

THE ONLY THING HE NEVER TOLD THEM

A thesis submitted

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by

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Before

Friday, May 12, 1882

Emery Rovenholt heaved his trunk on his four-poster canopy bed and looked around the bedroom, happy to be home from the Farnsworth Academy for the summer. His freshman year, his first ever away from home, had been a trying time, to say the least. But he was home and his relief was palpable. As he opened the trunk to unpack his things, a breeze wafted in through one of the two open windows on either side of the bed. He took a stack of folded shirts and carried them across the room to the maple chest of drawers, refilling the emptiness he left when he'd been home for the winter holidays.

The shelf above the chest was decorated with a few of Emery's valued trinkets: a Chinese figurine his mother had brought back from a trip she and his father took when Emery was very young, a photograph of his mother holding his hand at the Centennial festival when he was eight, and a wooden tribal symbol that Levi, one of the sharecroppers, had carved for him last summer, before Emery left for the Academy. It was supposed to bring good fortune. He'd carved one for Emery and for his two sons, Elijah and Marcus. There was nothing on the shelf or in the room related to Emery's father. But then, Jefferson Rovenholt had never been very involved in his son's life, a fact Emery was reminded of when only his mother waited in the carriage to bring him home from the train station. His father couldn't even be bothered to welcome him home, not that Emery was surprised.

"Your father was knee-deep in balancing the books," Emery's mother had told him when he climbed into the back of the carriage, even though he had not asked. "He is quite happy to have

you home with us for the summer. As am I, of course.”

“Mhm,” Emery had mumbled as she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek before telling George, the negro stable boy, to get them on their way. He snapped the reins and guided them home.

Emery shook his head as he turned back toward his trunk, catching his reflection in the floor mirror standing in the corner, the one his mother had imported from Switzerland a few years ago. Emery’s blond hair had grown longer at the Academy, longer than he usually kept it. He ran a hand through it, sweeping the locks to the side, the way he remembered Elijah had always told him he liked it. The better to see the flood of blue from his eyes, Elijah would say. Emery wondered briefly if he had stopped cutting it before the summer break because of his coming home and seeing Elijah. He went back to his trunk and lifted another pile of carefully folded clothing to return each item to its place in his bedroom.

That was Emery’s one fear of returning home for the summer. After he and Elijah had grown so intimate the previous summer, Emery pined after him every day at the Academy. Then over the winter holidays, Emery spent every moment he could with Elijah and his family, and it never seemed to be enough. But as their time together grew shorter, Emery began to have doubts. After he talked them over with Elijah, they hadn’t parted on good terms. He thought of Elijah often that spring semester, spending hours alone, looking at the picture of the two of them that his mother took and thinking of all their time spent together. Then once he was on his way back to the plantation, each minute bringing him closer and closer to Elijah, the anticipation left his body abuzz. He was so focused on Elijah throughout the carriage ride back to the plantation with his mother, he barely registered all of her questions about his first year at Farnsworth.

Carrying jackets and trousers to the closet and hanging them up, Emery kept hearing his

father drilling into Emery what his place was on the few occasions he tried to get Emery involved in running the plantation. Mr. Rovenholt had Emery following him around and tried to show him how a man treats his servants, the firm hand required of a man to keep his “niggers” in line. Emery cringed at the word every time. He saw the looks given his father when he walked away from them each time, glares from under furrowed brows, words mumbled and mouthed in silence, spit hitting the ground in effigy. Emery could never behave that way, speak to them that way. His father saw this sympathetic nature as weak, but that wasn’t it at all. Emery knew them as people, not servants or slaves, from all of his years spent down among them with Elijah and his family. They weren’t simply “things” that tilled, seeded, and picked the Rovenholt fields. They were individuals with passions for singing and art, fears of spiders and ghosts. His father knew none of this about any of them, and he didn’t care to know. Emery did, though.

As Emery lifted the final jacket from the trunk and walked it to the closet, the photograph of him and Elijah fell out of the pocket. Turning, he knelt and lifted it with tender fingers. He took a sharp breath, running a finger over Elijah’s face looking up at him in grainy black-and-white. They stood shoulder to shoulder by the mantle down in the parlor. Mrs. Rovenholt had taken the photograph the previous summer. Emery had kept it in the pocket of his jackets after he left for the Academy and missed Elijah terribly. Emery’s hand started to shake as he looked down at that face he’d pressed to his own so many times, the face he knew each and every intimate detail of, the eyes so deep he lost himself in them, the lips so soft, yet so firm when he kissed them.

Emery threw the jacket onto the floor of the closet. One of the cleaning girls would hang it up next time she came to his room. He released the photograph and it drifted to the floor as he stormed to the door. Before he could leave, he went back to the photograph and began to pick at the floorboards, searching for the loose one he used as his hiding place. Inside was a black box,

beaten up and dented, something one of his mother's shopping favors had been brought home inside of, the box later discarded. Emery placed the photograph inside the box, returned it to beneath the floor, and then, he walked from the room. He couldn't just leave the photograph out. His father would have a fit if he saw it. And if he'd been drinking...Emery didn't want to imagine that altercation. Mr. Rovenholt was rough and mean sober. Drunk, he was...vile was the only word Emery came up with that seemed appropriate. Without another thought, Emery left the house, needing to find Elijah. Betsy would have dinner on the table shortly, but Emery was not concerned with that. He could eat later. His stomach was in knots anyway.

Everyone talks about how wrong it is, when they talk about it at all, this "unspeakable sin." God condemns it, man condemns it, Father would kill it...like those two men in Alexandria who lived together. Rumors began and a group of people got together and killed them before the two could even plead their innocence. Father would do the same to me and Elijah if he caught even a hint of our love. But I can't stay away from Elijah. I need him. Father won't get in my way.

He trekked down the path toward the fields where clusters of negroes labored their days away working his father's crops. The sun was halfway into its descent—where it would kiss the horizon and disappear, guiding the stars and moon into the clear sky—by the time Emery reached the edge of the tilled and seeded dirt. As he wandered past, most workers didn't even pay him a distracted glance, either too intent on their work to notice him, or else pretending they were. A few though, gave him a smile, sometimes even a wave, when they straightened up to wipe the sweat from their brows and caught his eye. Mostly the women and girls, like Larisse who lived a few shacks down from Elijah's family with her new husband. She was a young woman who loved to read. Emery attended their jumping the broom ceremony as they promised to be man and wife and forsake all others. Then, there were the men who, either pridefully or

grudgingly, ignored him. Like Mordecai who always seemed to have his attention obviously wrapped up in something just above Emery's head whenever Emery was nearby. Emery wasn't offended though. He'd have probably resented someone born into his position too, if he'd been born into theirs.

Emery continued through his family's prized plantation, and eventually, it was time for the workers to call it a day. They slowly rose from the ground, like the shoots they tended with such care, their backs surely aching from the labor. Tools in hand, each began the migration along to the opposite end of the enormous property and to their shanty dwellings. Nearest him, probably halfway down the expanse of the fields, a young man was still crouched, determined to finish whatever task was at hand before stopping until morning's light. Emery's eyes lingered on that one of only a few workers not already trudging toward the setting sun. It was Elijah, and when he was upright, he froze, catching and holding Emery's gaze. Emery smiled and waved. Elijah seemed surprised as he returned a meek flick of his wrist through the air.

Elijah kept his eyes on Emery's a while longer before they hit the ground and found his gloves and implements, which he gathered. Emery couldn't see Elijah's face anymore, but he could tell Elijah was smiling by the way his ears twitched. His skin was naturally light, darkened by his hours in the sun, smooth and flawless. The angles of his face drew attention to his eyes and the sparkle in them. He had a firm jaw line, strong and commanding even at fourteen. It contrasted with his gentle demeanor. Emery watched him as Elijah straightened his back and walked down the line of fields. Elijah stopped at a young girl, not even yet a woman, and he grabbed her tools, offering her his hand and pulling her to her feet.

Emery felt the blush in his cheeks as he turned away. Elijah was always willing to give all of himself for others; it was one of the many things Emery loved about him, and his heart swelled.

He knew such a love couldn't possibly be wrong. He felt lighter finally seeing Elijah after so much time. Seeing him cleared ideas of frustration from Emery's mind he felt when they last parted. Elijah calmed him, and he could hardly remember any struggle over his feelings for the boy. Leaving Elijah to close out his day under the sun, Emery carried on down the dusty pathway. The negroes' quarters stood in a tight line at the far end of the fields, and they slowly filled with activity as Emery followed the bending dirt road away and around the side of a cluster of trees at the line of the property. He strolled down near the dock, catching the scent of fish on the air. There was not a single boat out on the water at that hour, as everyone was seated for dinner, he was sure. Back up the hill, he could just see the faded red walls of the barn over the little crest, next to a copse of trees. The hay loft doors were open, and Emery wanted to climb up and look out over the property. The sun set straight out over the horizon while the lush green and the shade that the sassafras and sweetgum trees provided from the heat were a welcome relief.

Emery entered the barn through the doors under the loft. The other end of the structure faced the house, which sat farther up the hill and was invisible for the tall branches above. The sill of the loft doors—the ledge he sat on as a child to feel like he'd risen above the world and how different he felt from everyone else in it—was rotted out, so he sat inside the opening. Emery angled his body directly at the quivering beams of the sun as its shimmering fire sank ever so lazily into the ground where it met the painted sky. It was so calming, and a soft wind caressed his salty cheek.

"I knew my best chance'a findin' you was here," Elijah announced from behind Emery.

"You always did know me so well." Emery was startled but didn't entertain Elijah with a reaction. Elijah knew anyway; Emery heard a chuckle escape him.

Elijah and Emery had always been close, even before intimacy had been a factor. Elijah's

family had worked for the Rovenholts since Elijah was five years old. Elijah had been a year younger than Emery and still too young to work, but they became quick friends. They were so close that when Elijah reached the age Mr. Rovenholt could send him out to the fields, Emery would go down and work in the dirt right beside him. Mrs. Rovenholt had felt it was good for him, that a man should learn a strong work ethic at a young age. She told him this after the first time his father caught him.

Mr. Rovenholt dragged Emery out of the fields, throwing a fit that he was “doing the niggers’ work.” It was beneath Emery, Mr. Rovenholt had roared. He beat Emery and left him crying in the grass. Emery had just wanted to spend more time with his friend. He’d grown up around the negroes, with Elijah, and learned about them as people before his father could try and beat into him that they were just property. As he got older, Emery went down to the fields more and worked with Elijah, always whenever his father wasn’t around, of course. He received many strange looks for a while, but he soon developed casual relationships with the people who worked the crops. The experience set him apart from others of his station in life, which became even clearer at Farnsworth, but Emery valued what he’d learned there, hard work and respect most of all.

“You can come sit with me instead of hiding back in the shadows,” Emery told Elijah. “I can’t look at the sunset and you behind me at the same time, and I’m here to watch the colors. I haven’t seen a sunset over the grounds since last summer.” Emery looked at Elijah and held out his hand to him.

Elijah didn’t take it, approaching with careful steps and hunching down near Emery, his shoulder rested against Emery’s. Emery didn’t look at him again until he was seated as comfortably as he could on the warped wood floorboards amongst the stray hay dust and leftover

strands. With Emery's eyes on him, Elijah stared out over the landscape where Emery had been watching. When Emery turned his head in that direction again, he felt Elijah's gaze, like playing a visual game of tag: only look when they weren't being looked at.

"How's your momma?" Elijah asked as he settled more easily against Emery.

Mrs. Rovenholt always had some affection for Elijah, and he grew to be very fond of her as well. She had a soft spot for cases of abandonment, felt they were in need of her love, so when she heard Elijah's story, naturally she had to love him. Elijah's young mother, no older than Emery was then, had an affair with her master just after the President freed all the slaves, when the Confederacy collapsed. Her family wished to stay on and work for their living, but was only allowed on the condition that she gave the baby away, per the master's wife's orders. So, when her baby was born, Elijah's mother named him and passed him off to Levi and Eloise. So, they were his mother and father. While Mrs. Rovenholt had this soft spot, Emery also suspected that a darker side of his mother enjoyed having a light-skinned negro around and knowing it hadn't happen to her. "Not my husband," she'd say in her drawl reserved solely for gossip when people asked about Elijah, and she'd dive into a retelling of his origins and the gossip of the affair he'd resulted from.

"She's fine. Came to the train station today and rode home with me. I just got in for the summer from Farnsworth."

"I know today was the day. Been keepin' track, you know..." Elijah looked down with shy eyes.

"Oh." Emery smiled, blushing again. He pressed himself harder against Elijah, nudging Elijah's head playfully with his own. His heart quickened a few beats at Elijah's admission.

Elijah didn't ask about Mr. Rovenholt, but Emery wouldn't expect him to. Mr. Rovenholt

had changed when the Confederates lost and he returned home from the war. Emery never knew the kinder man his mother claimed her husband used to be. Emery only ever knew the cold, no-nonsense man that raised him and terrified him. At least he used to. Emery started to outgrow his fear once he went away to the Academy, once he began to develop into his own man.

The silence that settled over the boys was comfortably uncomfortable. Emery felt like there were things to say, but he saw Elijah so infrequently and missed him so deeply, he had trouble putting his finger on even one. His eyes drifted back to his childhood friend, to Elijah's stubbly scalp, hair kept short, nearly to the skin, so as to trap as little of the sun as possible. His body was even leaner since Emery had seen him last at the end of the Christmas vacation, and his shoulders had broadened from the strain of fieldwork. Elijah looked contemplative, serene, as they watched the day gently die away together.

"I's surprised you tried to catch my eye today." Elijah's eyes didn't leave the horizon, but his words still angled to Emery.

"I had to see you. It's been too long."

"When you gone back to school in wintertime, you said we couldn't keep doin' this, couldn't be doin' what we'd been doin'."

Emery didn't reply at first, because he didn't know what to explain, how to explain his inability to resist Elijah, explain his fear and uncertainty. Elijah had never seemed to doubt their relationship. Emery didn't know how to tell him how much he'd missed him. But Emery didn't have to reply, since it seemed Elijah wasn't quite out of things to say just yet.

"Come to think, you said you wasn't gonna be able to see me no more, that you couldn't take the stress no more. But here you is. Why? I mean, we was talkin' about runnin' away together, escapin' your daddy and goin' north. Then, you come home for them holidays, and right before

you leave, you tellin' me we ain't gonna see each other no more. What's all that?"

He'd kept the bitterness out of his voice until then, but there must have been too much and a little had to spill into his words eventually. "El, I was so torn apart about this back then. It's been hard. There are expectations of me; you know that. I needed time. What did you want me to do?"

"Ah, I see." He nodded his head in easy bobs, jaw clenching. "You know, it's been real easy for me, feelin' these things, havin' these secrets and takin' these risks, dealin' with you bein' gone and how much I missed you. I reckon I should just be thankful you took the time to wander the grounds and give little ole me a quick smile and wave."

Emery took a breath, not the bait Elijah was throwing out for him. He knew Elijah was confused and hurt, being stuck at the plantation while Emery was away at the Academy, but that wasn't Emery's fault. "No, that isn't it at all. I missed you every moment I was gone. I looked at that picture of us every day. I unpacked and saw the picture again. You're all that matters. I needed to see you, to be with you."

He reached out a hand toward Elijah's, but Elijah pulled his hand away. "And you just knew I was gonna follow you up here, like some dog to a master?"

"No, it's not like that!" Emery was getting frustrated. "But I hoped you would, hoped you'd need to see me like I needed to see you."

"Right. So I see you when you feel like it, when you decide you need somethin' from me 'cause you feelin' some kinda way. But, me, my feelin's don't matter none. Good to know my worth ain't nothin', free or not."

"Don't start that with me; you were never even a slave. You were born into freedom for God's sake," Emery snapped.

He immediately regretted his words when Elijah turned his glowering eyes on him. The

angry look only lasted a moment though, before Elijah looked down, face falling, and shook his head. He gathered himself to stand up, but Emery caught his shoulder and tried to keep Elijah on the floor beside him. Elijah pushed his hand away with such force that Emery fell to the side.

“Get off.” Elijah worked the muscle in his jaw. “I dunno why I come after you. If you had a thing to say to me, you’d’a said it back after the holidays instead’a that nonsense about your place and shit, soundin’ like your daddy. I should’a gone home for dinner.”

Elijah was up on his feet, and Emery scrambled after him. He was at the railing by the ladder before Emery could reach him. Emery wrapped his fingers around Elijah’s forearm, pulling, but Elijah tried to tear away from Emery’s grasp. Grabbing on with his other hand, Emery tugged hard and won the battle of wills. They both lost their balance and tumbled into the pile of loose hay in the corner. Elijah grunted and grumbled, trying to wiggle free and stand up again, but Emery jumped on top of him. *You’re going to talk to me one way or the other.* Elijah strained for a bit, but finally resigned himself to the position and went limp. His eyes bored holes into the wall on his left side.

“Are you finished?”

Elijah didn’t move, but his throat bobbed as he swallowed whatever he would have liked to say. Surely something scathing.

“El, I’m sorry. Really I am.”

Elijah’s face flickered with forgiveness, but only for a second. So, Emery carried on. “After last summer, after I went back to school, I just wasn’t sure how to be around you, what it would be like. Then, the holidays...we’d never...gone that far before. I didn’t know what to do with these things between us. This isn’t something I know anything about. And we can’t exactly ask advice from someone who’s been through it. But, I’ve missed you. I came to find you today

because I couldn't stay away a minute longer. You know I need you. You're my best friend, my only friend. We've been through everything together."

Elijah's brow softened, and he seemed to be warring with himself. He still hadn't looked at Emery, so Emery reached down and touched Elijah's chin with his index finger. Gently, Emery turned Elijah's face to his, but Elijah's eyes were still down, watching Emery's chest and refusing his gaze. Emery raised Elijah's chin a bit higher, a measured motion, until Elijah reached a point where he couldn't look any lower. His eyes would have been on Emery's if he hadn't shifted them to the right. The side of Elijah's mouth started to curl into a playful smirk even as he tried to stay angry with Emery.

Emery leaned down and lightly pressed his lips to Elijah's. He felt Elijah's body tense underneath him, like he couldn't believe Emery had kissed him. Emery was a little shocked himself, but it felt so right. And he'd gone so long without those lips and that touch. Elijah's tension didn't last long before he raised his head and moved into Emery's kiss. It was only a few seconds, but in those, Emery knew it couldn't be wrong. It was too perfect. He broke the connection but left his forehead on Elijah's and his hand on Elijah's neck. Emery's thumb traced Elijah's jaw line.

"Em," Elijah breathed. "I don't..."

"I know." Emery laughed a little.

"No, I mean, we can't. What if someone comes in? What if your daddy comes lookin'? Don't neither of us need to be gettin' on his bad side."

"He won't come all the way down here from the house; Betsy will have dinner finished by now. And I miss dinner sometimes, just because I'm out wandering. No one pays any mind, and Betsy always saves me a plate."

“Well, maybe. I don’t—”

“You trust me, right? I promise, I would never let something happen to you.”

“I do trust you, but that’s not—I mean...” Elijah paused, and his eyes rose to Emery’s, searching. “I don’t understand. Why? Why now?”

“What do you mean?”

Elijah’s hand was under Emery’s shirt, and his fingers were like a breath, softly caressing Emery’s skin. Closing his eyes, Emery enjoyed Elijah’s touch. He lifted his head for a better angle on Elijah as Elijah said, “I just thought, I mean. After last time, last summer and the holidays, what we was doin’. What even are we doin’? I mean...like, ain’t this a mistake?”

“El, if it is, then I want to keep making this mistake.” Elijah looked down, unsure. Emery pulled Elijah’s head up and stared deeply into him. There was nothing but the two of them in that moment. Even the chorus of bugs, birds, and rustling leaves outside went silent, and Emery’s own voice was barely above a whisper when he added, “Will you make it with me?”

Elijah answered by kissing Emery again, more fervently. Emery returned Elijah’s energy, pushing his body against Elijah’s, arms wrapped around him. Elijah clutched at Emery’s back as Emery moved his lips down Elijah’s neck, tasting the bitter work, and beneath that, the taste of Elijah. Oh, how he’d craved feeling Elijah’s skin on his tongue. Elijah craned his neck and a satisfied noise escaped him as Emery bit at the muscle connecting his neck and shoulder. Emery knew how Elijah liked that. Emery was making his way slowly back to Elijah’s full lips when Elijah grabbed Emery’s hips and rolled him over nearer the wall and onto his back.

Unbuttoning the fall front of Emery’s trousers, Elijah’s hand went inside and freed Emery of both his trousers and his drawers. Meanwhile, Elijah’s other hand was lifting Emery’s shirt over his head. Fingers, callused from fieldwork, explored Emery’s body, reacquainting with his skin.

Emery's hands, soft from schooling and a high society upbringing, re-examined the body with which he'd already become oh-so-familiar in his wandering daydreams over the past months.

"Elijah..."

