrong.

Too wide, too dark, staring out from the canvas with an intensity that sends a shiver down my spine.

Her mouth twists, the curve of her lips sharp and unnatural.

I step back, the brush slipping from my hand. The shadows in the background seem to writhe, forming shapes that shouldn't be there. Figures—twisted and indistinct—loom behind her, their outlines blurred but unmistakable. They press against her, reaching, pulling.

“What the hell?” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of waves that now feel deafening.

I don't remember painting them. My hands tremble as I reach out, my fingertips brushing the edge of the canvas. The paint feels wet, though it shouldn't. I jerk my hand back, my heart hammering in my chest.

The studio feels alive now, the air crackling with something electric, something wrong. I stagger back, nearly tripping over the stool behind me.

And then, a laugh. Faint, lilting, unmistakably hers.

I wake hours later on the floor, the studio bathed in the soft glow of dawn.

My head aches, the events of the night before a fractured blur.

The canvas looms above me, her distorted face staring down with an expression that feels almost alive.

I scramble to my feet, ripping it from the easel and shoving it into the corner, face down.

The house is still now, the oppressive energy from the night before gone. But the scent of jasmine lingers, faint but persistent, as if it's seeped into the very walls.

The rest of the day passes in a haze. I can't focus.

Every room feels off, as if the angles are wrong or the light bends where it shouldn't.

Her belongings are everywhere—her books stacked on the coffee table, her sweater draped over the arm of the couch.

I should pack them away, box them up and send them... somewhere. But I can't.

Instead, I wander the house aimlessly, my footsteps echoing on the hardwood floors. The waves outside are calm, but their sound persists inside, relentless and inescapable.

By evening, I find myself back in the studio, staring at the stack of canvases in the corner.

I pull one out at random, another unfinished portrait of her.

This one is softer, her features rendered with a gentler hand.

She's smiling, her eyes alight with mischief.

It's a memory from before, one of the rare moments when we weren't at each other's throats.

"I hate how good you are at this," she said once, watching me paint her. She was sprawled across the chaise lounge, her hair spilling over the side in inky waves. "You make me look like someone worth loving."

"You are worth loving," I told her, my voice steady.

She laughed, low and bitter. "That's sweet, Calum. Almost convincing."

The memory twists in my mind, the edges fraying. I set the canvas down, my hands shaking. This is all wrong. She's gone, and yet she's here, her presence suffocating, her voice a constant echo. I can't keep doing this—living in the shadow of someone who was never really mine to begin with.

But I can't let her go, either.

I grab a fresh canvas, determined to paint something—anything—that isn't her. My brush moves without thought, strokes of color blending into something abstract, chaotic. The act is cathartic, the anger and grief pouring out of me in violent streaks of red and black.

When I step back, the image on the canvas is unrecognizable. It's a mess, a reflection of the turmoil inside me. But it feels honest, raw.

And then I see it. Hidden within the chaos, her face emerges, faint but unmistakable. Her eyes stare out at me, wide and accusing, her mouth twisted into a scream. The shadowy figures are there too, more distinct this time, their forms pressing against her, their hands reaching out.

I drop the brush, my chest tightening. The room tilts, the walls closing in.

Her laugh echoes again, louder this time, and the scent of jasmine floods the room.

I don't remember leaving the studio. I find myself on the beach, the sand cold and damp beneath my feet. The waves crash against the shore, their sound a relentless drumbeat in my ears.

"Annabel!" I shout, my voice raw. The wind tears the name from my lips, carrying it out to sea.

There's no answer. Of course, there isn't.

The walk back to the house is slow, my legs heavy with exhaustion. The windows of Holiday House glow faintly in the darkness, a beacon against the encroaching night. But the sight of it fills me with dread.

Inside, the air is still, the scent of jasmine gone. I climb the stairs to the bedroom, my body aching with fatigue. Her side of the bed is untouched, the pillow still faintly indented from where her head once rested.

I lie down, my eyes fixed on the ceiling. Sleep doesn't come easily. When it does, it's filled with dreams of her—her face, her voice, her laugh. And always, the shadows, closing in.

The next morning, I find the canvas from the night before propped up on the easel, though I don't remember putting it there. Her face stares out at me, her expression frozen in fear.

I burn it .

The flames consume the painting quickly, the colors distorting and blackening until there's nothing left but ash. But even as the fire dies down, I can still see her face, etched into my mind, haunting and inescapable.

I know she won't let me go. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter Nine

Calum—past

Her laugh cuts through the wind, careless and bright.

Waves slam against the shore with a ferocity I feel in my chest, each crash like a heartbeat turned inside out.

The wind's picking up, wild and constant, whistling through the dunes like it's warning us.

A Nor'easter's due by morning—they're calling it the worst swell in a decade—but Annabel walks ahead of us like the sky's not folding in on itself.

Jonathan keeps pace beside her, hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders relaxed. He looks like he belongs here—salt-worn, wind-cut, familiar. I trail behind them both like a ghost.

I've only known them for a few weeks. A few late nights sketching at the cafe. A few shared bottles of wine. A few scattered moments that already feel carved into me like grooves in wood.

But now, out here, under the heavy press of sky and sea, I feel like a stranger with sand in my teeth and someone else's heartbeat pounding in my ears.

Annabel stops near the edge of the water, her bare feet sinking into the wet sand. She

spreads her arms wide, tilts her head back, and closes her eyes. The moonlight paints her gold and silver—like a statue, or a dream I haven’t earned.

Then she peels off her clothes.

Slow at first. The sweater, the tank top. The curve of her back exposed, followed by the pale slope of her waist. She steps out of her jeans, then her underwear, and stands there—naked, unashamed—on the cusp of the dark Atlantic, the storm-lit sky behind her.

“Annabel!” Jonathan laughs, surprised. “You’re insane!”

She looks back over her shoulder, hair whipping in the wind, her eyes gleaming. “You coming or not?”

And then she runs into the sea.

The waves swallow her legs first, then her torso. She dives forward, disappearing beneath the white churn. A moment later, she surfaces, tossing her hair like a mermaid risen from the deep.

Jonathan doesn't hesitate. He strips off his shirt, then fumbles with his belt, laughing as he kicks off his boots and jeans and sprints after her in his boxers.

They splash into the surf, limbs flailing, voices carrying across the wind.

Annabel shrieks as Jonathan sends a wave crashing over her shoulder.

She retaliates, leaping onto his back, dunking him under.

They move like children, like lovers, like people who’ve forgotten how close the

storm really is.

I stand there, frozen, my hands stuffed in the pockets of my coat. Watching.

It's not just that she's beautiful—though she is, in that dizzying way that makes my throat go dry—it's the life in her. The way she pulls laughter out of thin air. The way she doesn't shrink from anything. She's pure nerve and instinct and wild light.

And I want it. That light. That recklessness. That closeness .

I'm the one who hangs back at parties, who leaves early without saying goodbye, who needs too long to speak when I feel something sharp and real. And she's in the water, glowing like she belongs to it.

I'm so fucking jealous I could scream.

After a while, they come back in. Jonathan ahead of her, pants held in one hand, shirt slung over his shoulder, water dripping down his neck. He's smirking, breathless.

Annabel walks slower. Her body is soaked, goosebumped, glistening, nipples puckered in the soft moonlight. Her hair is plastered to her back and shoulders, black as the sea. She doesn't cover herself. Just walks barefoot across the sand like she owns it all.

I yank my sweater over my head and step forward, holding it out without a word.

She pauses, surprised. Then a soft smile pulls at her lips.

“Thanks, Calum.”

She slips it over her head. It's too big, hanging off one shoulder, clinging to the

curves of her still-wet body. I reach out, gently brushing a strand of soaked hair away from her cheek. Her skin is cool, damp beneath my fingers.

She looks up at me—eyes storm-silver, soft with something I can't name—and for a second, I think the world might stop.

But Jonathan's voice cuts through the quiet like a jagged blade.

“Thought we'd established I'm the impulsive one.” His tone is sharp, lazy on the edges, but his eyes are anything but. They fix on me, then drift to her. “Looks like I've got competition.”

He yanks his jeans on with rough hands, muttering something under his breath before stalking up the beach, toward the dark outline of his family's cottage .

The wind howls around us, but it's his silence that leaves me raw.

Annabel exhales, watching him go. “He's always been like that,” she says after a beat. “Stormy. Possessive. Dramatic as hell.”

I glance at her, hesitant. “Are you... together?”

She blinks, then lets out a breath of laughter. “God, no.” She hugs her arms around herself. “We're childhood friends. He's just... protective. Moody. A typical artist. You'd think with all the poetry he writes he'd be better at talking like a human being.”

I huff out a laugh, surprised. “I wasn't sure. He acts like?—”

“I know,” she says. “He always acts like that. But no, Calum. It's not like that.”

She turns to face the water again. The moon casts a silver highway across the waves, and her wet hair clings to the back of my sweater. My sweater. On her.

“You really don’t like storms, do you?” she asks suddenly.

I glance up at the sky. “Not when they follow me.”

She smiles, just barely. “You’re quiet. But I don’t think it’s because you don’t have things to say.”

I look at her. Really look.

“You make it easier,” I admit. “To breathe. To be in the room.”

She tilts her head, eyes narrowing thoughtfully. “That’s a really beautiful thing to say.”

I shrug, awkward. “I meant it.”

For a long moment, we just stand there. The sea, wild and loud behind us. The storm gathering somewhere in the dark.

“I don’t sleep much,” she says softly. “Not lately. It’s like I can feel something coming.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know.” Her voice is distant. “A change. A shift. Like the tide’s about to pull everything I know out from under me.”

The wind picks up. Her hair whips across her face.

“I know that feeling,” I say quietly. “Like you're standing on the edge of something, and you're not sure if it's a beginning or an ending.”

She turns toward me. “Exactly.”

The wind howls louder. The storm is close now—I can feel it in my teeth.

Annabel presses her cheek to my chest, sudden and soft, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I don't move. I just let her rest there, still shivering, still damp, wrapped in my sweater.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “For being kind.”

I press my lips to her hair, just once. A kiss too small to matter. A kiss that means everything.

And in that moment, I know something's going to break.

Maybe it already has.

Chapter Ten

Calum

I haven't slept in three days. Maybe four. The nights bleed into mornings, and the mornings into something else entirely, something shapeless and gray. The sea outside roars its indifference, and the waves pound the cliffs like fists.

The door creaks open before I touch it, a slow groan that shudders through the house like a living thing. Holiday House feels alive tonight—its warped floorboards and faintly salty walls pressing in as though it's inhaling my presence, holding me tight in a grip I can't escape.

I pour another drink. The glass feels heavy in my hand as I lift it to my lips.

Bourbon. Annabel used to tease me for drinking it, called it an “old man's liquor,” but she'd always steal the glass when she thought I wasn't looking.

I used to catch her, her smile curling like smoke as she tipped it back.

A knock jolts me. Sharp, insistent. Not the wind, not the house settling into its bones.

I set the glass down with a thud and make my way to the door, the sound of my footsteps swallowed by the house's silence. When I open it, Jonathan Grey is standing there, framed in the glow of the porch light.

“Jonathan,” I say, my voice flat. The name feels foreign, like I'm speaking a language

I've long forgotten. He looks the same—still tall, still polished, still perfect. His dark hair is damp from the mist rolling off the ocean, and his sharp jaw is set tight. His eyes, though, are tired.

“Calum,” he says, and there's something in his tone I don't recognize. It isn't pity, not quite, but it's close enough to make my teeth clench.

“Why are you here?” I step aside, letting him in because it's easier than standing there in the doorway like a fool.

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he shrugs off his coat, the fabric dry despite the mist falling outside. His eyes scan the room, the empty bottles lining the sideboard, the ashtray overflowing with the remnants of my insomnia. He looks back at me, his gaze steady.

“Ravensreach felt like the only place to be,” he says finally, his words slow and deliberate. He doesn't sit, doesn't move farther into the house. He just stands there, taking me in like he's cataloging every inch of my unraveling.

“Funny. I thought you hated this place,” I say, my voice sharper than intended. I leave him to his judgments and cross the room, picking up my glass again. The liquor burns its way down, a welcome reprieve from the gnawing emptiness.

“I didn't hate it,” he says, following me now, his shoes echoing against the floor. “I hated what it did to you.”

I laugh, a harsh sound that doesn't belong to me. “Spare me the concern. You didn't come all this way to play therapist.”

Jonathan sighs, running a hand through his hair. He's always been the composed one, the one who knew exactly what to say and when to say it. Annabel loved that about

him—his easy charm, his poise. She used to call him her “steady ship” when I was the storm threatening to capsize them both.

“I’ve been grieving too, you know,” he says finally, his voice quieter now.

The words hit like a punch. I stare at him, the glass in my hand trembling just enough to spill a drop onto my wrist. “Grieving?” The word tastes bitter. “Grieving what, exactly?”

Jonathan’s jaw tightens.

“Annabel,” he says, like it’s obvious. Like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

I laugh again, louder this time, setting the glass down before I hurl it against the wall. “You barely knew her. Not the heart of her, not like I did,” I spit, my voice rising. “You spent what? A handful of summers here? Don’t stand there and tell me you’re grieving her like you understand.”

“I knew her,” he snaps, the crack in his polished veneer startling. “I knew her better than you think. Better than you ever let yourself believe.”

The room tilts, the bourbon surging in my veins like a second heartbeat. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Jonathan steps closer, his face inches from mine now. “It means you were too busy worshipping her to see her for who she really was.”

The air between us feels like static, charged and dangerous. His words claw at something raw inside me, something I’ve tried to bury beneath layers of paint and smoke and alcohol. “Don’t pretend you know what we had,” I hiss. “She was mine.”

His laugh is low, bitter. “Was she? Or was she just something you wanted to own?”

The accusation lands with a weight I can’t shake. My fists clench at my sides, the urge to lash out burning hot. But his eyes don’t waver, and the tension between us feels like it might snap .

“You think you were any better?” I say finally, my voice low and venomous. “You’re standing here, in my house, claiming to grieve her like you had some claim to her. So tell me, Jon —what exactly are you mourning? The idea of her? Or the fact that she never wanted you the way you wanted her?”

Jonathan’s composure cracks further, his shoulders stiffening. For a moment, he looks like he might hit me, his hands curling into fists at his sides. But then he exhales sharply, stepping back and shaking his head.

“I loved her,” he says, his voice quieter now, almost resigned. “Maybe not the way you did. Maybe not enough for her to stay. But I did love her, Calum. And whether you believe it or not, I’m grieving her too.”

The words hang in the air, heavy and suffocating. I don’t know how to respond, don’t know what to do with the tangled mess of anger and guilt and jealousy boiling inside me. Instead, I pour another drink, the sound of liquid hitting glass the only thing cutting through the silence.

Jonathan doesn’t speak again. He stands there for a moment longer, his eyes scanning the room as if searching for something he’s lost. Then he turns and walks to the window, his gaze fixed on the dark expanse of the ocean beyond.

“She was brilliant,” he says finally, his voice soft. “And maddening. And impossible to hold onto. But you already know that, don’t you?”

I swallow hard, the alcohol burning its way down.

“She was everything,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper.

Jonathan turns back to me, his expression unreadable. “She was human,” he says. “And she’s gone, Calum. No amount of bourbon or paint or self-destruction is going to change that.”

The words sting, but they also carry a weight of truth I’m not ready to face. I set the glass down, my hands trembling. The room feels too small, the walls pressing in. I need air, need to get out before I suffocate under the weight of it all.

“I need to paint,” I say abruptly, the excuse weak and transparent. Jonathan doesn’t argue. He simply nods, his eyes lingering on me for a moment longer before he walks toward the door.

“Take care of yourself, Calum,” he says quietly before he leaves, the sound of the door closing behind him echoing through the empty house.

The silence that follows is deafening. I stand there for a long time, staring at the spot where Jonathan stood, his words replaying in my mind. The house feels colder now, the shadows longer, the scent of jasmine creeping back in like a ghost.

I pick up the brush, my fingers curling around it like a lifeline. The canvas stares back at me, blank and unyielding. I dip the brush into the paint, the colors swirling together into something chaotic and dark.

As I work, her face emerges again, unbidden and haunting. But this time, there’s something different in her expression—something I can’t quite place. It’s as if she’s watching me, her eyes filled with a sadness that feels almost accusatory.

The shadows creep in around her, darker and more distinct than before. And in the distance, just beyond the edges of the canvas, I swear I can see Jonathan standing there, his figure blurred and indistinct but unmistakable.

I drop the brush, my chest tightening. The room spins, the weight of everything crashing down around me. Her voice whispers in my mind, soft and lilting, a melody I can't escape.

“You'll never let me go,” she says, her words a promise and a curse.

And she's right. I won't. I can't.

Because she's mine.

Even in death, she's mine.

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Chapter Eleven

Jonathan—past

The lifeguard tower groans with every gust of wind.

I sit cross-legged on the weather-worn floor, my notebook balanced on one knee, pen scratching furiously across the page. The light is shit—storm clouds swallowing the moon—but I write anyway. My words spill like the tide rising beneath me.

“The artist stands back, watching. Always watching.

The muse runs wild into the sea. The writer follows.

This is how it’s always been. Calum doesn’t know her the way I do. Not the way that matters.”

The Nor’easter is already here, even if the forecast says morning. The sea is a churning, snarling thing, foaming at the edges like it’s rabid. The wind hisses through the slats of the tower and whips through the dunes, shrieking low like the ghosts that haunt this stretch of coast.

I glance up from the page. The horizon has vanished into gray. Waves hurl themselves at the shore with growing violence. But I don’t move. I’ve written in worse.

I scribble more, the lines growing messier :

“Last night she stripped bare without hesitation. Ran into the sea like she belonged to it.

We’ve done that a hundred times. Since we were kids.

I could draw a map of her—every curve, every angle—blindfolded.

Calum stood on the shore like he didn’t know whether to run or disappear.

What does he see when he looks at her?

What do I see?”

My jaw clenches. I drop the pen and press my hands to my face, trying to squeeze the hunger out of me. It doesn’t work.

Annabel lives in the margins of my thoughts. In the space between breath and madness. I can’t write a story without her in it. I don’t want to.

A sudden flicker of motion down the beach catches my eye.

At first, I think it’s the wind playing tricks. A silhouette blurred by mist and memory. But the shape grows sharper. Closer.

Annabel.

She walks like a ghost from the surf, her white sundress clinging to her thighs, long hair whipping around her face like dark seaweed. For a second, I’m convinced I dreamed her up—dragged her from a half-formed scene in my notebook and gave her flesh.

But she keeps walking. Barefoot. Real.

The first drops of rain strike like warning shots. Then the sky opens up, and within seconds, she's drenched. The wind shoves against her, hard. She stumbles slightly, shielding her face with one arm.

I shoot to my feet. "Shit."

I jump down from the tower, boots slapping against the wet wood of the stairs. The rain is freezing, needling through my clothes. I run toward her, my breath ragged, heart hammering like I'm chasing down a part of myself.

"Annabel!" I shout, but the wind devours her name.

She turns anyway, smiling—god, that smile—and laughs as I reach her.

"Jonathan!" she calls, half breathless. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"You're soaked," I snap, grabbing her by the shoulders. "What the hell are you doing out here?"

She shrugs, rain streaming down her cheeks like tears. "Just having a little fun. You're always so serious."

"And you're always trying to get struck by lightning," I mutter, tugging her toward the tower. "Come on."

She protests at first, laughing, squirming in my grip. "Let me enjoy the storm!"

"You can enjoy it without hypothermia."

I pull her into the lifeguard station, slamming the creaking door shut behind us. Inside, it's barely better—cold, damp, leaking in one corner—but at least it's shelter.

We collapse onto the bench. She's soaked through, shivering. I dig into my bag and hand her my flannel. She pulls it on over her wet dress, flashing me a grateful grin.

The storm rages outside, the sea roaring in the dark. We sit shoulder to shoulder, sharing breath and memory.

She points at the wall behind us. "That still here?"

I turn. A carving in the old wood:

J + A

'til death

I smile crookedly. "You remember that night?"

"Of course," she says softly. "We camped out here. You drew it with your pocketknife and then you gave me the necklace and told me I'd be in all your books someday." She fingers the gold locket at her neck.

"You are," I say. "You always are."

The silence between us thickens. She looks at me, rain-bright and moonlit, and I don't think—I just move.

I kiss her.

It's desperate, bruising, full of all the words I haven't said in years. Her lips part

under mine. Her fingers dig into my shirt. She kisses me back like she means it, like she remembers too.

For a moment, the storm inside is louder than the one outside.

Then she pulls away, resting her forehead against mine. Her breath trembles.

“Don’t,” she whispers.

I pull back, searching her face. “You and Calum. Are you officially...?”

She exhales. “What does official even mean, Jonathan? Labels don’t change anything.”

I laugh bitterly. “That sounds like something someone says when they want to keep two people dangling.”

She winces. “It’s not like that.”

“No?” I ask. “Because it sure as hell feels like it.”

The silence stretches.

Then we hear it—his voice. Distant, desperate, calling her name.

“Annabel!”

She stiffens. Stands. Looks toward the sound like she’s being summoned by a tether.

“Shit,” she mutters. “He must’ve come looking when I didn’t come back.”

I stay seated, jaw locked. “He has a way of ruining the moment, doesn’t he? ”

She pauses at the door, hair soaked, lips still red from my kiss. She turns. “There is no moment, Jonathan.”

Then she disappears into the rain.

I follow slowly, trailing behind her like a shadow. I watch her run into Calum’s arms. He wraps her in his coat, hands sliding over her back. She melts into him like it’s instinct.

They return to the tower together. All of us dripping, teeth chattering.

Annabel sinks onto the bench, exhausted. Calum pulls her closer, rubbing her arms, pressing his lips to her temple. She closes her eyes, breathing against his collarbone.

She’s asleep within minutes.

I sit across from them, hands clenched. My wet shirt sticks to my skin like regret. My heart aches with a dull, unbearable throb.

She’s mine. She always has been.

Before Calum, before the sketches and paints and awkward silences.

She is branded on my heart like fire.

And I’ll wait.

I’ll wait until she remembers.

J + A

‘Til death.

Chapter Twelve

Calum

The dream starts the same way every night.

Annabel stands at the edge of the cliff, her hair swept wild by the wind, her dress clinging to her as if the storm itself is trying to claim her.

She looks back at me, her face a mix of defiance and something darker—disappointment, maybe.

Or betrayal. The sea below churns with fury, waves crashing against the jagged rocks, their roars almost drowning out her voice.

Almost.

“You don’t see me, Calum,” she says, her words sharp as the icy wind. “You only see what you want to see.”

I move closer, the damp earth sliding beneath my feet. My pulse hammers in my ears, louder than the ocean, louder than her accusations. “That’s not true,” I tell her, my voice strained, desperate. “I see you. I see everything.”

She laughs, but there’s no joy in it. “You see the version of me you’ve created. A muse. A prize. But not me. Never me.”

The distance between us shrinks, but it feels infinite. Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, I think she'll let me pull her back from the edge. But then her expression hardens, and she takes a deliberate step closer to the precipice.

“Annabel, stop!” I reach out, but she jerks away, her movements sharp and angry.

“You think you own me,” she snaps, her voice rising with the storm. “You and Jonathan both. You’ve turned me into a game, a possession to fight over. But I’m not yours. I was never yours.”

The wind howls, and she slaps me, her ring cutting across my cheek. The sting is immediate, hot and sharp, and when I touch my face, my fingers come away slick with blood.

“You’ll never let me go,” she says, her voice quieter now, almost tender. “Even in death, you’ll hold on.”

I try to say something, anything, but the words die in my throat. She steps back, her heel teetering on the edge, and I lunge forward, grabbing her wrist. For a second, everything freezes—the storm, the sea, even time itself.

And then she pulls away, slipping through my grasp like smoke. The scream rips from my throat as she falls, her body vanishing into the chaos below.

I wake with a jolt, my chest heaving, my heart slamming against my ribs. The room is dark, the air heavy with the scent of salt and rain. My hand flies to my cheek, and I freeze.

There’s blood.

My fingers tremble as they trace the slash running diagonally across my face, the

same spot where Annabel's ring had cut me in the dream. The wound is shallow but unmistakable, the sting fresh and all too real.

I stagger out of bed, my head spinning, and stumble into the bathroom. The harsh light blinds me for a moment, and when my vision clears, I see it—red streaks across my cheek, angry and raw. It's impossible. It has to be. But the proof stares back at me, undeniable and taunting .

The dream isn't a dream. Or maybe it is, but it's something else, too. Something worse.

I grip the edge of the sink, the porcelain cold beneath my fingers. "You're losing it, Calum," I mutter, my voice shaking. "This is just... stress. Grief. It's not real."

But even as I say it, I know it's a lie.

The dreams have been getting worse, more vivid, more...

physical. At first, it was just the cliff, the storm, her words echoing in my mind long after I woke.

But now, the lines between dream and reality are blurring, bleeding together until I can't tell where one ends and the other begins.

I splash water on my face, the coolness grounding me for a moment. My reflection stares back, pale and hollow-eyed, a ghost of the man I used to be. Annabel's voice whispers in my mind, soft and haunting: "Even in death, you'll hold on."

The sound of footsteps pulls me from my thoughts.

At first, I think it's my imagination, but then I hear it again—soft, deliberate, moving

down the hall.

My breath catches, and I turn off the faucet, straining to listen.

The house is old, its creaks and groans familiar, but this is different. This is someone, or something.

“Hello?” My voice is hoarse, barely above a whisper.

No response.

I flip the light switch on but the hallway remains dark.

The lightbulb must be out I think as I grab a flashlight from the cabinet and step into the hallway, my heart pounding.

The beam of light sweeps over the dark wood floors, the faded wallpaper, the framed photos lining the walls.

Nothing. The footsteps have stopped, but the silence is worse.

It’s thick, oppressive, like the house itself is holding its breath.

I move cautiously, the floorboards creaking under my weight. The sound of the wind outside is a constant backdrop, but every so often, I think I hear something else—a faint rustling, a soft whisper. I follow it, my grip on the flashlight tightening.

The studio door is ajar, the faint glow of moonlight spilling through the gap.

I push it open, the hinges groaning, and step inside.

The air is colder here, and the smell of paint and turpentine is sharp and familiar.

My paintings line the walls, each one a portrait of Annabel, each one capturing a different facet of her—her beauty, her sadness, her rage.

I approach the newest canvas, the one I've been working on for weeks. It's unfinished, her face still a ghostly outline, her eyes hollow and unformed. But as I stare at it, the shadows seem to shift, the lines blurring and morphing.

"Calum."

Her voice is a breath against my ear, and I whirl around, the flashlight beam swinging wildly. There's no one there, but the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I feel her presence, tangible and suffocating, like she's right behind me.

"You did this," the voice whispers, soft but accusatory.

"No," I say, backing away from the canvas. "I didn't... I didn't do anything."

But the voice doesn't stop. It grows louder, more insistent, until it's a scream, echoing in my head, drowning out everything else. I drop the flashlight, clutching my ears, but it doesn't help. The words are inside me, relentless and unforgiving.

"You did this. You did this. You did this."

The sound crescendos, and I fall to my knees, my vision swimming.

The paintings around me seem to come alive, their colors bleeding and swirling, their subjects shifting into grotesque parodies of themselves.

Annabel's face twists, her beauty marred by anger and pain, her eyes burning with

accusation.

“Stop!” I scream, my voice breaking. “Please, stop!”

And then, silence .

The room is still, the air heavy and stifling. I open my eyes, my body trembling, and look around. The paintings are normal again, their colors static and lifeless. The only sound is the wind outside, its howling a mournful dirge.

I stagger to my feet, my mind racing. I don’t know what’s real anymore. The dreams, the voice, the wound on my cheek—it’s all too much. I can’t escape her, not in sleep, not in waking. She’s everywhere, her presence a constant shadow, her memory a weight I can’t bear.

As I leave the studio, my eyes catch on the unfinished painting one last time. Her hollow eyes seem to follow me, and I swear I see her lips move, forming a single, damning word:

“Murderer.”

I slam the door behind me, my heart pounding, and retreat to the bedroom. The bed is cold and uninviting, but I collapse onto it, too drained to care. As I drift into an uneasy sleep, her voice whispers in my mind, soft and haunting:

“You’ll never let me go.”

And deep down, I know she’s right.

Chapter Thirteen

Annabel

“You’re insufferable,” I snap, slamming the cupboard door harder than necessary. The sound ricochets through the airy kitchen, breaking the serene quiet of the late afternoon.

Jonathan leans against the counter, his arms crossed, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. “And yet, you can’t seem to stay away.”

Jonathan’s parents are away, leaving us to turn their pristine Nantucket cottage into our own little sanctuary—or battlefield, depending on the day. Right now, it feels like the latter.

“Because we’re stuck here,” I retort, turning to face him. “If I had a choice, believe me, I’d be anywhere else.”

His smirk falters, but only for a second. “Anywhere else? Really? Tucked under Calum’s arm like a prized possession?”

My stomach twists, his words hitting a nerve I hadn’t realized was exposed. “Jealousy doesn’t suit you, Jonathan.”

“Jealousy?” He laughs, the sound sharp and humorless. “Don’t flatter yourself, Annabel.”