When Elijah removed his mouth and tongue from Emery's, Emery was disappointed, but Elijah instantly applied both to Emery's chest, kissing and biting and moistening the skin. Elijah made a slow journey down, taking his time everywhere: Emery's chest, one nipple then across his torso to the other, along the center of Emery's stomach, around his belly button, tracing the crease between Emery's hips and thighs with his tongue, teasing down and up, then back down. And then all the way back up to Emery's lips. Every nerve in Emery's body was firing, never more alive. Emery pushed Elijah up to stand up. He pulled Elijah's pants down just enough to get to what he desired, and Emery took Elijah in his mouth. Elijah was surprised. Emery liked it. Elijah's muscles tightened, body clenching, and a soft moan escaped him. Then a louder one, followed by a desperate inhale. Elijah's hands were in Emery's hair. They clutched and pulled as Emery pleased him.

"...asleep in that damned hay loft again! You're fifteen and too old for this, boy! I'm tired of you wandering off like this, and I'm not—"

The barn door flew open with a *bang!* and Emery felt all of the blood drain out of his face and every other part of him as well, as though it had been flushed into the bales below. He'd never known Elijah's skin could be so pale. They were in full view of Mr. Rovenholt, whose eyes locked onto Emery's above him in the loft. But the power of what Emery saw there, what he felt in that gaze, was too much, and Emery turned away.

"What in God's holy name are you doing!"

Mr. Rovenholt's voice roared up to Elijah and Emery from the large opening where he stood.

His furious mouth was wide open and the fear of God burned in his eyes. Elijah was frozen, terrified between Emery's legs. Emery frantically straightened his shirt and buttoned the fall front back into place. His fingers fumbled, and he couldn't seem to extricate himself from around Elijah to get the needed distance between them. Emery felt his body failing, collapsing inward and crushing him. He couldn't breathe.

"Father, I-I..."

"Shut up. Get down here. Now. And bring your nigger with you."

Emery made his way slowly toward the ladder, willing to do anything to put off the inevitable. Before he was halfway down, Emery realized Elijah still hadn't moved except to pull up the waist of his pants. Emery missed when he did that. He thought he saw Elijah quivering slightly, but that may have just been his own vision, shaky with adrenaline and the unknown.

"Come on," Emery whispered, "you've got to come down with me."

Elijah wasn't looking at him, but Emery barely noticed Elijah's head twitch from one side to the other.

"El, if you don't come down, he'll come up and likely throw you right out those loft doors."

"Now, boy!"

The sound of Mr. Rovenholt's booming voice lit a fire under Elijah, and he scurried to the top of the ladder, descending even faster than Emery could go below him. Upon reaching the bottom of the ladder, Emery turned and took a few steps toward his father. Mr. Rovenholt was drawn up to his full, intimidating six-foot-three-inches, and his thick, graying mustache fidgeted with the fury contained beneath it. The War of Northern Aggression had given Mr. Rovenholt a hardened demeanor. Just resting, he was a fear-inspiring man, always in control and controlling. In anger, he was indescribable. Elijah was fully cowering, standing a few feet behind Emery.

“My son. My only son, my heir. A *sodomite*?” The word fell from his mouth like poison. Mr. Rovenholt spat the taste the word left on his tongue at Emery’s feet. “And touching a nigger that way?”

“Mother hates when you call them that,” Emery said. The words had only just left his mouth when the full force of his father’s thick hand connected with his cheek, snapping his head so quickly to the side that his neck cracked. Emery tasted blood, his lip cut on his teeth.

“Your mother will have plenty to say to you back at the house,” Mr. Rovenholt warned his son. “As for you,” and he pointed around Emery at Elijah. “You’ll be dead before the moon peaks tonight, you will.”

“You won’t touch him,” Emery hissed through gritted teeth.

Mr. Rovenholt hit Emery again, this time with the back of the opposite hand on the opposite side of Emery’s face, so that when Emery straightened himself once more, his whole head throbbed with his pulse, one side then the other. Mr. Rovenholt panted from the power of his rage.

“I’ll kill him right this second. And you can watch. No one’ll miss one less nigger running around.”

Mr. Rovenholt took a step around his son. Emery was still afraid of his father, but right then, there were things he feared more. Emery put his hands on his father’s chest and pushed him back, trying to keep himself between Mr. Rovenholt and Elijah. Mr. Rovenholt’s arm swung at Emery, and his fist, iron in its force, made contact, knocking Emery’s chin up, and it felt as though a piece of the bone had chipped away. Emery’s head spun.

“Do not put your disgusting hands on me after you’ve touched that nigger with them. And do not think to get in my way. I’ll educate you soon enough, after I’ve disposed of your animal.”

“No!”

Emery lunged out, throwing his fist at his father for the first time in his life. Mr. Rovenholt caught it in his enormous hand and laughed. “Look who’s finally grown balls. You a man now, Mary Ann, huh? Are you tough, that it?”

He grabbed the front of Emery’s shirt and held him close, so close Emery could smell the tobacco on his stained teeth. Emery scratched his face, aiming for his eyes, black with hate. Mr. Rovenholt flinched away, protecting them, and Emery shouted. “Run, Elijah! Run, please!”

Elijah’s feet pounded the packed dirt as he took off around Emery’s father. He rounded the door of the barn and was lost to the words before Mr. Rovenholt could even roar, “Damn it!”

Now you can’t hurt him.

“Don’t think you’ve saved that filthy beast! I’ll drag him out of his shack and kill him in front of his whole family the minute I’ve locked you up in the house and taught you how men should behave!”

Still holding to the clump of fabric that was Emery’s shirt, Mr. Rovenholt drove his other fist into his son’s face over and over—his left eye, his cheek, his eye, his nose, his nose—until Emery’s body succumbed to the blissful darkness, and he no longer felt the pain. Or the fear.

Emery felt as though he’d been locked up for months. No, it had only been a matter of weeks—maybe three? Four? —since his father beat him and sealed him away from the world in the darkest reaches of the family cellar. Emery had lost all track of what day it was, even what time of day. His only means of counting time was when his mother sneaked a bit of food down to him. But, did she come every day? Every other day? He had no idea, no way of knowing, no way of finding out. She refused to speak, no matter how Emery prodded her. She simply slid a few

morsels in on the floor, under the door, and left, quietly weeping throughout the brief exchange. She had never been so distant from him, like he had broken their bond.

He thought he was starting to lose his mind. The darkness was so thick; his eyes had not and would not adjust. The quiet, though, was the most disconcerting. It was so encompassing, Emery's mind had started imagining and manufacturing sounds to fill it. He couldn't stop it; he could only let the noises distract him away from that hell. Emery tried to occupy his errant mind counting and measuring by touch, as he was the only thing in that cell, that tiny stone closet. He slept on the bare, hardened ground, without even a blanket. The room was square, each wall the length of twelve of his feet. Emery had triple checked this. He had no idea how tall the walls went; the highest he had reached was thirteen blocks, at least he thought.

His stomach was roiling with hunger. His mother hadn't been down in a while, longer than she'd ever stayed away before. He thought. Perhaps his father found out she was sneaking down there. Perhaps she was in trouble also. Perhaps she was even locked in a cell similar to his own. Perhaps she was even on the other side of one of those walls. Perhaps she wasn't. Perhaps she had given up on him. Perhaps she hated him as his father hated him. Perhaps he hated his father. Perhaps he hated them both. Perhaps...

No, not perhaps. Emery could never hate his mother. And he most definitely hated his father.

When Emery wasn't counting or measuring or perhaps-ing, his mind clouded the emptiness with thoughts of Elijah, the most chilling perhaps of them all. *What happened after he ran?* Emery wondered over and over in the dark. *Where is he now? Hiding? Dead?* If Mr. Rovenholt had gotten his hands on him, Emery knew exactly where he was...Elijah, with his hazelnut eyes, his strong will and soft heart, his playful nature. Emery couldn't even imagine the possibility that he was gone, that he might...*No. He can't be dead. He can't. I need that crooked smile, his*

infectious laugh, that tingle he sends down my back when he even brushes against me.

And the tears fell. Emery ended up like that so many times down there, thinking of Elijah—every time in fact—that he didn’t know how he had any tears left, any more moisture with which to produce them. Emery was so thirsty. His mother gave him one bowl of water the first time she visited and a second two times after. *Or was it three?* He had long since finished both. Oh, his mouth was so dry.

There was a click, the sound of a key in the door of Emery’s prison. His heart jumped, but immediately froze. *Am I being let out? Has Father returned to punish me more? Is he back to show me God’s Will? Or is he back for some other, some worse, reason?*

The light of the lantern was blinding, Emery’s eyes so accustomed to the abyss they couldn’t adjust to the sudden illumination. He thought there were two people. One emitted short gasping sobs that she tried to muffle: his mother, who was holding the lantern. That meant...yes, his father’s pitiless hands grabbed Emery gruffly, pushing him to the ground. Mr. Rovenholt grunted as he wrapped loops of rope around Emery’s feet and up to his hands, binding them together. He knotted them so tightly, they cut into the soft flesh of Emery’s wrists. Emery hissed from the shock of it and felt the hair of his father’s lip in his ear.

“Make another sound, even one accidental peep, and I’ll kill you. I’ll bury you in the field to fertilize the crops. Do not test my patience, boy.”

Emery believed him with all the terror in his body, so he dug his teeth into his still-sore lower lip to keep from making any noise when Mr. Rovenholt hauled him up and threw Emery over his shoulder.

Outside, the air was cool, so cool Emery was sure night must have fallen long ago. They might even have been in the wee hours of morning by then, but Emery didn’t know. Mr.

Rovenholt threw Emery on the floor of the coach that sat outside the front doors, like his catch on a hunt with his gentleman friends. Emery's head bounced off the wooden bottom of the vehicle like a rubber ball and fresh pain erupted like Mr. Rovenholt was punching him all over again. Emery squirmed onto his back and sat up, watching as his mother stepped into the coach around Emery's bound limbs and seated herself as far away as she could get, which was only a few feet in the confines of the coach.

"Mother," Emery whimpered as loudly as he dared.

She clenched her eyelids and angled her body so far away that she was only half-sitting on the seat; the rest of her hung off. His father climbed into the front of the coach. He snapped the reins, and the carriage lurched beneath Emery. It was dark, but Emery's eyes soon adjusted with assistance from the moon above. He watched his mother looking out of the porthole window by her head. Mr. Rovenholt navigated the property by the moonlight, none of the lanterns lit. Emery found out why when they reached the road, and Mr. Rovenholt brought the horses to a stop, lighting the coach's lanterns. Emery's apprehension grew. A chill ran through him, and it wasn't the air. They were sneaking away under the cloak of night. No one was to know they'd gone.

Where is he taking me? And for how long? I have to find Elijah. He has to be okay. We'll leave right then, run north like we talked about. Maybe New York City. I need to get back to him.

Mr. Rovenholt kept the horses paced at a quick clip, which left Emery thrown all about, gaining yet more scrapes, aches, and bruises. Emery's mother composed herself a short while into the trip, seeming to have resigned herself to her son's fate. Emery wracked his brain, craving an answer to the questions that pounded away at his skull with not enough room in his mind for them all. Each possible answer he imagined was worse than the last; each brought with it at least one new question. Emery would have given much to simply stop thinking for just a brief amount

of time, for a reprieve from the terrible unknown drowning him inside, but he knew that was impossible while he was yet conscious.

“Cannot believe you would not just let me kill the boy,” Mr. Rovenholt said to his wife, though more as a complaint to himself.

Mrs. Rovenholt didn’t respond or move, but Emery watched a tear glide down her cheek at his words as she sniffled, and then, she swiped the tear away.

“He won’t be able to help him. Even if he could, you’ll never be able to see him again. We made sure of that. Waste of time and waste of my money.”

Mrs. Rovenholt’s whole face clenched as she squeezed her eyes closed. Her body shuddered with silent sobs. Mr. Rovenholt didn’t say another word; he had made his point.

They had been on the road for over an hour when they came to a city. Emery expected his father to skirt around it, but instead he took the coach directly inside. Not long after, Mr. Rovenholt reined the horses to a stop outside the front gate of a large brick building with rows of windows running the length and height of it. It looked like a building that might have existed at the Academy, but Emery certainly did not get a school feeling from it nor a headmaster feeling from the ominous man who approached the coach from inside the gate. He carried a lantern and walked with the slow, deliberate steps of a man of position and authority.

Mr. Rovenholt stepped down from the carriage, and the man met him in front of the gate after swinging the wrought iron hinges inward. Emery’s mother appeared as though she was actively trying not to listen, looking down at her fingers and nails so intently in the dim light, like she’d only recently discovered she had them. Emery, however, strained his ears for the chance to pick up any clues about why they might be here and where they might be headed. He squirmed to prop himself up and have a view of the interaction. His movement caused his mother’s head to

snap toward him, only to shoot away again in the next moment when, Emery assumed, she remembered she was not acknowledging his presence.

“Good morning to you; you must be Mr. Rovenholt,” the man greeted Emery’s father, extending his hand. When Mr. Rovenholt took it, the man clasped it with his other, shaking it vigorously. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Dr. Moncure, superintendent of the establishment.”

The doctor was an older man, probably older than Mr. Rovenholt, with hair and a beard both completely gray. His belly protruded, and his hairline had receded. The suit he wore was impeccable, intimidating. His eyes, the way they caught the light, were startling. He seemed to make Mr. Rovenholt uncomfortable, which Emery liked.

“Yes, yes, it’s nice to meet you.” Mr. Rovenholt’s words were stiff and hurried. “My wife is...Carolyn, come down out of there and meet the doctor.”

Mrs. Rovenholt shifted in her seat and looked down at her hands, playing with her fingers. She sighed and took her husband’s hand in assistance, stepping down from the coach. She placed her hand in Dr. Moncure’s, and he kissed it. “It is very nice to meet you, ma’am. Mr. Rovenholt, you have a lovely wife.”

“Yes, thank you. So what do you need from us? I’d like to be on my way home soon.”

“Well, I can see,” Dr. Moncure looked inside the carriage at Emery, “that your son is bound. If you will untie his feet, I can guide him inside to his accommodations, once you have said your farewells, of course.”

Farewells? They can’t leave me here!

“Can you...I mean, do...” Mrs. Rovenholt cleared her throat, like the words caught there, unwilling to leave. “Is there anything you can do to help him?”

“Well,” Dr. Moncure paused, wringing his hands and averting his eyes. “This is not the usual sort of case we handle here but I have experience with the malignancy. If anyone can help the boy, it is I. Not to mention, your generous donations will certainly provide the means for me to do my best for your son. Young Emery is in the best hands.”

“And our arrangement still stands,” Mr. Rovenholt cut in. “His presence remains between us.”

“Oh yes, yes, of course.” Dr. Moncure nodded furiously, speaking in a quieter, more conspiratorial tone. “Yes, his file has already been created with his new identity. His records will be privately attended to, just as he will be. You have my word.”

“Good.”

Satisfied, Mr. Rovenholt returned to the coach and grabbed the rope around Emery’s ankles, pulling his son toward him. Once he’d untied the knots, Mr. Rovenholt wrenched Emery close to his face, showing his son the inside of his coat. “Run and I’ll shoot you dead without a second thought.”

Emery didn’t even look at his father. Mr. Rovenholt clutched Emery’s upper arm and dragged him out, standing him in front of Dr. Moncure, who examined him.

“It is a pleasure, Emery.”

Staring at him, Emery hoped his scowl said everything he would never have said in front of his mother. His father slapped the back of his head so hard that Emery’s teeth closed on his tongue. He spat a wad of blood and saliva at his father’s feet.

“Say hello.”

“Hi.”

Emery looked around, trying to ascertain where his parents were abandoning him. His eyes

found a sign near the front of the property. It was illuminated, revealing “Eastern Lunatic Asylum.”

Emery lost all of the control he’d maintained until that point. “No! You can’t leave me here! Mother, please! I’m not crazy! Please!”

Mrs. Rovenholt lost her control as well, bursting into tears and returning quickly to the coach. Emery reached out to his father with restricted hands, grasping for him.

“Father, please! Don’t do this! Father!”

Mr. Rovenholt’s expression softened for but an instant, one last remainder of the compassion the War had killed in him. Once that moment was gone, his eyes were empty, as though he no longer saw Emery, no longer registered his son’s existence. “I’m not your father. And you are not my son. Good-bye.”

Mr. Rovenholt turned his back on Emery, and desperation clawed at Emery’s insides, shredding him to ribbons. The anger burst forth, a fiery torrent.

“People will miss me! They’ll wonder where I’ve gone! What will you do then, Father? They’ll miss me!”

“No one will miss you,” Mr. Rovenholt said over his shoulder, stopping but not looking at Emery. “I’ve killed your nigger, and his family left. To everyone else, you are dead. We already hosted your funeral. It was a very sad occasion, but they’ll all grieve and quickly forget about you, as is the way with the deceased.”

With that, he walked to the coach, climbed into the front seat, and guided the horses away from the asylum. He didn’t look back. Emery was paralyzed. Elijah was dead, and Emery would be locked away in a psychotic hell until he died alone in a real cell.

No...he can't be gone. It's not possible. How could he do this? He can't...

“Elijah,” he moaned softly, too stunned yet to cry.

“Come, young man. Let us get you settled into your new home. Welcome to Eastern Asylum.”

*

Saturday, May 13, 1882

I look on helplessly as Father points the Burnside Carbine—the gun he brought home from the war—at Elijah. Elijah stands there, not even trying to run, as Father pulls the trigger. The flash and blast knock Elijah back off his feet, chocolate eyes still wide open...

I look on helplessly as Father punches Elijah over and over, beating him until Elijah finally goes down, and then, he kicks him again and again. Elijah never once protects himself, and Father only stops when Elijah is dead, blank eyes still wide open...

I look on helplessly as Father draws Elijah's body higher into the air, tugging the rope. Elijah never fights against the thick braid, never struggles against it. His body simply twitches as it tries to draw in the air it's being denied. Father ties the rope off once Elijah's movements cease, leaving him suspended there, eternal eyes still wide open...

I wake up screaming and tears run down my face without a cause I can recall. I pant and feel damp, having sweated through all of my clothes, moistening the bed too. All I can see when I close my eyes now are Elijah's dead eyes, his pale face, death blanketing him. I let that happen. It's my fault. I promised him I'd never let anything bad happen to him, promised I'd never let Father hurt him. Now, he's dead.

I scream again, full of rage. There's more grief than I can bear. I'm still roaring, vision impeded with tears, as I flip the bed. I can't stop. I punch the wall until I bleed, then I punch it again. There's no pain in my hand even as the skin splits, bones crack, my hand swells and breaks, and I feel nothing. What will I do without him? I ask myself over and over, picking up

the chair from the desk and throwing it against the wall. I do it again and it smashes to pieces.

My voice grows hoarse, and I think I taste blood. I crumple into the corner, knees clutched to my chest as I try to put pressure on the wound in my heart.

“I’m sorry, El,” I croak as attendants rush into the room. “I’m so sorry.”

*

Three years later...

Chapter One

Sunday, June 7, 1885

Emery sat at the desk in his room, charcoal stick in hand, and stared out the window through the iron mesh that prevented any sort of entry or exit. Evening settled in across the asylum grounds while twilight purple shadows danced through the trees and between the buildings in a sinister fashion that was appropriate to the place. He fantasized Dr. Moncure's death yet again, smiling to himself as he imagined being responsible for the steady trickle of blood running from the doctor's facial orifices, his well-deserved revenge. Emery looked down at the blank paper in front of him, but no words came. Such had been his problem for some weeks.

Writing was one of his very few means of passing time, besides reading, which he'd done extensively since he stopped writing. He'd read much of Poe and, surprisingly, some science journals. He'd never cared for them before, but they fascinated him here in the asylum. He was especially interested in electricity. It allowed for so many possibilities.

Emery's room itself was nothing special. The stool at the desk was hard, and he moved constantly, sitting there, as position after position grew more uncomfortable than the last. The desk wobbled, and the bed was lumpy and smelled funny, though of what he was unable to put his finger on. Emery always stopped to appreciate having his own room, which was obviously better than being locked down below the main building in the cellar, where he had nothing but his thoughts to occupy and distract himself. And fantasies where Elijah was once again by his side. He tried to avoid those though, as they weren't something he could ever make happen.

Emery was still bitter about the three years that he had spent enduring Dr. Moncure's

“treatments.” Well, three years and counting. Those very treatments brought him to a point where he sometimes lost focus and had outbursts of anger so intense, he couldn’t seem to control anything. That was why he had spent so much time strapped to a bed and immobilized or locked in isolation for days and weeks at a time. These outbursts became less frequent once he’d been moved to more comfortable quarters and was able to read and write to occupy his thoughts away from what he’d endured. What he’d lost.

The release of a lock behind him pulled Emery from the blank page. He turned as Carina Montaine walked in, carrying his evening meal. Carina was a high-society woman, roughly thirty Emery guessed, volunteering simply for something to do. Her parents owned a large estate with a negro for any and all tasks, as she revealed in their many conversations. The two discovered they had much in common, as her parents had written her off too. She’d never made something of herself like her older sister who married well and ran a large household in Georgia with her husband and their many children. Emery had listened as Carina complained over her mother’s shame that Carina had never married. She only still lived with her parents because her father couldn’t bear to put her out on the streets like her mother had wanted. Carina was the only member of the staff Emery tolerated, the only person here who treated him like a human, not an illness. Besides Carter, that is, before he died in Emery’s early days at the asylum.

“Doing some more writing, Anderson?” Carina asked, like he’d written anything at all recently. Emery had slowly grown accustomed to being Anderson Smith inside the walls of his prison. That was the new identity Dr. Moncure had given him, per the deal struck with Emery’s father, and he had to choose his battles, as they say. “Can I see?”

“I’m trying but not a word comes to me, Miss Carina,” he said, a half-smile curling the right side of his mouth when he looked up at her. “I give up today. I’ll go back to reading this copy of

English Mechanic and World of Science. Thank you for bringing it to me, by the way.”

“But of course. Father reads it then just leaves them lying around,” Carina explained.

“How fortunate for me then.”

“As for your writing, come now, you must have something to say!” she insisted, putting her hand on her hip and setting the food down onto the bed. “How can you even stand all that technical science stuff? It must be horribly boring. Don’t you have anything more interesting to read? Like some of Poe’s work? Those journals have to just put you straight to sleep.”

“I’ve read all of Edgar Allan Poe’s work that I can find, twice actually. I find the journals and periodicals quite riveting, as a matter of fact. Now, are you quite finished?” Emery asked after a pause. His eyes never left her.

She looked up, as though she was exasperated and needed to think about it. With the remaining rays of sunset bathing the room, Emery was reminded of how plain she was. Her pale blonde hair was pulled away from her reddened face and tucked into a chignon, revealing her puffy cheeks beneath eyes of the softest blue. Those were her only source of beauty, eyes a blue so gentle, he imagined that if he could wrap himself up in that blue, all his troubles of the past months would melt away. Carina’s eyes came back down and met Emery’s as he stared at her. She smiled, and he saw that the sore on her upper lip had taken on a new shine that disturbed him. The tension in her shoulders loosened, as it always did when Emery stopped teasing her.

“Yes, I suppose I am. Let me see whatever it is you plan to keep reading.”

Emery grinned, shaking his head at her, and turned back to the desk to retrieve the journal he’d been reading off and on, though he had no further use for it by that point, as it had already served its purposes. He handed it to her, and she traded him for his dinner plate. Setting it on the desk, he turned from her and ate in slow, measured bites while Carina sat on the edge of his bed

and tried to make sense of the journal. He looked back and saw her brow furrow as she traveled from line to line, turning it first upside down and then right side up. Emery smirked.

“This is utter nonsense,” Carina said from behind him as Emery gnawed a grisly piece of beef. She rose from the bed, and Emery froze as she ran her fingers through his long blond locks.

He smiled as he finished chewing the last chunk of potato, having emptied the plate, and turned to face her once more. “Well, I understand it just fine. It takes time and patience. Time I’ve plenty of in here and patience I also learned with that time.”

“So you really don’t have any stories in that handsome head of yours?” Carina asked, switching the conversation. “None of those dark tales that used to fascinate me so? The kind even Poe would envy?”

Emery laughed, tipping his head back as his hand held his stomach. “Not recently, I don’t have any. Not since the last ones were taken away and either destroyed or given to the doctor to study. I only had a few stories anyway. And that one poem I wrote and rewrote over and over again.”

“Yes, but I loved them. What about other kinds of stories?”

“Well, like what?”

Carina pretended to think with a playful quiver of her lips as she struggled against a smile. “Like a love story maybe? The kind where a nurse takes care of a lonely patient and they fall in love? Maybe sometimes she even sneaks him out of his room to make love with more excitement?”

“I could certainly give it some thought...”

She caressed his face and looked into his eyes. Emery returned her gaze, swallowing hard. She took up his plate from the desk. “Well, I’d better leave you to your evening contemplations,

so I can start my final rounds before lights out. Unfortunately, you're not the only company I have to keep here."

"As always, our visit has removed the melancholy of this place, if only for a short while." Emery flashed Carina a smile so genuine, the color rose in her cheeks, and she turned away a moment to conceal it. But he knew.

Turning back, she asked shyly over her shoulder, "You sure you don't want to reconsider growing a beard? You would be...irresistible with a bit of hair on your face. You'd look so much older."

"I appreciate that kindly, Carina, I do. But, like I've told you before, I've never been one for beards. I don't think I'm man enough to grow one yet anyway, even if I wanted."

"Suit yourself." She shrugged, obviously disappointed. "Can't blame a girl for trying. But just so you know, you've already shown me you're plenty of man with or without a beard."

Without looking to see if her words affected him, Carina went to the door, unlocked it, and stepped out. Before pulling it shut, she paused and called back through the opening, "Oh, I nearly forgot. Dr. Moncure wants a session with you before lights out. Lawrence or another of the patient attendants will be along shortly to—oh! Never mind me, Lawrence is here for you now."

The door swung back open as Carina let Lawrence into Emery's room. Lawrence was a large, muscular man, pale with receding hair. He wasn't particularly tall, but his thick limb and torso and his large hands made him quite intimidating, accented by his nervous scowl he wore always, except around Carina. Emery knew him all too well from his days of treatment in the cellar. Far too many times, Lawrence had been the force restraining Emery for one torture or another. Emery sometimes longed for the simple opportunity to just beat on the man for a while until he felt better. But, that wasn't a great concern for him, as Moncure was the one he would

truly avenge himself against.

“Get up. We don’t have all night,” Lawrence ordered in his gruff, gravelly voice. Emery forced an obedient smile as he stood and took slow steps toward Lawrence. The attendant grabbed him by the arm and pulled him closer, shoving Emery through the frame into the hall. “I told you we don’t got all night. Be quick about it, or I’ll drag you along behind me.”

Face to the floor, Emery glowered and thought of all the things he could do to the man. But he didn’t react.

“Must you be so rough with the patients?” Carina asked sweetly, placing her hand on Lawrence’s shoulder with affection.

“I-I...” the man stammered, face flushing rouge. “Just been a long day. I’ll take more care.”

“It would mean much to me if you did,” Carina flirted. Emery smiled. He knew Lawrence fancied Carina greatly and he would do anything she requested, even pretend respect for the patients he despised and, at times, feared. Mental instability made Lawrence wary. Odd for an employee of a lunatic asylum. “And, while we’re speaking of care, shouldn’t you secure the patient before escorting him to the doctor?”

Lawrence guffawed, too loudly, at the suggestion and wiped a hand down his chest. “Not this one, Miss Carina. Dr. Moncure...treated the fight outta him months ago. He won’t do nothin’ ’cept what he’s told.”

Carina looked uncertain but didn’t say anything.

Lawrence continued, “But if it makes you feel better, Miss, I’ll bind him up right and safe. Probably safer for him as well. Thank you for catching my error.”

Carina smiled and her eyes took on a sadness that warmed Emery. He knew he had her, but when her looks reaffirmed the fact, he was always pleased. She spoke to Lawrence, but her look

remained on Emery. “That’s very kind of you. I’ll leave you to your duties. Have a pleasant evening.”

“You too, Miss Carina. Before you go, do you...umm, would ya fancy a bite to eat after shifts let out?” He kept his eyes on his shuffling shoes.

“I can’t tonight. Momma and Daddy are expecting me home.”

“Oh, of course. ’Nother time then.”

But, she’d already turned and started her way down the hall. She always refused him, no matter how he asked. Yet still Lawrence persisted. Emery knew it wasn’t that Carina found Lawrence repulsive, per say, she was simply too distracted by and invested in Emery—Anderson, as she knew him. At a different time, under different circumstances, ones where Emery was not locked inside Eastern Asylum, he was sure Carina and Lawrence could very well end up together. Her parents would simply be happy she’d found a husband—any husband. But the allure of Emery made it not so. He smirked about this very fact as he watched Lawrence’s attention follow Carina walking away until she rounded a corner out of sight.

Lawrence then turned to Emery. “Don’t look so smug, lunatic. Get to walkin’.”

He pushed Emery by the shoulder to get him moving, keeping Emery in front of him as they reached the opposite end of the hall, descended the stairs, and exited the men’s ward into the courtyard. Outside, Emery breathed in the expansive grounds, an acre or so, judging from the area of the wrought iron fencing. There were ten buildings in addition to his own, the smallest a tool shed. Five, including the original building, were women’s wards, with four more men’s wards, one to the left and two to the right of Emery’s.

The buildings all faced the courtyard, forming a quadrangle shape, like there was nothing outside of the grounds. Beyond the buildings, Emery could see some lights and a few rooftops

from the city of Williamsburg, where Carina lived with her parents. The city was vast, one of the largest in the great state of Virginia. It had been the first capital of the state until the capital was moved to Richmond just before the War of Northern Aggression. It had lost much of its glory since the War, but was still a bustling hub of Virginian society and commerce. Carina informed Emery of such things, giving him a taste of the outside world when she could, helping him feel not quite so isolated. He looked forward to seeing for himself one day soon, as he knew he would. He would find a way out, no matter what. He'd been planning for some time now.

As expected, Lawrence led Emery to the original building, where Dr. Moncure would of course have his office established, the front-most and oldest building of the asylum. Small trees lined the walkways of the courtyard between the buildings, with lanterns illuminating them now that the sun had all but disappeared below the horizon. Cicadas sang as fireflies blinked, like earthy stars floating lazily through the humid air, unimpeded by the softest of breezes. Beyond the chattering insects, the silence was almost oppressive after the steady cacophony of the asylum. It was peaceful, but peace was such an alien feeling for Emery that it haunted him as he began to perspire in the still-warm evening. It was more haunting even than the gurgled cries and unnatural banging that regularly assaulted his ears from throughout his building.

Emery closed his eyes and shook his head, inhaling the scent of lilacs that washed over the grounds from some townswoman's manicured garden. He knew not from where, just that it didn't come from the grounds of the asylum, as no flower gardens had survived the laziness with which they were tended by the calmer patients, as a means of treatment. Emery had noticed this from his window overlooking the decrepit gardens and always scoffed at the idea of gardening for treating mental illness. After all of the horrors Dr. Moncure put him through, the thought of yard work was...mediocre.

The imposing dark-red brick of the main building rose above, towering over Emery and the attendant as Lawrence guided Emery through a door at the back of the building. Inside, the building was set up almost identically to Emery's. The air smelled and even tasted antiseptic, like the hall had been scrubbed clean, ceiling to floor. Or, like someone tried desperately to cleanse the remnant odors of death. Emery breathed deeply as though he could detect the truth beneath the pervading mask of bleach. He knew it must be there but didn't let it occupy his mind much as he was more focused on his impending meeting with the doctor. Emery and Lawrence turned down a third hall, and the malodor finally dissipated. Lawrence stopped Emery in front of a door labeled "Superintendent," on which Lawrence rapped firmly three times.

After a period of silence, the beckoning came from behind Dr. Moncure's office door. "You may enter."

Lawrence opened the door inward. Emery heard a guttural scream from elsewhere, like someone had just disemboweled a woman when the lights flickered. He cringed at the noise, even as the dark memory of his own time hooked to the machine blinked across his mind. Lawrence flinched too, unnerved by the scream, before he jostled Emery through the door.

The voice that still terrorized Emery's nightmares continued, "That will be all, Lawrence. This will not take long, so please return in one half-hour to retrieve the patient."

"Yes, Doctor." Lawrence undid the meager restraints with which he had tied Emery at Carina's suggestion.

"You are excused. Please, sit," Dr. Moncure instructed Emery. The chair was old and uncomfortable, the cushion mashed down by all of the posteriors it had accommodated over the years.

Dr. Moncure said nothing at first, continuing to scribble away at the pad of paper before him.

Emery took the opportunity to note how the doctor had aged since he was last evaluated. All of the color had fled from the follicles of his ever-thinning hair. Where there had yet remained the ghost of its former color a few months ago, it was sheer white. The wrinkles around his mouth and eyes had multiplied, like he had developed three or more new scowls and habits of brow furrowing, adding new lines to the already ragged face.

The office complemented Dr. Moncure's disheveled appearance, with the thin layer of dust coating the shelves of medical treatises and experimental cures. On the wall to Emery's right hung diagrams and models of the human body; scratchy notes were scrawled into the white space, noting possible areas of the body that could cause mental defection. Diagrams of the head suggested treatments for curing one malady of the mind or another. Nothing in the office indicated any familial bonds or friendships, as though all the doctor had was his asylum.

Toward the center of the doctor's desk, Emery saw a small letter opener. If only he could get his hands on it, snatch it up, he would lunge for Dr. Moncure and plunge the tiny weapon deep into the old man's frail neck skin. He imagined the sticky sensation of the blood pumped onto his hands, running down his arms, webbing between his fingers. He saw the doctor's eyes roll back, his face slacken, and the color drained from it like it already had from his hair.

"So, hello, Emery." Dr. Moncure finally greeted him upon closing the book and looking over his spectacles at his patient.

"Anderson," Emery corrected him with a smirk. He'd given Emery the name after all.

"Ah, yes, right. Of course," Dr. Moncure admitted with a brief cough and an adjustment of his glasses, looking suspiciously over them at Emery for a moment. Dr. Moncure reached to the corner of the desk, pulling Emery's file in front of him. "I do apologize for having to drag you all the way over here. I am far too busy to visit you at the present time. Politics of running a

hospital, you understand. I am sure you noticed, but I could not put off an evaluation any longer. So, how have you been? It feels as if it has been ages since we last spoke. None of those unpleasant urges?”

“It has been quite some time,” Emery agreed. He crossed his left leg over his right and leaned back. He grinned despite his words. “I’d been rather enjoying the break until the inconvenience of my summoning this evening.”

“Yes, well, the inconvenience must be had. You were far past due for a check up on your rehabilitation,” the doctor explained. “And, as for those ill-fated urges? I trust you have had none? No unpleasantness?”

“Doctor, I can honestly tell you that none of the urges I’ve felt recently are remotely unpleasant.”

“Hmm...well, I do hope your now-pleasant urges are not of a problematic nature.”

“No, nothing of the sort. So, will that be all?”

Frustration sneaked across Dr. Moncure’s weathered expression. “No, that will not be all. We need to discuss your progress, and I need to evaluate your mental state. How are you feeling today? Have you been keeping up on your devotions?”

Emery leaned forward, eyes wide and innocent, concealing his smirk. “Why, Doctor, I feel just wonderful, as though the blessings of sanity and purity have again been bestowed upon me by the Lord Himself. If I’m to tell the truth, I feel like I could be released from this fine establishment and function as a reformed and healed member of our glorious Virginian society.”

He closed his eyes and looked up, as though touched by the innocence of the spirit of the Lord. Emery peeked through a slitted eyelid and saw Dr. Moncure glaring at him over his spectacles again, like a teacher would chastise her pupil. “Took it a bit far with that last bit,

didn't I?"

"I long to believe you. Really, I do." Dr. Moncure shook his head as he rubbed his eyes and ignored Emery's ploys. "I am afraid, however, that I see a menace lurking behind your feigned innocence. I could not, in good conscience, discharge you. Should you falter and I be proven right about said menace, all of the damage you caused would forever plague me with guilt and tarnish my reputation as a man of medicine beyond repair."

"What if I solemnly swear that I bear no ill will and simply want to make a new life for myself?"

"No. Stop it. Pretenses of your reform are moot." Dr. Moncure snapped for a moment.

Emery sat back again, pleased to have pushed the doctor to anger. It was so rare and left him briefly satisfied.

"You will be released when I deem you capable of a stable, peaceful existence and not a moment before. Understood? Now, your devotions. You have kept up with them, yes?"

Sure. Like you would ever release me after all I've been through here.

"Of course, Doctor." Emery nodded vigorously. "Every morning, after breakfast, and every early evening, before dinner, I'm very devoted."

Dr. Moncure eyed him with suspicion. "Fine. I will be checking in on you periodically, and we will meet again for another private evaluation in one week."

"Looking forward to the occasion." Emery rose from the chair.

"Lawrence, you may take Mr. Smith back to his room now," Dr. Moncure called, loudly enough to be heard through the closed door.

"Doctor, I can't help but notice you haven't turned on your fancy new electric light," Emery pointed out, gesturing toward the switch on the wall.

“No, I have not. Nor do I intend to. The board decided upon wiring the hospital for electricity, but here in my private office, I have always preferred to work by candlelight, and I shall continue to do so.”

Lawrence entered and directed Emery toward the office door. On his way, Emery flipped the switch like a playful nuisance, illuminating the room in a bright, buzzing light, startling in comparison to the dim candles. “See how much better the visibility is with those electric lights though, Doctor? Surely you would work better in this brightness, especially at your age.”

“Damn it all!” Dr. Moncure roared and hurried to turn the light back off as Lawrence backhanded Emery.

“I will be watching you, young man. Remember how I can treat such foul behavior out of my patients,” Dr. Moncure threatened, and he slammed the door closed on Emery and Lawrence.

A chill ran through Emery, despite the southern summer heat, and he wasn’t quick enough to whip a bit of wit back at the old man, unnerved as he was by the doctor’s promise. He cringed at the thought of more time spent with Dr. Moncure. Emery didn’t even react to Lawrence’s harsh taunts and derogation on the return journey. He wanted to be locked back into the safety of his room, needed to calm himself. Emery despised how severely the doctor’s voice still affected him, resolved as he was each time not to let it be so. And yet, it unraveled him whenever he departed from the doctor’s presence. The voice always continued to haunt him for many nights after as well, but that only served to strengthen his need for vengeance. This determination was what kept Emery going.

“Lights out soon,” Lawrence told Emery back in his room, on his way out, as Emery sat on the edge of the bed, wordless. “You best start your contemplations and settle in for the night. Don’t let me get a summons to come back here and make you settle in. Lord knows I’d love the

pleasure.”

Emery ignored him and stared for a moment until Lawrence closed the door and locked it, sealing Emery into his solitude. It was a solitude for which he was thankful. His mind flicked back to the treatments he endured in the dank cellar. *Images of naked men, illicit acts, they blink in my mind. Dr. Moncure presses a switch. I lose control of my body My eyes go black, my joints lock, my skin burns, and the pain...it's like nothing I ever imagined. I pray to die. I plead for a quick death. And then, it's over. I'm panting, sweating, weak, my muscles not yet back under my control. He shows me another picture, and I scrunch my face to not look at it. I know what's coming before I hear the buzz...*

His screams echoed in his ears, the scar of the pain flashing across his skin. He saw Dr. Moncure's satisfied smile as electricity tore through him. His blood boiled even as fear turned the pit of his stomach to ice. Emery shivered and twitched, closing his eyes, clenching the lids, trying to force the memories back beneath the surface. Rage erupted within him, as it always did when his mind made him relive his experiences against his will. Emery could almost feel steam pouring from him, and his skin became slick from the cold sweat. He gasped for air, a pressure in his chest keeping him from drawing breath.

Emery flipped up the padding of his bed in anger and thrust his hand into a hole on the underside. Digging around, he found the too-often crumpled, straightened, and re-crumpled sheet of paper, his solace whenever his temper threatened to overwhelm him. It was a poem he'd written, and since re-written, fashioned after Poe's "The Raven." It was the only thing he wrote that he'd cared to keep. He rewrote it every time a staff member took it until he finally managed to hide a draft well enough. It helped him calm down and focus, gather his thoughts.

Gripping the paper in both hands, Emery read it over and over again, eyes skimming across

each line and down each stanza, more slowly with every time he finished the poem. When his chest no longer pounded and his breathing returned to normal, he again crumpled the paper as he had so many times before, stuffed it back into the bed padding, and lowered the padding back into place before lying down. He rested his head on the pillow, clasped hands beneath it.

With his mind no longer a whirlwind and in spite of his dreading the nightmares, Emery fell uneasily asleep. And just as he knew they would, the terrors came for him. Visions of him cuffed to the chair, the leeches pulling from his skin, the electrodes coursing fire through him, the bloodletting, his open wounds—they all conspired to send him tossing, turning, and fighting from one fit to another as he slept without rest.

Guts thrashed. Excrement, blood, water, and decay from within. Chunking vomit. Replenished food expelled, rehydrated fluid spewed forth. Dying. He felt like he died. The purge was right that time, the doctor said. Disease loosened, hold weakened. Emery writhed and misery ripped through his decrepit form. He took it. He would make them pay. The doctor and the men who assisted him, men like Lawrence, they would all pay.

Not more than an hour or two into his slumber, but well into the pitch black of night, a commotion from both outside his door and outside his window roused Emery from the last of his fits. He awoke with a shout, panting and looking about his room in a panic. He ran his hands over himself to be sure the injuries and torture had indeed been left behind in his dreams. Emery tried to wipe the sleep from his eyes as he sat up, feet on the floor, and strained his ears. The noises were such a mess and mix, he was unable to discern the source of whatever caused the upset.

Emery stood and walked to the door, hoping he might pick up more, or at least be able to

better sort out the noises as he listened through the crack between the door and its jamb. When he steadied himself with his hand against the wall, he felt it shaking, like a vibration, a pounding. Outside, he heard shouts that now became clearer to him.

“Help!”

“Let us out!”

“Satan rises for all his children this night!”

“Don’t let us die!”

Insanity, Emery thought, *the whole ward has been overcome with its own lunacy.*

He took a step back from the door and tried to think of what could cause such an uproar from the patients. Before he put his finger on anything, an odor, strange like he knew didn’t belong, pulled his attention to the faint light in his room. It flickered, as though a breeze blew the flame of a lantern. But there were no flame lanterns, since the electric wiring of the asylum. Emery looked out the window as word of the calamity finally reached him.