“You’re the one who can’t stop picking fights,” I say, stepping closer. “If you’re not jealous, then what is it? Boredom? Resentment?”

His jaw tightens, his smirk replaced by something darker, more dangerous. “Maybe I’m tired of watching you play the same game over and over.”

“And what game would that be?”

“The one where you act like you’re above it all,” he snaps, his voice rising. “Like you don’t care about the mess you leave behind, the people you hurt.”

He closes the distance between us, one hand wrapping around my neck as he holds me in place, his lips connecting with mine in a kiss that demands my submission. I give in, only for a moment, before I push him off. My breath catches, but I refuse to let him see the crack in my armor.

“You should be kissed by someone that knows how—and often. Not by boys, but by someone who knows what you need.”

“Don’t pretend you know me, Jonathan.”

“Oh, I know you, Annabel,” he says, his gaze locking onto mine. “Better than Calum ever will. You’ve known him a year and me a lifetime.”

The silence that follows is suffocating, thick with unspoken words and emotions too tangled to unravel. I open my mouth to respond, but before I can, the door swings open, letting in a gust of salty air and the sound of Calum’s familiar whistle.

He steps into the kitchen, a canvas tote slung over his shoulder and a smile lighting up his face.

“I found the paints,” he announces, his tone cheerful and oblivious to the tension simmering in the room.

“Perfect,” I say quickly, my voice too bright. I cross the room to meet him, letting his presence wrap around me like a shield.

He drops the bag on the counter and pulls me into his side, his arm draping over my shoulders.

The warmth of his touch is both comforting and stifling, a reminder of everything I’m trying to hold together.

He presses a kiss to the top of my head, and I force myself to relax, leaning into him as if nothing is wrong.

“Am I interrupting something?” Calum asks, his eyes flicking between me and Jonathan.

Jonathan, who’s been silent since Calum walked in, pushes off the counter and straightens. “Not at all,” he says, his tone flat. “Just a spirited discussion.”

Calum chuckles, clearly buying the lie. “Well, don’t let me stop you.”

Jonathan doesn’t respond. He just stares at us, his expression unreadable, before turning on his heel and walking out. The door slams behind him, the sound echoing through the house.

“Is he okay?” Calum asks, frowning slightly.

“He’s fine,” I say quickly, brushing it off. “You know Jonathan—always brooding about something.”

“Sounds like he was pretty upset,” Calum’s features remain calm but I feel the tension in his words. I don’t reply because I’m not sure he even wants me to. Silence hangs between us before he finally fills it. “He’s mad you chose me.”

My eyebrows lift with surprise. Calum isn’t usually so direct, I often feel his unease before he’ll ever mention it. “He’s just... having a bad day.”

“Is that all?” Calum sets his brush on the easel tray and tilts his head at me. “Maybe it’s time you stop seeing him.”

My heart aches at the thought. “Calum—” I place an open palm on his arm, “you don’t have to worry—”

“I’m not,” Calum interrupts.

I narrow my eyes at his defensive tone. “Calum, I swear to you. It would degrade me to marry him. He has no drive, no motivation. He’ll slip into the abyss of history without leaving a mark,” I curl myself against Calum’s form and say the words that I know he’ll feel the most, “not like you. You have so much to say, so much to give to the world. You will leave a mark Calum Vey.”

The tension eases from his muscles then. I know all of Calum’s soft spots. His weaknesses are two singular things: me and his art.

Calum seems satisfied with that answer, his attention already shifting back to the paints. He begins unpacking them, chatting about the colors he found and how he can’t wait to get started on his next piece. I nod along, my responses automatic, but my mind is elsewhere, replaying Jonathan’s words.

I know you better than Calum ever will.

Jonathan's words loop in my head, taunting me with its weight. Jonathan doesn't say things like that lightly. He knows exactly how to strike where it hurts, how to peel back the layers I've carefully constructed. But why now? Why here, in this house that's supposed to be our escape?

"Annabel?" Calum's voice pulls me back to the present.

"Hmm?" I blink, focusing on him.

He's holding up a tube of paint, his smile soft and boyish. "I said, should I use this for the background? Or the deep blue?"

I force a smile, nodding toward the blue. "That one. Definitely."

He grins, leaning in to kiss me again, and I let him, hoping he doesn't notice the tension still coiled in my body. He doesn't. Calum sees what he wants to see, and most days, I'm grateful for it. But today, it feels like a weight, a responsibility I'm not sure I can carry.

Hours later I'm sitting in the living room, still stewing. Calum is in his studio, lost in his art, while I sit curled on the couch, a glass of wine in my hand. The house is quiet, save for the faint sound of the waves outside and the occasional creak of the old floorboards.

Jonathan hasn't come back.

I tell myself I don't care, that it's better this way. But the truth is, his absence is a void I can't ignore. He's always been the storm to Calum's calm, the fire to his steady flame. And as much as I hate to admit it, I need both.

The wine tastes bitter, or maybe it's just me. I set the glass down and stand, pacing

the room like a caged animal. I think about going to the studio to join Calum, but the thought of his easy smile, his unshakable devotion, feels suffocating right now.

Instead, I grab a sweater and step outside, the cool night air washing over me like a balm. The cliffs are dark, the moon hidden behind a thick layer of clouds. I walk without direction, letting my feet carry me toward the edge, where the world feels both infinite and impossibly small.

“Annabel.”

The voice stops me in my tracks. I turn, and there he is, standing just a few feet away. Jonathan. His face is shadowed, but I can see the tension in his posture, the storm brewing behind his eyes.

“What are you doing out here?” I ask, my voice sharper than I intend.

“I could ask you the same thing,” he replies, stepping closer.

I fold my arms, trying to create some kind of barrier between us. “I needed air.”

He chuckles, a low, bitter sound. “And here I thought you had everything you needed inside.”

“What do you want, Jonathan?” I snap, tired of the games.

He doesn’t answer right away. Instead, he closes the distance between us, his gaze locking onto mine. “I want to know why.”

“Why what?”

“Why you chose him,” he says, his voice low and raw. “Why it’s always him.”

The question catches me off guard, the vulnerability in his tone cutting through my defenses. “Jonathan, I...”

“Don’t,” he interrupts, his jaw tightening. “Don’t lie to me. Not tonight.”

I take a deep breath, the weight of the moment pressing down on me. “It’s not about choosing, Jonathan. It’s not that simple.”

“Isn’t it?” he challenges, his eyes blazing. “The only thing I know for sure is that we are the same, Annabel. Our souls are haunted with the same darkness, the same need for more.”

“That’s... that’s not true,” but my words come out pathetic, soft, weak. I don’t believe them and neither will he.

“Bullshit. You love him. Fine. But don’t pretend you don’t feel something for me too.”

I open my mouth to argue, to deny it, but the words won’t come. Because he’s right. I do feel something for him. I always have.

“You’re different,” I say finally, my voice barely above a whisper. “You and Calum... you’re like night and day. I need both, but I can’t have that, can I?”

“No,” he says firmly, stepping even closer. “You can’t.”

The air between us crackles with tension, the unspoken truths and years of history bubbling to the surface. I should walk away. I should go back to the house, to Calum, to the safety of what I’ve chosen. But I don’t move.

Jonathan reaches out, his hand brushing against mine, and for a moment, I let him.

His touch is warm, grounding, and it reminds me of that night in the hydrangeas, when everything felt so much simpler.

But it's not simple anymore. And it never will be.

"I can't," I say, pulling away. "I can't do this. "

He watches me for a moment, his expression unreadable, before stepping back. "Then go," he says quietly. "But don't expect me to be here when you come back."

The words slice through me, sharp and final, but I don't look back. I turn and walk toward the house, each step heavier than the last.

Inside, Calum is still painting, his world untouched by the storm brewing just outside. I pause in the doorway, watching him, and for a moment, I envy his oblivion. But then he looks up, his face lighting up at the sight of me, and I remember why I chose him.

Even if it means losing everything else.

Chapter Fourteen

Calum

The graveyard breathes with an eerie calm as dusk settles over it, painting the world in hues of deep gray and lavender.

My footsteps crunch on the gravel path, the sound unnervingly loud in the otherwise silent expanse.

Holiday House looms behind me, a silhouette against the stormy sky, its windows dark and watchful.

This isn't the first time I've wandered into the cemetery since coming back to Ravensreach, but it's the first time I feel as though I don't belong here.

The air thickens, damp with the scent of freshly turned earth and sea spray.

My pulse quickens as I glance around, noting the shadows that stretch unnaturally long, shifting like they have lives of their own.

I grip the coat around me tighter and wonder, not for the first time tonight, if I'm losing my mind.

Then I see them.

A group of figures drifts toward me from the far end of the graveyard, their

movements fluid, unnatural, as if they're gliding just above the ground.

There are five of them, all shrouded in varying shades of translucence, their edges blurred as though viewed through frosted glass.

They aren't speaking, but their silence is oppressive, louder than any words.

My breath catches as I realize their faces are hollow, eyes sunken and empty, yet somehow still fixed on me.

I take a step back, my instincts screaming at me to run, but my body won't cooperate.

I'm frozen, a spectator to my own unraveling.

One of the figures raises a hand and points, the movement slow and deliberate.

The others follow, their arms lifting in unison to gesture toward the edge of the cemetery, where the woods creep like dark fingers over the land.

No, not the woods.

Annabel's grave.

A chill races down my spine, spreading like ice through my veins. I swallow hard and force my legs to move, each step heavier than the last. The group doesn't follow, but I can feel their gaze boring into my back, their collective will pushing me toward the headstone I've avoided since her death.

When I reach it, I stop short, my chest tightening as if the air itself has turned against me. The grave is simple, unadorned. No flowers, no trinkets left behind by mourners. Just a slab of granite etched with her name:

Annabel Lee Dupin

Beloved Daughter, Eternal Muse

But it's not the name that sends my heart into freefall. It's the date beneath it.

The death date isn't in the past; it's in the future—weeks away.

My breath quickens as I stare at the stone, the numbers blurring and reforming like a cruel trick of the mind.

This can't be real. It's impossible. Annabel is already gone.

I was there when it happened—or at least, I felt it happen.

I've been living with the weight of it ever since.

A rustling sound behind me snaps me out of my trance.

I turn, half-expecting to see the group of ghosts again, but the cemetery is empty.

The wind picks up, carrying the salty tang of the sea, and I shiver.

When I look back at the headstone, the date hasn't changed.

It glares at me like a warning, a taunt.

And then I see the grave next to hers.

I don't want to look. Every fiber of my being tells me to turn around, to run back to the cottage and lock the door, to pretend none of this is happening. But something

stronger—a pull I can't define—compels me forward. My feet move of their own accord, bringing me to the adjacent headstone.

It's smaller than Annabel's, less ornate. The inscription is stark, unadorned:

Calum Vey

Devoted Lover, Tormented Soul

The death date matches hers.

My knees give out, and I collapse onto the damp earth, my mind reeling. I press my palms against the ground, desperate for something solid, something real, but the world feels as though it's spinning off its axis. This isn't just a warning—it's a death sentence.

"I can't live without my life," I sob into the air. "Tell me how I'm supposed to live without my soul!"

The air shifts around me, growing colder, heavier.

I look up, and the ghosts are back, their forms encircling me like a silent jury.

Their faces, though indistinct, seem accusatory, their hollow eyes burning with a purpose I can't comprehend.

One of them steps forward, raising a hand to point at me, then to the grave.

"No," I whisper, shaking my head. "No, this isn't real. It can't be."

The figure tilts its head, as if mocking my denial. The others join in, their hands all

pointing now, their silence deafening. I clench my fists, the urge to scream building in my chest, but no sound escapes. I'm trapped in their judgment, in this nightmare of my own making.

"What do you want?" I finally manage, my voice cracking. "What am I supposed to do?"

The shadow moves closer, its form solidifying just enough for me to see the outline of its face. It's a woman, her features hauntingly familiar. Annabel.

Her lips part, but no words come out. Instead, the sound of the wind shifts, carrying her voice like a whisper through the trees.

"You," it says, fragmented and broken. "Your fault. Your end."

I scramble back, my heart pounding as her form flickers, dissolving into the shadows.

The others follow, their presence dissipating like mist under the morning sun.

But their absence doesn't bring relief. It leaves a void, a suffocating emptiness that presses down on me like the weight of the grave itself.

I stare at the headstone with my name on it, my chest heaving, my mind racing. The implications claw at the edges of my sanity, each thought more unbearable than the last. Annabel's death wasn't just a tragedy—it was a harbinger. A curse. And it's coming for me.

As the last rays of daylight fade, plunging the cemetery into darkness, I rise on unsteady legs and turn toward the woods.

The cottage is waiting, its windows glowing faintly in the distance, a beacon in the

storm.

But I know that no amount of light can dispel the shadows that have taken root inside me.

Annabel's voice echoes in my mind as I walk, her words a haunting refrain: "Your fault. Your end."

When I reach Holiday House, the storm has started again, the rain slicing through the night like shards of glass. I step inside, the warmth of the cottage a cruel contrast to the cold that clings to me. I head straight for the studio, my sanctuary and my prison.

The painting of Annabel stands in the center of the room, her eyes following me as I move. I grab a brush, my hands shaking, and begin to paint, desperate to capture her image, to understand her message, to exorcise the demons that have taken root in my soul.

But as the hours pass, the lines blur, the colors bleed, and the painting takes on a life of its own.

Annabel's face twists, her expression morphing into something unrecognizable—rage, sorrow, betrayal.

The brush falls from my hand, clattering to the floor, and I stumble back, staring at the canvas in horror.

The storm outside crescendos, the wind howling like a banshee, the rain pounding against the windows. I collapse into the chair, my body trembling, my mind fracturing under the weight of everything I've seen, everything I've done.

And in the distance, barely audible over the chaos, Annabel's laughter rings out,

hollow and haunting, a ghostly melody that promises no rest, no peace.

Only the end.

Chapter Fifteen

Jonathan—past

The salt-swept wind claws at my face as I crest the path to the cliffs, a tangle of emotions knotted in my chest. She's already there, perched precariously close to the edge.

The hem of her dress flutters like a pale, beckoning flag in the wind.

For a fleeting moment, she looks like something otherworldly—a siren drawn from the sea, set to lure men into the deep.

“Jonathan,” Annabel calls out without turning, her voice cutting through the roar of the waves crashing below. “You’re late.”

She always knows when I’m near. It’s uncanny, like she’s tuned into some frequency only I emit.

I’d planned to approach her calmly, to wait until I could steady my pulse and tamp down the thoughts that have plagued me since the night I heard what she told him.

But her presence—her very existence—renders rationality impossible.

“I heard you the other night,” I finally utter the only words running through my mind.

“What do you think you heard?” Her voice is cold, calculated .

“That it would degrade you to marry me.” I gulp down the words, each cutting cleaner than a knife.

She doesn’t respond. Maybe it was wrong of me to linger, to listen, but I can’t help myself. Not when it comes to her.

“I promised you once that I would always be here for you.” I close the distance between us. My boots scrape against the rocky path, sending loose stones skittering toward the precipice.

“You’re not exactly known for keeping promises,” she spits, turning to shoot me a look over her shoulder. Her lips curve in that infuriating, intoxicating way they always do, as though she’s both amused and utterly unbothered by my presence.

“And yet, here I am,” I slip a wisp of her raven hair between my fingers. Annabel is many things—unpredictable, impetuous, magnetic—but she’s also fragile, in a way she’d never admit. “It’s dangerous up here,” I say, nodding toward the jagged rocks below. “If the wind shifts, you could?—”

“Fall?” She cuts me off, laughing as she steps back from the edge. Her hair whips around her face, a wild halo against the storm-darkening sky. “Don’t worry, Jonathan. I’m not planning on making you a witness to anything so dramatic. At least, not today.”

Her words hang in the air, sharp and unsettling. I clench my fists, wishing I could say the right thing to anchor her, to pull her back from whatever invisible brink she’s teetering on. But Annabel is a force unto herself, as untouchable as the tide.

“Why did you come?” she finally says.

“I had to see you—had to know if you meant what you said. You speak like I’m

nothing to you.”

Her dark gaze hangs with mine then. “I tell him what he needs to hear.”

My eyes narrow on her soft features. One look from her breaks my heart. She haunts my waking moments and my dreams. “So it was a lie?”

“I meant it in the moment,” comes her soft confession, the words land like a dagger in my heart.

“Do you want me to leave? Never come back? I will if you say the words.” I growl.

She doesn’t say anything, but I see emotion welling in her dark eyes.

Anger bubbles up inside of me then. “Why do you do this? Why do you keep us both on a string? You know the slowest way to kill someone you love is never loving them enough, that’s what you’re doing to me, Annabel. You’re fucking killing me one word—one moment—at a time.”

She shakes her head, tears flowing from her eyes.

“No, please don’t say that.” She wipes at her cheeks.

“I just—can’t bear the thought of a life without you in it.

” She turns to face me fully. Her eyes, dark and inscrutable, search mine for a beat too long.

“Sometimes I need to talk to someone who isn’t him. ”

“Why? What’s wrong with the perfect, incomparable Calum Vey?”

“Everything,” she says softly, her voice almost lost to the wind. She wraps her arms around herself, though I can’t tell if it’s the chill or her thoughts she’s trying to ward off. “Nothing. I don’t know.”

“Annabel,” I press, stepping closer. “You can’t just say something like that and leave it hanging. If he’s hurt you, if there’s something I can do?—”

“He hasn’t hurt me,” she interrupts, her tone sharp but not unkind. “Not the way you’re thinking, anyway. It’s just... Calum expects so much. From himself, from me. I can’t live up to it.”

I’ve never been able to hide my emotions where she’s concerned, and now is no exception.

The relief at her admission is immediate, a flood of light in the shadowy recesses of my mind.

“You don’t have to live up to his expectations with me,” I say, the words tumbling out before I can second-guess them.

I reach for her hand, and to my surprise, she lets me take it.

“You could walk away. You could start over.”

She looks down at our hands, her brow furrowing slightly. “Walk away and go where? To you?”

“Yes,” I say, the word a vow, a lifeline. “You don’t have to be anyone but yourself with me. You know that.”

Her lips part, and for a moment, I think she’s going to agree. But then she pulls her

hand away, her gaze flicking to the horizon. “You’re sweet, Jonathan. And I care about you. I really do. But it’s not that simple.”

“It could be,” I argue, desperation creeping into my voice. “You don’t owe him anything, Annabel. You deserve to be happy.”

She shakes her head, a bittersweet smile curving her lips. “Happiness is overrated. What I need is someone who can challenge me. Someone who makes me feel alive.”

“And you think Calum does that?” The bitterness in my tone surprises even me. “He’s so consumed by his own ambition he can’t even see you for who you really are.”

“And you can?” she counters, her eyes flashing.

“You think you’re the only one who understands me?

That’s your problem, Jonathan. You see me as some idealized version of myself.

Calum makes me feel safe, but you make me feel free.

And I...” She trails off, her voice catching. “I don’t know what I need.”

The confession feels like a knife to the gut, and yet I can’t bring myself to blame her. Annabel has always been a storm, a whirlwind of contradictions and impossible beauty. How could I expect her to choose between the sun and the sea?

“You don’t have to decide right now,” I say finally, my voice low and steady. “Just... don’t shut me out. Don’t let him be the only one you turn to.”

She looks at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears. “I don’t want to hurt you,

Jonathan.”

“Then don’t,” I whisper, closing the last bit of distance between us. My hands find her arms, my grip firm but gentle. “Stay.”

For a heartbeat, she leans into me, her warmth a balm against the cold. But then she pulls away, her gaze flickering toward the path that leads back to the cottage.

“I have to go,” she says, her voice trembling. “Calum will be wondering where I am.”

“Let him wonder,” I snap, my frustration bubbling to the surface. “He doesn’t own you, Annabel.”

She flinches, as though my words have struck her. “No. He doesn’t.” Her gaze meets mine, filled with something I can’t quite name. Regret? Longing? Fear? “But he’s a part of me, Jonathan. Just like you are. And I can’t... I can’t tear myself apart trying to choose. It’s like tearing my soul in two.”

Before I can respond, she turns and begins walking in the opposite direction of Holiday House, her figure silhouetted against the storm-gray sky.

I want to call after her, to beg her to come back, but the words stick in my throat.

Instead, I watch as she disappears down the path, leaving me alone with the wind and the waves.

As I turn back toward the edge of the cliffs, I’m struck by the crushing weight of what just transpired.

Annabel’s indecision, her impossible beauty, her maddening contradictions—they’re all seared into my mind, as permanent as the jagged rocks below.

And yet, even now, I know I'd follow her anywhere, even if it meant stepping off the edge myself.

The storm grows heavier, the first drops of rain pelting my skin as I make my way back toward the path. But the tempest outside is nothing compared to the one raging within me. Annabel may not know what she needs, but I do. And I'll be damned if I let Calum be the one to give it to her .

By the time I reach the cottage, the rain is coming down in sheets.

My clothes cling to my skin, and my breath fogs in the cool air as I push open the door, not bothering to knock.

The warmth inside is almost suffocating, a stark contrast to the chill that has seeped into my bones.

I peel off my jacket and let it fall to the floor, too drained to care.

Calum's voice greets me before I even see him. "You're soaked."

I glance toward the living room, where he's seated by the fire, a glass of amber liquid in his hand. His gaze is piercing, as though he can see right through me.

"It's raining," I say flatly, kicking off my boots.

He doesn't respond immediately, his eyes narrowing as he takes a sip of his drink. "Where were you?"

The question is casual, but there's an unmistakable edge to it. "Out."

"With Annabel?"

I freeze, my pulse quickening. “Why would you think that?”

Calum’s lips curve into a humorless smile. “Because she’s not here. And because I know you, Jonathan. You’ve always been predictable when it comes to her.”

The accusation hangs in the air, heavy and unspoken. I want to deny it, to tell him he’s wrong, but the words catch in my throat. Instead, I meet his gaze head-on, my silence speaking volumes.

“You should be careful,” he says finally, his tone deceptively calm. “Annabel isn’t as innocent as she looks. She’ll chew you up and spit you out without a second thought.”

“And you’re any better?” I counter, my voice rising despite myself. “You’re so obsessed with her you can’t see that she’s drowning. You think you’re saving her, but you’re just pulling her down with you.”

His expression darkens, and for a moment, I think he’s going to lunge at me. But then he leans back in his chair, his grip on his glass tightening. “At least I’m not hiding in the shadows, waiting for scraps of her affection. At least I’m honest about what I want.”

The words cut deeper than I’d like to admit, and I’m left standing there, drenched and seething, as he turns his attention back to the fire. I’ve always known Calum and I were bound to clash, but this... this feels like the beginning of something far more destructive.

I vow then to inflict the kind of emotional pain she’s asked me to live with. I will make Annabel regret her decision to stay. Even if it kills me too.

Chapter Sixteen

Calum

Holiday House is a mausoleum of memories now. Annabel is everywhere and nowhere. Every corner holds her fingerprints, every shadow curls around her absence.

I sit at the desk in the small study she loved, its surface still scattered with reminders of her—a broken fountain pen, dried lavender stalks, her floral stationary.

Lightning cracks the sky, illuminating the room in sharp relief, and my eyes fall to the corner where her trunk sits.

It's a weathered thing, edges worn smooth by time, smelling faintly of cedar and salt.

Annabel always kept her most private treasures inside, hidden from prying eyes.

Not that she had to hide from me—I was her shadow, her confidant.

But she still locked it when she thought I wasn't looking.

I don't know what makes me get up and cross the room. Maybe it's the storm, or maybe it's her voice, faint but undeniable, whispering through the house like a siren call.

The trunk creaks as I open it. Her scent escapes—a blend of jasmine and something deeper, earthier, like damp soil after rain.

My hand trembles as I lift the lid and sift through her belongings: silk scarves, a tangle of gold bracelets, a pack of tarot cards missing the Tower.

Beneath it all, my fingers brush leather.

The journal.

I freeze, every muscle taut. She never let me read it. When I'd tease her about it, her smile would harden, her voice sharpening like a blade. "Some secrets are meant to stay secrets, Calum."

But she's gone now, and the journal is here, a relic of her mind, her soul. I take it out, my thumb tracing the frayed edges of the cover. It feels alive, as if it holds a pulse.

I hesitate only for a moment before opening it.

The first entry is dated almost a year before her death. The ink is bold, her handwriting loopy but elegant.

Ravensreach feels like the edge of the world.

Calum loves it here, but I don't know. The waves are too loud at night, like they're trying to break down the walls.

I told him it's romantic, but that's what he wants to hear, isn't it?

Romantic. Everything here has to mean something.

The cliffs. The storms. The silence. It's all so heavy, like it's waiting to crush me.

The pages that follow are a patchwork of thoughts, some light and effervescent,

others dripping with tension.

She writes about lazy mornings in bed, tangled in sheets and giggles wrapped in my arms. About Jonathan arriving unexpectedly, always with his easy smile and restless energy that made the house feel smaller.

Jonathan's different when Calum's around, one entry reads. Sharper, maybe. More aware of me. I told myself it's my imagination, but tonight, when Calum went to town, Jonathan looked at me like I was something he could take. I didn't hate it. That's the worst part. I didn't hate it at all.

My grip tightens on the journal, the edges biting into my palm. My chest aches, but I keep reading, my eyes devouring every word like a starving man .

The entries grow darker as the weeks pass. Annabel begins to write about an unease that seems to settle over her like a second skin. She mentions hearing footsteps in the hall at night when she knows we're alone, the sound of laughter—hers—echoing when she isn't speaking.

The cottage is playing tricks on me, she writes. It has to be. Yesterday, I found my hairbrush in the kitchen, of all places. I haven't been in the kitchen in days. And my perfume—Calum says he doesn't smell it, but I swear it lingers everywhere, like a ghost of myself haunting this place.

The wind rattles the windows, pulling me back to the present. The room feels colder now, the journal heavier in my hands.

The entries take a sharp turn in the weeks leading up to her death. The playfulness that defined her words is gone, replaced by a rawness that stings.

Jonathan kissed me today. He didn't ask, didn't wait. He just did it. Calum was in the

studio, lost in one of his frenzies. I wanted to slap Jonathan, to scream, but I didn't. I kissed him back.

I stop breathing. My hands shake, but I force myself to keep reading.

It was wrong. I know it was wrong. But for one moment, I wasn't weighed down by everything. By the expectations. The plans. The suffocating love that Calum pours over me like a flood. Jonathan didn't ask me to be anything but Annabel. Just Annabel. God, what's wrong with me?

My heart is a stone, sinking deeper into cold, dark waters. The journal feels like a living thing now, its pages crackling with the weight of her secrets. I should stop, but I can't. I turn the page, the next entry dated the day before her death.

Something is wrong. I don't know what, but I feel it.

Calum hasn't been himself. He's distant but watching me, always watching.

Jonathan keeps calling, but I can't bring myself to answer.

They're pulling me apart, both of them. And the cottage—it's worse at night.

The waves are louder. The shadows move when I'm not looking.

Last night, I thought I saw myself standing at the edge of the cliffs.

But it wasn't me. It couldn't have been. Could it?

The ink smudges at the end of the entry, as if she'd been interrupted. My hands are slick with sweat, the journal slipping in my grasp. I flip to the next page, expecting more, needing more.

But it's blank.

The journal ends there, as abruptly as her life. I stare at the empty page, willing it to give me answers. It doesn't.

I stand, the chair scraping loudly against the floor. The storm outside roars, the wind howling like a wounded animal. I clutch the journal to my chest, my breath coming in ragged gasps.

Was her death an accident? Or something else?

The cottage seems to close in around me, its shadows lengthening, its silence deafening. The walls feel alive, pulsing with a presence I can't name. I stagger to the window and press my forehead against the cold glass, the storm's fury echoing my own.

The waves crash against the cliffs below, relentless, hungry. They swallowed her once. Did they call to her? Did they lure her to the edge, whisper promises she couldn't resist?

I turn away, the journal still in my hands. Her words are etched into my mind, seared into my soul. She was afraid. Of the cottage. Of us. Of something more.

I sit back down at the desk, my fingers tracing the frayed edges of the journal. The storm rages on, but inside, it's her voice that fills the room, soft and trembling.

"Something is wrong. I don't know what, but I feel it."

So do I.

And I'll find out what it was. Even if it kills me.

Chapter Seventeen

Calum—past

“You’re too serious, Calum.” Annabel is sprawled across the worn leather armchair, her legs tucked beneath her like a cat.

She sips from a crystal glass of red wine, her lips stained the same deep crimson.

Her gaze is lazy, predatory, as she watches me work.

The easel creaks under the pressure of my brushstrokes, the painting taking shape with every drag and flick of color.

“You always look like the weight of the world is crushing you.” Her voice is playful, teasing, but there’s an edge to it, a challenge.

I don’t answer, focusing instead on the canvas. It’s easier to lose myself in the rhythm of creation than to face her head-on. She shifts in her chair, the sound of silk against leather drawing my attention despite myself.

“Come on,” she purrs. “You can’t ignore me all night.”

I glance at her, the firelight casting her in hues of gold and amber. Her hair is wild, tumbling over her shoulders in loose waves, and her eyes glint with mischief. She’s a study in contradictions—chaos wrapped in elegance, shadow bathed in sunshine, recklessness cloaked in refinement .