“Fire!”

Smoke. On instinct, Emery ran to the door and pulled. Locked, obviously. The meaning of the shaking walls and the calls for help all dawned on him. It was not simply the insanity of the other patients. They were perfectly sane in their distress, all sealed inside as the fire raged over the asylum grounds around them.

*

Monday, June 5, 1882

“Anderson, please. I can’t help—”

“My name is not Anderson! It’s Emery!” I shout. “You know this! You know my name! You helped Father sneak me here weeks ago!”

“Dr. Moncure,” the nurse begins. She holds a pad of paper and a pencil. She’s seated against the wall. “He doesn’t appear to be responding well.”

“Patient is still experiencing delusion and memory-recall confusion. In addition, the patient remains convinced his identity is that of an ‘Emery Rovenholt’, a boy who died months ago, a death Anderson Smith could not have possibly known about. I have shown him the boy’s obituary but to no avail. He firmly believes he is ‘Emery Rovenholt’.”

The nurse furiously scratches at the paper to record the doctor’s words.

“Why are you doing this?” I rail, knowing I’m not making the best case for my own sanity. “They already faked my death! Use my name! No one will care who I am...but I’m Emery. I am.”

Dr. Moncure ignores my words, addressing again the nurse instead. “Please, bring the ether. Just in case.”

Once she’s gone, he moves closer to me. I can’t stand the sight of the detail in him: the pockmarks in his skin, faded nearly to nonexistence with age, a blossoming brown spot beginning to bubble to the surface beneath his cheek, the cracking of his lips, chapped and dry.

“The only way this will be smooth and painless is if you cooperate. I only have the best of intentions for you. I am trying to help you be rid of your malignancy. Do you not want to lead a normal life of sanity?”

I’m glaring at him when the small blonde nurse returns, and he sits back down in the chair a

few feet from where I sit on the bed, legs crossed. “Now, Anderson, why do you—?”

“Call me ‘Anderson’ one more time, and I’ll find a way to kill you.”

The doctor’s eyes widen, but it doesn’t last long. Clearing the phlegm from his throat, he carries on. “Yes, well, fine, Emery then. I can see you are not yet ready to start working through these challenges.” He turns to the girl. “Two more weeks of isolation.”

“No!” I’m straining at the cuff and the chain. “Please, no! Not again, I’m sorry. I’ll talk. We’ll talk. Please don’t leave me here like this again. Let’s talk!”

I start to thrash in feeble desperation, but there’s nothing I can change. I see Dr. Moncure take the dampened cloth from the nurse and know what’s coming. I swat at him with one arm, but the girl pins it to the bed while the cloth engulfs my face, the fumes invading my mouth and nostrils. All spins into darkness.

Chapter Two

Sunday, June 7, 1885

Emery stood back at the window as his river blue eyes reflected colorless back at him in contrast with the red and orange rage outside. Leaning against the frame, he watched the calamity unravel below. He saw no point in joining his fellow lunatics in their pounding and their cries for help. One more voice and fist wouldn't bring a single person to their rescue any quicker. No, he instead focused on the show playing out across the grounds. The fire appeared to have originated in the main building—Dr. Moncure's building, funny that—and had spread over the wind from one women's ward to the next. If Emery craned his neck, it also looked as though the front most men's ward had caught a stray ember, but he couldn't tell if that was just a trick of the inferno shining in through the panes.

The night was bright as the dawn with staff scurrying frantically in and out of buildings, evacuating patients into the courtyard. Patients rushed out of the front doors of each building in a frenzy, some so overcome by the excitement they needed to be carried outside in the arms or over the shoulders of male attendants. There was no longer any entrance or exit around the main building; the only activity was the effort of dousing the rapturous flames, efforts Emery saw to be futile. Men worked to pump water onto the building, but too much was burning for them to do anything noticeable. The minute an area was extinguished, the heat simply dried up the water and the same area quickly burned anew. The courtyard swarmed with patients barely corralled by the few staff members responsible for them. Across the yard, the flow of people from the women's wards ceased, leaving hundreds to mill about in a daze from the excitement, the

fearsome change in their melancholy and mundane existence. Meanwhile, white-clad persons streaked through the crowd toward the men's buildings.

Emery took a quick glance around his room in a vain attempt to see if there was anything he'd like to save and take with him, but he knew he didn't want anything from that place kept safe. Emery sat on the bed to await his rescue and listened to the raucous symphony of the patients when he suddenly heard the lock click and his door was flung open. He froze. No one should have come for him that quickly. They'd just started with his building. He turned slowly, unsure what he'd find. From the door, Carina rushed to him. He winced as she threw her arms around his neck and he felt her familiar form. He returned her embrace.

"I came for you the moment I could slip away," Carina said, clutching him to her. "Come, we must go. It's very likely the wind will spread the fire to this building shortly, if it hasn't already." She took his hand and dragged him behind her until he managed to match the pacing of her delicate feet.

Outside on the asylum's courtyard, the scene was even more chaotic than he'd first seen. When the doors opened, the extreme heat hit Emery in the face like a wall. The flames of the now four burning buildings raised the temperature to at least that of midday. The air was dry, sapped of water, and he could feel the effect of the flames on his skin as he started to glisten with a thin sheen of sweat. He could already feel the tickle in his throat when he inhaled a parched breath. His eyes watered as though even the air was alight. The crowd sparkled with perspiration and the dancing flames playing tricks of light.

"Anderson, I..." Her voice pulled his attention away from the inferno for a moment. She looked at the buildings still being evacuated, uncertain, then her eyes raised and met Emery's.

"Go," he assured her. "Do your duty and save those who may still be saved."

Carina grinned sheepishly before kissing him chastely on the lips. She took off back toward the building to continue with the evacuation. Watching her go, Emery wiped purposefully at his mouth. Even before Carina was lost to the ever-growing crowd, he turned and started making his way through the mass of people, no longer concerned for the woman; she'd served her purpose. He had no further use for her, as it was time to plan his escape. Now that he was outside the building, he wished he'd put more thought into where and how he'd leave that place once the chance arose, as it had now arisen. He began wandering through the crowd. When Emery reached the opposite edge, attempts were still being made to put out the fires consuming the women's wards. There were many numbered in the crowd of fire fighters dressed neither in patient attire nor staff uniform, and he realized the denizens of Williamsburg proper, awakened by the commotion, must have emerged and gathered to help save what could be saved from the fiery maw.

Now this place finally looks like the hell it really is.

Looking above the intermixed townspeople and Eastern Asylum staff, Emery marveled at the robust glow that flickered across the rooftops and down the walls. The fire seemed to be a living being as it reared its many heads out of the windows, shattering glass and sending the pieces raining down upon the ground below and the people who scattered away. Panicked screams all around seemed almost to come from the beast itself. The wind was a raging exhale with soot and ash swirling around the hundreds of people crammed into that courtyard; they coughed as the monster continued to heat and poison the air, making it unbearable. The patients seemed like the victims in the attack of a monster of legend, so large, so imposing, the fire was almost too impossible to be real. Some patients stared at the flames, screaming, crying, while others sat on the hard ground, laughing and completely oblivious.

Emery had never seen anything so powerful, so beautiful, in all his life. Breathing in the scent of charred and charring wood, he loved it, found a semblance of peace in such devastation. It smelled like freedom and vengeance. Heavy black smoke clouded the otherwise clear sky. Not a star could be seen, but the outlined shape of the moon could be made out just barely as its light fought the obstructed night. And Emery had to remind himself that it was in fact night. So brilliant was the burning light that only by looking into the black summer sky above could he be sure of the time of day. He basked in the radiant destruction, making his way toward the front of the property. The fire had indeed started in the original building, as the entire thing was enflamed, and it was beyond saving, of that he had no doubt. As such, he needed to see it ravaged for himself, to watch it eaten away. He couldn't leave without that sense of finality. It was essential.

This is the moment I've waited years for, finally it's all coming down around us.

As he moved, Emery noticed again how few restrictions there were on all of the patients in the courtyard. No one was around to watch them or organize them. The staff was all too busy with the immediacy of the fire. Emery could do what he wanted, go where he wanted. *Out. That's where I'll go.* The lacking presence of the staff would help him after he'd watched the house of his nightmares burn for a moment or two. Walking there, Emery got lost in the fantasies in his head. Dr. Moncure's office gone, his treatises and "notes" piles of ash. The crib, the chair, those restraints, reduced to nothing but blackened garbage. The electrotherapy box melted, never to "train" anyone again. The leeches cooked and disintegrated, their fluid evaporated or baked away in the intensity. The cellar a pitch hole in the ground, beams and walls from above crashed down into it, a useless fire pit smoldering for days after. Dr. Moncure, with no family, no friends, asleep at his desk. The asylum his true home, awakened too late, half-suffocated in smoke, he'd

try to get out, but the door knob would be too hot, the hinges melted closed. He'd scream for help, but no one would hear him over the great fire beast's roars. His body would burn to the bone in the bottom of that pit, his death slow and agonizing. The pit itself would remain, charred, a scar like all of those the doctor had left Emery scarred with. It would be a reminder. Emery could see it so clearly in his mind as he neared the building.

When the crowd finally parted enough that Emery was in full view of Dr. Moncure's building, the sight disappointed him. While yes, nearly the entire thing was up in flames, roiling plumes of smoke high into the sky, it wasn't as close to destroyed as he had hoped. Much of the structure was still intact, resisting its impending doom. The doctor could even still escape if he wasn't out already. In spite of his disappointment, Emery couldn't help but be hypnotized by the onslaught crackling in front of and above him. It was a dream come true; the subject of his nightmares was being torn down before his eyes. Then a voice pulled him from his reverie.

"No, these are not all of the files!" Dr. Moncure shouted. "There was irreplaceable research and documentation in a set of boxes that *is not here!*"

Emery didn't move, transfixed by the voice of his tormentor, outside and very much alive.

"But, Doctor, there weren't any other—" a female voice pleaded. Probably an attendant, as the voice was much too young for a matron. Besides, the matrons would be consoling and caring for the more hysterical of the female patients.

"Yes, there were! Get away from me, you stupid girl, before I send you back in after them!"

Emery couldn't take it any longer, couldn't listen to that voice and let it send him back to the asylum cellar, not even in his mind. Rage roared within him, and he took off, pushing through the people. The need to get away, to calm all of the terrible things boiling up inside him, it was too great. He wanted so badly to kill the man where he stood, to press his face against the

burning walls. *One day, perhaps I will. But not today. Today, I escape this place.*

He pushed between people, left and right, every step needing another. Someone, staff member, townspeople, patient—he had no idea—stepped into his path, and Emery grabbed at him, flinging the young man out of his way in stride. Emery didn't stop running until he reached the opposite end of the grounds and found himself near the groundskeeping building. A rake leaned against the side wall near the back, next to a small, rickety ladder. *I must get as far as I can. Moncure will surely be searching for me. He'll capture me, return me to the cellar. I'll never see the light of day again. Carina will seek me out as well with her misguided lust. And Lawrence, he would love nothing more than to drag me, kicking and screaming, back to the bowels of Moncure's care. Everyone is going to be searching for me.*

The bulking crowd provided all the cover he could need, but he was still certain that all in the mass of people sought him. He breathed in, and particles of ashen air attacked his already barren throat. He became distracted as he doubled over in a fit of coughing that wracked his whole body. He needed to get himself together. He had always hoped this day would come, but as it had, Emery knew there would never come another opportunity as perfect as the fire. Escape was the only way he could ever be free. After all that happened in the cellar, Dr. Moncure would never allow him back out into the world. No, Emery had to take the opportunity now, before it was lost. Getting away wouldn't be any sort of problem; the patients were roaming the courtyard at will. The difficulty would be getting over the fence lining the property. He trusted he could climb it, except that morning dew had surely begun to settle in across the grounds where the fire hadn't kept it at bay, and the iron would be impossible to grip.

As inconspicuous as he could be, Emery strayed over behind the tool building. He looked to each side, constantly checking for unwanted eyes. He surveyed the portion of property before

him and saw that his best chance at freedom—once he was over the fence—would be the woods just outside of town, beyond the north side corner of the property. And, to his pleasure, the radiance of the still-growing fire left the back of the grounds pitch black in contrast.

Without pause, he peeked around the corner of the building. There wasn't a staff member in sight. Emery took off into the darkness, each step making him less and less visible to those still in the inferno's vicinity. As his eyes adjusted, he saw that a tree or two—he couldn't yet tell in the dark—had been kept inside the grounds when all of the rest were cleared away for the asylum's expansion. The serendipity wasn't lost on him as he broke into a sprint toward his salvation. *How did I not notice this before?* He cursed his inattention and his lack of a more careful plan.

Upon closer examination, he found the trees at the fence hadn't been as poorly planned as he assumed. The few branches that grew close enough to the ground to climb had all been chopped off, probably years ago. He weighed his options. He couldn't go back; he needed to figure it out there, at the fence. Looking up into the tree, Emery saw there were one or two branches he might catch if he took a running start for them, maybe pushed off the trunk as well. They looked to be some eight or nine feet from the ground. Just in case, he went to the fence and ran his hand over the iron bar, and as he suspected, wet.

Backing away, he stopped a good distance from the tree. He took off, running with all he had. Young and in the prime of his life, he realized it would pay off right then and there. He jumped at the tree, kicked off, and stretched for the branch. His fingers skimmed the coarse bark as he fell to the ground, barely getting a foot beneath himself to keep from mashing his face into the grass and dirt.

"Damn it!"

He walked away from the tree again, farther away for the second attempt, muttering and grumbling under his breath. His ankle was a bit sore, so he rolled it around to see if any damage had been done. Satisfied, he prepared to give the jump another shot. With a deep breath, he exhaled, launching himself at the tree. All the energy he had was in that run. His foot connected with the bark, higher this time he was certain, and as he went through the air, his hand wrapped around the targeted limb. He grabbed on with his other hand and started to pull himself up.

A vice clamped around his dangling foot. The force tore him down from the branch. He landed hard on his back and smacked his head on the ground. The impact knocked the wind out of him. In the dark, his vision was darker still as he tried to collect himself.

“Where you goin’, lunatic?” a familiar voice asked above him.

His eyes cleared. Emery stared up into Lawrence’s gleeful face.

“Get over here,” Lawrence ordered as he grabbed Emery by the neck of his shirt and lifted him up to face-level. Emery’s feet barely touched the blades of grass as they dangled. Emery squirmed and fought, struggling to escape the attendant’s grip. The fabric of his shirt strained, starting to tear. Emery moved more fiercely to accelerate the tearing and free himself. Lawrence wrapped a meaty hand around Emery’s throat, ceasing the attempts.

“It’s time to get you back to the pasture with all’a the other crazy little animals. Can’t have one escapin’ just ’cause of a little ole fire.”

Lawrence’s breath smelled as though he’d been throwing back bourbon since his shift ended. It was so potent, Emery imagined he could taste it. Lawrence staggered as he took the first few steps back toward the asylum. Panic struck Emery. He was too close; he couldn’t go back. He wouldn’t. Emery renewed his fight. Lawrence’s arm slipped a bit, and Emery used it to his advantage. Until Lawrence stopped and swung the back of his hand at Emery’s face, knocking

him to the ground. A throbbing in his head erupted.

“Don’t think you’re goin’ anywhere, ya crazy piece of garbage.”

He reached for Emery again, but Emery was too quick. He rolled out of Lawrence’s range. Emery jumped to his feet despite the aches of his abuse. His back hurt from where he landed after Lawrence ripped him from the tree. His chest felt as though the fire had spread inside it. Every joint was stiff from exertion. But he couldn’t let any of that get in his way. The physical threat Lawrence posed was real. He was drunk and could kill Emery without a thought.

Lawrence reached again, but Emery ducked around his hand. He threw his fist at Lawrence’s chin. Emery winced, never having punched anyone besides his father, years ago. The blow barely affected Lawrence, who rubbed his chin and laughed.

“That s’pposed to hurt? A’right, let’s make a scuffle out of it then. C’mere, boy.”

Emery was too focused to respond. He took off around Lawrence and back toward the two trees. If he had to fight Lawrence first for his freedom, he wanted to be near the means of his escape. Emery heard the man’s heavy, clumsy footfalls behind him, not in any particular rush.

“You think you can get up tha’ tree and outta reach before I pull your ass back down ta the ground again? Go ahead then, scamper on up. Don’t make it easy on me now.”

Emery did in fact try the jump once more. But his heart was pounding too hard. As he made a grab for the branch, he caught only air, missing by several inches. He was unable to get his feet under him, tumbling into the dirt instead. Emery scrambled. He only managed to raise himself to his knees before Lawrence stomped on his back.

“You really are crazy!” Lawrence laughed too loudly. “You couldn’t’ve thought that’d work! Get up now, or I’ll beat you unconscious and drag your body back.”

Emery went limp, unsure of what his next move should be. Lawrence reached down and

grabbed Emery's shoulder, removing his foot to lift him. Emery seized the opportunity. He rolled again—away from Lawrence's hand—the moment the pressure was off of his back. Kicking with all his might, he heard the *crunch!* from Lawrence's nose when his heel broke it. Lawrence screamed in agony.

“Kill you! I'll kill you! I'll rip your limbs from your body an' carry the pieces back in a sack! Worthless lunatic!” Lawrence raged as he clutched his face. Blood leaked through the cracks in his fingers, smeared into his eyes by his meaty hands.

“Worthless?” Emery taunted. “Is that why Carina ignores you, yet ran to rescue me first? Is that why I've had the pleasure of her soft lips against mine while you haven't even felt the brush of her hand? It must make you absolutely...mad that she prefers an unstable man over you.”

Lawrence roared unintelligibly and attempted to stem the flow from his nostrils. Emery, meanwhile, bent over a pile of fallen limbs at the base of one tree. Rooting through the cluster, he found one suitable to his needs. It had been a thick branch where it broke from the tree, likely in the recent storm. He extracted it as Lawrence barreled toward him. Realizing Lawrence's mass was his sole weapon, Emery took a step to one side. Lawrence turned to him. He reached for Emery's face. Emery knocked Lawrence's arm away with a heave of the branch. He didn't need Lawrence's shriek or the unnatural noise the arm made to know he'd broken another bone.

Emery contemplated playing with the man a bit more, as Lawrence had brought it on himself, following Emery to the fence and attacking him, not to mention his many sins in the cellar of the asylum. Pinning Emery down for the leeches, clipping electrodes to Emery's head, snapping him with the switch, restraining him for torture after torture, Lawrence needed to be toyed with. But Emery simply didn't have the time. He also wasn't sure he'd have the stomach for it, not if he could just run instead, no matter how much he wanted it and how much Lawrence deserved it.

The commotion of the still nearby courtyard kept Emery constantly vigilant of his need for urgency if he hoped to escape that night, once and for all.

Whimpering between angry huffs of breath, Lawrence cradled his arm, no longer paying any attention to Emery. Ready to be done with him, Emery swung his weapon like a baseball bat, following through after it forced Lawrence's head to snap forward with a resounding *crack!* Lawrence collapsed in a heap and didn't move or make a sound. Emery could just make out the darkening at the base of Lawrence's skull as he bled. He didn't know if he imagined it or not, but the metallic scent of blood was in the air. Emery threw the stained piece of wood to the ground beside Lawrence and turned to his escape tree. He needed a new plan. After the exertion of the fight, Emery no longer had the stamina to reach the high branches. But, an idea struck him. He went to Lawrence's body, hooked his hands under Lawrence's armpits and pulled. The body moved but a few inches before he lost his grip and stumbled backward.

"Come on, you fat bastard. You're my way out of here," he cursed at Lawrence's prone form.

He again grabbed the man, ensuring his grasp was firm, and began to heave the mass toward the tree. It needed to be just a few feet closer to be of use. Straining his back and flexing his legs, Emery slowly worked the body to the base of the trunk. Panting and sweating quite profusely, Emery leaned back against the bark to gather himself. He wiped his brow with his shirt and exhaled, walking away to what he deemed an appropriate distance. He tried to shake the exhaustion and tension out of his limbs before crouching down for his sprint. As he pushed off from the ground, he cut through the air, bounding with all he had left. Emery leapt and planted his foot where Lawrence's hips met his spine. Launched from his victim, Emery kicked from the tree and managed to wrap his fingers around the same branch he'd been pulled from just minutes ago. When his other hand grasped the branch, he hauled himself up.

Emery scaled the tree from one branch to another until he found one that stretched out over the asylum's fence and into the liberation beyond. Peering down, he saw that the ground was much farther away than he liked. He scooted out from the trunk, along the arm of the tree. As he did, the limb sank in time with his movements, lower and lower the farther out he went. When he was as far as he was comfortable, he thought if he could just skim down the end and hang, he could drop to the earth below as the bough broke. He did just that, feeling the thick, unforgiving skin of the tree cut his hands, slicing into his fingers and palms. It made each move down the branch more difficult than the last.

Before he could reach the end and lower himself to dangle from it, he heard the growing noise of splintering wood. He had no time to react or prepare as the branch broke, sooner than he had anticipated. He crashed down without even enough time to brace himself as he landed painfully on his side and flopped over from back to stomach to back. Groaning as he rose, Emery brushed off, then smiled at the unfettered expanse ahead of him. He was finally free of Eastern Lunatic Asylum.