“I’m working,” I say, my voice clipped. “You wanted me to paint. Let me paint.”

She tilts her head, a smirk tugging at her lips. “I wanted you to paint me, Calum. Not... whatever tortured soul you’re conjuring up over there.”

“It’s not tortured.” The words come out sharper than I intend, and her smirk deepens.

“Of course not,” she says, taking another sip of wine. “You’re just brooding, as usual.”

I bite back a retort, dragging my brush across the canvas in a harsh streak of black.

The truth is, she’s right. The painting isn’t of her, not really.

It’s her essence, her chaos and beauty distilled into color and form.

But no matter how many layers I add, it’s never enough.

She always slips through my grasp, a ghost of herself.

Annabel rises, her movements languid, deliberate. She crosses the room, the hem of her silk robe trailing behind her like smoke. Stopping beside me, she leans in, close enough that her perfume wraps around me.

“Show me,” she whispers, her breath warm against my neck.

I stiffen, my grip on the brush tightening. “It’s not finished.”

“It never is,” she says, her tone light but cutting. She steps around me, her fingers trailing along the edge of the easel. “That’s your problem, Calum. You’re always chasing perfection. But perfection doesn’t exist.”

I watch her, my chest tight with something I can't name. "And what about you, Annabel? Are you perfect?"

She laughs, the sound rich and full of mockery. "Hardly." Her eyes meet mine, and for a moment, the teasing facade slips. "I'm not as perfect as you think I am."

The confession lingers between us, heavy and unspoken. I want to ask what she means, to peel back the layers of her secrets and lay her bare. But I know better than to push her. Annabel gives what she wants to give, nothing more.

Instead, I set down my brush and turn to her fully. "If you want me to paint you, then let me paint you. Properly."

Her brows lift, intrigued. "Properly?"

"Sit for me," I say, gesturing toward the fire. "Pose."

A slow smile spreads across her face, and she tilts her head, considering. "All right," she says finally. "But only if you make it interesting."

She moves to the hearth, the firelight catching on the silk of her robe.

With a dramatic flourish, she slips it off her shoulders, letting it pool around her feet.

Beneath, she wears a simple black slip, the fabric clinging to her curves in all the right places.

She sinks onto the bearskin rug, stretching out like some pagan goddess, her hair spilling around her like liquid midnight.

"Interesting enough for you?" she asks, her voice laced with amusement.

I swallow hard, my throat dry. “That’ll do.”

I pick up my brush again, my hands unsteady as I begin.

She watches me, her gaze unwavering, and I feel the weight of it like a physical touch.

The storm rages outside, but here, in this moment, it’s just the two of us.

The world shrinks to the sound of my brush on canvas, the crackle of the fire, the rhythmic beat of the rain.

As I paint, the tension between us coils tighter, a live wire sparking in the air. Her teasing comments fade, replaced by a charged silence. She shifts slightly, her slip sliding up her thigh, and my pulse quickens.

“Calum,” she says softly, breaking the spell.

I glance up, my brush freezing mid-stroke. “What?”

She bites her lip, a rare moment of vulnerability flickering across her face. “Come here.”

I set down the brush, crossing the room to her. She sits up, her eyes searching mine, and for once, there’s no trace of mockery or deflection. She reaches for me, her fingers grazing my cheek, and I’m undone.

I kiss her, the movement raw and desperate. She responds in kind, her hands tangling in my hair as she pulls me closer. The fire roars behind us, its heat a pale imitation of the inferno between us.

I settle her back on the rug and nestle my hips between her thighs. My hands hold her cheeks as I kiss along her collarbone, sinking my teeth into the soft flesh of her shoulders and biting down hard enough to leave marks. She squirms and sighs, moans of pleasure sneaking from her lips.

“Do you want me to stop?” I utter against her skin.

“Never,” she replies before her lips attach at my neck and suck in slow, sensual movements.

“Good. You’ll never leave me, will you?” I murmur.

“Never,” she says.

I thread my fingers into her hair, gripping tightly so she’s unable to turn away from me. “I think you like it when I own you like this. Do you like when I overpower you? When you can’t move and I can do whatever I want?”

“Yes.” She groans, head nodding imperceptibly as she arches her hips into mine. “I love it.”

“I love you,” I whisper against her lips, the words tumbling out before I can stop them.

She stills, her breath hitching. For a moment, I think she’s going to say it back. But instead, she turns her head to the side, denying me her lips.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my voice hoarse.

She shakes her head, a small, bitter smile tugging at her lips. “Nothing. It’s just... sometimes I think you see me as something I’m not. Something I can never be.”

“Don’t do that,” I say, my frustration bleeding into my tone. “Don’t brush me off. ”

She looks up, her eyes shining with something I can’t decipher. “You don’t understand, Calum. You never have.”

Before I can respond, a noise outside draws our attention. A shadow moves past the window, barely discernible in the storm. My heart lurches, and I rise, crossing to the window. Peering out into the rain-soaked darkness, I see nothing. Just the wind and the waves, the storm’s fury unabated.

“Probably just the wind,” Annabel says, but there’s an edge to her voice now, a crack in her armor.

I nod, but unease settles in my chest. Turning back to her, I find her slipping back into her robe, her playful demeanor firmly back in place.

“Paint me again tomorrow,” she says, her smile forced. “Maybe then you’ll get it right.”

As she retreats to the bedroom, I linger by the window, staring out into the storm. The shadows shift and dance, and for a moment, I think I see someone standing there. Watching.

Jonathan.

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Chapter Eighteen

Calum

The studio feels colder tonight, the dampness from the ocean clawing its way through the walls.

The smell of turpentine and linseed oil hangs heavy in the air.

The canvas on the easel is a thing of torment, half-finished, half-alive.

Annabel's face stares back at me, her eyes wide and unyielding.

They burn with accusation, as if to say, You think you know me? You never did.

I've lost track of the hours spent in this room, slashing brushstrokes into existence.

My hand moves as if guided by something other than myself, a compulsion I can't explain.

What started as a simple portrait of Annabel—a quiet homage to her memory—has twisted into something grotesque.

Her delicate features remain, but shadows pool in unexpected places, warping her beauty.

And the eyes. God, the eyes. They follow me even when I look away.

A storm brews in the background of the painting, one I don't remember adding.

Waves churn violently, gray and white foam crashing against jagged rocks.

The ocean looks hungry, as if it's trying to swallow her whole.

My hand must have painted it, but it feels foreign, as though someone else held the brush.

I take a step back, the floorboards groaning beneath me. The room feels tighter, the air too thick to breathe. I tell myself to stop. Just for tonight. But I can't. Not until I understand what the painting wants.

I pick up the brush again, my fingers trembling. The bristles are stiff, laden with paint. I dab the palette, mixing black with the faintest touch of crimson. The color of regret. Or blood.

As I reach for the canvas, a whisper threads through the room, faint and indistinct. I freeze, the hairs on my arms rising.

"Finish it."

The words are barely audible, as if carried on the wind that howls outside. My breath catches. I turn slowly, scanning the room. It's empty, of course. Just me and the shadows. But the whisper lingers, wrapping itself around my ears like a phantom's touch.

"Annabel?" I say her name aloud, hating the way it sounds, fragile and desperate.

Silence.

The rain continues its assault on the windows, and somewhere in the distance, a branch snaps in the wind.

I tell myself I imagined it. Stress. Grief.

Too much coffee and not enough sleep. But deep down, I know better.

Holiday House has always had its secrets, and tonight it feels as though it's watching me.

The brush touches the canvas, almost of its own accord.

The black paint spreads like a wound, deepening the storm in the background.

My hand moves faster now, guided by something I can't name.

The waves grow larger, more violent, threatening to engulf Annabel entirely.

Her expression shifts, subtle but unmistakable. Fear .

I blink, stepping back. Her mouth, which I'd painted in a serene half-smile, now twists downward, trembling as if mid-scream. My stomach churns. This isn't what I painted. I know it isn't.

"Finish it."

The whisper returns, louder this time. A command. I whip around, the brush clattering to the floor.

"Who's there?" My voice breaks, echoing off the high ceiling.

No answer. Only the storm, relentless and unyielding. I press my hands to my temples, squeezing my eyes shut. I'm unraveling, I know it. But when I open my eyes, the painting is different again.

Annabel's eyes are darker now, shadowed and hollow. They seem to glisten, as if wet with tears. Her hand—one I hadn't painted—reaches out of the canvas, her fingers splayed as if begging for help. Behind her, the storm devours the coastline, pulling pieces of the land into its maw.

My knees buckle, and I collapse onto the worn wooden floor. The room tilts, spinning in and out of focus. My breath comes in shallow gasps, the walls pressing closer with every heartbeat. I need to get out. Now.

I stumble into the hall, the dim light from the studio spilling out behind me. The rest of the house is dark, the kind of darkness that feels alive, crawling and seeping into every corner. I grip the banister as I descend the stairs, my footsteps heavy and uneven.

In the kitchen, I pour a glass of whiskey, my hands shaking so badly I nearly drop the bottle.

The liquor burns as it slides down my throat, grounding me, if only for a moment.

I lean against the counter, staring out the window into the storm.

The ocean is barely visible, a black expanse dotted with whitecaps.

Her voice comes again, soft and mocking. "Finish it. "

I spin around, the glass slipping from my hand and shattering on the floor.

“Stop!” I shout into the empty kitchen, my voice cracking with the weight of my own desperation.

Nothing. Just the storm.

I don’t know how long I stand there, my chest heaving, my fists clenched. When I finally move, it’s not by choice but by compulsion. My feet carry me back to the studio. The painting waits for me, unchanged yet different, its presence oppressive.

I pick up the brush again, my hand steady now. The fear is still there, but it’s dulled, replaced by something else. Determination? Madness? I don’t know. All I know is that I have to finish it.

Stroke by stroke, the painting comes alive.

The waves climb higher, swallowing the rocks.

Annabel’s outstretched hand grows more defined, her fingers curling as if clawing for escape.

Her eyes bore into mine, pleading and accusatory all at once.

The shadows around her shift, taking on shapes I can’t quite make out—faces, maybe. Or monsters.

By the time I set the brush down, the first light of dawn is creeping through the window. The painting is complete, but it’s not a portrait anymore. It’s something else entirely. A warning. A curse.

I stagger back, my legs weak, and collapse onto the worn armchair in the corner of the room. The painting looms over me, alive in a way that no painting should be. My

vision blurs, exhaustion and fear dragging me under. As I drift into uneasy sleep, her whisper echoes one last time.

“Thank you.”

I wake with a start, the afternoon sun glaring through the window. The storm has passed, leaving the world eerily calm. For a moment, I think it was all a nightmare. But then my eyes land on the painting.

It's not the same as I left it .

Annabel is gone. The canvas is empty, save for the storm—a gray, churning abyss that seems to pull me in the longer I look at it. My chest tightens, my heart pounding in my ears.

I stumble to my feet, knocking over the chair in my haste. The painting is cold to the touch, the surface smooth and empty. No trace of her remains, not even the hand that had reached so desperately for salvation.

I sink to my knees, the weight of it all crushing me. The whispers, the changes in the painting, the storm—it's all too much. I clutch my head, trying to make sense of the chaos, but the answers elude me.

And then, faintly, I hear it again. Not a whisper this time, but a laugh. Light and airy, like wind chimes in the breeze. Her laugh.

It echoes through the studio, fading into the distance. I look around, my eyes wild, but there's no one here. Just me and the empty canvas.

And the storm inside me that will never end.

Chapter Nineteen

Calum—past

The light's gone gray by the time I hike the bluff back to Holiday House.

The wind's picking up again—sharp with sea salt, blowing through the pines like breath through teeth.

I can still taste the oil paints on my fingers, the scent of turpentine bleeding from my shirt.

The canvas under my arm is still wet, blues and ochres slashed in furious streaks across the panel.

Something about it felt right today. Alive.

I should feel good. Steady.

But the second I reach the porch and see the front door cracked open, that unease I've tried to paint away begins to rise again.

Voices. Laughter.

Annabel's laugh.

I step inside, boots heavy on the hardwood. The living room's bathed in gold from

the fireplace. And there they are—Annabel and Jonathan.

On the couch.

His arm around her shoulders. Her head resting lightly against him. Their bodies too close in a way that shouldn't belong to anyone but me.

She says something I can't hear, and he laughs softly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear like it's his right.

My throat dries.

And then?—

He kisses her.

Quick. Too familiar. His lips on hers.

And everything inside me breaks loose.

The canvas drops from my arm, slamming against the floor with a sickening crack. My easel clatters down after it, wooden legs splintering as it bounces against the stairs.

They both jerk apart.

“Calum—” she starts, but I'm already moving.

“You son of a—” I roar, charging forward and shoving Jonathan off the couch. He stumbles backward, arms flailing.

Annabel screams, lunging to stop me. “Calum! Stop!”

“This animal just kissed you!” I spit, pointing at Jonathan, my voice raw with fury.

Annabel throws herself between us. “I pushed him away! It was nothing! Innocent!”

But I can’t hear her. All I see is red. Jonathan’s smirk. His smug posture. Like he’s waiting for me to lose it. Like he wants me to.

He dusts himself off slowly, eyes cold and amused. “You need to calm down, Van Gogh. That temper of yours is gonna get you nowhere.”

“I’ll show you temper,” I growl, stepping forward again.

Jonathan meets me halfway and shoves me hard, right into the side of a finished painting—one I spent hours on. The frame snaps in two beneath my back. The canvas tears. I hear myself snarl.

Annabel’s crying now. “Please stop!”

But I’ve already surged forward .

I swing.

My fist connects with the side of his jaw. A sickening crack , then the sting in my knuckles. Jonathan’s head snaps to the side, but he straightens slowly, a laugh building in his chest.

“You want to do this?” he sneers. “Pick your battles wisely, Calum.”

I lunge again, but he sidesteps, grabbing my wrist and twisting it just enough to hold

me back.

“I’m not going to fight you,” he says, pushing me off with controlled force. “You’re not worth the bruise.”

And then he turns.

Walks out of Holiday House like it doesn’t belong to me. Like she doesn’t.

The screen door slams behind him. The wind swallows him up, and silence crashes down like a wave after thunder.

Annabel stands near the broken painting, trembling. Her hair’s a mess, cheeks streaked with tears. My own chest is heaving, my hands shaking from the aftershock of violence.

“Are you okay?” she asks softly.

“I should be asking you that.”

She looks at me, wounded. “Calum... it wasn’t what it looked like.”

I sink into the armchair, dragging a hand down my face.

“I saw him kiss you.”

“And I pulled away, ” she says. “Jonathan doesn’t know how to let go. He’s always been that way. But I didn’t want it.”

“I’m not sure he gives a damn what you want.” My voice is tight. “Maybe we should leave. Go somewhere else. Get away from him. He can’t accept this— us .”

She steps forward, her bare feet whispering across the floor. “I could never leave Ravensreach,” she whispers.

I meet her eyes.

“It’s the only place that’s ever felt like home.” She kneels in front of me, takes my face in her hands. “I’ll die here, Calum.”

Something inside me twists. Not with jealousy. Not with rage. With fear. A fear I don’t know how to name.

“I can’t lose you,” I murmur.

“You won’t,” she says.

“I want him gone.”

She sighs, resting her forehead to mine. “He’s my oldest friend.”

“He doesn’t treat you like a friend.”

She presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “I’ll talk to him. I’ll make sure it never happens again. I promise.”

The storm outside rages harder now. Rain slams against the windows like it’s trying to claw inside. The lights flicker, once. Twice.

“Let’s go to the couch,” she says softly.

She leads me there, curling up beside me. Her body fits against mine like memory. She pulls my hand to her chest and keeps it there like a tether.

“Tell me about your painting today.”

I breathe out slowly. “It came out... okay. There’s something in the color. Something I haven’t seen before.”

“That’s good.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

She runs her fingers through my hair, slow and gentle. Her touch melts the last of the tension from my shoulders.

“I hate how he looks at you,” I whisper. “Like he owns you.”

“He doesn’t.”

“He thinks he does.”

She kisses my temple. “You’re the one I’m curled up with.”

“Don’t see him again.”

She hesitates. Her hand stills in my hair.

“I can’t promise that,” she says. “But I can promise he’ll never touch me again.”

I clench my jaw. “I want more than that.”

“I know,” she whispers. “But Jonathan’s been part of my life since I had skinned knees and tangled braids. Cutting him out isn’t simple.”

“You’re not simple.”

She smiles faintly. “No. I’m not.”

She resumes stroking my hair. Her touch soothes me. The fury ebbs into a low throb. My eyes grow heavy.

“Rest,” she murmurs. “I’ve got you.”

I close my eyes. The scent of her shampoo—salt and citrus—fills my nose. Her heartbeat pulses steady against my shoulder.

But sleep doesn’t come easy.

Even with her beside me, even with her warmth, my dreams are choked with shadows.

Of Jonathan’s smirk.

Of Annabel’s tears.

And the terrible, electric truth that I’ve never fought for something so hard?—

And still might lose her.

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Chapter Twenty

Calum

The morning sun pierces through the curtains of Holiday House, streaking the walls with pale gold.

It feels intrusive, unwelcome. I sit at the edge of the dining table, Annabel's journal splayed open in front of me like an autopsy.

The inked words stare back, jagged and chaotic, a voice from the grave pulling me into her head.

Every line feels like a blade, sharp with meaning, cutting deeper with every turn of the page. Words tangled in riddles and contradictions. I love him, but he suffocates me. Was she talking about me? Or Jonathan?

The thought lingers like a bitter taste, and I slam the book shut, unable to read another word. I rake a hand through my hair, my chest tight, and reach for the whiskey bottle I'd left on the counter the night before. The burn in my throat steadies me, if only for a moment.

Jonathan. He's the only one left who might understand this madness. He was always there, in the periphery, watching us, watching her. I don't want to admit it, but part of me wonders if he's just as haunted by Annabel as I am. Maybe more.

I grab the journal, shoving it under my arm, and head for the door.

The walk to Jonathan's house is a short one, but the tension in my shoulders makes every step feel longer.

His place sits on the other side of Ravensreach Point, perched atop a rocky hill overlooking the ocean.

It's smaller than Holiday House but equally lonely, a shadow of the grandeur our family homes once boasted.

When I walk up the gravel driveway, I see him through the window, standing at the kitchen counter with a coffee mug in hand. He glances up as I approach, his expression shifting from surprise to something unreadable. Cautious, maybe. Guilty?

He opens the door before I can knock. "Calum," he says, his tone flat but polite. His eyes flick to the journal tucked under my arm. "What brings you here?"

"We need to talk." I step inside without waiting for an invitation. The air smells of coffee and faintly of salt, like the ocean is trying to creep in through the walls.

Jonathan closes the door behind me, his movements slow and deliberate. "Talk about what?"

"Annabel." Her name feels like a challenge on my tongue. "And this." I hold up the journal before tossing it onto the coffee table. The impact makes him flinch.

He doesn't sit, doesn't touch the book. Instead, he crosses his arms and leans against the wall, his face tightening. "You're reading her journal now? Isn't that a bit... invasive?"

I glare at him, the tension between us crackling like static. "Don't play righteous with me, Jonathan. You cared about her. You probably think you knew her better than

anyone, right?”

His jaw clenches, and for a moment, I think he might tell me to leave. But then he sighs, his shoulders slumping as if he’s deflating. “What’s in it?”

I hesitate. I don’t want to admit how much of it I’ve read or how much of it I don’t understand. “She wrote about feeling watched. About... being trapped. And she mentions us.” My voice hardens. “Both of us.”

Jonathan doesn’t move, but his eyes darken. “What does she say?”

“She said she loved me but that I suffocated her. She said you...” I stop, watching him carefully. “You made her feel free.”

His lips part slightly, but no words come out. Instead, he looks away, his gaze settling on the window.

“She was always good at making us feel like we were the only ones who mattered,” he says quietly.

“Is that your way of admitting you loved her?” The question hangs between us, heavier than I intended.

Jonathan’s head snaps back toward me, his expression hardening. “Loved her?” He laughs, but it’s bitter and hollow. “Don’t act like you didn’t already know, Calum. It was obvious to everyone. Even her.”

“Then why didn’t you—” I stop myself, biting down on the question before it tumbles out. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of thinking he had a chance with her.

“Why didn’t I what?” he presses, stepping closer. “Sweep her off her feet? Steal her from you?”

I don’t answer. I can’t. My fists clench at my sides, my nails digging into my palms.

Jonathan shakes his head, his voice softening but losing none of its edge. “Because it didn’t matter. She didn’t want me. She liked the attention, sure, but she always went back to you, didn’t she?”

“Don’t make it sound like I trapped her,” I snap. “She chose me.”

“Did she?” He gestures toward the journal, his tone cutting. “Because it doesn’t sound like she was as happy with you as you like to believe.”

The words hit their mark, and I feel the heat rise in my chest. “What the hell do you know about it?” I take a step toward him, closing the space between us. “You don’t know what we had.”

Jonathan doesn’t back down. “I know she was different before you. Lighter. Happier.”

“Bullshit.” My voice rises, the anger bubbling over. “You think you’re the hero in this story, don’t you? The noble friend who would have saved her if only she’d picked you.”

He flinches, but only for a second. Then his expression hardens into something colder. “No, Calum. I’m not the hero. But neither are you.”

The room falls into an uneasy silence, broken only by the distant sound of waves crashing against the cliffs. Jonathan finally moves, picking up the journal and flipping it open. His eyes scan the pages, his brow furrowing as he reads.

“She mentioned being watched?” he asks after a moment, his voice quieter now.

I nod, my anger simmering beneath the surface. “Yeah. She said she felt like someone was always there. Watching her through the windows, following her.”

Jonathan’s fingers tighten around the journal, his knuckles turning white.

“She told me something similar once. Just before...” He trails off, his throat working as he swallows.

“Before what?”

He hesitates, his gaze flicking to me before returning to the journal.

“Before the night she died. She seemed... distant. Like she was somewhere else entirely. When I asked her about it, she just laughed it off. But later, she pulled me aside and said she felt like something bad was going to happen. Like someone was waiting for her.”

The words send a chill down my spine, but I force myself to stay composed. “And you didn’t think to tell me this before?”

“What difference would it have made?” he snaps, slamming the journal shut. “She’s gone, Calum. Nothing we say or do will change that.”

“But it might help me understand.” My voice cracks, betraying the weight of my desperation. “Don’t you want to know what really happened to her?”

Jonathan looks at me then, really looks at me, and I see something in his eyes that I can’t quite place. Regret? Fear? Pity? He sighs, setting the journal back on the table.

“I don’t know if we’ll ever understand her,” he says quietly. “She was a mystery to both of us, and maybe that’s how she wanted it.”

I leave Jonathan’s house feeling no closer to answers, only more questions. The journal is heavy in my hand as I walk back to Holiday House, the storm clouds gathering on the horizon mirroring the chaos in my head.

Annabel’s voice echoes in my mind, fragmented and haunting. You and Calum both want me, but neither of you truly understands me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jonathan

The cliffs of Ravensreach Point stretch endlessly before me, jagged teeth biting into a slate-gray sky. The wind howls, wild and unrestrained, whipping at my coat like an impatient child demanding my attention. I dig my hands into my pockets, the cold biting at my fingertips as I approach the edge.

I haven't been here since that night. Not since she leaned into me, her laughter swept away by the waves crashing below.

Annabel.

Her name is a ghost, spoken only by the wind now, carried into the distance. I close my eyes and let the memory take hold. It always does.

The sun hangs low in the sky, a burnt orange bleeding into deep indigos.

Annabel perches on the edge of the cliff, her legs dangling over the abyss like she's daring the wind to take her.

Her hair, jet black in the dying light, whips around her face in a chaotic halo.

She doesn't bother to push it away. She never does .

"You're going to fall one day," I say, leaning against the rocks a few feet back.

She turns her head, flashing that smile—the one that’s half mischief, half melancholy.
“Maybe I want to.”

I frown, the humor lost on me. “Don’t joke about that.”

Her eyes soften for a moment, but the teasing edge in her voice remains. “You’re worse than Calum, you know that?”

The name feels like a slap, though she says it with her usual flippancy.

She looks back out at the horizon, her expression unreadable.

“He’d probably tie me to a chair if he thought it would keep me safe.

You can’t kiss me anymore, you can’t act like that.

Calum and I are together, please respect that. ”

“Is that what this is about?” I ask, stepping closer. “Him?”

She shrugs, a motion so delicate it’s almost imperceptible. “He doesn’t mean to be... so much. He just is.”

I sit beside her, careful to keep a respectable distance. The edge of the cliff has always made me nervous, but not her. Never her. She thrives on the thrill. “What do you mean?”

She picks at the frayed hem of her sweater, her nails painted a chipped red. “I mean, he doesn’t know how to let me breathe. Everything is this grand declaration with him—his art, his love, his anger. It’s all... consuming.”

I swallow hard, unsure of what to say. “That’s just how he is, huh?”

“It’s the thing I love about him and the thing I hate about him too,” she says, her voice sharper than I expect. “Sometimes I hate being this... this muse. This object he worships and obsesses over. It’s not love. It’s possession.”

“Annabel—”

“I’m serious, Jonathan.” She looks at me then, her eyes bright and wild, like the sea below us. “He doesn’t love me. Not really. He loves the idea of me, the version he’s created in his head.”

Her words hang heavy in the air between us, the truth of them undeniable. But it’s not my place to agree. Instead, I reach out, brushing a strand of hair from her face. She doesn’t pull away.

“What about me?” I ask before I can stop myself. The words spill out, raw and unfiltered. “Do I love you, or just the idea of you?”

She tilts her head, studying me with a faint smile. “You’re different.”

“How?”

“You just... see me.”

Her hand brushes mine, a fleeting touch that sends a jolt through my entire body. I want to pull her closer, to kiss her, to tell her everything I’ve kept bottled up for years. But I don’t. I can’t.

“You could leave him,” I say instead, my voice low. “You don’t have to stay.”

She laughs, but there's no joy in it. "And then what? Be with you? You think that would solve anything?"

The words sting, but I don't flinch. "I don't know. Maybe."

She sighs, leaning back on her hands. "You're sweet, Jonathan. Too sweet for your own good. But you don't understand. Calum and I... we're tied together, whether we like it or not. It's messy and complicated and probably toxic as hell, but it's ours."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Of course not," she says, her voice cracking slightly. "But I don't know how to untangle myself from him. Or if I even want to."

The admission cuts deeper than I expect. I look away, unable to bear the sight of her so raw, so vulnerable. She's always been a hurricane, tearing through everything in her path, but now she seems... lost .

"I just wish things were simpler," she whispers, more to herself than to me.

I don't respond. What could I say? That I'd make things simple for her? That I'd sweep her away from all of this, if only she'd let me? She'd laugh in my face.

And yet, I can't stop myself from hoping.

The memory fades, leaving me hollow. I stare down at the rocks below, the waves relentless in their assault. She's gone, and all that's left is the echo of her voice, the ghost of her laughter.

I light a cigarette, the smoke curling around me like a shield.

The journal Calum brought over sits heavy in my mind, its secrets burning a hole in my consciousness.

But now, standing here where it all began, I pull her words out of the ether.

The pages are worn in my memory, the ink smudged in places, as if touched by tears, her words jumping out at me like accusations.

I love them both, but I hate them too. They suffocate me in different ways. Calum with his intensity, Jonathan with his kindness. I want to run, but I don't know where.

The words are too much to bear. She was right. I am too kind. Too soft. I never fought for her the way Calum did. I let her slip through my fingers, thinking she'd always come back.

But she didn't.

And now I'm left with nothing but questions and regrets.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Calum

The truth lies in the waves.

The words are scrawled hastily in one of Annabel's sketchbooks, as if written in a moment of panic or desperation.

My chest tightens as I read it again, my mind racing.

Annabel wasn't one for riddles, not like this.

She preferred her truths cloaked in laughter or venom, delivered with the precision of a blade. This feels different. Urgent.

I take the sketchbook to the fireplace, the flames casting erratic shadows on the walls.

My hands tremble as I hold the note up to the light, searching for more—a smudge, a clue, anything to give the words meaning.

But there's nothing. Just those six maddening words, staring back at me like a challenge.

Annabel once joked that the waves would swallow her whole if she let them.

It was one of her endless whims, delivered with a coy smile as we sat on the cliffs,

the wind tangling her hair.

“There’s something romantic about it,” she’d said, her voice light, but her eyes distant. “Being claimed by the sea.”

The memory surges forward now, sharp and unrelenting. Annabel’s laugh echoes in my memory, bright and sharp, cutting through the storm of my mind like a blade. “You’re too serious, Calum,” her voice dripping with mockery. “You see monsters in shadows, but sometimes a shadow is just a shadow.”

But this isn’t just a shadow. The sketchbook is real, tangible. Proof of... something. My mind is a maelstrom, fragments of memory and suspicion colliding in a relentless torrent. I stare at it for what feels like hours, as if the answers might materialize if I look hard enough.

Annabel’s voice whispers in my ear, unbidden. “The truth lies in the waves.”

What truth? What was she trying to tell me?

The storm rages through the night, but I can’t sleep. I sift through her sketchbook again, searching for something I might have missed. The sketches of the cliffs are detailed, almost obsessive. She’s captured every jagged edge, every twist of rock, as if trying to map out a secret.