*

Friday, December 8, 1882

I've not been out of bed in a week. I'm chained to it, crippled. Dr. Moncure calls it the rest cure. After having my body so violently cleansed over the week, this is supposed to heal all the areas that were purged, scar tissue. The constant bed rest will keep my mind from allowing dark things to feed the illness he's worked so hard to weaken. Eight weeks I'm to be kept. Nurses come in, clean me, move me around, keep my blood circulating. They feed me some fatty, milk-based concoction, like I'm swallowing the grisly juices from Aunt Edna's rotund excesses.

At first I resisted the feeding, but they just force it down my throat. It's the only thing they feed me, so I choke it down whenever they walk in with that tube to plunge it into my mouth. Harder to resist was the "no talking" restriction. The rest cure is total. I'm not to use or do anything, not even speak if spoken to. Today is my first day not gagged, and I'm trying to keep it that way.

The door opens and a young man walks in carrying the tube-and-plunger full of fatty goop. Has it been two hours already? I haven't even digested the last feeding.

*

Chapter Three

Sunday, June 7, 1885

Ten minutes into the wilderness outside of Williamsburg, Emery stopped to catch his breath. He was exhausted, his whole body strained. Resting against a sapling, he panted with his hands on his knees. He glanced around, trying to get his bearings. He needed to get to the city and gather enough supplies to make it safely to his father's plantation. That was the first place he had to go. His last piece of Elijah was there, a photograph of the two of them together, the only photograph that existed of Elijah. And, it was far past time Emery confronted the man who locked him in an asylum, damning him to years of torture.

Elijah had been all Emery thought about over his years in the asylum. That, and vengeance against his father and Moncure. But it was Elijah who got Emery through the torture, the pain and agony, focusing on their happy memories. He still couldn't believe his lover had been dead three years, three years since Emery's father murdered him. Elijah was on Emery's mind so much, it was like he'd never left him. Like he was still beside Emery, had gone to the asylum with him. He'd been in the bed beside Emery through the weeks of the rest cure, tied to the bed, unable to stand or move; he'd been in the crib with the wooden bars that held Emery so tightly he couldn't scratch if he had an itch; Elijah had been the negro man Dr. Moncure sent into Emery's room to check his progress and reactions. Memories of tilling the fields side by side kept Emery from real insanity when the leeches drained his humours.

Emery had felt a connection to Elijah from the time they were children. They were both different and found a kindred spirit in the other. Emery wasn't like his father, rough and

commanding. He was sensitive, as his mother had put it. His father called it embarrassing. He always said there was “something wrong with the boy,” because Emery treated the negroes like equals, friends. To Emery, they were just people, no matter how his father mistreated them.

Then there was Elijah. His light skin and his illicit conception made him an outcast amongst his people. He would talk to Emery about how the white people treated him black, because he was, but the black people treated him like he wasn't. He felt like he didn't belong. He didn't even have parents. But the two of them had each other. As they grew older, their connection deepened and a love blossomed. Emery had tried to resist; it wasn't right, wasn't even legal. He could be killed, arrested, even locked in an asylum apparently. But Elijah still held that pull, and Emery always found himself seeking out his childhood friend, his lover, no matter how the world around them viewed their feelings. Together, they each belonged somewhere. That sense of belonging was what got Emery through the darkest moments of his treatment. The memory of that contentment kept Elijah alive for Emery.

But he wasn't alive. Elijah was dead. Because Emery's father killed him. That was another reason Emery had to go back and face him. He would avenge Elijah. He had to. *What else do I have to live for?* Vengeance had begun to consume Emery in that asylum, and only Elijah had kept it sometimes at bay. There had been no coping with the loss of Elijah. All Emery could do was dwell, remember his lover, sometimes to the point of lunacy, talking to Elijah and imagining responses, anything to keep the pain to a minimum. He needed that picture back. And to see his father. He hoped his mother wouldn't get in the way. After all that had happened, he still didn't know how he felt about her. He was sure he'd figure it out once he reached the plantation and saw them both.

A noise in the brush pulled Emery back to the immediacy of having to gain more distance

from his former prison. The real possibility that staff were looking for him had his senses highly alert. He just knew someone was already searching the woods for him at that very moment. He had to get away. There was no way he could let any attendants drag him back to the asylum. And in his state, after that fight with Lawrence and his fall from the tree, Emery was weak and unsteady on his feet. He was uncertain of his ability to fight off any staff hunting him.

He tore away deeper into the trees. The brambles and branches grabbed at his garments as he struggled through the woods, grunting and huffing. When his foot was ripped out from under him, his face broke through the leaves. He tasted the dirt and moss of the ground as they were smashed into his mouth when he tumbled down the incline of a hill he hadn't anticipated.

"Damn it all!"

When the earth leveled out, Emery lay on his back, further battered and bloodied. Despite the aches, he got first to his knees, then to his feet, and froze at another noise. He ducked behind a tree, holding his breath. It was just the gurgle of a creek. He released the air he held, but it caught in his throat as he stepped away and heard a woman's voice pierce the tranquility. He didn't move, watching the shadowed figure trample along without a care as he debated how to react should she notice him.

"The trees, the trees, so many, so big," the woman sang with child-like innocence. It was definitely a patient, loud as she was. Relief swept him; a patient he was confident he could handle without bother.

*How in the hell did she get out when I had to fight to the death and scale a tree?
Unless...yes, that must have been a ladder I saw against the fence as I ran off into the woods. If
only my climb had been as simple. I don't have time for this.*

Shifting his arm to alleviate a twitching muscle, Emery winced the second it skimmed his

shirt, hissing at the pain. Reaching for the tender spot, he felt what must have been a thorn or piece of wood imbedded in his inner forearm. He ripped it out, unable to stifle the grunt as he realized how deeply it had stuck. The woman stopped a moment, then took a few steps in his direction. He was ready for her.

“What’s this we are found?” she asked upon seeing him. “Hello! Friend! You are enjoying the trees too?”

The patient standing before him was a slightly bulbous woman, more round at her natural curves than Carina. She came to Emery’s chest at full height, and her large eyes gleamed, like they were constantly filled with tears. Her teeth were a dingy color, as though she spat tobacco with the men, and the front two stuck out even when her mouth was closed. The lines of her face, the way her jowls sagged, these were the last things he noticed, her old age revealed in them. The hem of her shirt was clenched between her fingers, which bulged like packed meat, and her eyes roamed over the area.

Emery bounded to her and slapped his hand over her mouth with such force that it made a noise. She shrieked in her throat, only partially muffled by his grip. Disregarding his muzzling palm, the oblivious woman chattered away against his skin as though the two were having tea. He pressed more tightly, until he felt her teeth through her lips and his fingers clenched her jaw. Her babbling ceased.

“I’m going to pull my hand away,” Emery whispered in her ear, mouth brushing against it. She giggled at the touch. “Shut. Up. Make one more sound, and I’ll kill you where you stand.”

When he removed his hand, the woman didn’t say a word, but quietly hummed to herself. He put a finger to her lips. She whimpered once, but was finally silent.

“I don’t want to hurt you. Stay here, silent as if I stitched your mouth closed. If I hear you,

you'll regret it. Do you understand me?"

The woman had shut her eyes and was bobbing her head quickly from side to side. Emery pushed her into a sitting position by her shoulders as she continued to wobble. He shook his head and left her there as he ran toward the creek. The way he'd dealt with Lawrence disturbed him. He didn't want to harm the woman. But he couldn't let her risk his freedom either. Rustling in the leaves made him look back as the woman chased after him, shouting. "I'm coming with you! I come too!"

Emery glared as though just the force of his annoyance could silence her.

"Friend, wait! I'm Jane. Who you are?" Jane prattled like nothing had happened. "Come with you on an adventure!"

He ran back to head her off and tried to cover her mouth again, whisper-shouting, "Shut your damn mouth! Do you want us both caught?"

"Adventure!" she yelled, swatting his hands away to keep him from silencing her. She was adamant. "I'm coming too!"

He didn't know what to do. He couldn't run, as she'd made it clear she would follow him. But he didn't want to hurt her. As she continued slapping her hands in the air needlessly at Emery and shouting that they were going to have an adventure together, Emery's panic mounted. He thought he heard the sounds of people approaching. A twig crunched, leaves rustled, the wind whistled between the boughs, and he snapped. He was out of time.

Emery charged Jane. As he tackled her, she squealed when she landed in the mud of the creek bank and crawled toward the water, looking for escape. Emery lost control. She was putting his freedom at stake, so she had to die. There was no other way. He rose from the ground and jumped onto Jane's back as she sloshed through the shallow water on her stomach. The force

of his pounce sent up a loud splash, but he didn't care. He wasn't thinking about anything but her silence. Nothing else mattered as he saw the world in a shadow of red.

She struggled against him, trying to shake him off of her as she kept rising up. Digging his knee in between Jane's shoulder blades, he pinned her down and pressed her face below the water until it met with the mud and rocks of the creek bed. Jane flailed and floundered like a loose trout. He pushed harder on her head, using his other hand to add pressure, clumping her hair in his fingers and pounding her up and down against the water and rocky bed. He clenched his eyes shut, unable to watch even as he killed her, hot angry tears leaking out and down over his cheeks. She had to be quiet. He needed her dead. The tension of Jane's struggling body lessened, until finally, he felt it release as she died beneath him. A sob erupted from him and he scrambled backward away from her body. Emery couldn't open his eyes until he felt the bank, not wanting to look at the woman's prone form, her lifeless body.

Emery knew he couldn't linger long but needed to take a breath, calm himself over what he'd done. His body shook like blades of grass in the breeze, and his vision wouldn't focus as tears continued their stream down his face. He had to leave. But he was afraid, if people were in the woods and found her before he was far enough away, they'd know to look harder for him. They'd know which direction he'd gone. He risked a glance at Jane and gagged. The sight of her was nauseating. If staff found her, they would know another patient had killed her; they would know two had escaped. Emery was certain they'd think of no other option. Soon after, they would all be searching for him: the staff, Moncure, the townspeople, everyone.

But not if they can't tell right away that she's a patient.

Trying his best not to look at her, Emery quickly peeled Jane's soaking clothes off of her body. Hurrying away and leaving the naked woman floating in the shallows of the creek, Emery

went back to the trees on the bank. He would dispose of her clothes elsewhere, bury them perhaps, but he had to turn his focus back to his escape, had to block out Jane and the horror he had committed. He needed to get into the city and be on his way to the plantation.

He wasn't far from the city but wanted to get farther away from the asylum and find the right place to hide out until early morning, a difficult task in the still dark and shadowed woods. Morning seemed to be the best time to slip into the city, gather his supplies, and be off. Snooping around the city at that hour, after such a calamity at an asylum full of lunatics, wouldn't be an intelligent decision. Emery took off into the woods, with the body of his second victim lying behind him.

I've killed two people. What am I becoming?

Emery eventually found a place deep in the woods where he felt safe enough to hide out. The ground beneath the root system of a large tree had been partially worn away. Or dug out, Emery couldn't tell in the dark. Slipping underneath, he leaned back and listened so hard he felt like his ears would ache from the effort. For over an hour, he heard nothing but the sounds of the wilderness: owls hooted, a cricket or two chirped, and nocturnal creatures scampered over the ground. Between the cool of night and his slowing heart beat, Emery started to nod off, exhausted as he was from his excursions. But the moment he closed his eyes, Jane's pale and waterlogged face burst into his vision, flicking between her face and Lawrence's bloody, equally pale countenance. Bursting out of the faces, Emery saw the fire, the roaring flames and screams of patients as attendants, nurses, and volunteers tried to evacuate them. He'd enjoyed the sight in the moment, the exhilaration of retribution as the house of horrors burned. Not until Jane did he realize how many patients probably died in the blaze. The wind spread it so quickly, he couldn't guess at the losses.

Emery very nearly shrieked out at the sight, panting, his heart racing once more. With all of the death on his mind, he couldn't possibly sleep. He couldn't bear the faces and couldn't risk waking up screaming. He realized sleep was a poor idea in any case so soon after his escape. No, he needed to remain aware and vigilant, needed to avoid the faces of his sins. So with wide eyes, he waited, rocking back and forth on his haunches, arms wrapped tightly around the bent knees of his crossed legs.

I just want their faces to go away.

*

Sunday, January 14, 1883

Elijah and I lay next to each other on the lush green grasses, staring up at the clearest night sky of that summer. Stars twinkled above like millions of fireflies igniting. The humid air had dissipated, a breeze wafting across the hill we were enjoying. He and I had spent the evening together, since he left the fields for the day with the other workers. We ate his mother's stew, then simply wandered lazily. Later, the ground became our mattress for relaxing the rest of the evening away. We had talked ourselves out, so we just enjoyed each other's company in silence.

I was to leave for the Farnsworth Academy at the end of the summer, for my first semester there. Neither of us wanted to talk about it. We spoke around it, never about it. The separation hovered over me—even weeks away—when I wasn't around him, Elijah, my best friend, my only friend. Lying there, it pressed on my chest; I felt drawn to him, a feeling like I'd never felt so strong as then. We had to talk about it. I couldn't leave and not.

"I'm going to miss you," I told him.

"I'll still be here."

"I wish I could take you with me."

That caused him to laugh. "Our world'd never let that happen. But I do wanna get gone, one day. Go north, do more'n slave labor."

"Father would never let you go."

"I ain't worried 'bout your daddy. He don't own me. Can't nobody own me no more. And I could get away from your daddy, if'n I needed."

There was a pause. I knew he could. He was clever enough, smart enough. His parents loved him enough to help. He'd do great things.

"You'll still be here when I come back from school?"

“Always.”

I took his hand.

I dwell there, back in that moment on the hill with Elijah, as my body quivers, still unable to get out of this bed. I wish he had been able to get away from Father. I guess I did finally take him with me, kept him in my memories. I pray I won't lose that too.

I think about the weeks we had together after that moment, two months of really being together, like I'd wanted for so long. Like he'd wanted too, he told me later. We'd never been closer. Those moments will get me through. Those moments and all the ones that came after, before Father...no, I can't think about that. Can't imagine it...go back to the meadow...go back...

*

Chapter Four

Monday, June 8, 1885

An hour after the beginning rays of sunrise had shone, Emery crept through the yard of a meager dwelling outside the main streets of Williamsburg, Virginia. The wind from the previous night still blew, whipping his hair about. It carried with it the smell of cinder as it had when he traveled all night to the opposite side of town. Now that dawn had broken, it was time to search for a house with laundry hung out on a line for drying. Emery could not possibly wander the city in his patient attire. The drawstring, cotton trousers and loose, matching shirt would stand out everywhere he went like a beacon.

When he finally found what he sought, he approached a pair of men's trousers, stiff and thick, the kind that would protect Emery from the terrain he had to endure on his way back "home." He scoffed when his mind conjured the word. *Isn't home where the heart is or some such nonsense? If so, home is dead, as my heart was murdered. I have no home.*

The trousers hung next to a rather large, though very nice, shirt. It wasn't sturdy like the pants and would likely be torn and nearly destroyed by the time Emery reached the plantation. But it was soft, cotton he thought, and billowy, the kind of shirt he could move around easily in, with little restriction. He would be comfortable in it and that would be a nice change.

Taking both from the line and bundling them under his arm, he tore a dress, a second pair of trousers, and an apron down and released them into the next gust to cover for the missing garments, like they'd all blown away. He didn't need townspeople sounding the alarms for his theft. He was only doing what was necessary to make it safely out of the city. It would take quite

some time for the help to realize the clothes were stolen, if they ever did. In a house of such opulence, Emery wondered how noticeable two missing items would really be. Satisfied with his cover, Emery left the property and went back along to the outskirts.

He came upon the back end of an elaborate garden with hedges more than tall enough to keep any passing eyes from catching a glimpse of him as he relaxed a moment. Inside, the shrub walls led a maze of gravel pathways that eventually opened up into an expanse of meticulously arranged flowers, rows of so many colored buds that he could barely take them all in. The perfume of the garden soothed his nerves as he stopped at a bench in the corner of one turn, where he could immediately see if anyone approached or spotted him lurking.

Emery stripped his clothes from his body, struggling with how stiff and soiled the fabric was. Once he slid the fresh trousers up his legs and the shirt over his head, however, he felt his body sigh with relief at the comfort. The shirt was many measurements too large, but that didn't matter. He sat on the bench and slumped over, so exhausted his eyes wouldn't stay open. He'd refused to give in and sleep the night before, knowing it was too soon after his escape to risk being so unguarded. No, he would wait until he was finished in Williamsburg. The difficulty was that he'd only been to the city once, shopping with his mother, and that was years ago. He had no idea how to come across the items most essential to his trip. Food was the biggest necessity. The growl in his abdomen had escalated to a rolling rumble; he hadn't eaten a bite since the dinner Carina brought him the previous evening. His best chance was to go into town, but he either needed to steal money on the way or steal his supplies as he came across them. Neither idea appealed to him.

Before leaving the tranquil seclusion and beauty of the garden, Emery ventured into the proper area to have one last careful look for anything useful. He made his way to a shed at the

far-left wall of the manicured nursery and slipped inside, closing the door. The smallest bit of light filtered in through a revolting window, smeared with dirt and filth. Haphazard clusters of pots, hoes, shovels, bags of seed, and over-clothes for the gardeners were all strewn about. The air was unpleasant, smelling of a mixture between fresh soil, musty grass clippings, and sweaty human musk. He turned up his nose as he scanned the shed's contents.

Against the front wall, on the floor, sat a sturdy pair of boots. His eyes lit up as they rested upon them. When he kicked off the worn out, torn up shoes that had been provided him at the asylum, he stepped into each boot and saw a burlap satchel hanging above. The boots were slightly too small, but they would serve him much better than what he had stumbled into the city wearing. Emery removed the satchel too and slung it over his shoulder before he sneaked quickly along the garden wall, returning through the hedge maze and exiting the property.

Backtracking along the outskirts, he took Capital Landing Road into Williamsburg. Emerging at random from the surrounding countryside would've been suspicious to anyone who sighted him. But if he were a traveler entering the city and passing through, he trusted fewer people would give him a second glance. When Capital Landing met the Williamsburg grid, Emery strolled down Nicholson Street and left onto Botetourt until he saw the main span of Duke of Gloucester Street running straight through the heart of the city. By that point, much of the town had woken and the denizens were out starting their daily routines.

Emery followed the cobblestones deeper into Williamsburg, carefully aware of his surroundings, as he had no idea who may have seen him on the grounds of the asylum the previous night, who had or had not been volunteering with the extinguishing efforts and patient tending. He passed inns and taverns, the apothecary, and once he caught sight of the courthouse in the middle of the city, Emery found himself in a market square. For the first time, it hit him

that he was in public. He was free and among the crowds of people out running errands and buying this foodstuff or that knick-knack.

He paused a moment to look around and take in the shoppers. He could go where he wanted and do what he wanted. He was about to interact with people outside the asylum for the first time in years. The very idea left him vibrating with nervous excitement. But he knew he needed to be on guard. He wasn't there for socializing; he was afraid he wouldn't even know how to socialize anymore. And, he needed to get out of that city and the dangers of those people. Weaving around market-goers and examining the merchandise of various peddlers, he spent the next hour pushing between people who gawked and haggled at tables laden with goods. As proprietors argued with various women over the price of bread or how many apples should actually be included for the amount charged, his hands, despite trembling with nerves, managed to swipe a loaf of bread, a few pastries, a bundle of carrots, and two oranges. Each was taken and placed inside the satchel with but one swift motion. He'd practiced this in the asylum: snatching something from a cart, slipping a sheet of paper from a clipboard or file, a pencil and book of matches from a pocket. Those last two he'd been most severely punished for taking, but it became a kind of game to him. Eventually he was able to get away with it every time. Now, he was thankful for the game.

He shuffled his way back through the crowd from where he'd first entered the market. His anxiety at the possibility of recognition was becoming too much. Emery managed to snatch a few coins from shoppers' loose purses, which was much easier in the crowded market than it had been in the asylum, distracted as both the men and women were in their shopping. All he had to do was bump into a person, apologize to their distraction as the coin left the pocket or purse. They were never any the wiser. He felt guilty, had to keep reminding himself it was necessary, it was the only way. He could repent at a later date.

As Emery slipped the last coins into the satchel, he caught a man's eye. The man, young but certainly older than Emery, had been watching him. He clearly saw Emery stealing the coins. Emery's heart pounded as the man smirked. It was time to leave. He hurried past the stand where he'd stolen the still-warm bread and could finally see an end to the expanse of bobbing heads and hurried toward that end; it was time he left the godforsaken city before he found himself in some trouble he couldn't easily walk away from. When he'd pushed himself through the throng of shoppers, the contrast of being in the quiet streets was calming. He was still in a panic and couldn't wait to finally be on his way. But before he turned his back on the city and made for his father's plantation, Emery needed to stop for just a few more things. He remembered seeing a General Store on the opposite end of the market. He rushed toward it to get in and get gone. But he had to go around the block and take the long way in order to avoid the crowd and escape the witness to his theft, in case he wanted to follow Emery and play hero.

Over half an hour later, inside the General Store, Emery looked about, studying his surroundings. He had to be more careful. Behind the counter at the front of the store sat a man whose face Emery couldn't see, hidden behind *The Virginia Gazette* as it was. Despite sitting inside, his skin that Emery could see was colored with sun, like he spent his days away from the store toiling outside at some sort of labor. At the counter, there were two other customers. The men stood together, finished purchasing and just conversing as though over a couple of beers at a tavern in town. Both were older, likely with adult children, and their bellies revealed just how much beer and ale they'd actually consumed over their many years of hard work, either on their farms or at their trades. Emery would've paid them no mind if not for catching their topic of conversation. The man behind the counter continued to read the paper, eyes raising to Emery every so often, slyly over the paper, his face still concealed, but there was something familiar

about those eyes. Rather than excuse himself around the two men, Emery waited patiently and listened, pretending to search through his travel bag.

“No, no, no, no. They only know of one fer sure. The other two’s just missin’. Can’t call ’em dead without no body.”

“Ain’t gonna be no bodies if the two ladies done burned up inside one’a the buildings. All’s I’m sayin’ is, too bad didn’t a few more get burnt up. I ain’t never been comf’ter’able with all’a them crazies shackled up inside city limits.”

“Well, dang, Lou, don’t hide yer feelin’s. Ain’t like it’s their fault. Didn’t none of ’em ask for the crazy inside ’em.”

“You know one done escaped, right? Scurried right out in all’a the mayhem. Prob’ly wanderin’ through town now, talkin’ to its self, hearin’ voices tellin’ it to kill folks or some such craziness.”

“That’s a farfetched rumor based on lady gossip, and you know it. Ain’t no crazy stumblin’ around, lookin’ to eat your face or any old thing. You’re full’a more dung than all the sties and stables in the whole darn city.”

“No, sir, Jeb, it’s the God’s honest truth. Heard they found one’a them male attendants or whatever he was, drunk as a skunk and beat half ta death out by the fencin’. They’re a’comin’, Jeb, mark my words. One, if not more.”

Half to death? Lawrence is alive?

The news of Lawrence’s spared life both relieved Emery and terrified him. Dr. Moncure would know he’d escaped. They’d be looking for him, probably already were. It was time to go.

“Excuse me,” he said, unfocused and lost in his own head.

The men stepped to the side and toward the door, without a word. The shopkeeper put down

the newspaper and looked up at Emery, smiling with his whole face. Emery's jaw dropped. It was the man from the market square, Emery was certain, the one who'd watched him stealing. The man was more handsome than Emery noticed in his panic at the market. His face was clean-shaven and his eyes were green like a spring meadow.

"G'morning," the clerk greeted him. "What can I get you?"

Emery didn't know what to say, what to do. He stared. The man acted like he hadn't just seen Emery, but his knowing smile said differently. Emery knew he should leave, but he played along. "I'd just like a loaf of bread and maybe a few potatoes."

"Okay, I'll grab those for you."

When he was gone, Emery grew anxious at how open he was inside the store, how he couldn't get out if the shopkeeper sent for a policeman. He was outnumbered if the shopkeeper enlisted the help of the other two men. He had to leave—the keeper returned, smiling just as large, and laid Emery's requests on the counter. He wondered if he was simply being paranoid. Maybe he'd imagined the knowing smile. The keeper didn't recognize him after all. That didn't alleviate Emery's persistent fear. The two older men turned to discussing evening plans as they moseyed to the exit, preparing to part ways. They turned and waved to the shopkeeper as they left the store.

"See y'all later," the man called after the two before returning his attention to Emery.

"Nothing else I can get for you? What brings you in?"

"No. I'm just passing through. Can you direct me as to where I might find some meat and a bit of cheese?"

"Sure thing, friend." The man stepped out from behind the counter and put his hand on Emery's shoulder. Emery flinched at the touch and stepped to the side. The man cocked his head,

but led Emery to the storefront window. “Meat won’t keep for long in this heat, but down about two blocks, you’ll make a right down North Henry Street, and Lloyd’s butcher shop’ll be the third one on the left. Then, you come back up to Duke of Gloucester—that’s this street here—turn left, and you’ll find the Cheese Shop, second from the corner on your left. They’ll take real good care of you.”

“Thank you.”

“Kendrick.”

“What?”

“That’s my name. I’m assuming you have one too?”

Emery was suspicious. He didn’t understand why Kendrick acted like he hadn’t seen him steal. Emery knew he couldn’t trust the man with his name. *Should I make one up? I don’t want to tell him I’m Emery, but isn’t that safest?* No one knew him by that name. It had been kept secret with his father’s under-the-table agreement with Dr. Moncure. He surely couldn’t say “Anderson,” as that was the name anyone asking about him, searching for him, would use. Even the doctor wouldn’t risk asking for “Emery,” what with the deal he made with Mr. Rovenholt.

“I’m Emery.” *Why did I just tell him my name?*

“Nice to meet you, Emery.”

Kendrick held out his hand. Emery gripped it and shook. When Emery pulled away, Kendrick let his fingers skim along Emery’s palm to the tips of his fingers. Emery jerked backward and looked up into Kendrick’s face, unable to figure out the look he saw there. But Kendrick was like him; he had to be.

“So, how long you been traveling? You look worn down and road-ridden. No offense.”

“None taken. It’s like I’ve been on this journey for years. I’m ready to bring it to an end.”

“Must be a nice feeling. You headed straight out of town after you make your last few purchases?”

“Yes, that’s my plan. I’ve already been in the city far too long.”

“That’ll be forty-two cents. Sorry to hear that. Would’ve been nice to grab a pint with you at one of the taverns.”

Emery handed Kendrick one of the silver coins he’d stolen, and upon taking it, Kendrick closed his hand around Emery’s fingers, brushing them again. *What is he doing? How can he be so forward? They would lock him up for such behavior, like they did me. Surely he can’t tell just from our interaction here. One thing is certain: he doesn’t really want that pint.*

“I’ve never really been one for taverns.”

That didn’t deter Kendrick’s interest as he paused and raised an eyebrow at Emery, like Emery was playing right into his hand. “Well, would you like to hang around town ’til I close the shop? I have a place up on the north side of the city. Maybe you’d like to clean yourself up, sleep in a real bed and rest before the remainder of your traveling?”

“I can’t. I’m sorry. I don’t even know you, and I really must be on my way.”

“I know you don’t have any reason to trust me, but you can. I saw you in the market, and—”

“I don’t know what you think you saw there, but it wasn’t whatever you think.” Emery turned to the door and made quickly for it.

“You were on the grounds of the asylum last night!” Kendrick called after him. Emery stopped dead, eyes wide, but no longer seeing the door. Kendrick walked out from behind the counter past Emery and locked the door, then pulled down the shade. Gently, he nudged Emery, guiding him out of view of the shop windows. “I saw you there the night of the fire. I remember your face; it stood out to me. And the fact that you’re still in my store means I was right about

you. You're like me, and you didn't belong there. I know what that doctor there does to men like us. People talk. I'm not gonna tell anyone I saw you. And the stealing's your business. I know you must've had good reason. Come over tonight. Please. Take a night off from your troubles and come enjoy yourself. Or at least relax a while."

Kendrick massaged Emery's shoulder, but Emery pulled again. He was so conflicted inside. Kendrick's implications made Emery uncomfortable, and he still had so much love for Elijah. *I can't go home with this man I just met. Not now that I know what he wants. Will he try to bed me? I can't imagine... Though, I'd love a hot meal. Maybe it won't have to be more than that. So long as we don't have to talk about me.* Emery was certainly not ready for that. *Act normal*, he kept telling himself.

Finally, against his better judgement, Emery agreed, averting his eyes to the floor. "Thank you. If it won't be too much trouble, I'll stop by. I could use a bath, and I'd also really like to get this mess of hair trimmed up if you would be able to help. I just don't have steady enough hands."

"Stop by tonight. You can have some dinner, and I'll get your hair straightened out. Here's where you can find me."

Kendrick took a sheet of paper and a pencil out from under the counter and sketched a rough map through Williamsburg, directing Emery from the General Store to his residence. Emery took the sheet and his items off of the counter and placed them into the satchel, still unable to look Kendrick in the eye. "Store closes at five, and I'll be home shortly after that. Come calling whenever suits you. Early as you want."

"I'll do that. Thank you."

"It's my pleasure. I'll be seeing you this evening."

“Yes. Goodbye.”

Without looking back, Emery hurried from the store. His insides felt like they were trying to squirm outside of him. He stepped out of the store, into the gleaming sunlight of the early afternoon, and started down the road toward the butcher shop. He grimaced, wondering what he’d just gotten himself into.

Emery sat at the gnarled table against the wall of Kendrick’s small kitchen that evening. The house, while probably meant for a family—as it surely would be filled with one day—was large enough only for Kendrick, with all of the clutter packed into the edges of each room.

“All the garbage I ‘inherited’ when my father passed on,” Kendrick had explained as he first led Emery into his home a short while before. “Only thing the man had worth anything was that store. Collected junk like a hobby, and now, I get to sort through it all.”

Emery hadn’t replied, taking in the surroundings and muttering some acknowledgement that he heard the man’s explanation. Not that it mattered to Emery one way or the other. He’d been able to bathe and his mouth salivated at the smells from the meal Kendrick was preparing. He wasn’t concerned with Kendrick’s personal life, still didn’t trust him. Emery was there to clean up, rest, and eat a good meal.

The stew was rumbling softly in the pot at the little fireplace in the next room, across the entryway from where he waited. Emery assumed that was Kendrick’s sitting room. Rabbit, carrots, celery, potatoes, and spinach were all cooking together, making him feel as though he’d gone weeks without a single morsel to eat. He had, of course, eaten earlier that day, something to hold him over. The smell of a fresh meal held his attention on the fireplace. Emery watched the logs crackle and the fire seemed to swell under the pot, building up around it, swallowing it and

raging uncontrolled. Emery saw it consume the walls, spread over the floor, trap him and Kendrick inside. He felt it burn over his skin, searing it away...

"Bet you're feeling better," Kendrick remarked as he approached the table, a bowl of stew in each hand, steaming like the water hitting the walls of the asylum the previous night.

Emery jumped, breathing heavy. He looked at Kendrick then quickly away.

"Are you all right?" Kendrick asked as he set the bowls down and put a hand on Emery's shoulder. Emery jerked away, shaking a bit.

Once the food was in front of him, it assaulted all of Emery's senses at once. He could see how perfectly each item had cooked, could feel the warmth on his face as he breathed deeply, the aroma so potent he could taste the scent on his tongue. Emery was so drawn in and overwhelmed, and he tried to focus on that.

Emery rolled his head around and forced a smile. "Sorry, I had a moment. Last night was... It was a lot to take in. But, yes, I do feel quite refreshed. Thank you. This stew looks and smells wonderful. A family recipe?"

"Well, thank you. And no, actually, it's something I picked up on my travels when I first went out on my own. Mother died when I was a young boy, in labor with a sister who didn't survive the birth. And Father wasn't much of a cook either. Had to learn it all on my own."

"Oh, okay. Well, it looks and smells delicious."

Kendrick went on talking about the preparation of the meal, like Emery would find interest in how he cooked it, but Emery couldn't keep his glance from wavering down repeatedly, caring only for devouring the contents of the bowl. He gazed back at Kendrick, who locked onto the look. Kendrick reflected the hunger in Emery's eyes, though Kendrick hadn't paid a bit of attention to his own bowl since sitting at the table. Emery had to keep from encouraging

Kendrick's desire. He quickly looked away and took his first bite. It flooded his mouth with flavor and he immediately took another without even chewing what was already in his mouth. Kendrick cleared his throat and stared down a moment, blush in his cheeks.

"Yes, well, so sorry. Don't let me keep you from it. Please, dig in."

And, Emery did with gusto. Feeling rude, Emery felt he should engage in some sort of polite conversation with the man who had taken him into his home, fed him, and clothed him. He so wanted to be wrong about Kendrick's intentions, no matter how nice the man was. Surely they could just enjoy a nice meal together and each other's company. There didn't there have to be sexual tension.

"So, now that your father has passed, what are your plans? Will you keep running the store and stay here in town? Maybe eventually take a wife and have a few children?"

"Not at all," he laughed. "I spent my young adult years traveling, experiencing the world, which I was still doing when news of my father's ill health reached me. I returned home to handle his affairs. But I long to leave again. As for a wife and children, I've never been one for the domestic life, though perhaps one day. I'd rather enjoy my real interests for the time being."

Emery almost looked up to see how the last remark should be taken, but he felt he didn't actually want to know, so he watched his spoon scoop another bite instead. "What are your plans then?"

"First, I have to sell my father's store. Once that's taken care of, I plan to move north, somewhere with a faster paced life. I've never been to New York City, so I'm thinking I may start there."

"Interesting. I've never been there either. Actually, I've never been outside the boundaries of Virginia, so I'm fascinated by the life you've led. All this traveling you've done, you said that's

where you learned to cook? What else did you get to experience?"

"Yes, yes, it's always been very exciting. I've met some of the most wonderful people. I learned to cook from an Indian woman out in the western territories. I mined for gold for a while, which was a complete waste of three months, and tried my hand at smithing, though I didn't have the shoulders for it. I think the most useful and most rewarding experience I gained concerned medicine. I'm practiced in the treatments of a few more-common ailments, diagnosing symptoms, and stitching up wounds. I even removed the bullet from a man who'd lost a duel. Sadly, he never made it back up off the table. Lost too much blood."

"Wow, you really have been all over. Being stuck back here must seem...mundane in comparison."

"It's not all bad. I've been back about five months. The consistency has been relaxing, but once that store sells, I can't wait to be on my way out again."

"Why not just close it when your father died? It was his, not yours. You had no obligation to it."

"No, I didn't, but my father loved that store. It was his pride and joy. And it was my grandfather's before him. Broke Father's heart that I didn't stay here to work it with him and take it over when he got too old and would've wanted to just step out and leave it to me. While I don't want it, I could never just close it. I want someone to buy it and keep it open, run the store and love it like my father did."

"Well, you've certainly done right by him. And you have a plan."

"I do." He nodded, taking his last bite of stew.

Emery had finished his minutes ago, inhaling it more than eating it, hungry as he was and delicious as it was. Eyes closed, he leaned back with a loud belch and sighed, blushing with a

weak, “Excuse me.”

“Sounds as though you enjoyed it,” Kendrick said with a laugh as he stood to gather their dishes.

“Very much so.”

“Good. So...what about you?”

“Well, what about me?”

“I have some idea what you’ve been through, and not many can say that. I thought it might do you some good to talk about it. Moncure’s a real beast.”

Visions of the asylum passed before Emery once more, all that the doctor had put him through; he remembered all his talks with the doctor.

“We shall continue your treatment today. We will be working with the body again, giving your mind a rest for the afternoon.”

“Okay.”

The doctor starts to fish around in a container. He removes a small black mass between his thumb and index finger, placing it on my arm. As it latches to my skin, I realize they’re leeches. Dr. Moncure lines my left arm and my thighs around my genitals with them. “These episodes of venesection will help balance the humors of your body and drain the parts of the disease anchored in your bloodstream. On the arm, they will take the blood closest to your heart. Around the penis and testicles, they shall drain the darkness causing these episodes of insanity that arise there. The disease has penetrated every part of your body, made itself a part of who you are. But, I am able to fix that.”

I can feel the blood pulled from more than a dozen openings in my skin, drawn into the maws of the tiny midnight parasites consuming me, digesting the disease inside me, taking it away.

“We will continue this periodically. With your other treatments, the disease will stand no chance. Clarity is in sight, sanity within reach. I will heal you, then all those like you. I will rid the earth of this plague.”

Emery still felt the creatures attached to his skin. He ran his hands frantically over his arms and chest as a tear rolled down his cheek. He blinked rapidly and swiped it from his cheek, not looking at Kendrick. His eyes had glazed over, like he was no longer in that kitchen, no longer at that table, no longer with Kendrick. And in a way, he no longer was. His voice was quiet, barely a whisper.

“I was there a very long time...felt like forever, like I’d never be anywhere but in that cellar again. He...I...” Emery took a rattled breath, tried not to cry.

Kendrick took up the conversation. “What do you see? The chair? Or the machine, that electric thing he straps to your head?”

Emery’s whole face scrunched as he threw his head back and forth. “Please, stop. I can’t. Stop.”

“Okay. Okay. Shh...it’s all right, you’re out.” Kendrick tried to soothe Emery, running a soft finger over Emery’s knuckles from across the table. They were quiet a while as Emery dealt with the demons plaguing him. It was more than just the asylum. Kendrick didn’t know the half of it, and he would never understand.

“You speak as if you were there too,” Emery said, once he felt able to talk again.

Kendrick laughed dryly. “No, thank God I was never there. But there are stories of Moncure amongst those who run in our circle. Eastern Asylum was not the good doctor’s first asylum, and you were certainly not his first patient.”

Emery nodded absently but said nothing else.

Kendrick clapped his hands as he rose from the table and changed the subject. “I’ll be right back with my scissors and comb so I can get to work on your hair like I promised. Could you move your chair to the middle of the room? Easier to clean up that way.”

Emery dragged the heavy wooden chair to the center, as instructed. He sat again and felt his body relax. He was comfortable and had almost forgotten how good it could feel. Fingers ran gently up through his hair, and it startled him ever so briefly as Kendrick returned, but Emery didn’t let it show.

“So—”

“Shh.” Kendrick silenced him. “Just sit there and let me focus.”

And Emery did. The sensations that quivered through him each time Kendrick skimmed over his head, gathering the hairs and snipping off inches from one side to the other were so relaxing. When Kendrick pulled a little too tightly, once, then again, Emery felt his pants tighten, and he didn’t know how to react. He hoped Kendrick didn’t notice.

“How short are you wanting to go with this?”

“Very short, an inch or two at most. I don’t want to have to deal with it for a while.” And, he didn’t want Kendrick to stop the sensations washing over him.

“As you wish.”

Kendrick did another sweep across, and Emery’s eyes fluttered closed as a second wave of yet shorter hairs showered down around him, to his shoulders, collecting on his neck, landing in his lap, and scattering to the floor on all sides. He hadn’t felt touches so gentle in such a long time, none he’d wished for. Carina caressed him, but those were the clumsy longings of a silly woman playing the wrong game. These were the lovely desires of a man, desire Emery never thought he would feel again. How his body ached to experience those desires again. But his

heart, his head, they wouldn't allow it. Emery couldn't allow it.

So lost in his pleasure was he, it took a few moments before he realized the hair had stopped falling, that he was no longer being touched. "You're an even more handsome young man than I first thought in the store this morning."

Emery coughed. "Umm, thank you. May I see?"

Kendrick held a hand mirror up for Emery to inspect the work, and Emery inhaled sharply. He didn't care how it looked; Emery had no use for vanity. He just wanted to look more like himself. And he did. It was perfect, and he felt so much better. He looked up to Kendrick and nodded. Kendrick's shoulders relaxed and he smiled like he was relieved to have pleased Emery. As Kendrick lay the mirror down on the table, Emery opened his mouth for one more word of thanks, but Kendrick never let it escape Emery's throat. Kendrick turned back and pressed his lips to Emery's, hard and firm.

For a moment, Emery didn't move; Kendrick's kiss was nothing like Carina's, because of many more reasons than just him being a man. An energy existed there, a power. He pushed Kendrick back with a heavy breath, and Kendrick looked at him, hunger mixed with confusion in his eyes. He leaned in again, but Emery held him away.

"No, I can't. I'm sorry." Emery started to stand up, but Kendrick kept him in his seat.

"Someone else?" he asked with a smirk.

Emery paused as visions of Elijah passed before him. Looking down, he said, "Yes, there's someone else."

Kendrick laughed, stroking Emery's face. "Well, I have someone else too. A couple of someone elses actually. But mine and yours aren't here, and men have needs."

"I love him, but..." He couldn't discuss Elijah with Kendrick. He wouldn't. But Kendrick

misinterpreted Emery's hesitation.

"Are you thinking about the asylum?" Kendrick's voice was tender and quiet. He stroked Emery's cheek. Emery opened his mouth to speak but closed it, clenching his eyes closed and shaking his head again. Kendrick continued. "Look, men don't court each other. They don't live together or marry. We simply...appreciate each other when the opportunity arises with a like-minded man. I'm sure he knows this. How old are you to not understand such things?"

"I am eighteen and know enough to understand my own desires. Who says I can't love just one man?"

"No one," Kendrick conceded. "But who says you can't appreciate others in the meantime? When will you even see this 'someone else' again? I know you must need satisfaction after you were locked away for so long."

Emery knew he would never see Elijah again, not alive. He'd been dead for years. But Emery also didn't want anyone else. He couldn't let himself have anyone else. He'd never allowed himself the time or opportunity to grieve Elijah, to mourn his death and accept that he was gone. Now that he was free, now that his thoughts were his own, he needed time for grief and mourning. He couldn't even entertain the idea of letting another man into his heart, into him. It was as though Elijah had just died again, had died finally, because he'd stayed alive in Emery's mind over Emery's need to cope with his treatments. He didn't need that coping now, and the death was real and tangible for the first time to Emery. He told Kendrick so, at least how he couldn't open himself up like that. The man finally relented, rising and backing away with his hands raised in surrender. A long silence ensued. Emery didn't know what to do with his hands or where to rest his eyes. Kendrick glanced around, desperate for a distraction from the imposing quiet.