In the margins, she’s written fragmented thoughts, barely legible:

“The waves know.”

“He’s always watching.”

“I can’t breathe.”

The words feel like a scream, trapped on the page. My chest tightens, the walls of the cottage pressing in on me. She was scared. I didn't see it before, blinded by her light, her games. But it's here, laid bare in her own hand. She was terrified, and I didn't save her.

The next morning, the cliffs are slick and treacherous.

I trace the same steps along the cliff as I've done a thousand times before, searching for more clues, more pieces of the puzzle.

The waves crash below, their rhythm hypnotic, relentless.

I stare out at the horizon, where the sky meets the sea, and a strange calm settles over me. The truth lies in the waves.

I step closer to the edge, the wind tugging at my coat. For a moment, I feel weightless, as if the ocean is calling me, pulling me toward its depths. And maybe it is. Maybe that's where the answers are, buried beneath the waves.

But then a voice cuts through the stillness, sharp and unwelcome.

"Calum!"

I turn to see Jonathan standing a few yards away, his expression twisted with something between concern and anger. He's mostly dry despite the rain, his hair falling over his forehead, his coat flapping in the wind.

"What the hell are you doing?" he shouts, striding toward me.

I don't answer, my mind still tangled in Annabel's words, her sketches, her fears. Jonathan grabs my arm, yanking me back from the edge.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” he snaps, his grip tight.

“Maybe that’s the point,” I mutter, the words slipping out before I can stop them.

Jonathan’s face hardens, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t be an idiot, Calum. You think this is what she would’ve wanted?”

I wrench my arm free, my anger flaring. “What do you know about what she wanted?”

His laugh is bitter, sharp as the salt in the air. For a moment, I see the storm in his eyes, mirroring the one inside me.

“I found her sketchbook,” I say finally, my voice low. His expression falters, a flicker of something—recognition?—crossing his face.

“And?” he asks, his voice strained.

“She wrote that the truth lies in the waves.”

He exhales sharply, running a hand through his hair. “That doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means she was here,” I snap. “Maybe it means she... she didn’t just drown, Jonathan. There’s more to it. I can feel it.”

He shakes his head, his gaze darkening. “You’re chasing ghosts, Calum. She’s gone. You have to let her go.”

But I can’t. I won’t. The truth is out there, waiting to be uncovered. And I’ll find it, no matter the cost.

As Jonathan turns to leave, Annabel's voice echoes in my mind once more, soft and haunting.

The truth lies in the waves.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Calum-past

The salt wind catches Annabel's dark hair, curling itself around her neck like a noose.

Morning light drips over her skin like warm honey.

Annabel lays across the grass, barely clothed in that sheer featherweight slip, its hem tangled high on her thigh.

She stretches one arm over her head and squints against the sun, her lips parted, indolent and indifferent.

There's a softness to her—bare legs, bare feet, dark hair spilling like seaweed in every direction.

And then there's the sharpness beneath it. Like something waiting to cut.

My easel's angled in front of her. I've already blocked in her curves with charcoal, but the oils—those I take my time with. Cobalt blue for the shadows beneath her breasts. A kiss of Naples yellow along her ribs. I chase every hollow and slope with my brush, silently worshipping the shape of her.

"You're staring again," she says, eyes still closed.

I dip my brush into the mixture of ochre and cream. "That's the point."

“You stare too hard.” Her tone is light, teasing, but I catch the tightness behind it. “Like you’re trying to memorize me before I disappear.”

I glance at her over the edge of the canvas. “Aren’t I?”

She huffs softly, then shifts. The slip pulls across her breasts and the silk clings to her nipples—taut, dark, obvious. She knows it. She does nothing about it.

“I’m bored,” she sings. “How much longer must I lay here like a corpse while you play God with your little brushes?”

I set my palette down. The brush sticks between my fingers.

“You’re not a corpse,” I murmur, stepping around the easel. “You’re a temptation.”

Her lids lift, those ocean-gray eyes glittering as they meet mine. “Then stop painting and do something about it.”

I crouch beside her, brush still in hand. My voice drops low, dark with want. “You always do this. Get restless right when I’ve captured something perfect. You ruin it.”

Her smile is lazy. “Maybe I like the ruining part.”

I slide the strap of her slip off her shoulder and push it down her body, discarding it in the grass at her side.

Her skin is cream, blushed faintly from the sun, and hot under my touch.

She doesn’t stop me. Her breath stutters only slightly when I lower my mouth to her breast and take her nipple between my lips, sucking slowly, tongue circling the stiff peak.

She moans—soft, broken, immediate. Her hips shift against the grass. I bite down, gently, then release her with a wet sound.

“You’re not bored anymore,” I say.

“No.” Her eyes are glassy now. “Not even a little.”

I dip the tip of my brush into sky blue. The color is thick and luminous. She watches, fascinated, as I lower it to her chest and stroke it gently over the nipple I just left wet and aching.

She shivers .

“You’re mad,” she whispers.

“No,” I murmur, painting a soft swirl around the other nipple, watching her chest rise and fall with shallow breaths, the golden locket she never takes off glimmering at her throat. “I’m inspired.”

I paint a line down the center of her sternum. It trembles. Her thighs press together. My brush keeps going—circling her navel, dipping into it like a secret, then down farther still. I pause just above the juncture of her thighs.

She holds her breath.

“I should finish the painting,” I say.

“You won’t,” she whispers.

“No,” I admit. “I won’t.”

I drop the brush to the grass and lower my mouth between her legs, relishing the bare pink softness of her. She gasps when I lick into her, when I suck her into my mouth, when I flick and curl my tongue until she cries out my name, feral and breathless and utterly undone.

She comes fast. Then again. Her fingers knot in my hair, and she arches into me like she'll die if I stop. The wind tangles around us, lifting her moans to the sea.

When I rise, her body is slack and trembling. Her eyes are wide and wild and reverent.

“Calum—” she breathes.

“Shhh.” I kiss her, tasting her on her lips, and then I slide my pants down my thighs and push inside her in one hard stroke. She gasps. I groan. She's tight, wet, already ruined and still ready for more.

“Mine,” I hiss against her throat as I thrust, slow at first, then faster, deeper, until our bodies slap together and the garden is nothing but heat and sweat and her whispered pleas.

My lips attach at her neck, sucking hard, hard enough to leave a mark.

I bite and nip, causing her to cry out and beg for more .

“Yes—Calum, yes?—”

I hold her down, her wrists pinned above her head, her legs wrapped around my waist. She's everything I can't paint. Everything I can't control.

And yet she's always slipping through my fingers.

When I come, I bury my face in her neck, biting down to mark her.

She strokes my hair, chest still heaving.

I lift my head and stare down at her, lips parted, skin streaked with blue. “Promise me,” I whisper. “You’ll always be mine. My muse. My everything.”

She swallows. Her fingers tighten in my hair.

“I promise,” she husks, but somewhere underneath her submission I sense the lie.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jonathan

“You were watching us, weren’t you?” Calum accuses, his voice low, tight. His fingers grip the edge of the table as if anchoring himself. “The journal—Annabel wrote about someone watching her. That was you, wasn’t it?”

The accusation hangs in the air, sharp as broken glass. I meet his gaze, refusing to flinch. “Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, but the words sound hollow even to me. “She was... paranoid. You know how she could be.”

“She wasn’t paranoid,” Calum snaps, stepping closer. The firelight dances on his face, highlighting the fury simmering beneath his calm facade. “She was afraid. And now I’m starting to understand why.”

I let out a bitter laugh, crossing my arms. “You think I was spying on you? That I’m some villain lurking in the shadows? Don’t flatter yourself, Calum.”

But he doesn’t back down. “You were always around, Jonathan. Always conveniently nearby. Don’t tell me you weren’t watching. ”

I open my mouth to deny it, but the words catch in my throat. The truth is messy, tangled in the kind of emotions I’d rather bury. I can still feel the rain that night, cold and unrelenting, soaking through my coat as I stood at the edge of the trees, staring at the cottage.

That night flashes back in my mind, sharp and vivid.

The rain came down in sheets, drumming against the leaves, turning the ground to mud.

I could see them through the window, their figures silhouetted against the glow of the fire.

Annabel, draped over the couch like some ethereal goddess, her laughter spilling into the night.

And Calum, sitting too close, his hand on her knee.

I remember the ache in my chest, the bitterness curling in my gut. I told myself I was protecting her, watching to make sure she was safe. But deep down, I knew it was a lie. I watched because I couldn't look away.

"I didn't—" I start, but Calum cuts me off, his voice rising.

"Don't lie to me, Jonathan. I can see it all over your face." He steps closer, his presence overwhelming, his anger almost physical. "You were there that night, weren't you? You saw something the night she died, didn't you?"

My pulse quickens, and for a moment, I consider denying it. But what's the point? Calum knows me too well; he always has. "Fine," I say, my voice clipped. "I was there. But not for the reasons you think."

"Then why?" he demands, his eyes burning into mine. "Why were you there, following her like... some creep?"

"Because of her!" I snap, the words spilling out before I can stop them. "Because I

loved her, Calum! I loved her, and she told me—” My voice breaks, and I turn away, raking a hand through my hair. “I couldn’t let her go.”

The confession hangs between us, heavy and raw. Calum exhales sharply, his jaw tightening. “You... loved her,” he repeats, the words slow and deliberate. “Is that what you’re calling it?”

“Yes,” I say, turning back to him. “I loved her in a way you never could. You suffocated her, Calum. You wanted to own her, to trap her in this goddamn house like some fragile little doll.”

“And you think you’re any better?” he spits, his voice venomous. “You think stalking her, watching her from the shadows, is love?”

“It’s more than you ever gave her,” I fire back, the anger surging through me. “At least I saw her for who she was. I didn’t try to make her something she wasn’t.”

Calum’s laugh is cold, cutting. “You’re delusional. She chose me, Jonathan. Not you. She always chose me.”

The words hit their mark, but I refuse to let him see the wound. “Maybe she didn’t have a choice,” I say, my voice low. “Maybe you never gave her one.”

Calum’s expression darkens, his fists clenched at his sides. For a moment, I think he might hit me, the tension between us teetering on the edge of violence. But instead, he turns away, his shoulders heaving with barely restrained fury.

“You don’t know anything,” he says, his voice quiet but laced with venom. “You didn’t know her the way I did.”

“Did I?” I challenge, stepping closer. “Because from where I’m standing, it sounds

like she was terrified of you. Terrified of what you'd do if she ever left."

Calum whirls around, his face inches from mine. "Shut up," he growls, his voice trembling with rage. "You don't know what you're talking about."

But I do. I've read the journal. I've seen the fear in her words, the way she tiptoed around him, always careful, always calculating. And now, for the first time, I can see that same fear in him.

"What are you afraid of, Calum?" I ask, my voice soft but cutting. "That the truth might come out? That maybe, just maybe, you weren't the perfect couple you like to pretend you were?"

His hand shoots out, grabbing the front of my shirt and yanking me forward. "I said shut up," he hisses, his breath hot against my face. "You don't know anything."

But I do. And he knows it.

The memory of that night claws at me, the rain soaking through my coat, the cottage glowing like a beacon in the dark. I remember watching them, my heart pounding in my chest as Annabel stood by the window, her silhouette framed by the firelight.

All of me wanted to go to her, to pull her away from Calum and his suffocating love. But I couldn't. Instead, I stood there, drenched and desperate, until the lights went out and the cottage was swallowed by darkness.

"You did this to her—she would still be here if not for you and your love," I hiss.

Calum shoves me back against the wall. His face is a mask of fury and grief, his eyes wild. "No, you don't know what you're saying."

“It’s not me that’s saying it.” I retort. “It’s all there, in her own words.” I think of the journal. “Your love took from her—it should have been you. Not a day goes by that I don’t think our world would be better if it’d been you that lost your life that night.”

His grip loosens, eyes falling closed as he steps away from me. “I—I...” his eyes lock with mine, fury and pain simmering, “I think that every day too.”

I straighten my shirt, my heart pounding as I meet his gaze. “Fine,” I say, my voice steady. “At least we’re in agreement about something, Calum.”

He walks toward the door, the weight of the conversation oppressive in my small cottage. He opens the door, salty air blowing in a gust as he goes as one thought lingers in my mind.

The truth may not bring her back, but at least we agree, his love drowned her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Calum

The wind howls against the cottage walls, an unrelenting chorus that drowns out the ticking of the clock.

The fireplace spits and crackles behind me, its warmth barely reaching the icy fingers of dread crawling up my spine.

My canvas stands before me, the stark white expanse mocking my every attempt to capture her.

Annabel. Perfect, infuriating, unattainable Annabel.

I can feel her presence here, as though she's just stepped out of the room. The sound of the waves crashing against the cliffs filters through the walls, though the sea tonight is calm. It's an impossibility, but I've learned not to question the peculiarities of this place—or of her.

My hand trembles as I lift the brush. I haven't eaten in days; the crusted remains of uneaten bread lie abandoned on the table.

My body screams for rest, for sustenance, but I cannot stop.

Not now. Not when she's so close. The brush drags across the canvas in slow, deliberate strokes.

The paint flows effortlessly, too easily, as if the image already exists beneath the surface, waiting for me to uncover it .

Her eyes come first. I've painted them a hundred times before, but tonight, they stare back with an unsettling clarity. Wide, dark, and brimming with sorrow—no, accusation. My breath catches. I set the brush down and step back, my gaze locked on the canvas. The room seems to tilt around me.

“Impossible,” I whisper, but the words feel hollow. Her eyes bore into mine, alive and knowing.

The cottage groans, a sudden, violent gust rattling the windows. I whirl around, heart hammering, but there's nothing. Just the fire sputtering weakly and the shadows pooling in the corners. Still, the hairs on the back of my neck rise, an invisible weight pressing down on me.

When I turn back to the painting, it's changed.

Her lips are there now, slightly parted, as if caught mid-breath.

They're tinted with a bruised hue, the same shade they probably were when she was pulled from the cold water.

I force the thought away and pick up the brush again.

My strokes become frantic, feverish. I work in bursts, my hands moving faster than my mind can keep up.

Her face emerges from the canvas, hauntingly beautiful, a reflection of the woman who once consumed my every thought. But something's wrong.

Her skin begins to wither under my brush, pale and translucent.

I can see the bones beneath, the hollow sockets where her eyes should be.

No matter how hard I try to fix it, the decay spreads.

The pink of her cheeks turns to ash, her high cheekbones sagging as flesh drips away.

The painting isn't a portrait—it's grotesque, a macabre vision of what I dread most.

I slam the brush onto the table, my breath coming in ragged gasps. My hands shake uncontrollably as I stagger back, collapsing into the nearest chair. Sweat beads on my forehead despite the cold creeping into the room.

And then I hear it .

A faint scraping sound, like nails dragging against wood. It comes from everywhere and nowhere, filling the space between my ears and echoing deep in my chest. My head snaps toward the door, but it's closed. Locked.

The sound grows louder, closer, until it seems to be coming from inside the walls themselves.

I clutch the arms of the chair, my knuckles white, as the floor beneath me vibrates with a low, guttural hum.

The smell of decay fills my nostrils—putrid, suffocating.

I gag, the taste of ash suddenly coating my tongue.

“Stop,” I choke out, though I know no one is listening. “Just stop.”

The air turns frigid. My breath puffs out in visible clouds, the heat from the fire no longer reaching me. The windows slam shut with a deafening crack, the force rattling the glass panes. I lurch to my feet, every muscle in my body coiled with panic, and whirl around to face the canvas.

She's there.

Annabel stares back at me, her expression no longer sorrowful but twisted in rage.

Her eyes glint with a malevolent light, her lips pulled back in a snarl that exposes gleaming, impossibly sharp teeth.

The shadow I'd painted over her shoulder now takes shape, a looming figure with no discernible features except for its eyes—red and glowing like embers.

The canvas vibrates as though alive, her image trembling and shifting.

“You killed me!” her voice screams, guttural and otherworldly. The sound pierces through my skull, a jagged knife slicing through my thoughts.

I stumble back, tripping over the chair and crashing to the floor. Pain shoots up my spine, but I barely register it, too consumed by the horror before me. Her scream echoes in my ears, a relentless cacophony that drowns out the roaring storm outside.

“No!” I cry out, my voice breaking. “I didn't—I didn't kill you!”

The words sound pathetic even to my own ears. My vision blurs as tears streak down my face, hot against my frozen skin. The room spins, the walls closing in as the smell of decay intensifies.

I force myself to my feet, staggering toward the canvas. My hands reach for it,

trembling, as though I can erase her fury with a single touch. But the closer I get, the more her features contort—her once-beautiful face now a mask of rot and ruin.

“Please,” I whisper, my voice raw. “Please, stop.”

The shadow on the canvas seems to shift, its form writhing like a nest of serpents. It leans closer to Annabel, its eyes burning brighter. And then, impossibly, she begins to laugh.

It’s not her laugh—not the light, musical sound I remember. This laugh is sharp and jagged, scraping against my sanity like broken glass. It spills from the canvas, filling the room with its unbearable weight.

I can’t take it anymore. With a roar, I grab the edge of the canvas and hurl it across the room. It crashes against the wall, the frame splintering, but the laughter doesn’t stop. It echoes in my mind, reverberating through my bones as I sink to the floor, my hands clawing at my ears.

“Make it stop,” I plead, rocking back and forth. “Make it stop.”

The laughter fades slowly, leaving only the sound of my ragged breathing and the crackling fire. The oppressive cold begins to lift, the smell of decay receding. But the damage is done. I can feel it in the marrow of my bones, in the hollow ache of my chest.

I force myself to look at the shattered canvas, half-expecting her to still be there, glaring at me with those accusing eyes. But it’s blank now—a stark, empty void where her image once was. The shadow is gone, too, leaving behind only splashes of dried paint on the wall.

A wave of exhaustion crashes over me, pulling me under. My limbs feel like lead as I

crawl to the corner of the room, collapsing against the wall. My heart pounds in my chest, a relentless reminder that I'm still alive—though I don't know how.

I close my eyes, the image of her decayed face seared into my mind. The words she screamed echo endlessly: You killed me. You killed me.

Did I?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Annabel

“Annabel!” My younger cousin Brittany runs up to me in the fruit aisle at the farmer’s market in Ravensreach.

“Hey, Britt—I didn’t know you were here this weekend.” I pull her in for a quick hug. Brittany’s father is a lawyer in Manhattan and rarely makes time to visit the family cottage on the coast. “Your mom usually calls me when she’s going to be here.”

“Oh, my parents aren’t here with me. Actually, they’re mad at me right now.” Her stormy navy irises hang on mine. “They didn’t tell you?”

“Tell me what?” I lift a shiny apple from the bin and turn it in my palm.

“I got married last weekend. Eloped.”

“What?!” I nearly drop the apple. Brittany isn’t even twenty—my uncle is probably fuming. “To who? What about college?”

“I’m still going to Barnard—my new husband is very supportive of my career goals.” She lifts her palm as she speaks, a small pear-shaped diamond sparkles from her ring finger .

“Well, who’s the lucky guy?”

“Someone you know, actually.” She’s nearly bubbling with excitement.

“Really?” I frown, at a loss about who she might mean. There are eight years separating Brittany and myself—I can’t think of anyone her age that it could be.

“Jonathan.” She grins, eyes sparkling with joy.

“J-Jonathan Grey?”

“The one and only.” Her eyes dart to her ring with a soft smile. “He’s so sweet to me—I’ve known him my whole life, I’ve had a crush on him for years, but he never gave me the time of day until we ran into each other in the city—”

“But he’s ten years older than you,” I can’t keep the annoyance from my tone.

“Yes—well, that’s why Daddy is mad.” A pout turns her lips. “Age is only a number anyway—Jonathan is good to me. He sends me flowers and takes me out to nice dinners in the city—he spoils me.”

“Hm.” A ball of pain is lodged in my throat, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. “How long have you been... dating?” I think back on the last time I saw Jonathan, his frustration and anger at me. Had they already connected at that point? Or is it our argument that sent him running to her?

“We ran into each other last month—he gave me his number and said if I needed anything that I should reach out to him. Isn’t that sweet?”

I don’t respond. I don’t have the words. I feel like my heart has been hallowed out. How could he do this after everything?

“Oh—Annabel—please don’t be mad at me. I know you and Jonathan are close. I

thought maybe he would tell you about our news—”

“We haven’t spoken in a while,” I whisper.

Brittany’s eyes dart up and down my form. “Well, I thought you’d be happy for us—I love him so much, Annabel. More than I’ve ever loved anything, and he loves me too.”

I nod, try to swallow the pain down, but it remains stuck in my throat. “I’m happy for you.” I force a smile. “So happy. For you both. I—I’m just surprised is all.”

“I think I’m still in shock too. It all happened so fast. But when you know, you know, right?”

And Jonathan feels like home, I still remember when I was a little kid and fell off my bike one summer and he carried me all the way home.

My knee was bleeding and I was crying hot tears and when he set me down, he wiped at my cheeks and said I would have the coolest scar.

Then he kissed my scraped knuckles and helped me put Band-Aids on my knee and...

oh Annabel, I think I loved him even then. ”

I have to suppress a groan.

“Well, Calum will be worried, I should get going. I’m so happy for you, Brittany.” I move in to give her a hug.

“Maybe we could do dinner together some night—I have to be back in the city by Monday for classes but the four of us would have so much fun together.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” I lie.

She gives me one last hug before turning in the direction of the flowers. As I walk away all I can think is that I dodged a bullet running into Brittany alone—if Jonathan had been with her... I can’t even imagine.

I spend the next ten minutes walking back to Holiday House with my heart throbbing in my throat.

I have to resist stopping on the sidewalk to lose my stomach.

By the time I reach the cottage, my anger has reached a fever pitch.

I’m practically vibrating with Jonathan’s betrayal.

He’s using my cousin to hurt me, to get revenge.

He could never love her, not after everything he said about us.

I knew he was hurt, I knew his pain cut deep, but I never thought he would stoop so low as to marry someone in my own family just to get under my skin.

I stomp around the corner of the house and run into Calum and his easel on the front porch.

“Hey!” His smile is wide and bright. My own sense of betrayal throttles me then as I realize that I am hurting this man just by being so pained by Jonathan’s decision.

If I was happy with my life with Calum I wouldn’t be feeling so devastated by Brittany and Jonathan’s marriage. My stomach twists at the thought.

“Hi.” I ascend the two steps and place a hand on Calum’s shoulder.

“Are you okay?” His eyes hang on mine. “You look like you’re getting sick.”

“I’m fine.” I swipe at my forehead. “I just didn’t eat this morning and the walk just... took a lot out of me I guess.”

“Maybe some lunch and a nap then—the sunshine is so bright today I thought I’d do some painting outside.”

“Good idea,” I press up on my toes to kiss him softly before sending him an encouraging smile. “It looks great.” I glance at his painting in progress.

“Thank you,” he grins. “It’s called Falling Sky . It reminds me of you—strong at the edges but soft at heart.”

I nod as tears well in my eyes. I push my hand over my face, trying to hide the emotion that’s simmering just below the surface.

“Want me to make you some lunch?” he asks.

“No—I’m fine. You’re sweet,” I call over my shoulder as I step into our home.

Our home. Not me and Jonathan’s, me and Calum’s.

An overwhelming urge to run away washes through me.

I set my tote bag of fruit and vegetables on the counter and go directly to my bedroom.

The walls feel like they’re closing in. Like my skin is crawling with the pain of living

this life .

I throw myself onto the bed, bury my face in the pillow and let the tears flow.

I don't know what I'm doing anymore, maybe I never did.

For the first time I think maybe being alone is the only way out of this mess I've found myself in.

But then I think of the pain I've already caused, the pain leaving would cause.

I sink deeper into the clouds of cotton and down and let the pain wash through me one violent tear at a time.

"What's wrong?" Calum's voice interrupts my anguish. He sits on the side of the bed, a palm rubbing my back.

"Nothing—" I start but he shifts, locking his gaze with mine.

"Don't do that. I can tell you're lying." The storm clouds in his eyes hover on mine.

"I—I—" my thoughts swirl as I grasp for something to say. "I ran into my cousin Brittany at the market."

"Oh yeah?" he says.

"She—she eloped last month."

"Isn't she young?" he asks.

I nod. "It was unexpected—she—she married Jonathan."

Calum's gaze darkens. A long silence stretches between us before he finally opens his mouth to speak. "So that explains it."

Before I can say a word he stalks out of our room and down the hallway to his studio. I follow him, heart hammering as I think how already I've said too much.

"Calum—" I reach for his arm but he yanks it away.

"Stop—it's always this. Always about him. I'm sick of hearing about him. You're obsessed with him." Hot tears spill down my cheeks as he hurls his words like weapons.

"No, that's not true. We've just been friends for a long time?—"

"Bullshit," he seethes. Before I can stop him, he tears the painting— Falling Sky —off the easel and hurls it against the wall. One corner of the frame splits and the edge of the coffee table leaves a wide gash in the center of the canvas.

"Calum—"

"I should leave—you're toxic, you both are and staying is destroying me," he spits, kicking the canvas and inflicting more damage to his precious painting.

"Calum—no. Please, I love you. I don't want to live without you," I plead for him to hear me, to understand.

"You don't want to or you can't?" His eyes blaze with anger, chest heaving with pain and adrenaline.

"I—both?—"

“Because I can’t live without you, Annabel. Losing you to him would kill me.”

“You won’t, you never will. He’s married, he’s someone else’s now.”

“Bullshit,” he says, “if you wanted to be with him he would leave her tonight. He only married her to get back at you, you know that, right?”

“That’s not true, maybe he loves her.”

Calum rolls his eyes. “Do you love him?”

I open my mouth to deny it, but I can’t force the lie from my lips.

“I knew it.” Calum kicks at Falling Sky again then walks out the door, letting the heavy wood slam in his wake.

I sigh, regret and relief swirling in equal parts in my stomach.

I’m not sure if I want him to stay or leave and the idea occurs to me then that I’ve always felt this way.

Caught between two worlds, lost in the love that exists between two men, always wondering if love is meant to be this painful.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Calum

“Calum...”

Her voice. Sweet, lilting, but with an edge that chills me to the bone. I whip my head to the side, but there’s nothing there. Just the empty void of the bedroom, bathed in pale moonlight filtering through the cracked curtains.

My pulse thrums like a trapped bird against my ribs. The sensation returns, tracing down my jawline, light as a feather. I bolt upright, the sweat on my skin now cold and clinging. The whisper comes again, louder this time, insistent.

“Calum...”

I don’t want to move. I don’t want to look. But some primal force compels me, dragging me out of the bed with sluggish limbs. My feet hit the cold wooden floor, and the whisper transforms into a low murmur, then a chorus of murmurs, as if the walls themselves have grown mouths.

They’re surrounding me.

The murmurs escalate, each word sharper, more distinct. The faintest trace of breath lingers at the back of my neck, sending a shiver skittering down my spine. The whispers layer over one another, a maddening cacophony of words I can’t quite grasp, until finally, one voice breaks through the noise.

“You did this.”

The accusation is guttural, anguished, and unmistakably hers.

Annabel’s voice. My legs carry me forward before my brain fully processes what I’m doing.

The walls pulse with sound as if the house itself is alive and angry.

The whispers swell, becoming a scream, and I stumble into the hallway, my heart pounding in my throat.

“You did this!” The scream tears through the air, reverberating in every corner of the cottage.

I spin in circles, desperate to find the source, but it feels omnipresent, everywhere and nowhere at once. My breath comes in ragged gasps, my hands shaking as I clutch at the doorframes for support. And then, just as suddenly as it began, the sound shifts—no longer from above or around, but below.

The floor beneath me vibrates, the whispers twisting and tangling, funneling downward. I drop to my knees, pressing my ear to the wooden boards, and there it is—soft, guttural, rising and falling like waves against the shore.

The voice is beneath me.

I scramble to my feet, the room tilting as exhaustion and fear weigh down my every move.

I stagger to the shed, my fingers fumbling with the latch in my haste.

The hinges scream in protest as I wrench the door open and snatch a shovel.

My thoughts are jumbled, incoherent. All I know is that I have to dig. I have to know what's under the floor.

Back in the house, I plunge the blade into the floorboards, the sound of splintering wood slicing through the quiet night. The work is brutal, relentless. Each swing of the shovel feels like a blow to my own sanity, but I can't stop. I won't stop.

Sweat pours down my face, mingling with the dirt and sawdust that clings to my skin. My breath comes in sharp, painful bursts. The whispers grow louder, almost mocking, their cadence in sync with the rhythm of my digging.

"You'll never find it," they taunt. "You'll never understand."

I grit my teeth, swinging harder. The hole widens, revealing the earth beneath the floorboards. My hands blister, but I don't care. My vision blurs, but I keep going, clawing at the dirt with my bare hands when the shovel no longer suffices.

The hours stretch on, the world outside fading to nothing. There is only the hole, the whispers, and my frantic need to uncover whatever lies beneath. The dirt is damp and cold, clinging to my skin like a second layer. My nails crack, my fingers bleeding, but I don't stop.

Finally, the first rays of dawn creep through the window, casting the room in a faint, golden light.

My body screams for rest, but my mind refuses to relent.

I reach down, my fingers brushing against something solid.