“I’m sorry,” Emery finally said.

“No, no, I am the one who owes you an apology. I couldn’t help myself.”

“Perhaps I should go.” Emery rose from the chair.

“You don’t have to do that. Come, relax here a while. We can talk, and you can still stay the night.” But Kendrick’s tone was clear that Emery did probably need to leave.

“No, I really think I should be heading out. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.”

Emery held his hand out for Kendrick to shake.

Kendrick took Emery’s hand and looked him in the eye. “If you ever need anything or find yourself back in the city, please don’t hesitate to stop by. We have to support each other. No one else is going to.”

“I won’t. Thank you,” he said.

Kendrick’s words sounded ominous to Emery, and they made him uncomfortable.

Kendrick walked Emery to the door and held it open for him as the sun was setting. “Do you have everything you need? You’re sure you won’t stay for a night of rest before you set out for wherever you’re going?”

“Yes, I believe I have what I need,” Emery said. “And no, I just can’t stay.”

“Okay then. Safe travels to you. I hope you find what you’re looking for and I hope to see you again one day.”

“Yes, perhaps. Good-bye.”

Outside, the evening air was clean and fresh, though still slightly humid from the moist day. It was no longer choked in smoldering ash as it had been the night before, and Emery was thankful enough for that. He walked quickly to the end of the city and out of its limits, constantly looking over his shoulder as he set out toward Alexandria, along the way to which, he would

reach his destination: his father's plantation, where he would finally find answers and vengeance.

*

Thursday, June 7, 1883

I need to get up, have to move. It's like my body will combust from all the energy I haven't been able to use. Feels like I'm buzzing with it all, my body vibrating from the force. I keep twitching as Dr. Moncure stands over me, questioning and evaluating. Like he's purposefully drawing this out. He enjoys this, me chained here at his mercy, me and God knows how many others like me.

Or unlike me.

I don't know if I'll even remember how to walk. I don't remember what it feels like to have my legs under me, to support my weight, carry me around, upright.

Dr. Moncure is saying something, but I can't hear it over the hum of my over-energized body. He reaches to unlock one of the manacles keeping me in bed, then undoes both at my feet. He slips a key into the last manacle as he addresses me. "Anderson, it is time for a sit-down session. We need to discuss your progress so—"

The minute it clicks and the cuff falls away, I'm swinging my arm with every bit of energy they've made me contain these past weeks. When my fist connects with his face, between his ear and his nose, the crunch is more satisfying than touching myself. His nose bleeds heavily down through the fingers clutching his face. He's gasping, and the nurse with him is horrified.

"My name. Is Emery." I can't keep the bit of glee out of my voice even as I try to sound firm and strong.

One of Dr. Moncure's attendants, Carter is his name, rushes in and grabs me, pinning my arms behind my back. "Are you all right, Doctor?"

He groans, dabbing away the remaining blood from his face before spitting a wad into the cloth in his hand. "Ah, yes. Yes, I will be fine. I thought we had finally made progress. No matter. Take him to the crib. That ought to tame the devilish spirit inside his poor tortured

mind.”

I should probably be more terrified than I am. But, I can't bring myself to be. I'm still far too amused by the doctor's rich, thick blood throbbing down and oozing between the slits in his fingers. I feel the pulsation in the air.

*

Chapter Five

Thursday, June 11, 1885

Emery arrived at the edge of the Rovenholt plantation just before dusk, when his mother and father would be sitting down across from each other at the dinner table to enjoy whatever surely delicious meal Betsy had spent the afternoon preparing. Emery sneaked onto the property through the back, where the woods provided the natural western border of his father's domain. It had taken him almost three days of traveling to get there, roaming through the wilderness and avoiding main roads and other travelers. Large oaks and sassafras trees filled the interior of the woods and thinned to some sweetgum and more sassafras at the edges. Ivy crawled up a few of the trunks.

Where the tree line ended and opened up into the expansive property, up and around the hill toward the house near the center, Emery stopped. In the distance at the dock, he heard the rush of the river, swollen with overflow from the lake a few miles away. The lingering sunlight still sent long shadows across the grounds. Sitting down on a raised root, Emery inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of his mother's gardens, the flowers so aromatic, they could've sent him to sleep. He could almost see their... *Wait, I don't smell them. Where are Mother's flowers?* The absent sensation left Emery confused. He imagined them. His mother never neglected her precious gardens. The missing scents were even more potent than the flowers themselves would have been.

He had to go. He had to get into the house. His first task was to get inside and recover that photograph from his old bedroom. It was the only photograph that existed of him and Elijah, the

only proof of their time together outside of Emery's memories. The photograph was also the only one ever taken of Elijah. Emery had to have it back. Even if his father had thrown out all of his things or burned them after he had supposedly killed him, the photograph would still be underneath the floorboard where he'd left it.

Emery wished he could wait for nightfall before venturing to the house and slipping inside. Daylight, even the minimal light of evening, made the risk of being caught or held up from the goal too real for him. He was too anxious to get inside, but dinner was his best opportunity for getting in unnoticed. His mother and father would be occupied at the dinner table while the servants and other help ate in their respective places. The entries and halls should be clear, and the second floor would be completely vacant. Dangerous as it was, he had to go then, wanted to go right then.

Spending the next minutes watching and checking around him from where he hid, Emery made sure there was no one strolling about the grounds. There shouldn't be, but he had to know before he finally stepped out into the open. He ran to the barn where he'd been found with Elijah, the place to which he always used to escape, his sanctuary. That all felt like a lifetime ago. It looked just as Emery remembered, unchanged in the three years of his absence. He wanted to bask there a moment, relive happier, more innocent times, but he had more important things to accomplish first. Perhaps afterward.

Rather than take a chance traveling the dirt path from the barn up through the property, past the fields and the stables and on to the house, Emery navigated his way in a less conspicuous route. He ducked into the barn and hid the satchel against the wall, behind a bale of straw. Looking briefly around the space, he saw the barn was in disarray, decrepit and clearly no longer used for anything on the plantation except as a storage shed for things no one needed any longer.

There were broken shovels and hoes, a wheelbarrow missing its wheel, and tattered harnesses and bridles for horses. The sight revealed to Emery just how far into destitution the plantation had fallen if a whole barn and so many implements had been abandoned without repair. He sighed before walking back out. Back in the open, he sprinted toward the copse of red maple and river birch, on the other side of which stood the horse stable and carriage house. They should be empty, which Emery counted on as he panted through the trees. Near the other side of the wooded area, he saw the two buildings from between the trunks. He immediately silenced his breathing upon hearing voices from outside them.

“...if they shut it down?” a young male voice asked. Emery recognized him as George, the stable boy who’d driven him and his mother home from the train station that fateful summer. “And what about the damage? The house could fall down.”

“That ain’t gonna happen. It’ll keep on going whether he leaves or not. And the house ain’t gonna fall down. It’s just a bit of foundation damage. I done talked to Grady. He’s workin’ on fixin’ it now. We ain’t gonna be going nowhere,” a second, also young, male voice answered. “You worry too much for someone so young.”

That was James, George’s older brother.

“But, James, what if—?”

“Enough. Look, life’d be better here without that bitter old white man anyway, but nothing’s gonna happen. Momma and Daddy won’t—” James stopped as Emery held his breath. Surely the boy hadn’t seen or heard him. At least he hoped not. He thought about revealing himself to them, but the fewer people who knew he was back from the dead, the simpler his visit would be.

“Leave Momma and Daddy to worry about all that. They always make sure we taken care of,” James continued. “Run along home. I left a tool back in the stable. I’ll be right behind you.”

George walked on, and Emery watched James head back to the stable. At the entrance though, he turned sharply and took careful steps toward the copse of trees, hunched over and squinting for a glimpse of whatever he thought was hidden there. Emery tensed as the boy drew closer. He wanted to slip deeper into the trees but didn't want to risk any noise confirming his presence to James.

"James, come on! Ain't you ready to just go home for dinner? Whatchu lookin' for?" George called to his brother.

Further and further, James's measured footfalls brought him nearer. Emery could hear James's nervous, even breathing that he tried to keep quiet. He stopped. When the boy ventured no further into the woods, Emery hoped his curiosity had abated and he would leave. But James's breathing still filled the otherwise hushed leaves and branches. Minutes passed and the sun sank ever lower. Finally, he turned in the direction of his brother. "Comin'."

Emery breathed a sigh of relief and waited until he trusted they were far enough away, and then, he crept the rest of the way to the house, finally sneaking in through a side door. As he made his way around a corner, he couldn't help but feel an uneasiness in the house. It felt neglected despite all of the negroes still staffed and charged with keeping the place in order. There was a hollowness as Emery ventured through the halls. Reality wasn't in line with how he remembered the house. When he reached a staircase to the second floor, he passed it, continuing on deeper into the first level. He couldn't help his curiosity in searching for a reason behind the dismal feeling, the empty air, the eerie quiet. He thought perhaps he would just peek in on his parents as they finished dinner. He wanted to see them for himself, get a clue as to whether their demeanor matched the melancholy of their plantation.

Emery passed his mother's prized paintings that decorated the walls and the lavishly adorned

rooms that his father had used as a means of showing off their wealth and power. On he walked until he came to the sliding wooden doors of the dining room standing ajar. When Emery peered inside, there was quite a meal spread out on the table before the sole inhabitant of the room. A woman sat in a chair at the left side, picking away at a plate of food. Emery recognized Betsy immediately, the negro woman in charge of preparing all of the family's food. She'd always gone out of her way to take care of Emery, and they'd formed a close bond. She was always one of his favorite people on the plantation. Seeing her there alone, Emery wondered where his parents were, and he felt an aching in his chest for one of Betsy's enveloping hugs.

Should I talk to her? I need to get upstairs then find Father. This will take away from that. Not to mention if the wrong person catches me in here talking to her. But it's Betsy. She always watched out for me, took good care of me, and shielded me from Father when she could. I've got to see her.

"Betsy." He announced himself uneasily as he stepped into the dining room, sliding the doors completely closed behind him.

"Oh!" Betsy exclaimed, so startled she jumped up from the table, knocking her chair backward and causing such a terrible ruckus. "Who...oh, my Heavens. It can't be..."

"I'm home," Emery said, running to her.

"So you are." She had tears in her eyes as she opened her arms and started toward him too. They met and he finally got that hug he'd needed for so long. He let it consume him, hugging her back fiercely. He'd never realized he could miss her that much. She smoothed his hair repeatedly as she whispered into his chest, "You alive. Praise God I can't believe it's really you. You alive."

When she finally released him, Betsy started running back toward the kitchen. Emery was confused, but he let her go without a word. He heard a lot of commotion coming from behind the

door: cabinets slamming shut, the clatter of dishware, and at one point, a loud crash like she just either dropped a large glass dish or spilled a stack of plates or bowls. Emery winced at the sound and smirked, shaking his head. Betsy returned moments later with all of the fixings to set a second place at the table, which she did, right at the head, looking at Emery expectantly once she'd finished.

“Come, you gonna have dinner with me. Don’t even think of shakin’ that head or givin’ me no excuses,” she ordered. “I always cook up all’a this food and end up eatin’ my meal alone. Well, not today. I’m sure we got plenty to discuss, and ain’t no better way to do that than over a good meal and with a full belly. Get on over here, baby.”

Emery chuckled at her but did as he was told. “Breakfast for dinner, Betsy?”

“Hey, I’m doin’ all’a the cookin’ and I’m the only one who’s eatin’ it, so if I’m cravin’ wheat cakes, that’s what I’m makin’.”

“No one else eats? What do you mean? Surely Mother and Father must eat dinner. They’d never miss a whole meal, and especially not dinner.”

“Boy...lot’s happened since you been gone. Your daddy don’t do nothin’ ’cept get drunk an’ pass out on that oak desk in that office of his. I cook all the same meals, just like I’m paid to. I lay it out, and when he don’t come down, I fix myself a plate, eat right here at this table, then I take a tray up to his study and set it outside his door. I don’t know what happens to it from there and I ain’t paid to know.”

“And Mother? Her putting up with such behavior startles me, but she doesn’t come down for your meals either?”

“Oh, honey, your momma left your daddy months ago. We all figured that and your death was what drove him to drink like he do now.”

Emery couldn't believe his ears. Now he understood the melancholy that permeated the entire house. His mind wouldn't wrap around what Betsy had told him. "Mother's...gone? Did she say anything? Did she say why she left?"

"Never said one single word. All's I know is, your daddy went into town on some sort of business, and your momma packed up her things and left in a carriage. Saw one of the colored boys steering for her. Before now, I'd have swore to my grave she blamed your daddy for not doing more to save you when you was 'sick.' Thought your momma couldn't ever get over your death, and then one day, she was gone. Never came back. Now I gotta wonder why she up and left like that. Clearly you ain't dead. But enough talk. We got all evenin'. You look like you ain't eaten a good bite in years. Eat up and we can talk more. "

The food was every bit as delicious as Emery remembered. The wheat cakes were fluffy and soft, with butter melted over the surface and maple syrup so sweet that his tongue tingled. He didn't realize until he was completely finished with his first stack of cakes and had downed three sausage links that Betsy hadn't even touched her food. She'd sipped her coffee a few times, but she just watched Emery eat, a nostalgic smile sparkling on her kind, labor-hardened face. Emery wiped his mouth, averting his eyes awkwardly, then slowly lowered his napkin back into his lap.

"Sorry," he mumbled, swallowing another half-link of the sausage.

"No, don't apologize, child." She waved him off. "You don't know what it means to me to be watchin' someone enjoy my cookin' again. To see you enjoy my cookin' again. I still remember that time you sneaked into the kitchen and ate the whole plate'a bacon before I even got it to the table."

Emery laughed. "You were so mad at me. Made me stand there with you and help you cook another plate before you had to serve it."

“Yeah, I did. Your momma was fit to be tied when that grease splashed and burned your hand, though. Thought I’s gonna get beat that day.”

“Mother would never. She even hid it from Father. That was the first time I knew I could trust Mother. But then...never mind. After that, I loved being in the kitchen.”

“You was a good little helper. Made your daddy good and mad, you doin’ ladies’ work, as he said. But I didn’t care none. Man ought’a know how to cook. It’s good for ’im.”

“You know you were always my favorite, right?”

“Of course I was, child. Who else would it’ve been?”

She raised her eyebrows at him, as if challenging him to try and tell her she was wrong. Emery just laughed, despite the news and his mind swimming. He shook his head at her because they both knew he couldn’t tell her that. “I missed you, Betsy.”

“I’ve missed you too, Mr. Emery. You don’t know how much my heart hurt when your daddy told us you died. This was a sad, sad place after that, yes it was. Everyone loved you so much. So kind and carin’, never lettin’ the color of anyone’s skin let you see ’em any different.”

“How did that work exactly, me dying? I mean, what did I die from?”

“Damned if I know. One day, we was all just told you was sick something horrible and weren’t none of us to go near even your room. Your momma was beside herself with the grief of it. Then, when we was told you finally passed, just a week later, your momma couldn’t even get herself outta bed. Didn’t eat or speak to nobody for nigh on two weeks. Pitiful to watch, it was. Your daddy never did tell none of us what it was what took you from us so soon.”

“It was him. He took me from you so soon.” Emery’s words were bitter, but he said nothing else for a moment as he mulled over the new details he’d not been privy to before. “So, I was gone three years, but you say Mother didn’t leave Father until just a few months ago?”

“That’s right, baby. She knew you was alive then? All that time we thought you was sick and all that time we thought she was grievin’ your death, you was alive and she knew?”

“Yes, she knew. She was with us—Father and I—when he sent me away.”

“Sent you away? Now, where did—”

“Wha’re you doin’ in ma house?”

Neither of them had heard the heavy footsteps in the hall, so both were startled as the deep voice carried into the dining room just before the sliding doors slammed open. Emery could smell the whiskey before he even registered the voice.

“Hello, Father.”

Mr. Rovenholt didn’t say a word, instead staring at Emery, so drunk Emery figured he couldn’t even really see him. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, back and forth, unsteady as he was in his drunken stupor. All at once, his eyes widened with recognition as he raised the bottle of liquor he’d stumbled in with to his lips and took a large, sloppy gulp, splashing it down his face and the front of his unkempt shirt. Swiping at his chin with his forearm, he dried the mess off with his sleeve, attempting to focus more fully on the son he clearly thought he would never see again.

“How’re you here?” Mr. Rovenholt slurred.

“I left some things behind when you locked me away in that asylum. Speaking of, we have some unfinished business, you and I.”

Betsy gasped at Emery’s words. “You mean—” But they both ignored her.

“Get outta m’house.”

“Oh, I’m afraid I can’t do that just yet. See, you and I are going to have words, whether you like it or not. Would you like to attend it here or shall we have a bit of privacy and go up to your

study?” Emery didn’t know where the strength of his words came from. He’d been terrified of his father for so many years. Perhaps the hate he fostered during those torturous years in Moncure’s care had finally overridden whatever fear he used to harbor for his father. Or perhaps it was the man’s diminished appearance, with his bloodshot, unfocused eyes, his protruding belly, and his loss of stature. He looked smaller to Emery, both in height and size. He almost seemed to have shrunk in the years of Emery’s absence.

“Ain’t got no business wit’ you. Get th’ hell out. You got no right. You don’ live here no more. How’d you get out anyway? Need to get ahold’a that doctor. Ain’t keepin’ up his end’a the bargain.”

“I have every right,” Emery hissed. “I am your son, though I don’t know how I could claim such, as you were never much of a father.”

Mr. Rovenholt took an uncertain step toward Emery, then another. Emery watched him stop as the whiskey got the best of him, and he braced himself on the end of the table. He chased the feeling away with another long pull from the then almost empty bottle. Emery looked to Betsy, her eyes wide with fear. She wrung her hands anxiously. Mr. Rovenholt finally sputtered, quiet, “I have no son. He’s dead to—”

Two of Emery’s long, quick strides brought him straight to his father, and Emery swung his arm across his body, the back of his hand striking his father’s face. Normally a sturdy, formidable man, the force of Emery’s blow sent his father reeling to the side, catching himself before he could topple down to the floor.

“I didn’t die! You shipped me away, but I’m right here! I am your son!”

Emery punched his father in the same side of his face twice more, this time sending him to the ground. Mr. Rovenholt dropped his whiskey, its contents spilling out onto the boards. Emery

knew then that he hadn't imagined his father's diminishment. Drunk or not, Emery's last punch to his father hadn't even fazed the man. Now a few punches had him on the ground. Emery looked down at the broken skin of his knuckles as his father struggled to gather himself and fumbled in his efforts to stand back up. Emery cleaned the blood off his knuckles with his mouth as the now empty bottle sailed past his head, missing by inches.

"You are pathetic!" Emery shouted as the bottle *thunk*-ed and shattered, followed by a much heavier *thud*! Emery turned at the sound to see Betsy lying on the floor, unconscious. He ran to her and crouched then gently shook her shoulder. "Betsy?"

She groaned but never opened her eyes. There was a bloody gash in the side of her head where the bottle had struck her when it missed Emery. Emery was just happy to know she was alive. He hated that yet one more person had been hurt because of him. Mr. Rovenholt was hunched down with an elbow on his knee. He panted slightly as Emery looked back to him.

"Damn you if you've hurt her!"

"I'm already damned with a poof son and a runaway wife," Mr. Rovenholt said, then he shrugged. "Besides, just another nigger anyway."

"Don't call her that!" Emery roared and rushed over to his father as the man began to rise unsteadily to his feet. Emery stopped, swinging his leg to kick his father, whose head he could still reach. Mr. Rovenholt moved and caught the leg under his arm. Panic flashed across Emery's face as his father used the leg to fling him bodily away from him.

"I'll call 'em whatever I damn well please! My family paid good money for them niggers, and they are mine, whether I still legally own 'em not! They're mine!"

Emery exhaled an angry breath from his nostrils and gave up. He had not come there to argue the status of the negroes working the plantation. He needed to find out why his mother left. And,

more importantly, where she'd gone. "Where is Mother?"

Mr. Rovenholt instantly blistered at the mention of his wife. Emery could almost hear his father's teeth grinding in fury, could feel the thickening tension in the room. "Don't talk about her. That ain't none'a your business either."

"None of my—? She is my mother! Whether you like it or not!"

"Stupid boy, don' you think if I knew where she'd gone, she'd be back here already? What're you doin' here anyway? I told you years ago, your nigger's dead. What else you got to come back for?"

Emery lost all control. He took a glass from the table and threw it at his father. When the man ducked to avoid it, Emery charged him, punching him over and over. Mr. Rovenholt kept getting up until, finally, Emery grabbed a plate and smashed it over his father's head. Mr. Rovenholt collapsed in a heap and didn't move again as Emery paced the floor, panting, and still furious. When his gaze fell on Betsy, he immediately stopped and ran to her.

"Betsy," he whispered, gently tapping her cheek.

She moaned softly, but didn't otherwise stir. He went to the sitting room and retrieved a pillow. Placing it under her head back in the dining room, Emery then wetted a cloth napkin and began cleaning the cut at her hairline. He stroked her face and watched her affectionately as her eyes opened for the first time.

"Shh..." Emery said as Betsy opened her mouth.