My heart lurches in my chest. I scrape away more dirt, revealing a smooth, unyielding surface.

A box.

It's small, no larger than a shoebox, its edges worn and weathered. My hands tremble as I pull it free, the whispers around me rising to a fever pitch. I fumble with the latch, my breath hitching as I lift the lid.

Nothing.

The box is empty.

A choked sob escapes my throat, frustration and despair crashing over me like a tidal wave.

I hurl the box across the room, the sound of it splintering against the wall barely registering over the deafening silence that follows.

The whispers are gone. The house is still.

And I am left alone, broken and hollow, staring into the abyss I've created.

The room tilts, my vision darkening at the edges as exhaustion finally takes hold.

I collapse beside the hole, my body crumpling like a marionette whose strings have been cut.

The last thing I see before the darkness claims me is the faint outline of Annabel's face, hovering just beyond the edges of my consciousness.

Her expression is twisted, not with love or anger, but with pity.

“Let me go,” she whispers, her voice distant and echoing. “Holding on will only hasten your end.”

And then she’s gone, leaving me with nothing but the cold embrace of the earth and the crushing weight of my own guilt.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Calum

Later that morning, the brush glides over the canvas, trailing a soft curve of burnt umber across Annabel's cheek.

My hand is steady, though my mind races with a thousand fragmented thoughts.

Her expression is peaceful, serene. A ghost of a smile plays on her lips, the kind she reserved for moments of triumph or secrets she intended to keep.

I glance at the painting, then at the others leaning against the walls, a testament to my descent.

Annabel's face stares back from every angle—eyes wide with joy, lips parted in laughter, brows furrowed in sorrow.

A dozen versions of her, all conjured in the sleepless nights since I returned to Holiday House.

I rake a hand through my hair, damp with sweat despite the chill in the room.

The sea air seeps through the cracked window, carrying the faint scent of salt and decay.

My chest tightens, a sensation I've grown familiar with since she.

.. since Annabel left. No, not left—was taken.

The truth presses against my mind, a suffocating weight I can't bear to name aloud .

My brush falters, streaking an unintended line across her shoulder.

“Damn it,” I mutter, stepping back to assess the damage. Her image remains intact, but something feels off. The colors are too vibrant, her expression too knowing. She doesn't look serene—she looks amused, as though she's laughing at my pathetic attempts to capture her essence.

“You think this is funny, Annabel?” My voice echoes in the quiet, and for a moment, I feel the absurdity of talking to a painting. But it isn't just a painting. None of them are. They're pieces of her, fragments of a puzzle I can't seem to solve.

Exhaustion presses against my temples, and I drop the brush into the jar of murky water. The bristles fan out like they're drowning, much like I feel most days. I wipe my hands on a rag and step away, needing space, air—anything to quell the suffocating sense of being watched.

I move to the other side of the room, my gaze falling on a stack of finished canvases leaning against the wall.

One catches my attention, the painting of her standing by the cliffs.

It's the one that haunted me most, her silhouette backlit by a stormy sky, her raven hair wild in the wind.

I don't remember painting it—not entirely, anyway.

It feels like it came to me in a fever dream, my hands moving on their own,

compelled by something unseen.

I pull it forward, and as I do, something flutters to the ground. A piece of paper, brittle and yellowed at the edges, lands at my feet. My breath catches, a mix of dread and anticipation tightening in my chest.

I kneel and pick it up, the texture rough against my fingertips. It's another letter, the words scrawled in a hurried, almost frantic hand. My pulse quickens as I scan the lines, the familiar slant of Annabel's handwriting pulling me under like a riptide.

You let me slip away. You didn't see me for who I was, only who you wanted me to be. Now, I'm lost, and it's your fault. You failed me.

The words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I stagger back, clutching the letter like it might disintegrate. My gaze flicks to the signature at the bottom—a strange symbol, drawn in what looks like ash. A crude spiral with jagged edges, almost like an eye, but it's unlike anything I've ever seen.

I lift the letter to my nose, inhaling the faint, acrid scent of burnt wood. Ash. It's definitely ash. My hands tremble as I hold the letter up to the light, trying to make sense of it. The symbol stares back at me, mocking, taunting. It feels alive, a living scar branded onto the page.

"This wasn't here," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "It wasn't here last night." I glance at the painting again, searching for answers in the stormy cliffs and the haunting curve of Annabel's figure. But it offers none, only the silent accusation of her absence.

I sink into the nearest chair, the letter still clutched in my hand.

My mind races, replaying every interaction, every argument, every whispered confession between us.

Was she trying to tell me something all along?

Did I miss the signs? My chest heaves with the weight of guilt, a familiar but unbearable companion.

The air in the room grows colder, and I shiver despite the sweater I'm wearing. The faint scent of Annabel's perfume drifts through the air. It's impossible, yet undeniable. I close my eyes, gripping the letter tighter, as though it might anchor me to reality.

The scrape of nails against wood jolts me upright a while later. My eyes snap open, darting around the room, but there's nothing—no one. The sound comes again, more insistent this time, like claws raking against the floorboards.

"Annabel?" I call out before I can stop myself. The word feels ridiculous on my tongue, but the silence that follows is worse. It presses against my ears, thick and suffocating, until I swear I can hear my own heartbeat pounding in my skull.

A sudden gust of wind slams the window shut, and I jump to my feet, the letter fluttering to the floor. The room feels charged with an energy I can't explain. The taste of ash lingers on my tongue, acrid and metallic, as though the letter has left a physical mark on me.

I turn back to the painting on the easel, my breath hitching at what I see. Her expression has changed. The serene smile is gone, replaced by something darker—sorrowful, accusatory. Her eyes seem to follow me, glinting with an emotion I can't name but recognize all the same.

"You're losing it," I mutter, raking a hand through my hair. "This is just... exhaustion. Lack of sleep. That's all."

But even as I say it, I know it's a lie. Something is happening here, something I can't explain or control. I glance at the letter on the floor, the strange symbol burned into my mind. It feels like a warning, a message from beyond the veil.

I step closer to the painting, my hands shaking as I reach out.

My fingers hover over the canvas, inches from her face, and for a moment, I swear I can feel her warmth radiating from the paint.

It's impossible, but then again, so is everything else that's happened since I came back to this godforsaken place.

"Who failed you, Annabel?" I whisper, my voice cracking. "Was it me? Was it Jonathan? What are you trying to tell me?"

The painting offers no answers, only the silent torment of her gaze. I turn away, unable to bear it any longer. The room feels like it's closing in on me, the walls pressing closer with every breath .

I grab the letter from the floor and fold it carefully, tucking it into my pocket. Whatever this symbol means, whatever message she's trying to send—I'll figure it out. I have to. For her. For us.

The storm outside intensifies, the wind howling like a chorus of ghosts. The windows rattle in their frames, and for a moment, I think I hear her voice carried on the wind—a soft, lilting laugh that sends chills down my spine.

I sit back at the easel, my hands trembling as I pick up the brush again. The image of her face burns in my mind, more vivid than ever. I can't stop now, not when I'm so close. The need to finish the painting consumes me, a fire in my veins that won't be extinguished.

The brush moves of its own accord, the strokes frenzied and desperate.

Her eyes become darker, her lips fuller, her skin more lifelike with every pass.

The air grows colder still, the scent of decay mingling with the jasmine, and I swear I can hear the faint rustle of fabric, like someone shifting in the room.

I don't stop. I can't. The world narrows to the canvas and the brush in my hand, the lines and colors coming together in a symphony of obsession. Her face shifts beneath my strokes, becoming more vivid, more real—and more haunting.

When I finally step back, my heart pounds in my chest like a war drum.

The painting is finished, but it's not what I intended.

Her face is beautiful, yes, but it's twisted with fear, her eyes wide and filled with tears.

And behind her, barely visible in the shadows, is a figure—a looming presence I didn't paint but can't deny.

I collapse into the chair, my vision swimming as the room spins around me.

The taste of ash is stronger now, choking me, filling my lungs.

And then, as if to confirm my worst fears, the painting shifts.

Her lips part, and a scream erupts from the canvas—a sound so raw, so filled with anguish, that it shatters the glass of the window behind me.

“You killed me!” Annabel's voice roars, her painted form coming alive before my

eyes.

I fall back, my heart slamming against my ribs as terror surges through me. The room explodes in chaos—the wind howling, the windows slamming, the scent of death suffocating me. I claw at the floor, desperate to escape, but her voice follows me, relentless and unforgiving.

“You killed me!” she screams again, her face contorted with rage and sorrow. “You did this!”

And then, with a final, gut-wrenching cry, the room falls silent. The wind dies, the scent fades, and the painting is still once more. But the echo of her voice lingers, a haunting refrain that will never leave me.

I lie on the floor, my chest heaving, my mind shattered. The letter burns in my pocket, the symbol etched into my soul. Whatever this is, whatever she’s trying to tell me—it’s not over. It’s only just begun.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Calum

The morning comes heavy with fog, the air thick enough to cling to my skin as I set up my easel outside. The cliffs stretch ahead, jagged teeth biting into the restless ocean below. It's the kind of day Annabel loved—gray and unpredictable, where the sea seemed alive with secrets.

The easel stands steady against the uneven ground, and I pull out a fresh canvas, its surface glaringly white. Another painting, another attempt to capture her essence, to bring her back. My brushes feel worn, like me—overused, stretched to their limits.

This one will be different, I tell myself. This one will be perfect.

The cliffs where she fell loom in the distance, their presence like a gaping wound.

I've painted them before, of course, countless times in the weeks since her death.

But never from this angle, never with this perspective.

I press the charcoal to the canvas, sketching the scene before me—the rough outline of the cliffs, the wild brush of the sea, and in the center, her figure emerging like a memory I can't erase .

“Just you and me again, Annabel,” I murmur, my voice swallowed by the wind.

As the image takes shape, my focus narrows.

The brush moves, following instinct more than thought, and her face appears on the canvas—her lips curved in that maddeningly playful smile, her eyes holding secrets that no painting could ever fully contain.

She seems alive, more alive than I feel in this moment.

The sound of voices drifts up from below, sharp and urgent.

I glance over the edge and spot two figures standing near the base of the cliffs.

One of them I recognize immediately: Jonathan.

His broad shoulders are tense, his hands gesturing wildly as he argues with a fisherman whose face is weathered like the sea itself.

I strain to hear them over the crash of the waves, but their words are lost to the wind. My stomach knots, a sick sense of unease settling over me. Jonathan's presence here feels wrong, intrusive. He has no right to be near these cliffs, not after what happened.

The fisherman raises his voice, loud enough for fragments of his words to carry. "...saw you that night... meeting her here..."

The charcoal slips from my fingers, tumbling to the ground as the meaning of his words sinks in. Meeting her? Annabel? My pulse pounds, my hands clenching into fists as I watch Jonathan step closer to the fisherman, his movements aggressive, defensive.

Jonathan shakes his head, his voice rising above the surf. "You don't know what

you're talking about. You didn't see anything."

The fisherman stands his ground, jabbing a finger in Jonathan's direction. "I know what I saw. You were here, arguing with her. She was upset."

I don't wait to hear the rest. My legs move on their own, propelling me down the narrow path toward them. The world blurs around me, my focus narrowing to Jonathan's figure and the fury building in my chest.

By the time I reach them, the fisherman has turned away, his hands raised in frustration as he retreats toward his boat. Jonathan doesn't notice me at first, his back to me as he stares out at the sea, his shoulders rising and falling with heavy breaths.

"What the hell was that about?" I demand, my voice cutting through the air like a blade.

Jonathan turns, his expression a mix of surprise and irritation. "Calum. What are you doing here?"

"This is my property," I snap, stepping closer. "I could ask you the same thing. What did he mean, meeting Annabel? Were you with her the night she died?"

His jaw tightens, his gaze shifting away. "It's not what you think."

"Then explain it to me." My voice shakes, but I don't care. The weight of his silence, his evasiveness, is unbearable. "Tell me what happened."

Jonathan exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. "Fine. Yes, I met her that night. She asked me to."

The admission is a punch to the gut, stealing the air from my lungs. "Why?"

“She wanted to talk,” he says, his tone defensive. “She was upset, said she needed someone to confide in. Someone who wasn’t you.”

The words cut deeper than I thought possible, but I push the pain aside. “And? What did you talk about?”

Jonathan hesitates, his gaze flickering to the cliffs. “She was scared, Calum. She said she felt trapped, like she couldn’t be herself with you anymore. She... she wanted to leave.”

My hands curl into fists, the anger bubbling beneath the surface threatening to boil over. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” he says, meeting my gaze with a defiance that makes my blood run cold. “She wanted out, Calum. She was tired of being your muse, your... project. She wanted to be free.”

The world tilts beneath my feet, the ground feeling unstable, like the cliffs themselves might crumble beneath the weight of his words. “You argued with her,” I say, my voice low and accusing. “The fisherman said so.”

Jonathan looks away, his silence damning. “It wasn’t an argument. Not really. She was upset, and I tried to calm her down.”

“And then what?” I demand, stepping closer. “What happened after that? Did she fall, or did you?—”

“Stop,” he cuts me off, his voice sharp. “I know what you think. I didn’t push her, Calum.”

My chest heaves, the air around me feeling too thin, too oppressive.

“You were the last one to see her,” I whisper, the accusation slipping from my lips like a curse.

Jonathan flinches, his expression hardening. The image of Annabel falling, her body tumbling into the sea, fills my mind, and the rage inside me explodes.

“You should have told me,” I shout.

“What?” he snaps, shoving me back just as hard. “That she was miserable? That she wanted to leave you?”

The words hang in the air, heavy and suffocating. I stagger back, the fight draining out of me as the truth crashes down like the waves below. Annabel wasn’t happy. She wasn’t safe. And I was too blind to see it.

“I loved her,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I loved her more than anything.”

“So did I,” Jonathan says, his voice raw with emotion. “But it wasn’t enough. Nothing was ever enough for her.”

We stand there in silence, the weight of our shared grief pressing down on us like a storm. Jonathan turns away first, his shoulders slumping as he begins to walk back toward the path. “She’s gone, Calum. You can’t change that. None of us can.”

I watch him go, my chest hollow and aching. His words are true, but they offer no comfort. Annabel may be gone, but her ghost lingers, haunting every corner of this cursed place.

As the wind picks up, I look back toward the cliffs, my gaze falling on the jagged rocks below. The waves crash against them with relentless force, their roar a symphony of anger and despair.

The fisherman's words echo in my mind, mingling with Jonathan's confession and the memories of Annabel that refuse to fade. There are pieces missing, fragments of a story I can't quite piece together. But one thing is clear: I won't stop until I uncover the truth.

Even if it destroys me.

Chapter Thirty

Annabel

The gallery lights are too bright, reflecting off the glass of champagne flutes and art pieces, casting fractured beams that ricochet around the room.

I stand in the center, a fixture among fixtures, a piece of Calum's curated collection.

My dress is red—his favorite color—and clings to me like a second skin.

He's always wanted me to look like this: something striking, something impossible to look away from.

"Can I talk to you?" the familiar voice comes from over my shoulder.

I bristle instantly. "No."

Jonathan clears his throat, moving to face me directly. "So you've heard."

"About your wedding? Yes, I've heard." I remain cold, detached.

"There wasn't a wedding, we eloped."

"As if this makes the fact that you married my cousin any better," I scoff. "How could you? Do you hate me?" My eyes finally meet his. He looks like a broken puppy, empathy and pain swirling in his stormy irises.

“I wish I hated you,” he finally says. “I just wanted to hurt you.”

“Well, now I hate you,” I seethe under my breath. He clutches my elbow but I tear myself from his grip. “Don’t.” I shake me head, fighting tears. “How could you do that to her? She’s young—na?ve.”

“I wanted to feel loved—you—you—”

“Stop it. You’re weak, broken—how could I ever love you?”

“Annabel—just listen—” he reaches for my arm again but I back out of his reach.

“Don’t do this. Not here—I won’t let you ruin this night for Calum.”

Jonathan’s eyes cloud with anguish. “I made a mistake—I—I need you. Just give me a few minutes to explain.”

I shake my head, fighting back stubborn tears.

“Annabel, you’re radiant.” Someone interrupts us then.

The voice is familiar—an investor often in attendance at Calum’s shows.

I turn to find the older man, his silver hair slicked back, his suit impeccable.

He looks like money—old money, the kind that doesn’t shout but whispers, and somehow still commands the room.

“Thank you,” I say, offering him the smile I’ve perfected for nights like these. “Calum’s work does most of the radiating.

He laughs politely, raising his glass. “And yet, it’s clear who his muse is. Every brushstroke screams your name.” His eyes flick from me to Jonathan. “I’m sorry if I interrupted you.”

“No—it’s nothing,” I turn away from Jonathan and sip my champagne, letting the conversation drift to safer waters—Calum’s meteoric rise, his talent, his vision. Always Calum. Even in his moment of triumph, I am an accessory, a piece of art complementing the exhibit.

Across the room, I catch sight of him. He’s magnetic tonight, his presence pulling every eye, every conversation into his orbit. He’s in his element, charming patrons and collectors, speaking passionately about his work. About me .

He saunters slowly to me then, smiling that boyish grin that makes people trust him instantly.

“Mind if I steal my muse for a while?” he asks the silver-haired man, his hand finding the small of my back. The man raises his glass in good humor and retreats, leaving us in our own little bubble of light and expectation. “Did you have fun?” he asks.

“It was perfect. They all loved you, Calum. Loved your work.”

His eyes flicker across the room to land on Jonathan’s brooding gaze trained directly on us. “And you?”

“I always love your work.” I smile and slide off the bar, my gaze holding his. “Don’t let Jonathan get in your head,” I say softly. “He thrives on chaos.”

“So do you,” his words hang between us, sharp and cutting.

My smile slips at his accusation, but I catch myself quickly. “Come on,” I say,

linking our arms. “Let’s go back to the hotel.”

“Not yet. Come with me.” He leads me across the room to the elevator.

He punches the button for the rooftop, we ascend and a few moments later the doors slide open to reveal the starlit sky.

“You’re breathtaking,” Calum says as we walk out onto the rooftop, his eyes scanning my face like he’s cataloging me. “Have I told you that tonight?”

“Yes,” I say, teasing. “Twice. But you can tell me again if it makes you happy.”

“It does.” He leans in, his lips brushing my temple. “You make me happy.”

The weight of his words settles between us, heavier than the champagne flute in my hand. He takes the glass from me, sets it aside, and intertwines his fingers with mine.

“Come with me.”

I don’t question it. I never do with Calum. He leads me through the throng of people, nodding and smiling at those who try to stop him, his grip on my hand firm and possessive. We take the elevator to the rooftop, the hum of the crowd below fading until it’s just us and the distant hum of the city.

The air is cooler up here, the lights of New York spread out like a constellation at our feet. Calum releases my hand and turns to face me, his expression soft and unguarded in a way that makes my chest tighten.

“Calum—?”

“I’ve wanted to do this for a long time,” he starts, “and maybe it’s not perfect—this

isn't how it's supposed to go. But I can't wait anymore, Annabel."

He pulls out a small velvet box and drops to one knee. The motion is fluid, as though rehearsed, but I know it hasn't been. He's too sincere for that.

"I love you," he says. "I've loved you since the first time I saw you, and I'll keep loving you until—until there's nothing left of me to love you with. Annabel, will you marry me?"

The ring he holds isn't ostentatious. It's modest, understated, a single diamond that catches the rooftop lights and glimmers softly.

It's beautiful, and it's wrong. It doesn't belong to the girl I really am, the one he doesn't see.

I think of Brittany and Jonathan, of the twisted way love can ruin you or save you in the span of a breath.

I wonder if I have it in me to love with all of my soul, or if I will always be this: wracked with a torturous indecision, skin crawling just when peace and happiness settle in.

Calum has made love and art his religion, but I find love is the most painful religion.

"Yes," I hear myself say. "Yes, Calum." The word tumbles out before I can stop it, and the look on his face—pure, unfiltered joy—makes me hate myself.

He stands, slipping the ring onto my finger, and pulls me into his arms. I bury my face in his chest, breathing him in, trying to convince myself this is the right choice. That I can be the person he thinks I am.

But I'm not.

Back in the gallery, the champagne flows more freely than before, the crowd buoyed by the announcement of our engagement. Calum is radiant, his arm around my waist, introducing me to everyone as his fiancée. The word feels foreign, heavy on my skin.

"You have to come for drinks after this," someone says—a man in an expensive suit who smells like cigars and ambition. "There's a group heading to The Peninsula. The people there are exactly who you want to meet, Calum."

Calum hesitates, glancing at me. "I don't know... Annabel mentioned not feeling well. We might call it an early night."

I play my part perfectly, laying a hand on his arm and offering a faint smile. "I'll be fine. You should go. This is important."

"I'd rather be with you," he says softly, his eyes searching mine.

"You'll be with me," I say, brushing a kiss against his cheek. "Tomorrow. Go, Calum. Celebrate."

He finally agrees, though reluctantly. He flags a cab for me, opening the door and making sure I'm settled inside before leaning in. "Call me if you need anything," he says. "Anything at all."

I nod, and he kisses me—a kiss that feels more like a vow. Then the door closes, and I'm alone.

The hotel room is silent when I enter, the luxury almost oppressive. I kick off my heels and pour myself a glass of wine, sinking into the armchair by the window. Outside, the city glitters, alive and endless. It's everything I thought I wanted, and

yet, tonight it feels hollow.

I glance down at the ring on my finger, turning it so the light catches the diamond. It's perfect, like Calum. And like Calum, it feels like a trap.

I love him, I think. Or at least, I love the idea of him. The artist who sees me as something more, who immortalizes me in his work, who loves me so completely it leaves no room for doubt. But that love is suffocating, a weight I can't bear.

He doesn't see me. Not really. He sees what he wants to see—a muse, a partner, a wife. He doesn't see the cracks, the flaws, the parts of me that don't fit into his perfect picture.

And Jonathan...

The thought of him slips into my mind unbidden, unwelcome. Jonathan, who knows my flaws and loves me anyway. Jonathan, who makes me feel alive in a way Calum never could. Jonathan, married to my cousin.

I take another sip of wine, the bitterness settling on my tongue. Tomorrow, I tell myself. I'll figure it out tomorrow. Tonight, I just need to breathe.

But even as I close my eyes, I know there's no escaping the choice I've made. No escaping the storm I've set in motion.

Are you awake?

The message sends, the faint whoosh carrying it into the ether, and I curse myself. But almost immediately, the screen lights up.

Always. Where are you?

I hesitate. My thumb hovers over the keyboard, but then I type the words that will undo me.

The Chelsea. Room 120.

It takes less than ten minutes.

When the knock comes, I'm already at the door, my breath shallow, my pulse erratic. I hesitate for half a second, fingers on the cool brass handle, before pulling it open.

Jonathan stands there, his hair damp from the rain, his tie slightly loosened. His suit jacket is nowhere to be seen, and his expression—always so composed, so carefully indifferent—is raw tonight.

“You shouldn’t have texted me,” he says, but he steps inside anyway. His voice is low, edged with something dangerous.

“You shouldn’t have come,” I counter, closing the door behind him. The lock clicks into place, the sound louder than it should be.

For a moment, we just stand there, staring at each other. The room feels smaller with him in it, the air heavier. His eyes, dark and searching, rake over me, lingering on my hand where the ring glints faintly in the dim light.

“So it’s true,” he says, his voice breaking slightly. “He proposed.”

I nod, unable to find my voice.

“And you said yes.”

Another nod. The tension in the room is unbearable, the silence electric. I watch as

his jaw tightens, his hands balling into fists at his sides.

“Why?” The word is a whisper, a plea. “Why him, Annabel?”

“Because he’s safe,” I say, the words tumbling out before I can stop them. “Because he’s steady and sure and everything I should want.”

“Should,” Jonathan echoes, stepping closer. His presence is overwhelming, his heat, his intensity. “But not what you do want. Not what you feel.”

I can’t argue with him. I can’t look away from him, my heart rattling with a slow-building rage. “Why her?”

His eyes falter to the ground. “Because I loved you so much I started to hate you. I wasn’t thinking straight—I only wanted you to feel the pain I’ve been feeling.”

“Revenge?” I shake my head. “I knew it. You don’t feel love, it’s only selfish hatred that lives in your soul. You’re cruel.” Hot tears leak from my eyes.

“I—I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“She’s not even twenty! You’re a monster!”

“Only when I’m not with you—seeing you with him makes me want to murder him just to make the pain go away. Makes me want to murder you—”

“Jonathan...” I start, but he cuts me off, his voice rising.

“You love me. I know you do. Don’t stand there and tell me otherwise,” his words are seething, accusatory.

“Love isn’t enough,” I say, my voice trembling. “It’s not enough to build a life on.”

“And safety is?” His words are a slap, sharp and biting. “You’re lying to yourself, Annabel. You don’t want a life. You want a cage.”

His words hit their mark, and I flinch, the wine glass slipping from my hand and shattering against the floor. The sound is a gunshot in the silence, and for a moment, neither of us moves. Then Jonathan steps forward, his hand reaching for mine.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly. “I didn’t mean?—”

“Yes, you did,” I snap, pulling away from him. “And maybe you’re right. Maybe I do want a cage. Maybe I need one. Because being with you... it’s chaos, Jonathan. We’re a storm.”

“And Calum?” he asks, his voice heavy with disdain. “Does he make you feel like you can breathe?”

“No,” I admit, tears stinging my eyes. “But at least with him, I know where I stand.”

Jonathan lets out a bitter laugh, raking a hand through his hair. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to marry him. Come with me, Annabel. We can leave tonight. Go anywhere you want.”

“And then what?” I ask, my voice rising. “What happens when the chaos takes over? When you realize I’m not who you think I am?”

“I don’t care,” Jonathan says, stepping closer again. His hands find my face, his touch firm yet tender. “I don’t care who you are, Annabel. I just want you.”

His words undo me. Before I can stop myself, I’m kissing him, my hands clutching at

his shirt, pulling him closer, deeper. The world tilts, and for a moment, nothing else exists. Just him. Just us.

Jonathan kisses me like he's drowning, his desperation matching my own. His hands are everywhere—my waist, my back, my hair—anchoring me to him as though I might slip away. And maybe I will. Maybe I already have.

When we break apart, gasping for air, his forehead rests against mine. "Don't leave me," he whispers, his voice raw. "Please."

I close my eyes, tears slipping down my cheeks. "I can't do this, Jonathan. This has to end."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "It doesn't. It doesn't have to."

"It does." I pull away from him, putting distance between us. My chest aches, my entire body screaming at me to go back to him, to let myself fall. But I can't. "You don't understand."

"Then make me understand," he pleads, his voice breaking.

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around myself. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Jonathan stares at me for a long moment, his expression a mixture of heartbreak and fury.

Chapter Thirty-One

Jonathan-past

“So that’s it? You’re his now?” I stand in the middle of her hotel room. “Why did you call me over here tonight then?”

“I’m still me,” she says, but her voice is weak. Hollow. A ghost of the girl who used to race me barefoot through tidepools and whisper secrets into my hair.

“No. You’re half-his, never mine,” I mutter, stepping closer. “But I’ve loved you since you were thirteen and furious and wild and brave enough to scare the hell out of me.”

Her breath catches. “You’re not mine either. You married my cousin .”

“I was meant to be in your family, one way or another,” I spit, regretting my words the instant she flinches.

“You think I haven’t seen you trying to disappear into his world?”

” I lean in until my breath hits her mouth.

“Regardless of anything else you’ll always be mine, Annabel. You don’t get to erase that.”

I kiss her before she can lie.

She shudders when my mouth crashes onto hers—no patience, no apologies. My hands are already in her hair, tugging, twisting. She moans into me, her body pliant and warm and frantic. Her fingers claw at my back. She tastes like lemon and longing.

I hover over her body on the hotel bed, grasping her thighs and pulling her against me. She gasps but doesn't stop me. Her legs wrap around my waist, drawing me in, anchoring me.

I trail my lips down her neck, biting, sucking until her skin blooms red. She cries out when I bite her shoulder, when I tug her red dress off one arm and latch onto a nipple, hard and needy. I lick, suck, savor, the other pebbled peak begging for my mouth.

“You do this to me,” I whisper against her breast. “Only you. Always you.”

Her thighs quiver. Her hands tangle in my hair, pressing me closer, begging without words.

I kiss down her stomach, over every dip and hollow like they were carved just for me. Her navel, her hips—I bite there too, marking her where he won't see. Where only I know.

Then I'm standing again, yanking the shirt off her body. She's completely bare beneath it. I press her back onto the bed, pull my belt open, shove my jeans down just enough.

Our eyes lock.

“You want this?” I ask, my voice rough with need and something darker.

She nods, breathless.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” she moans. “God, yes—Jonathan, please.”

I push inside her in one hard, desperate thrust.

Her head tips back. Her mouth opens in a silent scream as she tightens around me. I lose every rational thought I’ve ever had. Her heat, her grip, the way her body molds to mine—it’s religion. It’s punishment. It’s salvation.

I move, deep and fast and reckless. Our moans fill the air, the rhythm urgent, frantic, raw. Her nails dig into my back. My name spills from her lips like prayer and sin and promise .

“I’ve always loved you,” I gasp against her throat. “Even when you didn’t love yourself.”

Her hips arch into mine, frantic, pleading. I reach between us, rub her exactly how she likes, and she comes apart with a cry that shatters something inside me. She clenches around me, milking every ounce of control I’ve been fighting to keep.

I follow with a broken groan, emptying into her, losing myself and finding myself in the same breath.

I collapse over her, our chests slick, heaving. My hands cup her face. I kiss her again, soft this time. Reverent.

“You’re mine,” I whisper. “Even if you leave, even if you marry him...you’re still mine.”

She doesn’t answer.

I wait. I count the seconds. Her silence stretches like a noose.

And then, finally, barely audible?—

“Calum will be back soon.”

The words are icewater in my veins.

I go still.

Her body’s still beneath me, but the warmth is gone. She looks up at me with wide, wet eyes—and guilt so sharp it cuts.

One name. That’s all it takes.

She’s just murdered me.

I push off the bed. Step away. Tug my jeans up. She watches me, but doesn’t reach for me. Doesn’t call me back.

And I realize, in that moment, I will never be enough for her.

Not when he already owns the world she’s chosen.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Calum

The storm builds like a crescendo, its furious symphony shaking the very walls of the cottage. Wind howls through the cracks, and rain lashes the windows, yet inside, I barely notice. My focus is absolute. The painting consumes me.

Annabel's image stares back at me from the canvas, her presence so vivid it's as if she might step out of the frame at any moment.

The brush trembles in my hand, a marionette string guiding me through motions that don't entirely feel my own.

Her eyes—God, her eyes—they follow me. No matter where I stand, they pin me in place, daring me to look away.

I can't.

“Almost there,” I murmur to myself, though the sound feels foreign. My voice, weak and hoarse, is swallowed by the storm outside. The air inside the room is thick, suffocating, laced with a metallic tang I can't place.

The flames in the fireplace flicker violently, casting shadows that twist and curl like phantom hands along the walls. My strokes become frenzied, driven by something deeper than inspiration—a compulsion, primal and unstoppable.

I glance at the room around me, the remnants of my obsession scattered like debris.

Paint tubes, brushes, overturned jars, and half-empty glasses litter the space.

Half a dozen other portraits of Annabel line the walls, each more lifelike than the last. Each one a step closer to this moment. To this painting.

Her lips are curved in a faint smile, but it's the kind that doesn't reach her eyes. No, her eyes are too busy accusing me. Pleading with me. They shimmer with a strange light that seems alive, liquid, almost too real to belong to the static world of oil and pigment.

The storm crashes louder, shaking the windows. Lightning flashes, briefly illuminating the room. It's enough to catch a glint of something in the painting—around her neck.

I step closer, squinting at the locket that dangles against the hollow of her throat. A familiar unease coils in my stomach. It wasn't there before. I didn't paint it. Did I?

I drop the brush, reaching out with trembling fingers to touch the locket in the painting. The gold is etched with intricate patterns, and at its center is the same symbol from the letter—a jagged, looping sigil burned into my mind.

A shiver skates down my spine as I lean closer. The symbol pulses faintly, almost imperceptibly. I swear I can smell the acrid scent of ash and decay wafting from the canvas.

“Impossible,” I mutter, but the words are hollow.

The cottage groans, the storm outside screaming in protest. My knees buckle slightly, and I clutch the easel for support. Sweat drips down my temple, mingling with the

paint smudges on my face.

The locket looks so real. Too real.

I need to stop. The thought is faint, fleeting, and quickly drowned out by the roaring need to finish. My hand finds the brush again, and I drag the bristles across the canvas with a ferocity that borders on violence.

Her face transforms under my touch, her beauty deepening into something otherworldly, haunting. But there's something else now, something creeping into the background—a shadow, amorphous yet menacing. It looms over her shoulder, shapeless but unmistakably there.

A guttural sound escapes my throat as the image burns into my vision. The shadow. The locket. The symbol. Her eyes. Her eyes.

The taste of ash coats my tongue again, bitter and acrid, as though the air itself has turned toxic. My hands tremble, the brush falling to the floor with a muted clatter. My knees hit the floor a second later, and I grip my hair, gasping for breath.

The cottage thrums with an energy I can't describe. The shadows cast by the fire seem to ripple, shifting and bending into impossible shapes. I close my eyes tightly, willing it all to stop.

When I open them, the painting has changed again.

Annabel's face is no longer serene. Her smile is gone, replaced by a gaping mouth twisted in a silent scream. Her skin, once luminous, now appears as though it's rotting, her high cheekbones melting, dripping like candle wax.

My stomach churns, bile rising in my throat as I scramble backward. My heart

hammers violently, each beat a painful reminder of my own fragility.

And then, the painting moves.

Her eyes dart toward me, locking me in place with an intensity that feels like a physical blow. Her lips part, and though no sound emerges, I hear her voice as clear as if she were standing beside me.

“You killed me.”

The words reverberate through my skull, each syllable a dagger driving deeper. I cry out, my voice hoarse and broken, as I fall onto my back. The world spins, the room darkening at the edges as shadows crawl closer, reaching for me.

The last thing I see before my vision fades is Annabel’s mouth twisting into a grotesque smile, her teeth bared in a macabre display.

I wake with a start, gasping for air. The storm has quieted, leaving only the steady drip of rain against the windows and the faint crackle of dying embers in the fireplace.

I sit up slowly, every muscle in my body aching. My clothes are damp with sweat, clinging uncomfortably to my skin. The cottage is silent now, oppressively so.

For a moment, I think it was all a dream—a vivid, horrifying nightmare born of exhaustion and grief. But then my eyes fall on the painting.

It’s still there, exactly as I left it. The rotting skin. The screaming mouth. The shadow lurking in the background.

And the locket.

I force myself to my feet, my legs trembling beneath me. I approach the painting cautiously, as though it might spring to life again. My hand reaches out, hesitating before brushing against the surface.

The paint is dry.

That can't be possible. I only just finished it. But the locket, its intricate design, feels as real as the wood beneath my fingertips.

My fingers trace the symbol etched into its center, and a sharp, searing pain shoots through my hand. I yank it back, staring at my palm. A faint burn mark now mars the skin, the symbol etched there like a brand.

Panic grips me, and I stumble backward, knocking over a chair in my haste. My breath comes in ragged gasps as I clutch my hand, the pain searing and unrelenting.

The room feels colder now, the air thick with an unseen presence. I turn toward the mirror above the fireplace, and my reflection stares back—pale, haunted, and barely recognizable.

But there's something else.

In the mirror's corner, just behind me, a shadow moves.

I spin around, heart pounding, but the room is empty. Only the painting remains, its grotesque image seared into my mind.

I back away slowly, unable to tear my eyes from Annabel's face. Her scream feels eternal, a silent accusation that I'll never escape.

And then, as if in response to my fear, the wind picks up again, rattling the windows.

The cottage groans, the fire sputtering weakly. The shadows stretch and twist, reaching for me once more.

I sink to the floor, clutching my knees to my chest. My mind races, searching for answers, for any explanation that makes sense. But deep down, I know there's only one truth.

Annabel isn't gone.

And she isn't finished with me.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jonathan—past

I'm losing her.

Annabel stands on the sidewalk outside The Chelsea waiting for a cab, her back to me, the wind tearing through her hair and whipping the hem of her dress around her legs.

She's the picture of defiance, an untouchable goddess who knows the power she holds over mortal men.

I've been waiting out here for her all morning.

I watched Calum leave hours ago—probably for a meeting before they head back to Ravensreach.

“Turn around,” I demand, my voice sharp, cutting through the cacophony of city chaos.

She doesn't move, her posture rigid as she refuses to look at me. “You shouldn't be here.”

Her words, so dismissive, slice through me. I take a step closer, reach out to her and then think better of it. “You didn't say that last night,” I reply, venom lacing my tone. “Or have you already forgotten?”

Her shoulders tense, and I know I've struck a nerve. Good. She deserves to feel as raw and exposed as I do.

"Last night was a mistake," she says finally, her voice barely audible over the wind tunneling down 23rd Street. "It shouldn't have happened."

"A mistake?" I laugh bitterly, the sound harsh and hollow. "That's what you're calling it? After everything we've been through, everything I've done for you?"

She turns then, her eyes blazing with that familiar fire that both infuriates and captivates me. "What have you done for me, Jonathan? Besides marry my cousin and make my life more complicated?"

The accusation stings, but I press on, my anger fueling me. "I've protected you. I've been there for you when Calum was too busy chasing his dreams to notice you were drowning. I've loved you in ways he never could."

"Loved me?" she snaps, her voice rising with fury. "You don't love me, you're just trying to shape me into something I'm not. You're more like him than you think, you know."

"Don't compare me to him," I growl, stepping closer. "Calum doesn't even know who you really are. He's in love with some fantasy, some perfect muse he's conjured up in his head. But I see you. I see the cracks and the flaws, and I still want you."

Her laugh is sharp and bitter. "Wanting me isn't love, Jonathan. It's obsession. And it's suffocating."

For a moment, her words steal the air from my lungs.

But then the fury surges again, hot and blinding.

“You talk about suffocation as if you’re some helpless victim,” I say, my voice trembling with rage.

“But you’re the one pulling the strings, Annabel.

You’re the one playing us against each other, turning us into pawns in your little game.”

Her jaw tightens, and I see the cracks forming in her carefully constructed facade. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t I?” I take another step closer, my voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “I should kiss you again.”

“Don’t kiss me again, if you did I’d have to leave him and he wouldn’t survive.” Her eyes hang an extra beat with mine, as if she’s at war with herself. “The surest way to kill me would be to kiss me again.”

“So that’s it then? We forget last night ever happened? Go back to our dull lives?” I move closer, needing to be near her. “Always longing, in miserable agony, forever seeking the secret names that vibrate in each other’s skin.”

Her eyes flicker with something—fear, maybe—but she quickly masks it with defiance. “Yes. Go home to your wife.”

“No, I’m finally seeing things clearly,” I say, my tone cutting. “You begged me for this, Annabel. Do you know why Calum got that commission at the New York Public Library? Do you think it was because of his talent? Because of his genius? No, Annabel. It was because of me.”

She blinks, confusion clouding her features. “What are you talking about?”

“You know my father is the library’s biggest patron,” I reveal, my lips curling into a bitter smile. “He’s the one who made it happen. He’s the reason Calum is standing on the precipice of greatness. And you’re the reason he’s about to fall.”

Her face pales, the weight of my words sinking in. “You wouldn’t?—”

“Wouldn’t I?” I cut her off, my voice low and menacing. “You’ve been lying to him, lying to me, playing us off each other like we’re nothing more than toys for your amusement. You’ve betrayed both of us. And now, you’re going to pay for it and you don’t like the consequences.”

“What do you want?” she yells into the wind.

“Leave him. Leave him and be with me, we’re meant to be and you know it.”

She shakes her head. “I can’t—Calum—he can’t live without me or his career. If I leave him it would break him. He would lose himself—”

“He’s weak. I thought if I got him that commission—if I did this for you—it would prove that I would move mountains for you—that you would finally leave him.

His art is the only thing that matters to him, not you, not really.

He’s not capable of loving you like I am, like I always have.

He’s too consumed with his work, his art, his success.

You know that, Annabel. From the start it’s been us—you and me against the world.

Always.” She shakes her head, and my gaze hardens at her silent rebuff.

“If you don’t leave him I’ll pull the mural project.

I’ll tell my father to commission someone else. ”

Tears glisten in her eyes, but she blinks them away, her defiance returning. “You’re pathetic,” she spits. “You think you can control me, manipulate me, but you’re nothing, Jonathan. Nothing. You married my cousin to spite me, what makes you think I could ever respect you after that?”

Her words ignite something dark and primal within me.

I step closer, my hands curling into fists at my sides.

“If you don’t come clean, I’ll destroy him,” I say, my voice trembling with anger.

“I’ll take everything from him—his career, his reputation, his future.

And when he finds out the truth about you, do you think it will destroy him more than losing that commission? ”

Her breath catches, and I know I’ve struck a nerve. But instead of backing down, she steps closer, her face inches from mine. “You’re a coward,” she hisses. “Hiding behind your father’s money and influence, pretending you’re so righteous and noble. But you’re just as broken as I am.”

The admission stuns me, but I recover quickly, my anger flaring once more. “You’re better off dead to both of us,” I say, my voice cold and detached. “At least then, you wouldn’t be able to ruin anyone else’s life.”

Her eyes widen, and for a moment, I see genuine fear. But then her expression hardens, and she takes a step back, the morning wind whipping her hair around her

face. “You’ll never have control over me, Jonathan,” she says, her voice steady. “Not now, not ever.”

With that, she turns and walks away, her figure disappearing down the block. I stand there watching her go, my anger simmering beneath the surface. She thinks she’s won, that she’s untouchable. But she has no idea what I’m capable of.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Calum

The cottage is cast in shadows, each corner of its grand but crumbling expanse steeped in an unsettling stillness.

I wake, gasping, my chest heaving as though I've been submerged underwater.

The dream is already fragmenting into jagged pieces, but the sensation it leaves is visceral—wet, choking terror like seaweed wrapped around my throat.

The storm has returned, battering the windows in waves, relentless as grief. I sit up, the sheets damp with sweat, and glance toward the doorway of the bedroom. It's open, but only the faintest sliver of moonlight spills in from the hall. The rest of the cottage is shrouded in black.

Something isn't right. I feel it like an itch beneath my skin.

The air is heavy, laced with a cloying scent I can't place—burnt, metallic, and wrong. My pulse quickens as I swing my legs over the side of the bed, my bare feet meeting the icy wooden floor. I wince but force myself to stand.

The hallway stretches before me like a dark throat, and though the storm howls outside, inside the cottage it's deathly quiet. My skin prickles as I step forward, the floorboards groaning beneath my weight.

Then I see it.

The walls of the hallway are covered in ash.

It streaks the white paint in broad, furious strokes, forming the same jagged symbol that's haunted me since I found it.

It repeats over and over, carved into my vision like a brand.

The ash smears where the wind from an open window must have caught it, dragging the shapes into sinister trails like claw marks.

I reach out, my hand trembling, and press my fingers against one of the marks. It feels cold and coarse, leaving smudges on my fingertips. The scent of ash intensifies, and my stomach churns.

“Annabel?” I whisper, the name catching in my throat.

A door slams behind me, the sound sharp and deafening against the silence. I spin around, my breath hitching as I search for the source. The shadows seem to close in, but I see nothing. Just the hallway and its grotesque markings, stretching endlessly into the dark.

Then I hear it—a faint rustle, like the whisper of fabric brushing against skin. My gaze snaps to the bedroom door. At first, it's only darkness. But as my eyes adjust, I see a figure, pale and flickering, standing just beyond the threshold.

It's her.

Annabel.

Her outline is fractured, the edges of her form dissolving and reforming as though she's made of smoke. Her face is shrouded in shadow, but I can feel her eyes on me. They bore into me with a force that makes my knees buckle.

"Annabel?" My voice is barely audible, strangled by the terror clawing at my chest. "Is it you?"

She doesn't respond, doesn't move, but the energy in the room shifts—dense and oppressive, like the moments before a lightning strike.

I blink, and she's gone.

No, not gone. Moving.

Her form distorts, bending and jerking as though the act of motion itself is unnatural. She rushes toward me, her figure a disjointed blur of pale limbs and trailing darkness. I stumble backward, my heart pounding so violently I think it might burst.

"Annabel, stop!" I cry, my voice breaking, but she doesn't stop.

She doesn't stop.

In a single, horrifying moment, she reaches me.

I brace for impact, for the feel of her, but she passes through me instead.

The sensation is excruciating—an icy, tingling jolt that sends my teeth chattering and my limbs shaking.

It's as though I've been struck by lightning, but instead of heat, it's deathly cold, a numbing chill that settles deep into my bones.

I collapse to my knees, clutching my chest as I struggle to breathe. The words echo in my head, bouncing off the walls of my mind like a drumbeat: Finish it. Finish it. Finish it.

It's her voice. Her voice, furious and relentless, filling every crevice of my consciousness.

"Finish what?" I gasp, my fingers clawing at the floor as though I can find an anchor. "Annabel, what do you want from me?"

There's no answer. Just the storm outside and the lingering chill of her presence. I'm alone again, but the cottage feels more alive than it ever has—alive with malice, with her.

I force myself to my feet, my legs trembling as though I've run for miles. The hallway seems to stretch endlessly now, its walls still scarred by the ash symbols. They seem to shimmer in the dim light, almost pulsing, as if mocking me.

I stagger back into the bedroom, slamming the door shut behind me. My breath comes in ragged gasps as I lean against it, trying to make sense of what just happened. The air is thick, the room suffused with the lingering scent of decay and ash.

The painting stands in the corner, untouched but watching me all the same. Her face looks different now—less accusing, more... pleading. Her painted eyes glisten as though wet, and the locket around her neck gleams unnaturally, catching light that isn't there.

I can't take it anymore.

I grab the sheet draped over the nearby chair and throw it over the painting, covering

her face, her scream, her eyes. But even hidden, I can feel her. The weight of her presence presses down on me, and her voice continues to echo in my mind.

Finish it.

I sink to the floor, my back against the door, and bury my face in my hands. The events of the night swirl in my head, a maelstrom of fear and confusion. The ash. The symbol. Her shadow. The way she felt when she passed through me.

I need answers. But from whom? The only person who might know is the one who's haunting me.

I sit there for hours, or maybe minutes. Time has become meaningless in this cursed place. The storm begins to wane, the thunder rolling farther into the distance. The cottage grows quieter, but the silence feels heavier now, as though the walls themselves are holding their breath.

When I finally stand, my legs feel like lead. I cross the room to the mirror above the dresser, needing to see myself, to confirm that I'm still real. My reflection stares back, pale and hollow-eyed, a ghost of the man I once was.

But as I turn away, I see it.

In the corner of the mirror, faint but unmistakable, is the symbol.

It's not carved into the glass, nor is it drawn. It's inside the reflection, hovering behind me like a brand etched into the fabric of reality itself .

And then, just as quickly as it appeared, it vanishes.

My breath catches in my throat as the realization dawns: I can't escape her. She's

everywhere now, in every shadow, every reflection, every beat of my frantic heart.

She wants me to finish it. And until I do, she won't let me go.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Calum

The wailing shreds through my sleep, pulling me from the abyss of an uneasy dream.

It isn't gentle or distant. It's guttural, raw, vibrating through the walls of the cottage like a living thing.

My eyes snap open, and the room around me swims in pale gray dawn.

For a second, I think it's just the wind—a storm still lingering after last night's chaos.

But no. This is human. A sound drenched in grief, in rage. A sound that claws at my insides.

I sit up too quickly, the blood rushing to my head. My vision darkens for a moment, and when it clears, the sound crescendos into a scream that almost shakes the walls. My heart hammers against my ribs, and I swing my legs over the side of the bed, bracing my hands on the mattress to steady myself.

“Annabel?” I whisper, my throat dry and cracking around the syllables.

No answer. Just that unrelenting wail. It feels like it's coming from everywhere at once, above me, below me, inside me. I press my palms against my ears, but it's no use. The sound is inescapable.

And then, just as suddenly as it began, the silence swallows it whole.

I sit frozen for a moment, waiting, bracing for what comes next.

The air in the room has changed. It's thick, heavy, like it's weighing me down in some invisible way.

The fine hairs on my arms stand on end. I want to move, but I can't.

My body feels like it's locked in place, a marionette waiting for its strings to be yanked.

Out of nowhere, a force slams against my face, hard and unyielding. My head snaps to the side, my cheek stinging with the heat of the impact. I gasp, bringing a hand to my face, fingers trembling as I press against the burning flesh. There's no one here. Nothing that could have done this.

The slap echoes in the silence of the room, and I stagger to my feet, disoriented. My gaze shoots to the corners of the room, to the doorway, to the windows streaked with faint morning light. But there's no one.

No one, and yet I felt it. The distinct, sharp burn of fingers across my skin.

I stumble toward the dresser, gripping its edge to steady myself as I lean toward the mirror above it. The reflection staring back at me is ghostly, my face pale, my eyes wild, the cheekbone on the left side of my face bright red with the unmistakable outline of a handprint.

A handprint.

My chest tightens, my breath shallow and erratic as my gaze locks on the fiery mark.

It shouldn't be possible, but there it is, a searing accusation branded into my skin. The fingers are long and delicate— her fingers. Annabel's.

She can hurt me. This isn't just whispers and flickering shadows anymore. This is rage. A fury so tangible it left its mark on me .

“What do you want?” I demand, my voice trembling with fear and defiance. “Why are you doing this?”

The mirror fogs over as though something unseen is breathing against it, a slow condensation that creeps over the glass.

I watch, my pulse hammering, as shapes begin to emerge.

At first, it's indecipherable, but then the same jagged symbol carves itself into the fog.

The lines are deliberate, drawn as though by an invisible hand.

It glistens wetly in the dim light, a mocking reminder of the ash-covered walls.

Through the faint etching, her image flickers in the reflection—not fully formed, just a suggestion of a face, a curl of hair, eyes brimming with fury and sadness.

My chest tightens, and I back away, unable to tear my gaze from the mirror.

I want to look away, but her presence is magnetic, horrifying.

“Annabel, stop!” I shout, my voice cracking. “Tell me what you want from me!”

Her image wavers, her lips parting in a soundless scream. And then she's gone,

leaving only the fogged-over mirror and the symbol. My cheek still throbs as I clutch at the dresser, my nails digging into the wood.

My mind races, fragments of thoughts colliding into one another. This is no longer just grief twisting into delusion. Annabel's anger is real. Her pain is real. And now, she's making sure I feel it too.

I glance around the room, half-expecting her to appear again, her disjointed form emerging from the shadows. But nothing moves. The house is silent once more, and yet every creak of the floorboards feels ominous, like it's echoing a warning.

I don't know how long I stand there, staring at my reflection, waiting for something else to happen. The sun is creeping higher now, spilling more light into the room. It does little to soothe the oppressive weight pressing down on me.

I need answers .

I dress quickly, throwing on the first clothes my shaking hands can find.

My body feels like it's operating on autopilot, my mind too fogged with fear and confusion to register the simple acts of pulling on jeans, a sweater.

My cheek burns hot as I shove the bedroom door open and step into the hallway.

The ash marks are still there, streaking the walls with their haunting repetition.

The sight of them makes my stomach churn, but I don't stop.

I don't know where I'm going—there's nowhere left in this house that doesn't carry her imprint—but staying still feels like an invitation for something worse.

I wander through the cottage, my footsteps hesitant.

The storm from the night before has passed, leaving behind an eerie stillness.

The air smells faintly of salt and decay, and I find myself drawn toward the studio where I've been painting her.

It's the only place that might hold answers—or at least distractions.

The studio is exactly as I left it, the unfinished portrait of Annabel still dominating the center of the room.

Her image stares back at me, serene and beautiful, but I can't look at her without remembering the anger in her face this morning.

The way her shadow moved, the force of her hand on my cheek.

I approach the painting cautiously, as though it might spring to life again. The locket around her painted neck gleams, its surface catching the light in a way that seems almost deliberate. I've been avoiding it, too afraid to inspect it closely. But now, I feel an undeniable pull.

I reach out, my hand trembling, and press my fingers to the painted locket. The surface is smooth, cool to the touch, but as I lean in closer, I notice something I hadn't seen before.

There's a faint engraving on the locket's surface. A symbol. The same jagged lines that have haunted me, carved into the painted gold.

A shiver runs through me, and I step back, my hand falling to my side. The room feels colder, the shadows deeper. The mark on my cheek throbs in time with my

heartbeat, a constant reminder of her presence.

“What do you want me to finish?” I whisper, my voice breaking. “What am I supposed to do?”

The air around me shifts, a faint rustling like the sound of fabric brushing against skin. I spin around, half-expecting to see her standing there again, but there’s nothing. Just the empty room and the lingering scent of decay.

I can’t stay here. Not like this.

Grabbing my coat from the back of a chair, I throw it on and head for the front door. The morning light is harsh as I step outside, the chill biting at my skin. The ocean stretches out before me, endless and unforgiving, and for a moment, I feel like I’m staring into a void.

The wind whips around me as I make my way toward the cliffs. I don’t know what I’m looking for, but the pull is undeniable. The waves crash against the rocks below, their relentless rhythm matching the pounding in my chest.

As I stand at the edge, the symbol flashes in my mind again, burned into my memory. It feels like a key, but to what, I don’t know. Annabel’s voice echoes in my head, her anger, her pain, her demand: Finish it.

I close my eyes, the wind tearing at my hair, and for the first time, I let myself surrender to the fear, the grief, the guilt. Whatever she wants, whatever she’s trying to tell me, I have to figure it out. Because if I don’t, I’m not sure I’ll survive her wrath.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Annabel

“Annabel.”

The sound of my name cuts through the wind, sharp and accusing.

I stop mid-step, my toes digging into the sand and breath catching in my throat.

I don't turn right away. His voice carries weight, a tether pulling me back to a reality I'm not ready to face.

“You've been avoiding me since the night of the gallery opening. ”

“How did you find me?”

“I knew you'd be here.” Jonathan's words come closer now, each one heavy with something unsaid. “You're always here. Remember when we used to hide out on this stretch of beach as kids?”

I turn slowly, my arms folded against the chill—or maybe against him.

He stands just beyond the line of shadows, his face half-lit by the pale moon.

His hair's disheveled, his coat unbuttoned, and his jaw clenches with a mixture of anger and something softer, something I don't have the strength to name.

“What do you want, Jonathan?” My voice is brittle, carrying none of the sharpness I wish it did. I try to hold my ground, to summon the flippant shield I’ve perfected, but tonight it feels thin, transparent.

“What do I want?” He takes a step closer, the gravel crunching under his boots. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

I bristle at his tone, lifting my chin. “If you came here to play the martyr, don’t bother. I’m not in the mood.”

“Why are you even here, Annabel?” His eyes are dark, searching mine for answers I refuse to give. “Is it because of him? Or is it just you running again, pretending you don’t leave destruction in your wake?”

“Don’t you dare,” I snap, the words sharper than the wind. “You don’t get to stand there and act like this is all my fault. Like I owe you some neat little explanation tied up with a bow.”

Jonathan’s jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he might turn and leave. But then he exhales, his breath visible in the frigid air. “I’m not asking for a bow. I’m asking for honesty, Annabel. For once in your life, just tell me the truth.”

“The truth?” I laugh, though it’s hollow and bitter. “The truth is you don’t want honesty. You want validation. You want me to say everything you’re desperate to hear.”

His hands ball into fists at his sides, and when he speaks, his voice cracks with frustration. “I want you to stop lying to yourself. To me. To Calum. You’re tearing yourself apart, and you’re dragging us all down with you.”

I take a step back, the wind whipping my hair into my face. His words strike

something raw in me, something I can't name, and it only makes me angrier. "And what about you, Jonathan? You think you're so different from Calum? You're not. You want to own me just as much as he does."

"That's not true." His voice softens, but his eyes blaze with something desperate. "I don't want to own you, Annabel. I want to love you. "

"No." I shake my head, the word cutting like a blade. "You want me to be some version of myself that fits neatly into your life. You want me to need you, to depend on you. That's not love. That's control."

"Control?" Jonathan's laugh is humorless, bitter. "You think love is about freedom? Then why does every choice you make look like a prison?"

The words hit me like a wave, cold and unyielding. I don't answer right away, the truth of his accusation coiling around my throat. Instead, I turn toward the edge of the cliff, staring out at the endless sea. The water churns violently, frothing against the jagged rocks below.

"Love should feel like freedom," I whisper, more to myself than to him. "So why does it always feel so suffocating?"

Jonathan doesn't answer right away, but I can feel his presence behind me, a shadow just out of reach. When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet. "Maybe because you don't know what you want. Or maybe because you're too afraid to admit it."

I whirl around, my fists clenching at my sides. "And you think you do? You think you have me all figured out?"

"I think you're scared," he says simply. "Of Calum. Of me. Of yourself."

The words strip me bare, exposing every fragile, ugly part of me I've tried so hard to bury. My vision blurs with unshed tears, but I refuse to let them fall. "You don't know me, Jonathan."

"I know enough," he says, his gaze unwavering. "I know you hate being tied down, but you're terrified of being alone. I know you love Calum's ambition, but it makes you feel small. I know you're drawn to me, but you hate yourself for it."

"Stop it," I whisper, the words shaking with emotion. "Just stop."

But he doesn't. He steps closer, his voice softening. "I know you feel trapped, Annabel. But you don't have to be. You can let go."

"Let go of what?" I scream, the sound tearing from my throat. "Of Calum? Of you? Of this whole goddamn mess? Tell me, Jonathan, what do I let go of first?"

"Of the lies," he says, his voice steady. "Of the idea that you have to choose between us. Of the fear that if you stop running, you'll lose yourself."

His words hang in the air, heavy and undeniable. For a moment, the wind dies down, the world holding its breath. I stare at him, my heart pounding in my chest, and I feel like I'm standing on the edge of something vast and terrifying.

"I don't know how," I admit finally, my voice barely audible.

Jonathan's face softens, and he reaches for me, his hand brushing against mine. "You start by being honest. With yourself. With us."

I pull my hand away, shaking my head. "I can't."

"You can," he insists, his voice firm. "You just don't want to."

The truth of his words slices through me, leaving me raw and exposed. I take a step back, the edge of the cliff looming closer, and for a moment, I wonder what it would feel like to fall. To let the waves take me, to let it all go.

But then Jonathan grabs my arm, pulling me back. His grip is firm, grounding, and for a moment, I hate him for it. For keeping me tethered when all I want is to drift away.

“Don’t,” he says, his voice breaking. “Don’t you dare.”

I look up at him, my vision blurred with tears. “I don’t know who I am anymore, Jonathan.”

“You’re Annabel,” he says, his voice steady. “You’re messy and beautiful and infuriating. And you’re worth fighting for.”

The words are a balm and a curse, filling me with both hope and despair. I want to believe him, but the weight of everything I’ve done—everything I’ve left undone—feels too heavy to bear.

“I don’t know if I can fix this,” I whisper, hands cradling my twisting stomach.

“Then don’t,” he says simply. “Just stop running. Stop hiding. Be here. Be real.”

The simplicity of his words is staggering, and for a moment, I feel like I can breathe again. I nod slowly, the tears spilling over, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I let myself feel the weight of it all.

Jonathan pulls me into his arms, and I let him. For now, it’s enough.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Calum

The air inside the cottage hangs heavy with the smell of turpentine and salt, as if the sea itself has seeped into the walls.

The painting looms before me, unfinished but unnervingly lifelike, Annabel's image emerging from the canvas like a memory dragged from the depths of my mind.

Her eyes, dark and shimmering, seem to follow me across the room.

I can't decide if they're accusing or pleading.

I wipe a hand over my face, the paint-smudged tips of my fingers streaking against my skin. My pulse pounds erratically, and the back of my neck prickles, as if the shadows in the room are leaning in, watching me.

But I can't stop. I'm so close to finishing.

Each brushstroke feels guided by something outside of myself, a compulsion that overrides the ache in my back and the fog in my mind.

My hand moves, swift and precise, painting details I don't recall ever seeing in real life but which emerge with startling clarity now.

Annabel's hair, loose and wild, falls in perfect, chaotic waves.

Her lips are slightly parted, as though she's caught mid-sentence, the words just out of reach.

And the necklace—the delicate gold chain around her neck—shimmers faintly in the dim light.

The symbol etched into the pendant burns against the canvas like a brand.

It's the same one I found in the letter, scrawled in ash and etched into the mirror. A jagged, twisting design, delicate but ominous. Just like her.

I set the brush down, my hands trembling. The storm outside rages, the wind howling like a living thing. I tell myself it's just the storm, just my exhausted mind playing tricks, but then I hear it—a whisper. Soft at first, barely audible over the gale, but growing louder, insistent.

“Finish it.”

The voice—her voice—wraps around me like a vice. I whirl around, expecting to see her standing there, her flippant smile, her eyes glinting with mischief. But there's nothing. Just the shadows, just the storm.

“Annabel?” My voice cracks, unsteady. I take a step back, my foot catching on a drop cloth. “What do you want?”

The whisper comes again, closer now. “Finish it.”

I turn back to the painting, my breath hitching.

The air feels charged, electric, as though the storm has breached the walls of the cottage.

And then I see it—her face on the canvas has changed.

Her expression, once serene, now contorts with sorrow, the faintest glimmer of betrayal etched into the curve of her lips, the crease of her brow.

But it's not just her face that's changed. There's a figure standing beside her now, shadowy but unmistakable. My stomach churns as I realize who it is.

Jonathan.

His likeness is unmistakable—the strong jawline, the broad shoulders, the way his hand rests possessively on her arm. The shadows on his face deepen, giving him an almost sinister edge, but there's no mistaking him. He's there, beside her, staring at me from the canvas.

A sharp, bitter laugh escapes my throat. “What is this, Annabel? Some kind of sick joke?”

The painting doesn't respond, but the room does. The windows rattle violently, and the fire in the hearth sputters as if gasping for air. The temperature plummets, and the scent of decay floods my senses, overwhelming and suffocating. I stagger back, my chest tightening.

“You planned this, didn't you?” My voice rises, raw with anger and something darker—fear. “You were going to leave me. For him.”

The figure in the painting shifts subtly, almost imperceptibly, but enough to make my heart stop. Annabel's painted lips curve into a faint, mocking smile.

“Stop it!” I yell, grabbing the nearest object—a paintbrush—and hurling it at the canvas. It strikes the surface with a dull thud, leaving a streak of black across

Jonathan's shadowy form. But the painting doesn't flinch. Annabel's eyes hold mine, unwavering and unrelenting.

"You were mine," I whisper, the words trembling on my lips. "You said you loved me."

The room answers with a groan, the walls seeming to close in. And then I see it—the locket on Annabel's neck in the painting. The same symbol, the same chain. It gleams faintly, almost alive. My vision blurs, my head pounding with the weight of realization.

She wasn't just wearing the locket in the painting. I bet she was wearing it that night. The night she died. The locket burns in my mind, its twisted symbol a question I can't answer. Did she mean to leave me? Was Jonathan the one she'd chosen all along?

"Why, Annabel?" My voice cracks, barely a whisper. "Why him?"

The shadows in the room deepen, and I swear I hear her laugh, soft and cruel.

The storm outside crescendos, the wind screaming against the windows.

The painting seems to pulse, the colors shifting and swirling like oil on water.

Her face twists again, her serene beauty warping into something monstrous.

Her lips part, and I hear her voice, clear and cutting.

"You killed me."

The words strike like a blow, stealing the air from my lungs. I stumble back, my knees buckling as the room spins around me. The shadows close in, and the painting

looms larger, her image alive and seething.

“No,” I gasp, shaking my head. “No, I didn’t.”

But the painting doesn’t relent. Annabel’s eyes blaze with accusation, and Jonathan’s shadow seems to stretch, his hand tightening on her arm. The symbol on her locket glows faintly, a brand of betrayal.

“You killed me,” she says again, her voice echoing in my mind. “You never saw me. Not really.”

Tears blur my vision, and I fall to my knees, clutching my head. “I loved you,” I whisper, the words a broken plea. “I loved you more than anything.”

“Then why couldn’t you let me go?” Her voice is a razor, slicing through my defenses.

The storm roars, and the room shakes as if the earth itself is rebelling. The fire in the hearth flares, casting monstrous shadows on the walls. And then, with a deafening crack, the painting splits down the middle, the canvas tearing in two.

The room falls silent, the storm outside suddenly distant. I stare at the ruined painting, my breath coming in ragged gasps. Annabel’s face is gone, her image lost to the destruction. But the locket remains, painted in perfect detail on the jagged edge of the canvas .

The symbol stares back at me, its meaning just out of reach.

I collapse onto the floor, the weight of it all pressing down on me. The truth, the lies, the unanswered questions—they swirl together, a tempest I can’t escape. And in the midst of it all, her voice lingers, soft and haunting.

“You killed me.”

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Calum

I wake in the middle of the night. My eyes instantly landing on the the mirror, unable to shake the sensation that something about it has changed.

It sits at the end of the hallway, its gilded frame warped by time and salt air.

The glass is cloudy, speckled with dark spots like decay spreading across its surface.

But tonight, it's luminous, almost glowing, drawing me toward it like a moth to a flame.

I step closer, my bare feet soundless on the cold floor.

My reflection stares back, but it's wrong.

There's something about the eyes—my eyes—that makes me pause.

They look too wide, too knowing, like they're holding secrets I can't begin to fathom.

I raise my hand, and the reflection follows, but there's a lag, a hesitation.

My hand trembles, but the hand in the mirror is steady, defiant.

“Annabel,” I whisper, my voice hoarse. The name feels like an invocation, a plea.

The glass ripples as though disturbed by an invisible current, and I stumble back, my pulse hammering.

That's when I see her shadow.

It's faint, just a flicker, but unmistakable. It stretches down the hallway behind me, long and thin, the outline of her head and shoulders unmistakable. I spin around, expecting to find her standing there, her lips curved in that infuriating, mocking smile. But the hallway is empty.

A hollow laugh escapes me, bitter and raw. "Losing it, Calum," I mutter under my breath. "Completely losing it."

I turn back to the mirror, and my breath catches in my throat.

The glass is no longer cloudy. It's clear, too clear, and etched into its surface is the symbol.

Over and over, the jagged lines crisscross, carved deep and deliberate.

The etchings shimmer faintly, as though they've been burned into the glass with something far more permanent than human hands.

The symbol multiplies, spreading like a virus across the surface of the mirror.

My reflection begins to disappear beneath the onslaught, but not before I see the final etching.

It's over my eyes—my reflection's eyes. A thousand versions of the same symbol, spiraling outward, consuming every inch of the mirror and my image with it.

“No.” The word escapes me, a desperate denial. I reach out, my fingertips grazing the surface of the glass, and the temperature drops instantly. It’s so cold it burns, and I jerk my hand back, the skin red and raw.

“Why are you doing this?” I yell, my voice echoing down the empty hallway. “What do you want from me?”

The only response is silence. No, not silence. Breathing. Slow, deliberate, right behind me.

I whip around, my vision swimming, and I see her again—just a shadow, fleeting and ephemeral, disappearing into the walls like smoke. My legs give out, and I slump against the mirror, my chest heaving. My mind races, the edges of my sanity fraying with every passing second.

I feel her now, not just in the air but in my very skin, like she’s seeped into my pores, into my blood.

The taste of salt lingers on my tongue, metallic and sharp, as though the sea itself is trying to claim me.

My hands shake as I push myself to my feet, stumbling down the hallway toward the studio.

I need to paint. It’s the only thing that keeps me tethered, the only thing that makes sense anymore.

The canvas waits for me like a patient lover, its surface blank and pristine.

My brushes sit in a jar of murky water, and I grab one without thinking, dipping it into the darkest shade of black I can find.

But my hand won't move. The brush hovers above the canvas, trembling as though caught in an invisible current. My mind is blank, save for her face, her eyes, the way they stared at me in the painting before it was destroyed. Accusing. Loving. Betraying.

I close my eyes, and the image comes unbidden.

Her lips, curved into that maddening smile.

Her hair, wild and untamed, framing her face like a halo.

The necklace around her throat, the symbol gleaming like a brand.

My hand moves of its own accord, the brush dragging across the canvas in long, jagged strokes.

The room grows colder, and I hear the creak of floorboards behind me.

I don't turn. I can't. The air feels heavy, oppressive, pressing down on my shoulders like a physical weight.

I paint feverishly, the lines and shapes coming together in a grotesque symphony.

Her face emerges again, but it's not the face I remember.

It's twisted, decayed, the skin melting away to reveal bone and sinew.

"Stop it," I whisper, but my hand doesn't obey. The brush moves faster, the strokes more violent, as though I'm trying to exorcise her from my mind. But she won't leave. She's everywhere—in the paint, in the shadows, in the very walls of this cursed cottage.

The whisper returns, louder now. “Finish it.”

“No!” I scream, throwing the brush across the room. It clatters to the floor, the sound deafening in the silence that follows. My chest heaves, and I stagger back, my eyes locked on the painting. Her face stares back at me, hollow and accusing, the symbol etched into her forehead like a brand.

The room tilts, and I collapse into the chair behind me, my head in my hands. The whispers grow louder, overlapping and chaotic, like a thousand voices speaking at once. The words blur together, but one phrase rises above the rest, clear and cutting.

“You’re already dead.”

I freeze, my breath hitching. The room feels suddenly still, the air electric with anticipation. Slowly, I lift my head, my gaze drifting to the mirror in the corner of the studio. It’s cracked, the glass spiderwebbed with fractures, but my reflection stares back, whole and untouched.

And then it moves.

Not a normal movement, not a blink or a tilt of the head. It steps forward, closer to the glass, its eyes locked on mine. I can’t move, can’t breathe, as it presses its hands against the inside of the mirror, its lips curling into a smile.

“You’re already dead,” it says, its voice my own.

The world tilts again, and I’m falling, the darkness swallowing me whole. The last thing I see is her face, her hollow eyes staring down at me, and the symbol burning brighter than the sun. The whisper returns, soft but insistent, wrapping around me like a noose.

“Finish it.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Calum

The lullaby that wakes me is soft at first, carried on the whispers of the wind through the cracked windowpane.

It drifts into my consciousness like a ghost's breath, pulling me from the restless haze of half-sleep.

I sit up abruptly, my body coated in a slick sheen of sweat, the air in the room suffocatingly dense.

The melody is familiar, but I can't place it—a gentle, haunting tune that sends a shiver crawling down my spine.

“Annabel?” My voice cracks, barely above a whisper.

The cottage is silent except for the faint, repetitive creak of the rocking chair in the corner.

It's moving on its own, swaying forward and back with an eerie precision, as though guided by invisible hands.

My pulse quickens as I throw off the covers, my bare feet hitting the icy wooden floor.

The rocking chair stops the moment I approach, the lullaby cutting off mid-verse, leaving an oppressive void in its wake.

I can't tell if the chair was a figment of my imagination or another fragment of her lingering presence, but I don't care.

I turn to the wall of paintings that dominates the studio.

They're scattered across the space—propped against walls, hung haphazardly, some even leaning against the furniture. Every single one is of her.

Annabel in the garden, her head tilted back in laughter, sunlight spilling across her black hair.

Annabel at the cliffs, her face turned away, watching the horizon like a secret she'll never share.

Annabel drowning, her body floating lifelessly among jagged rocks like Ophelia, enchanting even in death, the sea foam tinged with crimson.

Each portrait is a confession, a scream of my obsession, my inability to let her go.

I approach the most recent painting, the one I started two nights ago in a fit of delirium.

Her expression here is darker, her lips parted as though caught mid-accusation.

Her eyes, hollow and sorrowful, seem to pierce through me.

Around her neck, the locket gleams—an anchor, a mystery I can't unravel.

“Please,” I whisper, my fingers brushing against the canvas. “Just tell me what you want. Tell me how to make this right.”

The room doesn’t answer, but the weight of her absence feels heavier than ever, pressing against my chest like a vice. My gaze drops to the locket. I trace its outline with trembling fingers, the cold paint against my skin a sharp contrast to the firestorm raging inside me.

“You always wore it,” I murmur, my voice cracking. “What does it mean, Annabel? Why won’t you tell me?”

The room seems to exhale, the temperature dropping another degree.

My breath fogs in the air, and I turn instinctively toward the mirror.

It looms at the end of the hallway, its surface fractured and distorted, the cracks spreading like veins.

The symbol etched into the glass has faded, but I can still see its faint outline, like an echo of something sinister.

I know what I have to do. My legs feel like lead as I move toward the mirror, the shadows around me deepening with every step. The lullaby starts again, soft and mournful. I reach the mirror and stop, my reflection staring back with eyes that aren’t entirely my own.

“Annabel,” I say, my voice steady despite the terror clawing at my throat. “If you’re here, if you can hear me... please. Show me.”

The glass ripples, a faint shimmer spreading across its surface. My reflection blurs, the image distorting until it’s no longer mine. Instead, I see her.

She stands behind the glass, her face pale and luminous, her hair a wild halo around her.

Her lips curve into a small, sad smile, but her eyes burn with something darker—anger, longing, despair.

She reaches out, her fingers pressing against the other side of the mirror, and I do the same.

The moment my hand meets the glass, the world tilts.

I'm no longer in the cottage.

I'm standing beside her.

The air is thick with the scent of salt and decay, the ground beneath my feet soft and damp.

The ocean roars in the distance, the cliffs jagged silhouettes against a storm-gray sky.

Annabel stands beside me, her gown billowing in the wind like smoke.

She's more beautiful than I remember, but there's something off about her—a shadow that clings to her, an otherworldly glow that makes my stomach twist.

"You came," she says, her voice light but edged with something sharp. She cradles her belly, and my breath catches as I realize what I'm seeing.

She's pregnant.

"How...?" The word barely escapes my lips, my mind spinning with possibilities.

“Annabel, what is this? What’s happening?”

She turns to me, her smile softening into something almost tender. “You always said you’d follow me anywhere, didn’t you, Calum? Even into the dark. ”

“This isn’t real,” I stammer, my chest tightening. “It can’t be. You’re—you’re gone. You drowned.”

Her laughter is light, almost musical, but it chills me to my core. “Is that what you believe? That I simply slipped away, swallowed by the sea?” She steps closer, her hand reaching out to brush against my cheek. Her touch is cold, like frostbite, and I flinch.

“Annabel,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I tried to save you. I?—”

“You tried to own me,” she interrupts, her voice suddenly harsh. “You and Jonathan, both of you, pulling at me like I was some prize to be won. Do you know what it’s like, Calum? To love and not be free?”

“I loved you,” I insist, the words tumbling out in desperation. “I still love you.”

She shakes her head, her eyes filled with an aching sadness. “You loved the idea of me. The version you painted over and over, perfect and obedient, untouched by the flaws you couldn’t bear to see.”

Her words hit like a blow, and I stagger back, my knees nearly buckling. The wind picks up, whipping around us, carrying the sound of the lullaby on its icy breath.

“You never saw me,” she continues, her voice rising. “Not really. You saw what you wanted to see, what you needed to see. But now…” She gestures to her swollen belly, her fingers curling protectively around it. “Now you’ll see the truth.”

The ground beneath me shifts, the cliffs trembling as though alive. The roar of the ocean grows deafening, and I feel myself being pulled toward the edge. Annabel watches me, her expression unreadable, as I fight to keep my footing.

“Annabel, please,” I beg, tears streaming down my face. “Tell me what you want. Tell me how to make this right.”

Her gaze softens for a moment, and she reaches out, her fingers brushing against mine. “Finish it,” she whispers, her voice barely audible over the chaos. “Finish the painting. Finish the story.”

Before I can respond, the ground gives way beneath me, and I’m falling, the world dissolving into darkness. The last thing I see is her face, her eyes burning with an intensity that sears into my soul.

I wake sprawled on the floor in front of the mirror. My head throbs, and my body aches as though I’ve been battered by the storm. The lullaby is gone, replaced by an oppressive silence that feels heavier than any sound.

I sit up, my hands trembling as I push myself to my feet. The mirror is intact, its surface cracked but no longer glowing. My reflection stares back, gaunt and hollow, but the symbol is gone. For now.

The paintings are exactly as I left them, but they feel different somehow, as though they’re watching me. I approach the most recent one, the one of Annabel with the locket, and my heart sinks.

Her belly is swollen now, just as it was in the vision. The locket gleams brighter, its shape more distinct, and the symbol is etched into its surface, sharp and unyielding.

“Finish it,” her voice echoes in my mind, a command I can’t ignore.

I grab my brush, my hands steady despite the chaos in my mind. The paint flows easily, the image coming together with a clarity that feels otherworldly. Her face, her eyes, her unborn child—it all takes shape before me, each stroke a piece of the puzzle I can't yet solve.

When I step back, the painting is complete, and the weight on my chest lifts slightly. But the questions remain, pressing and unrelenting. What will it cost me to uncover the truth?

Chapter Forty

Calum

The path to Jonathan's cottage is uneven, the sand slipping beneath my boots as I trudge along the coastline.

The air outside feels like it's been wrung out of a wet cloth—heavy and suffocating.

The moon is cloaked in clouds, offering little light, and the only sound is the relentless crash of waves against the rocks below.

My fists clench with every step, my jaw tight, teeth grinding together.

Jonathan.

The name twists in my mind like a knife. He's always been there, lurking at the edges of my life with Annabel. A shadow I could never quite shake, a rival I didn't ask for but was forced to contend with. And now, he has answers I need—answers about her.

The windows of his cottage glow faintly as I approach, the warm light taunting me. Inside, Jonathan is likely sipping his whiskey, indulging in whatever twisted memories he holds of her. I don't knock when I reach the door. I shove it open, the old hinges groaning in protest.

Jonathan is seated in a leather armchair near the fireplace, a glass of amber liquid balanced precariously on the armrest. He doesn't flinch as I storm in, his eyes lifting

lazily to meet mine.

“Calum,” he says, his voice smooth, maddeningly calm. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I slam the door shut behind me, the force rattling the windows. My eyes dart around the room, and then I see it: a locket on the table beside him, glinting in the firelight. Annabel’s locket.

“You have her things,” I say, my voice low, dangerous. “Why?”

Jonathan tilts his head, a faint smile tugging at his lips. “Annabel and I had a history, as you well know. She left a few... reminders behind. I’ve held onto them.”

I stride forward, my chest heaving with barely contained rage. “That doesn’t belong to you. None of it does.”

He lifts the glass to his lips, taking a slow, deliberate sip before setting it down. “And yet, here it is. Strange how that works.”

I’m inches away from him now, my fists trembling at my sides. “Where did you get it?”

“Does it matter?” He leans back, his gaze steady, unflinching. “Annabel’s gone, Calum. What difference does it make who has a few trinkets of hers?”

I grab the table, flipping it to the side. The locket clatters to the floor, and the stack of letters topples, some spilling open. My breath catches as I recognize her handwriting—looped and delicate, aching familiar. I reach for them, but Jonathan moves faster, snatching them up.

“You don’t get to read those,” he says sharply, standing. His calm facade cracks, his voice tight with something raw, unspoken.

“They’re hers!” I shout, my voice echoing in the small room. “I have a right to know what she wrote. What she thought. You don’t get to keep her from me. ”

Jonathan’s jaw tightens, and for a moment, I think he’ll relent. But then, his gaze hardens.

“No,” he says, stepping back toward the fireplace. “You don’t.”

Before I can stop him, he throws the letters into the flames.

“No!” I lunge forward, but it’s too late. The fire hungrily devours the paper, the words—the pieces of her—curling into blackened ash.

I grab him by the collar, slamming him against the mantle. His whiskey glass shatters on the floor, shards scattering like broken promises.

“You son of a bitch,” I growl, my face inches from his. “What are you hiding?”

Jonathan doesn’t flinch, even as I press him harder against the stone. His eyes burn with defiance, but there’s something else there too—regret? Guilt?

“Let me go, Calum,” he says, his voice low and steady. “You don’t want to do this.”

“Why?” My grip tightens. “What aren’t you telling me?”

He stares at me for a long moment, and then his lips twist into a bitter smile.

“You really think you knew her, don’t you?”

Annabel wasn't some perfect creature, Calum.

She was messy. Complicated. And you—" He laughs, a harsh, broken sound.

"You suffocated her. You and your goddamned paintings, your obsession with capturing her. She told me how it made her feel, like she was drowning. Did she ever tell you that?"

The words hit like a slap, but I don't let go. "And you think you were any better? You think chasing after her, trying to pull her away from me, was love? You didn't know her any more than I did. Anyway, you betrayed her when you married her cousin, asshole."

Jonathan's smile fades, and for the first time, he looks vulnerable. "Maybe not," he admits quietly. "But at least I didn't try to turn her into something she wasn't."

I release him, shoving him away in disgust. He stumbles but doesn't retaliate, his shoulders slumping as he steadies himself against the mantle.

The room feels unbearably small, the fire's heat oppressive. My gaze falls to the locket, still lying on the floor amidst the chaos. I bend to pick it up, clutching it tightly in my hand.

"You should leave," Jonathan says, his voice weary. "There's nothing for you here."

I look at him, his face shadowed and tired, and for a moment, I wonder if he's right. But then I think of Annabel—her laughter, her tears, her secrets—and I know I can't walk away. Not yet.

"You burned the letters," I say, my voice shaking with anger. "But you can't burn the truth."

Jonathan doesn't respond, his gaze fixed on the flames.

I turn and walk out, the locket cool in my palm. Outside, the wind has picked up, howling through the dunes like a mournful cry. The cottage disappears behind me as I make my way back to Ravensreach, the weight of what I've lost—what we've all lost—pressing down on me like the tide.

Chapter Forty-One

Annabel

The wind howls like a feral animal, clawing at my hair and lashing my face as I stand on the precipice of Ravensreach Point.

The sea below churns and boils, an abyss of dark water and jagged rocks.

It feels alive, a monstrous thing waiting for me.

My fingers clutch at the delicate necklace around my throat, the cool metal a weight I've carried too long.

Behind me, Jonathan's voice cuts through the chaos, sharp and unrelenting. "Annabel, please!"

I laugh bitterly, regretting the message I sent him just hours ago—a cry for help or my final farewell, I'm still not sure.

It's been over a month since the gallery opening, since the night we made love.

Since the night my resolve soured to hate.

"Don't tell me what to do, Jonathan. That's all anyone ever does—tell me what I should be, how I should act, who I should love."

He's closer now; I can feel his presence like a shadow creeping up my back. "This isn't the answer," he says, his voice softening, taking on a pleading tone that only stokes my fury. "Calum doesn't have to know—about us, about anything. We can fix this."

Fix this. As if anything could be fixed.

As if I'm not already shattered beyond repair.

I spin to face him, the necklace in my hand like a lifeline turned noose.

"You think this is about him? About you?" I take a step toward him, the cliffs biting into the soles of my shoes.

"This is about me, Jonathan. For once in my godforsaken life, it's about me."

His face twists with something between anger and desperation, and I can see the storm brewing in his eyes. "You're not thinking clearly. You're being dramatic, as always."

"Dramatic?" My laugh is high-pitched, verging on hysterical. "You've been pulling my strings for years. You and Calum both. I'm a doll to you, something to dress up and parade around. But guess what? Dolls break."

He reaches for me, but I take another step back, closer to the edge. The wind teeters me on the brink, the pull of gravity a whisper in my ear. His eyes widen, panic flashing across his features. "Stop this! You're not thinking straight. You're not this reckless."

I meet his gaze, steady and cold. "Oh, darling. That's where you're wrong. You've never really known me, have you? Neither of you have."

I glance down at the necklace, its tiny pendant glinting faintly in the stormy light.

He gave it to me when we were younger, before everything became so complicated.

It was supposed to mean something—love, loyalty, eternity.

But now it feels like a shackle, a symbol of everything I've lost and everything I can never be.

“Annabel, please,” Jonathan says, his voice cracking. He steps closer, his hands outstretched as if he can pull me back with sheer force of will. “You don't have to do this. You can still have a life, a future.”

“A future?” I scoff, tears burning hot against the chill of the wind.

“What kind of future? One where I'm trapped between you and Calum, always pretending to be something I'm not?

Always haunted by my own guilt?” I shake my head.

“You both want to make me into a sweet little wife, a mother to your children, a commodity—” I sob, my palms tracing my still-flat stomach.

“No. That's not a future. That's a prison. ”

His hands curl into fists at his sides, and I see the fury simmering beneath his fear.

“Are you... are you pregnant?”

I don't answer, and it's all the answer he needs. He steps closer.

“Is it mine?”

My throat tightens painfully. “I don’t know.”

Silence hangs between us, heavy and oppressive.

“So that’s it then? You’re just running away, like you always do? You’re a coward, Annabel.”

“Maybe I am,” I admit, my voice softening. “But at least this way, I’m the one making the choice.”

I feel the ground beneath my heel crumbling away. Jonathan surges forward, panic etched into every line of his face. “Annabel, stop! You don’t know what you’re doing!”

I reach up, unclasp the necklace, and hold it out to him. For a moment, he just stares at it, as if it’s a snake poised to strike. “Take it,” I say, my voice trembling. “Take all of it. I don’t want it anymore.”

He reaches for the locket, his movements frantic as he locks the chain around his fingers. We’re tethered together, the cheap golden chain shimmering between us. “You’ve broken your own heart and you’re breaking mine.”

I shake my head. “We’re too wild—souls like ours burn too bright. He’s frost and I’m fire, and you and I are like two flames hellbent on combusting together. Like stars that burn until they consume, incinerating each other and everything around them. Don’t you see? We would ruin each other.”

“That’s not true,” he says .

“We already have.” I step back, the wind catching my hair and clothes, pulling me toward the edge.

For a fleeting moment, I feel weightless, untethered.

Free. My eyes close, and I think of Calum, of the way he looks at me like I'm his salvation.

I think of Jonathan, of the way he sees through my masks but still wants to control me.

And I think of myself, the girl I used to be before I let them define me.

A gust of wind pushes me closer and I let it, stepping nearer to the cliff edge.

“Annabel, no!”

The ground disappears beneath my feet, and I'm falling. The air rushes past me, cold and biting, and the roar of the ocean grows louder, a deafening crescendo. My heart pounds in my chest, a wild, erratic rhythm, and for one brief, searing moment, I feel alive.

Then the water swallows me whole.

The sea is colder than I imagined, a frigid embrace that steals the breath from my lungs.

The waves toss me like a rag doll, the salt stinging my eyes and filling my mouth.

I claw at the water, desperate for air, for something solid to hold on to.

But there's nothing. Just the endless, suffocating dark.

I hear voices above the surface, faint and distorted. Jonathan's voice, calling my

name, frantic and desperate. But he's too late. They're always too late.

My vision blurs, the edges of the world growing dim. And then, in the darkness, I see her—a reflection of myself, shimmering and ghostly. She reaches out to me, her expression calm and serene, as if she's been waiting for me all along.

"It's okay," she whispers, her voice carrying through the water like a lullaby. "You're free now. It's finished."

The last of my strength fades, and I let go, sinking into her arms, into the depths, into oblivion.

Chapter Forty-Two

Jonathan—past

The necklace bites into my palm as I clutch it, the sharp edges digging into my skin, grounding me in this nightmare.

The wind tears at my clothes, whipping my hair into my face, and the rain needles against my skin, cold and relentless.

I stand on the edge of the cliffs, staring down at the churning waves, searching for any sign of her.

But there's nothing. No trace of Annabel. The sea has swallowed her whole.

“Annabel!” I scream, the word ripped from my throat, raw and broken. The storm answers with a deafening roar, the waves crashing against the rocks below, mocking me with their indifference. She's gone. She's really gone.

My legs give out, and I fall to my knees, the wet earth slick beneath me.

I can barely feel the rain anymore, though it soaks through my clothes, heavy and suffocating.

My body trembles, a violent shudder that wracks me from head to toe.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not like this. She wasn't supposed to win.

I look down at the necklace in my hand, the tiny pendant glinting faintly in the storm's dim light.

It's a cruel, mocking thing—a symbol of everything she was, everything she took.

The edges are smeared with mud now, tarnished, just like her love.

My knuckles ache from the grip I have on it, but I can't let go. Not yet. Not ever.

"This is your fault," I mutter, my voice barely audible over the storm, but the words taste like venom on my tongue. "All of this is your fault."

The storm seems to agree, its howling wind echoing my accusation.

I lift my head and stare up at the sky, the dark clouds swirling in a chaotic dance.

Lightning streaks across the horizon, illuminating the tempest for a brief, blinding moment.

My face twists with grief and fury, the emotions colliding inside me, tearing me apart.

Calum. He'll know. I'll make sure of it. He deserves to know the truth about the muse he worshiped, the goddess he painted over and over as if she were perfection itself. He'll see her for what she really was—what she did. And he'll feel the weight of it, just like I do now.

Annabel thought love would save her. She thought it was enough to keep us tethered to her, to keep us fighting for her. But she was wrong. Love didn't save her. It destroyed her. It destroyed all of us.

And now, it's my turn to destroy.

The necklace feels heavier in my hand, its weight pulling me down like an anchor.

The storm rages on around me, but I barely notice.

All I can see is her face, her eyes wide and wild, her lips curled in defiance as she stepped off the edge.

She chose this. She chose to leave, to escape, to take control in the only way she knew how.

But she didn't escape me. Not really. She never will.

I rise to my feet, the necklace still clutched tightly in my hand. The rain washes over me, but it doesn't cleanse. It can't. Nothing can. I turn away from the edge, the roar of the ocean fading into the background as a new resolve takes root in my chest.

Annabel's gone, but the story isn't over. Not yet. And I'll be the one to write the ending.

The storm rattles the windows of Holiday House like an angry beast, rain hammering the roof in relentless sheets.

Inside, the dimly lit studio glows with a soft golden light, the kind that would be warm if it weren't so suffocating.

Calum sits before the canvas, his brush moving with maddening precision, every stroke a whisper of obsession.

He has no idea what's just happened at the cliffs, no idea that Annabel's secrets have

unraveled into the abyss.

I stand in the doorway, my clothes soaked through and clinging to my skin. The storm follows me in, dripping onto the pristine floorboards, but Calum doesn't even notice. His entire world is that canvas. Annabel. Always Annabel.

"Still at it, I see," I say, my voice cutting through the quiet hum of his focused breathing.

Calum flinches, the brush freezing mid-stroke. His head jerks toward me, eyes wide, as though I've shattered some sacred spell. "Jonathan. What the hell are you doing here?"

I step inside, shaking the water from my coat. The scent of turpentine and oil paint fills my nose, acrid and sharp. "Clearly, I'm interrupting something important. You've been so consumed with your work, I'm shocked you even noticed me standing here."

His frown deepens, and for a moment, his gaze flicks to the painting. The curve of her lips, the slight tilt of her head, the glint in her eyes that seems both coy and haunting. A muse immortalized. A ghost conjured by paint and obsession.

"What do you want, Jonathan?" he asks, his voice wary.

I let out a dry laugh, stepping closer, the storm still roaring outside. "What do I want? That's rich. I came to talk about her. Annabel. "

Calum's face tightens, and his grip on the brush grows rigid. "What about her?"

I move further into the room, the heat of the space suffocating against my storm-chilled skin. "She's dead."

His expression hardens, his jaw clenching. “You’re sick. You’re a sick and twisted liar.”

“I wish I was.” My voice rises, sharper now, edged with the storm raging in my chest. “We were arguing. She threw herself off the cliff.”

“You bastard—” Calum growls, his eyes hard and anger.

“It’s true,” I say, my voice cold. “And it’s your fault.” I take another step closer, the heat of anger blooming in my chest. “You were too blind to see it because you made her into some untouchable masterpiece in your head. But I knew her. I knew the real Annabel.”

Calum stands, his brush clattering to the floor. “You don’t know a damn thing.”

“Oh, I don’t?” I snap, my words cutting through the air like the lightning slicing across the sky outside. “She was never going to choose you. Not really. She loved the idea of you, the artist, the dreamer. You were her escape, Calum, never her reality.”

His face twists with anger, but there’s something else there too—doubt. It’s a small crack, but I see it, and it spurs me on. “You’re wrong,” he says, but the words sound hollow. “Annabel loves me.”

“Did she?” I take another step forward, closing the distance between us.

“Or did she love the pedestal you’ve put her on?”

You trapped her in this fantasy, this gilded cage of your making.

She didn’t love you, Calum. She loved what you represent.

And you didn't love her. Not really. You loved the version of her that existed in your head.

She was a wild, wicked girl and she burned too bright for this world. And now she's dead. ”

The room falls silent, the storm outside echoing the turmoil inside.

“If she's dead it's because you pushed her.” Calum's hands tremble at his sides, his fists clenching and unclenching as if trying to hold onto something that's slipping away.

I shake my head, bitterness choking out my thoughts.

“Get out,” he says finally, his voice low and trembling with barely contained rage. “Leave. Now.”

I hesitate, my breath ragged. I could push harder, break him entirely. But there's something in his eyes—something fragile and raw—that makes me pause. I step back, the tension between us thick enough to choke on.

“You're a fool, Calum,” I say, my voice softer now, laced with pity. “And one day, you'll see it. One day, you'll finally see her for who she really was. And it will destroy you.”

His eyes burn with hatred as I turn and walk away, my footsteps heavy in the stillness of Holiday House. The storm rages on outside, but inside, the silence is deafening.

As I reach the door, I glance back. Calum is staring at the painting, his shoulders slumped, his hands limp at his sides. The light from the storm flickers across Annabel's face on the canvas, her eyes seeming to mock him with their knowing

sadness.

The storm batters against the walls as I step out into the night, the cold rain hitting my face like needles. Somewhere in the distance, I think I hear her laughter—haunting, hollow, and triumphant.

Chapter Forty-Three

Calum

My life has been bitter since I last heard her voice. As if her presence in my life has been a journey of precious and violent revenge.

The air shakes the window panes, the soft howling slipping through the cracks like a protest.

“Don’t leave me here where I can’t find you...” I moan into the void. “How can I excise pain that radiates through my body, that torments my blood, that clings to my bones?”

Her phantom touch is like a vibration through my skin.

I feel her everywhere—in bed next to me, a lingering comfort that never quite fulfills.

Annabel—my phantom lover, sent to destroy me.

The last remaining pieces of me erode the longer I cling to someone that’s already gone.

The realization hits me that the ghost of what could have been is more painful than what was, the emotional echoes of a relationship that won’t let go.

The endless cycles of regret and obsession, repressed grief and unresolved emotional

damage, my new addiction.

I've become my pain, loving her my new identity, heartbreak has trained my brain to crave the very thing I need to escape .

"I miss you so much, Annabel, it's left a you-shaped hole in my soul.

But if I stop missing you, I lose you. I'll forget that you were real, that even for a while, you were mine.

" I crush my hands over my face as anguish descends.

"I never deserved you, I was never enough—but for a time you made me feel."

I think of her heartbreak when she found out Jonathan married Brittany, is this how she felt? Broken? Ruined by love? Lost in her pain? I refuse to believe she loved him—he was only a distraction—I'm sure of it. We were more. We were always more.

I draw a fingertip along the curve of her waist, the unfinished painting of her in the garden, the faint outline of her nipples through her slip as morning sun bathes her body in warmth.

Missing her might cost me everything—life, happiness, hope—but still, she haunts the edges of my mind.

I've lost so much, losing even a single memory feels like another death I can't take.

My eyes drift to the mirror, the one that always reflects her.

I grind my teeth as unspoken rage pummels my system.

I grip the nearest object—a clean canvas propped at my feet—and hurl it against the mirror.

It doesn't crack, so I grab the canvas again and angle the sharp edge at the center of my reflection.

I beat against the glass, hot tears washing down my cheeks and blurring my vision as I beat the canvas over and over until pain throbs through my hand and streaks of crimson paint the walls and mirror, shards cutting my fist and decorating the canvas in splatters of red.

The mirror is irreparably broken, the glass covering the floor around my feet. My breathing comes out in frantic gasps as the fractured mirror finally matches my broken heart.

I hate her. I love her. I need her. I need to be free of her.

I don't think I ever will be. I feel haunted, hopeless, maimed by her love.

For the first time, regret crawls through my system.

I should have turned away from her that first day on the beach, recognized her love would ruin me.

I should have done so many things, but instead I'm standing here, stumbling through the architecture of my heartbreak, trying to piece together my soul and wondering if instead of finding myself in her love, I lost myself. I know I'll never love again.

My muscles feel weak, like they've finally atrophied from heartbreak.

I drop into the chair in the corner, allowing my eyes to fall closed.

Her dark features materialize in my mind, her wry smile as she takes in the unfinished painting of her in the garden.

Her last words echo in my mind before she walked through the gate and out of my life for the last time.

“Finish it, Calum. For me. For us.”

I push myself out of the chair with sheer will, moving out of the cottage hoping that fresh air will clear my mind.

The sun’s too bright. Even with sunglasses digging into the bridge of my nose and the salt wind stinging my skin, it feels like the sky is trying to split open and swallow me whole.

I walk the shore anyway, barefoot, the sand cold and wet and unfamiliar.

Grief has a weight to it—wet wool soaked through, heavy in places you didn’t know you could carry.

I pretend for a second she might be ahead, just out of view, dancing through the surf with her slip trailing behind her, laughing like I haven’t buried her ashes and left what remains of her in a graveyard not far from here.

I round the bend where the cliffs rise sharp and gray, and I almost don’t notice her—curled near a driftwood log, knees tucked in, chin resting on them.

“Brittany?”

She startles. Blinks. Wipes her face with the sleeve of an oversized cream sweater.

“Oh.” Her voice cracks. “Hi.”

She stands slowly, like she’s been there a long time, legs stiff and unsure. I haven’t seen her since the funeral. She looks thinner. Pale. Hair in a messy knot.

I step closer, cautious. “You okay?”

She gives a small, pitiful laugh, but her eyes brim again. “Not really.”

“Yeah. Me neither.” I look down at the sand, then back at her. “You don’t look good.”

She flinches slightly, like I’ve slapped her. Then her mouth twists into something between a smile and a grimace. “Thanks, Calum. Always knew how to charm a girl.”

I snort quietly. It’s the first sound that’s almost human to come out of me in days.

“I meant...” I rub the back of my neck. “You look like you’ve been crying.”

She nods. Bites her lip. “I’m sorry. I should’ve come by sooner. I just—I couldn’t. I kept thinking about it, about you. About her.”

Her. Annabel.

My lungs tighten.

“I keep imagining the moment all was lost—wondering if we could have done something differently,” she sobs.

“I took the semester off,” Brittany adds softly.

“My dad’s furious. Says I’m throwing away my future, but...

” She looks out at the water. “This is the only place that feels like anything right now. Like healing, maybe. I don’t know. ”

I follow her gaze. The tide is rolling in, eating the beach inch by inch.

“I get that,” I say. “I can’t leave. I don’t sleep anywhere else now. I just stay at the cottage. Waiting for nothing.”

She wipes her cheeks again, but her hands tremble.

I notice how much she’s shaking and for the first time, I wonder if she’s cold or if it’s something else. Something deeper .

“You were close,” I murmur, though I already know the answer. “You and Annabel.”

“We grew up like sisters,” she says, voice thick. “She was everything I wasn’t. Brave. Loud. Beautiful. She made people notice her.”

I glance at Brittany—her soft features, her barely-there freckles, the way she crumples in on herself. A shadow to Annabel’s spotlight.

“You were beautiful too,” I say quietly. “You still are.”

Her eyes flick up to mine, startled.

And then she shakes her head, almost violently, as if she can’t accept anything kind.

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” she whispers.

Her voice catches, and she looks like she wants to say something else—wants to spill it, whatever it is—but swallows it down. She wraps her arms around herself and stares out at the water again like it might speak for her.

I don't press. I can't.

My grief is a stormcloud and I can barely see past the edges of it. I haven't slept in days. Haven't eaten. My head is pounding.

"The sun's killing me today," I say, squinting up at it. "Sorry, Brittany. I should probably head back."

She nods quickly. "Of course. I didn't mean to?—"

"No." I reach out and touch her arm lightly. "It's good to see you. I'm glad you're here."

She looks at where my hand rests against her sweater. There's something unsaid behind her eyes. Something deeper than crushing grief. A secret. A silence too loud.

But again, she doesn't speak.

"Maybe I'll see you around," I offer. "I come out here a lot."

"Yeah." She blinks fast. "Me too."

I nod once, then turn to go. The walk back feels longer.

Heavier. Like her sadness has followed me, settled on my shoulders beside mine.

The unbearable weight of our shared loss is suffocating.

As I walk away I know I won't see her again, I can't, she's too close to the woman I loved.

Too much a reminder of what I'll never have again.

I don't look back.

Chapter Forty-Four

Jonathan

“You look like death, Calum.” My voice cuts through the silence.

I find him in the studio, as expected, hunched over another portrait of her.

He’s painted her a hundred times, maybe more.

Each one a desperate attempt to bring her back, to immortalize her in strokes of oil and pigment.

But no amount of paint will undo what’s been done.

“Have you eaten? You look hollow—sunken in. Like you’re vanishing before my eyes.”

Calum flinches, his hand jerking and smearing the brush across the canvas. He turns to me, his eyes bloodshot and hollow. “What are you doing here?”

I ignore him and ask, “when’s the last time you ate?”

“I don’t remember,” comes his quick reply.

I sigh. I don’t bother with pleasantries. There’s no point. Not anymore. “We need to talk.”

He narrows his eyes, suspicion flickering across his face. “About what?”

I glance at the painting behind him. Annabel in one of her many moods, this time serene and wistful. But her eyes—those damn eyes—seem to accuse us both.

“About her,” I say, nodding toward the canvas.

Calum follows my gaze, his shoulders tensing. “What about her?”

I step closer, the storm outside rattling the windows. “You think you knew her, don’t you? You think she was this perfect, ethereal creature, your muse, your everything. But she wasn’t. She was human, Calum. Flawed. And she was drowning under the weight of your expectations.”

His jaw tightens, his hand curling into a fist at his side. “Don’t you dare?—”

“She was pregnant.” The words leave my mouth like a gunshot, reverberating in the small room.

Calum freezes, his face a mask of disbelief. “What?”

“You heard me,” I say, my voice steady despite the chaos inside me. “Annabel was pregnant when she died.”

His mouth opens, then closes, as though he’s struggling to process the information. “That’s... That’s not possible.”

“Isn’t it?” I challenge, stepping closer. “You were so wrapped up in your work, in turning her into this idealized version of herself, that you didn’t even see what was happening right in front of you.”

His eyes dart to the painting, as though searching for answers in her painted likeness. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“Maybe because she couldn’t.” My tone softens, just slightly. “Maybe because she didn’t think you could handle it. Or maybe because she didn’t know if it was yours.”

The color drains from his face, and for a moment, I think he might pass out. “What are you saying?”

I let out a bitter laugh, the sound harsh and grating. “I’m saying it could have been mine, Calum. She didn’t know. She couldn’t know. But the pressure you put on her, the pedestal you forced her onto... That’s what broke her.”

“That’s not true.” His voice is barely above a whisper, his hands trembling as he grips the edge of the table. “She loved me.”

“She loved you the way a moth loves a flame,” I snap. “She couldn’t resist you, but you were burning her alive.”

He sinks into the nearest chair, his head in his hands. For a moment, the only sound in the room is the relentless pounding of the rain against the windows.

“Why are you telling me this now?” he asks finally, his voice raw.

“Because you deserve to know the truth,” I say, though the words feel hollow even to me. “And because she deserves to be remembered for who she really was, not the fantasy you’ve painted her into.”

He looks up at me, his eyes filled with a mixture of anger and despair. “You think you’re so righteous, don’t you? You think you knew her better than I did.”

“I didn’t just know her,” I say, leaning closer. “I loved her. The real her. Not the muse, not the dream. The woman. And she loved me too, whether you want to admit it or not.”

The room falls silent again, the storm outside mirroring the tempest inside us both. Calum stares at the painting, his face a mask of pain. “She would have told me,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me. “If she was pregnant... She would have told me.”

“Maybe she planned to,” I say, my voice softer now. “Or maybe she didn’t want to burden you with the truth. Either way, she’s gone. And nothing we do or say will bring her back.”

He doesn’t respond, his gaze fixed on the canvas. For a moment, I almost feel sorry for him. Almost.

“I’ll leave you to it,” I say finally, turning toward the door. But before I leave, I glance back at him one last time. “Think about what I said, Calum. Think about who she really was. And maybe, just maybe, you’ll find some peace.”

With that, I step out into the storm, the wind and rain lashing against me. I’ve done what I came to do, but the weight in my chest hasn’t lessened. If anything, it’s grown heavier.

Annabel may be gone, but her ghost lingers in every corner of Holiday House. In every painting, every memory, every lie we told ourselves about who she was. And no matter how hard I try, I can’t shake the feeling that I’ll never be free of her.

Because the truth is, I don’t want to be. Love is the drug that kills the most slowly. A sickness I never want to cure.

Chapter Forty-Five

Calum

Pregnant.

I think of the painting, her hands cradling her swollen belly. The secret she carried. The secret that killed us. I know now this is what she wanted to tell me.

The studio is quiet now. Too quiet. The paintings, dozens of them, stare back at me.

Each one a version of Annabel—laughing, serene, coy, and furious.

Her eyes seem alive in every stroke, accusing, questioning, mocking.

I've lost track of how many nights I've spent here, painting her over and over, trying to capture something I can't even name.

I can't do it anymore.

The thought hits me with the force of a wave, knocking the breath from my lungs. I can't keep this up, can't keep her locked in this house, in my mind, in my work. She's here, always here, but not in the way I want her to be. Not alive.

And if I don't let her go, she'll take me with her.

I pace the studio, my footsteps muffled by the thick rug beneath me. The air feels

charged, as if the storm has left behind a residue of its fury. My gaze lands on the painting, the one I finished last night, the one that feels more alive than any of the others.

Annabel stares back at me, her expression a heartbreaking mix of love and betrayal.

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, her lips slightly parted as if about to speak.

Around her neck is the locket, the same locket that Jonathan tried to burn in his pathetic attempt to erase her memory.

The symbol etched into the locket is faint, almost invisible, but I can feel its weight pressing on my chest like a stone.

I reach for the painting, my fingers trembling as they brush against the edge of the frame. The oil paint is dry but still seems to shimmer, as if alive. I can hear her voice in my head, soft and distant, whispering words I can't quite make out.

“You’ve always been the knife I twist inside myself. Is this love?” The pain vibrates through me. “What do you want from me?” I ask aloud, my voice breaking. “What do I have to do?”

The room grows colder, the air heavy with the scent of lilies and decay. A soft breeze stirs, though the windows are shut. And then I hear it—a whisper, faint but unmistakable.

“Let me go.”

My breath catches. The words are so soft, so fragile, but they carry the weight of a lifetime. Or perhaps several lifetimes.

“I don’t know how,” I whisper back, my voice trembling. “I don’t know how to let you go.”

The room grows colder still, and the whisper comes again, more insistent this time. “Holding on will only hasten your end.”

I stagger back, the weight of her words pressing down on me like a physical force. My heart pounds, my mind racing. She’s right. I’ve known it all along. But knowing and doing are two very different things.

I glance at the painting one last time, at her eyes filled with sorrow and something that looks almost like relief. And I know what I have to do.

The fire crackles to life in the hearth, its flames licking hungrily at the air. I carry the painting to the fireplace, my hands steady despite the storm raging inside me. The weight of the frame feels heavier than it should, as if it’s resisting me, as if she’s resisting me.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, my voice breaking. “I’m so sorry.”

I slide the painting into the flames, the heat blistering my skin as I hold it there for a moment longer than necessary.

The fire roars, consuming the canvas with an almost unnatural ferocity.

The colors warp and twist, Annabel’s face dissolving into a blur of reds and yellows.

For a moment, I think I hear her scream—a high, keening wail that pierces through the crackle of the fire.

And then, silence.

I collapse to the floor, my body trembling, my breath coming in ragged gasps. The flames die down, leaving behind a pile of ash and the faint scent of burnt oil. The room feels lighter somehow, the oppressive weight that has hung over it for weeks lifted.

The days that follow feel like waking from a long, fevered dream. The house is quiet now, the shadows no longer shifting in the corners of my vision, the whispers no longer haunting my nights. For the first time in weeks, I sleep.

When I wake, the studio feels like a different place. The paintings are gone, their absence both a relief and a sorrow. I sit at the easel, the blank canvas before me both daunting and liberating.

I don't know how long I sit there, staring at the emptiness, before I finally pick up a brush. The movements come slowly at first, tentative and unsure. But then something clicks, and the strokes come faster, more confident. I lose myself in the rhythm, the world outside the studio fading away.

When I step back, hours later, the painting is complete. It's not Annabel this time. It's the house—Holiday House—bathed in sunlight, the waves calm and inviting, the cliffs no longer foreboding. It's peaceful. Serene. A place where I can imagine finding solace.

And for the first time in a long time, I feel at peace too.

That night, I sit by the fire, a glass of whiskey in hand, and watch the flames dance.

The house is quiet, the storm a distant memory.

I think of Annabel, of her laughter and her tears, of the love we shared and the secrets that tore us apart.

I think of the painting, now nothing more than ash, and the weight that has lifted from my chest.

I know I'll never forget her. She'll always be a part of me, a ghost that lingers in the corners of my mind. But I also know that I have to move forward. That holding on to her, to the pain and the guilt, will only destroy me.

As the fire burns low, I close my eyes and whisper a silent goodbye.

And somewhere, in the quiet darkness of the house, I think I hear her whisper it back.

Calum

Months have crawled by since I burned the paintings, and still I remain at Holiday House, my once-vibrant prison now subdued in muted grays and pale sunlight. The air feels thick with ghosts, their whispers tangled in the salty breeze.

Jonathan is gone. I tell myself it's because he couldn't bear the sight of her grave, just a short trek from the cliffs where it all ended.

But even as I think it, the truth circles like a shark.

Jonathan has always been a ghost whispering at the edges of my life.

His presence was never more than a shadow cast by Annabel's brilliance.

And maybe I'm a ghost too. Love kills us slower than any weapon, I think.

The thought unsettles me, but I push it aside as I stand in the gallery.

The hum of whispered admiration flows around me, an almost tangible pulse of life.

My latest work—a series titled Love and Madness —hangs across the pristine walls.

Each piece is a raw wound, bleeding emotions too tangled to name.

The sea dominates every canvas, wild and unrelenting, its waves swallowing memories, faces, and the weight of human frailty.

Annabel is there, of course. She's always there. Her silhouette lingers in the foam, her eyes glint in the storm clouds, her laughter echoes in the chaos of crashing waves. People praise the work as masterful, as transcendent. They don't realize it's a confession.

"She saved me," I murmur, my voice too low for anyone to hear.

I don't know who I'm speaking to. Perhaps the ghosts, perhaps myself. Perhaps her.

Back at Holiday House, the gallery's applause still rings in my ears like an unwelcome guest. I climb the narrow staircase to the attic, the wood creaking beneath my feet.

The space above is cluttered with forgotten relics of lives I barely recognize as my own.

Dust clings to every surface, and the faint scent of mildew hangs in the air.

I don't know why I've come up here. Maybe I'm chasing shadows. Maybe I'm looking for her.

In the far corner, a stack of yellowed newspapers catches my eye.

They're tied with brittle twine, the kind that snaps with the slightest touch.

I kneel and untie the bundle, my hands trembling as I sift through the pages.

The headlines are mundane—political scandals, stock market shifts, the usual churn of human chaos—until one stops me cold.

"Local Tragedy: Lovers Lost at Ravensreach Point."

The ink is smudged, but I can make out enough. A photograph accompanies the story: Annabel's smile, radiant even in grainy black-and-white, and Jonathan beside her, his expression caught somewhere between smug and vulnerable.

My pulse quickens as I read. The article claims they both died that night, swallowed by the sea.

A double tragedy, it calls it. But I remember Jonathan standing in this very house, dripping rainwater onto the hardwood floors as he hurled accusations at me.

I remember the venom in his voice, the fire in his eyes.

How could he have died that night?

Unless...

The thought creeps in, insidious and uninvited. Unless he never left the cliffs. Unless he's always been here, haunting me, unraveling my mind thread by thread.

The paper trembles in my hands as the attic seems to close in around me. The shadows deepen, their edges sharp and hungry. I feel his presence, just as I feel hers, and the weight of it is suffocating.

I descend the stairs in a daze, the newspaper clutched tightly against my chest. The house feels alive around me, its walls breathing, its floorboards groaning under the weight of all that remains unseen.

I collapse into a chair in the studio, the paper slipping from my grasp and fluttering to the floor.

Annabel saved me.

The realization crashes over me like a wave, cold and unrelenting. She knew Jonathan would haunt me, knew he would try to drag me into the abyss with him. Her death wasn't an escape—it was a warning. A shield. A sacrifice.

I close my eyes, her face seared into the darkness behind my lids. She came to me because she knew death wouldn't stop Jonathan. She came to save me from him, from myself, from the abyss that yawns wider every day.

Later that night, I pick up a brush, my hand moving almost of its own accord. The canvas before me is blank, a pale expanse that seems to stretch endlessly. I don't think. I don't plan. I paint.

Holiday House emerges from the strokes, bathed in the soft glow of a summer morning.

The cliffs are gentle, the waves serene.

The sky is clear, its blues unmarred by storms. And there, in the window of the house, a figure stands.

I can't make out her face, but I know it's Annabel. It will always be Annabel.

The brush slips from my hand, clattering to the floor. I stare at the painting, my chest tightening with a strange mix of grief and relief. She's at peace now. I have to believe that. And faintly inscribed in the clouds behind Holiday House:

“It was many and many a year ago,

In a kingdom by the sea,

That a maiden there lived whom you may know

By the name of Annabel Lee;

And this maiden she lived with no other thought

Than to love and be loved by me.

I was a child and she was a child,

In this kingdom by the sea;

But we loved with a love that was more than love-

I and my Annabel Lee;

With a love that the winged seraphs of heaven

Coveted her and me.

But our love it was stronger by far than the love

And neither the angels in heaven above,

Nor the demons down under the sea,

Can ever dissever my soul from the soul

Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.”

The nights are still the hardest. The house is quiet, too quiet, and the shadows seem to press in from all sides. I lie awake, staring at the ceiling, my mind replaying the moments I can never undo. Her laughter, her tears, her final words .

Finish it.

Weeks later, the gallery sends word: Love and Madness is a success. The pieces have been sold, prints commissioned, acclaim pouring in from critics and collectors alike. They call it my magnum opus, a work of unparalleled emotional depth.

I call it a funeral.

I refuse the invitation to the celebratory gala, choosing instead to stay at Holiday House. The thought of leaving this place feels wrong, as though I'd be leaving her behind. She's here, in the walls, in the air, in the waves that crash endlessly against the cliffs.

I sit by the fire, a glass of whiskey in hand, and watch the flames dance. The painting of Holiday House leans against the wall, unfinished but perfect in its imperfection. I know I'll never sell this one. It belongs here, just as I do.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the crackle of the fire. "For everything."

The house is silent, but I feel her presence, warm and fleeting, like a summer breeze. And for the first time in months, I think I understand.

She didn't leave me. She saved me.

And now, it's my turn to save her.

As the night deepens, I find myself standing by the window, looking out at the cliffs. The sea is calm tonight, the moon casting a silver path across its surface. I wonder if she's out there, somewhere beyond the horizon, watching over me.

"Let me in," comes the whisper. I'm not sure if it's reality or a figment of my mind. I

don't care.

"Goodnight, Annabel," I whisper, my breath fogging the glass .

The house creaks softly, almost like a sigh, and I smile.

For the first time in what feels like forever, I feel at peace.

I move to my bed, my muscles weak with the sustained loss of her—my life.

I tuck myself into the cotton and down, feeling the cool sheets against my cold skin wishing not for the first time for the warmth of her at my side.

The slowest way to kill someone you love is to not love them enough, I think as hot tears hover at my eyelids.

My heartbeat slows, my breathing coming in shallow gasps.

That's when I see her.

"Let me in," my Annabel whispers again. My heart tightens like a vice. She's relentless.

I'm in sight of my Heaven.

Death is the only reunion...

A final breath shudders through me, a tired smile turning my lips. "Take it, take my soul, sweet Annabel, it's always been yours..."

THE END.