He helped her up, and with most of her weight on him, his arm around her back supporting her, Emery guided Betsy to the couch in the same sitting room from which the pillow had come. He laid her down on it. Once he'd covered her with a blanket, he blew out the candles, letting the darkness envelop her, the sun having long set. Back in the dining room, lit by candles on the wall

around the room and two still burning on the table, Emery sat in the chair nearest his father. He leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees, lips pursed beneath laced fingers. He watched the still man and knew he didn't have long to decide what to do with him. His father could wake at any moment, though soon was not likely. He'd been hit rather hard, and Emery smiled at the fact.

*

Tuesday, July 31, 1883

Lawrence delivers me to the cellar. I don't like him. I normally deal with Carter, who is gruff and stern also, but he doesn't abuse patients like Lawrence. I've only had to deal with him twice before now, but both times he was mean and degrading, hitting me and shoving me. He gave me a bloody nose the second time. He pushed me from behind because I "wasn't moving quick enough." My hands were bound, and I couldn't catch myself. My feet stumbled, and I slammed into the wall where the hall rounded a turn to the left. My eyes were watering down my face as my nose erupted. Lawrence did nothing except tell me to keep moving and warn me not to "get any blood on him."

Carter is a different story and it is he who normally escorts me. He has never put his hands on me, never called me a name or degraded me. He is the one who restrains me for treatment, but it's not like he has ever really harmed me. They tie me down, Moncure talks, I make him angry, and he punishes me in some way. I can tell that it makes Carter uncomfortable. Maybe it's the fact that he's married. He wears a ring, and I think I remember him mentioning a wife one time. Maybe he even has a son too, sees his son in me.

When Lawrence opens the door to a room in the cellar, it is one I've never been to. I can hear angry voices arguing inside. The room is bare, with a chair in the center. It is decorated with the same restraints to which I've become accustomed. On the gray floor, surrounded by rust-stained walls, a table stands nearby the chair with some kind of machine I've never seen before sitting on top. It has a bunch of switches and knobs on a panel and wires connecting it to some other machine.

"Carter, you are very close to stepping out of line, and I will not tolerate such insubordination much longer. You have a job to do, a job I pay you to do, and you will do it.

Preferably without complaint, I might add.”

“You’re already out of line! You can’t use this to treat patients! They aren’t animals you’re training; they’re human beings. Doctor, I can’t stand by for this. It’s inhumane.”

Lawrence stops inside the doorway and stands back against the wall with me, waiting for an end to the confrontation. He whispers to himself, “Always knew he didn’t have it in him to work here. Cares too damn much about these things. Crazy as they are, worse than animals.”

“Carter, mental patients have been treated in this manner for some time now. It works. Who are you to question it?” Dr. Moncure asks.

“There are other ways! This isn’t treatment! It’s torture!”

“I am sorry you feel that way. You need not be present then, how about that? You will assist Lawrence in strapping the patient to the chair, attach the device, then you may wait outside until I am finished.” Dr. Moncure walks over and puts his arm around Carter, his hand on the man’s shoulder. They are roughly the same height, Carter built stocky with close-cropped brown hair, thick brows, and dark eyes. Dr. Moncure starts to guide Carter back to Lawrence and I.

“No! Dr. Moncure, I can’t just stand by and let you—” Carter’s voice abruptly cuts out with the crack! of Dr. Moncure snapping his neck. Carter crumples to the ground, dead.

I scream, feeling like I’ve just been punched by what I see. My eyes are wide in horror, and I can’t look away, no matter how much I wish I could. Dr. Moncure looks down in disgust before clicking his tongue and looking at Lawrence.

“Lawrence, please escort young Anderson back to his room. We will have to postpone his treatment for tomorrow. When you are finished, return here and clean up this mess.”

“Damn, Doc.”

“Do not call me that. I did what was necessary, as will you. Now be on your way.”

Dr. Moncure doesn't say a word to me, and I'm glad. I'm not sure what I would respond if he did. All I can see are Carter's empty eyes, the unnatural angle of his neck as his body lies on the floor. Lawrence pulls me back into the hall and guides me aggressively back the way we just came. Underneath the shock of Carter's tragic fate, another terrifying thought blooms dark and foreboding in my mind. What treatment was I about to be subjected to that was so awful, Carter lost his life trying to keep me from it?

*

Chapter Six

Thursday, June 11, 1885

Emery stood and took a cloth napkin from the table, bending over his still unconscious father. After watching him for over half an hour, Emery had thought over all the various ways he could deal with his father, from locking him away to maiming, torturing, or killing. He'd drawn many ideas from his time in the asylum, an apt vengeance for the man who left him there to die. He'd finally decided to take his father down to the cellar to the same room his father locked him in.

Emery used the napkin to gag his father, opening his mouth to wrap the fabric more tightly before cinching the knot behind the man's head. Emery then took a knife from the table to the linen tablecloth—on which his parents had always prided themselves—and sheared two long strips from the width of the white cloth. He used one to bind his father's wrists in front of him and the other to bind his ankles. Emery had to move him, not far, but far enough that he couldn't risk the trip waking the man in transit. He still didn't know exactly what he would do to his father, but his first course of action was to get the man to the cellar. Then, he would figure out the rest. Standing over his father's head, Emery scooped the man under the shoulders, in his armpits, and began to drag him toward the door.

While Mr. Rovenholt was much lighter than Lawrence had been, Emery still had to stop many times to rest and catch his breath. But he kept the need for urgency always at the front of his mind. After what felt much longer than it had actually been, Emery reached the proper door, down at the end of the hall from the dining room, on the left, past portraits and a mahogany stand holding an empty Oriental vase that used to be filled each morning with fresh flowers from Mrs.

Rovenholt's garden. He took a step down, then pulled his father down with him. When he'd struggled much and was only halfway down, he decided he'd had enough. Releasing his father, Emery moved to one side and let the man slide the rest of the way to the bottom. When Mr. Rovenholt crashed to the floor below, the impact finally jostled him awake. Emery could just barely make out the muffled groans from behind the cloth obstruction.

"Shut up down there," Emery snapped, descending. He walked around the perimeter of the cellar and lit all of the tarnished brass lanterns hung on the walls. They illuminated the bricks of the walls, the hard packed earth of the floor, and the doors of the half-dozen cold storage rooms around the open central chamber. Once all of the lanterns had been lit, Emery saw the foundation damage he heard James and George discussing. He had everything he needed. He knew then what he had to do with his father to finally put an end to his threat.

Returning to his father, Emery dragged the man, groggy and moaning softly, toward the back wall of an empty storage room that stood open and pitch black. Emery brought a lantern and sat it just inside the doorway; he'd need the light by which to work. Emery watched his father take in the room, the horror of realization dawning across his face. "You recognize this room, Father? It appears our situations have been reversed this go around. This time, you will be sealed away in here with no reprieve. No one will help you; no one will hear your calls. Only, your stay will be far more permanent than mine was."

Emery left his father lying there, let him digest what he said, while he carried large cement bricks—whole and in pieces—and mortar over to the open doorway. As he lifted the last brick, he heard his father's voice from within the room.

"You cannot just lock me in here. This is my house. Mine. I will get out. And when I do, I will hunt you to the ends of the earth. I will do everything in my power to see you locked back

into that asylum, never to see the light of day again. This I promise you, sodomite.”

Face flushing crimson, Emery bristled at his father’s words and had to take a breath to steady himself and maintain his composure. *He can’t do anything. He can’t hurt me again. I’m in control this time, not him. I’ll never let him hurt anyone again.* Emery carried the last block back to the room and saw his father had freed himself from the gag, which now hung loosely around this neck. He was struggling against his wrist bindings while Emery watched and tried to keep his voice even as he replied. “I believe every word of what you just promised. And that’s why I’m not simply locking you in here.”

As he talked, Emery began spreading a layer of mortar on the ground just inside the doorway, leaving enough room so the outward opening door would still close. Then, he laid the bricks into it and lined their sides with mortar after each was laid. At the end of the first row, Emery had to fill in the remaining gaps with mortar, then he spread a layer on top of those first bricks.

“Just what do you think you’re doing?” Mr. Rovenholt demanded, scrambling to stand up despite his bound feet and hands.

“I told you your stay in this room was to be more permanent than mine,” Emery reminded him, barely looking up from the brickwork.

“You cannot just seal me in this room forever!”

He finally managed to get his feet beneath him and began hopping toward the slowly closing doorway. When he reached it, Emery picked up the hammer and swung, hitting Mr. Rovenholt in the shoulder and sending him reeling back into the room, down to the floor.

“The hell I can’t! You said yourself you’d never stop until I was back in the asylum! Well, I’ll die before I go back there. So I have to do this. It’s the only way. I have to.”

“You belong in that asylum. I should’ve killed you three years ago when I found you

touching that nigger.”

“And you belong in Hell! But I can’t bring myself to kill you with my own hands, no matter what you’ve done. So this will have to suffice. You can wither and die slowly in here. You took everything from me! Elijah, Mother, my whole life! But I won’t let you take my freedom too. Not again. So you can spend the rest of your days locked in the darkness of your own hate.”

Emery returned to his work on the wall as Mr. Rovenholt continued to struggle against his bonds. Emery had just begun the fifth row when a flash of movement caught his attention a moment before his father’s hand was around his throat.

“Stop this foolishness, you ignorant child,” Mr. Rovenholt hissed through clenched teeth.

Grasping the hammer, Emery brought it around and down on his father’s wrist, causing a shriek of pain as the man let go and backed away, cradling the broken bone. Emery climbed over the wall and kicked Mr. Rovenholt in the face where he crouched, panting, sending the man toppling backward to the dirt floor. “You are not getting out! You won’t escape! I can’t let you!”

Emery swung the hammer down on Mr. Rovenholt’s left ankle and the man screamed in agony. “Do you know what that doctor did to me in there? Do you! Do you even care? He tortured me!”

He swung on the right ankle. Mr. Rovenholt’s wails could have curdled blood.

“That doctor electrocuted me!” Right ankle. “He whipped me!” Left ankle. “He isolated me for weeks and months!” Left ankle, right ankle. “He touched me!” Emery missed that final swing, denting the packed earth of the floor, his vision blurred in tears running down his dirty, sweaty cheeks. Sobbing, he threw the hammer out of the room and climbed out after it. Emery wiped his face with the front of his shirt and went back to work as his father whimpered and moaned in pain on the floor. Before the wall got too high, Emery reached in and removed the

lantern. After one more row of bricks, he could no longer see his father for the shadow cast by the wall. He could only hear his sputtering moans and gasping inhales.

“Please...” came the weak call from within the room, “don’t.”

“Shut up.”

“Emery...son...please...”

“Son? I’m your son now? Now that you’re in agony, at the end of your rope, now that desperation has dug its claws into you! Now, I am your son? How dare you! I am *not* your son! And you were *never* my father!” Emery quickened his pace on the brickwork, panting huffs of hot, furious air out of his nostrils. He heard movement from inside the room but could not see what his father was doing.

“Spare me, please, and I will tell you what happened to Elijah.”

“You think I want to know what awful things you did to the boy I loved? The boy I love!” Emery reached down, grabbed a piece of brick, and hurtled it into the darkness. The loud grunt from his father told him he’d hit his mark in some way. “He’s dead! You took him from me! I don’t need to know anything else! You killed him!”

“He’s...he’s not dead.”

Emery froze. He barely dared to breathe. “What did you say?”

“Elijah...He’s alive. I didn’t...kill him. Please, spare me.”

“Tell me what happened!” Emery roared. He was dizzy, bracing himself against the doorjamb. *He’s alive? It can’t be.*

“Uhh...I went looking for him that night, after I locked you down here. He was gone. I tried to get those niggers to tell me where, but they wouldn’t. I shot the man and beat his wife, but I couldn’t get the truth out of them. I left the woman on the floor, surely dead, or so I thought.

Brought the man's body up to the house in a wheelbarrow."

Everything I know is a lie. He's alive. Elijah is still alive. I have to find him. I have to finish this and find him. A second chance...oh my God...

Emery's mind was reeling in a whirlwind. Emery's voice was quiet as a breath as he asked, "Where? Where is he now?"

Mr. Rovenholt laughed a humorless laugh. "You always were stupid. Don't you think if I knew, I'd have found him and killed him already?"

Emery glared into the dark depths of the room for a minute before he went back to work without a word.

"No! No, you have to let me out! I told you the truth!"

"I don't have to do anything. You confessed to save your own skin. The moment you're out, you'd continue to hunt me. And Elijah as well. This is the only way I can ever be safe, that Elijah will ever truly be safe. It's the only way."

Mr. Rovenholt broke down into sobs, shouting incoherently as Emery set the final row of bricks into place. He paused at the last remaining hole, staring inside, imagining he could see what he'd reduced his father to. He felt guilt, and it surprised him. *Why should I feel anything for him? He took everything from me and said himself he would never stop.*

Almost as if he could read Emery's thoughts, Mr. Rovenholt cleared his throat loudly, and after a moment, he said, "Emery, I am sorry."

Emery paused at the unexpected words. He longed to believe his father, hated how awful his father had been for as long as Emery had known him. But that was the truth. He had always been a cruel and unkind man. Emery wanted this to be a change of heart, his father's realization of all of his sins and a last ditch effort at reconciliation. But Mr. Rovenholt was not that kind of man,

and Emery knew the words had to be false and empty, a desperate man's last chance to save his own life. Emery had to finish this; it was his only chance at safety.

“Ask God's forgiveness, because you'll have none of mine.”

With that and a moist grating noise, Emery slid the last piece into the wall. Once he put the foundation supplies back where he found them, Emery closed the door to his father's tomb, concealing his handiwork. He walked slowly around the perimeter of the cellar, blowing out each of the candles in each lantern. He felt a pit in his stomach but managed to ignore it. While Emery knew he should be exhausted, yet his body was abuzz, like the electrical boxes in the cellar of the asylum, pumping out energy enough to light whole buildings. Elijah was alive. The idea still didn't seem real to Emery. He'd believed him dead so long, the truth tilted his world on its side in the best of ways.

He needed sleep after his journey and the excursions with his father, but his mind would never let him, not until he learned where Elijah had gone. His mother, Eloise, would know, so Emery had to see her. He ran up the stairs, through the parlor, and burst through the double front doors, not a thought on his mind save for Elijah. At least until he looked out into the darkness that had settled across the plantation grounds. It was quite late, and he paused a moment, not wanting to disturb Eloise as she'd surely been sleeping for hours after a hard day's labor. Such thoughts were quickly chased away by the only thing that mattered: finding Elijah.

The night was clear, with stars twinkling above and a portion of the moon illuminating the grounds. Emery hurried off, thankful for the light, as he didn't want the attention a lantern might bring from anyone who was still awake or awoke as he walked. Too exhilarated to take the time of walking the path around the fields, Emery trudged straight through them, unconcerned with where he stepped. He just had to get to Eloise. The smell of dirt, freshly disturbed, wafted up

around him in the fields, intermingled with the blossoms in the fruit trees and dew beginning to settle over the grounds from the cool night air.

The hour was nearly silent with the exception of some rustling leaves and animals of the night seeking their meals. A pair of eyes shined at the edge of the wood, but Emery didn't concern himself with it. The pit in his stomach remained and a tingle between his shoulders made his back uncomfortable. *It's from what I've just done to Father. But I had no choice, with him or with Jane.* Nonetheless, his actions left him uneasy with himself. For the moment though, more pressing matters distracted him.

*

Monday, September 10, 1883

“Move it a little quicker and be quiet about it,” Lawrence demands as he shoves me forward and out the door of my building. He is taking me back to Moncure in the cellar, and I wonder what surprise treatment he has in store for me today.

“You sure are pushy,” I complain. For this, he slaps me in the head.

“I said shut it!”

“I did shut it,” I say, then I make my voice deeper. “But, you never told me to shut it.”

Lawrence’s footsteps stop crunching in the gravel behind me, and I’m pulled to a stop by the leashes they usually attach to us when they have to take patients out for some reason or another. I smirk before wiping my face and widening my eyes innocently. I turn to look at him and his eyes are wide too, but not in innocence. They’re wide in fear.

His voice is a ghost of a whisper. “What did you just say?”

I have to try not to laugh. This is how I have taken to distracting myself on these walks to treatment. Helps me not think about what kind of pain I’m in for when Lawrence gets me to the cellar.

“Me? I didn’t say anything,” I tell him in my regular voice. Then I changed it, make it high-pitched. “Yeah, he didn’t say nuffin, ya mook. Tha’s Rog said that.” I go deep again. “No, that wasn’t me.”

“Stop it!” Lawrence is shouting now, panic in his voice. He wraps his shaking fingers around the baton on his belt. “What are you doing?”

“He ain’t doin’ nuffin. Let’s go. We gotta get ta the doc,” I say in the high voice, then go back to normal. “Guys, stop. You’re scaring the man. I can handle it. Come on, Lawrence.”

“I ain’t scared!” he roars, drawing his baton like some kind of sword. He really does look

quite silly with the way he's point it at me. "Get movin'! And no more talkin'! F-From any of you."

We walk on for a bit in a very uneasy silence. It takes all my effort not to laugh at him. He's terrified of the patients. All of them. Why he works here has always baffled me. Then again, this is the South, post-Reconstruction. I guess they have to take money how they can get it. A paying job is a paying job.

We're about halfway to the main building when I stop and bend down, my voice deep. "Hold on, my shoe's untied."

Then I go high. "No, it ain't. Tha's Emery's shoe tha's untied, not yours."

These shoes don't tie. This is hysterical.

"Emery doesn't exist! You imagined him! Your name is Anderson Smith!" Lawrence is beside himself. I can hear the fear in his voice, his desperation.

High-pitched. "You don't know nuffin about nuffin. This Emery right here."

Now, deep. "Yeah, how don't you see him, standin' right here in front of you? This 'Anderson' man, though, we all know he isn't real. Maybe you the one who's crazy."

Crack! I feel the blow of the baton, the weight of Lawrence's swing, before I even realize he moved. My vision flickers, and I have to steady myself with my hands on the ground in front of me. There is a throb from the blow, but the pain is worth the discomfort I caused Lawrence.

"You say one more word—any of you—and I'll knock your asses out and drag you down to that cellar. You hear me? Don't even answer that." Lawrence's voice shakes as he speaks. I smile, then wince, because it makes my head hurt.

I obey him this time, continuing on without a sound. I achieved what I wanted. Lawrence will pay for that blow and every other pain he has caused me. And once I escape, he and Dr.

*Moncure both had better pray to God above that they never cross paths with me on the outside.
There'll be hell to pay for both of them. I swear that on Elijah's grave.*

“By the time Dr. Moncure's done with you today, we probably won't even need restraints for ya anymore. You'll heel when we tell ya and you'll shut up when we tell ya, like a well trained dog, instead of the mongrel you are now.”

I blanch at this and have no retort now.

Chapter Seven

Thursday, June 11, 1885

When he had last been down amongst the negroes, having dinner with Elijah and his family, they'd lived near the center in a meager dwelling they shared with another family. A house—if one could call it that—built for two or three, housed nine: Elijah's family and the Johnstons. Emery couldn't be sure if they still lived in the same place, or really if they even still worked on the plantation. But, considering the limited work options for negroes anywhere, let alone in the South, he felt safe seeking them out where they'd always been. When he came upon the shack he remembered, and tried to look through the window hole, through the parted, tattered curtain, it was too dark to see anything but outlines. With shaking hands, Emery took a steady breath, his body alive with nervousness, and knocked sharply on the rickety door. There was silence; Emery couldn't even sense movement within. He knocked again, harder and longer.

“Jus' a mo'!” a woman's groggy voice called. Eloise.

Emery looked about as he waited. In the soft lunar light, the decrepit shacks, haphazardly dispersed, were monstrosities that looked as though they'd been nailed together in a matter of minutes, no care taken for security or stability. Though those were two luxuries to which negroes still had no claim. Elijah and Emery were supposed to escape that place together, escape his father and make a life together somewhere up North. Emery was supposed to give him a better life...except maybe now he still could. Emery turned his nose up at the odors growing ever stagnant in the cluster of shacks: one moment, human filth, and the next, sun-baked skin, still lingering even after nightfall. During the day, Emery remembered the whole area was

unbearable; there was no escape from the sweltering sun, even as it set in the evenings. Yet somehow, he had always felt more comfortable there than in his father's house.

The door rattled open, and Emery turned back at the noise. There stood Eloise, hand on the door, like she was ready to slam it shut in a moment. Her eyes were red with droopy lids beneath scowling brows. It took a moment but her face changed, taken aback by his appearance: bruised, puffy face, split lip, skin broken at his knuckles. She was dressed in plain, ragged nightclothes, stitched together from mismatched pieces of fabric, ugly though barely affordable, and cool for summer nights like that one. A petite woman, her body still rippled with muscles in its own right. Her hair was braided atop her head, and while her skin was as black as her husband's, her eyes were like honey, and she exuded a natural calmness. Looking at her and remembering Levi, it was impossible to think she'd given birth to Elijah. There was no way his light complexion could've come from them. Having such a thing hanging over his head had made Elijah's life even more difficult. He once told Emery that even around his own people, he'd never been anything except the token bastard.

"Hello, sir. D'you know what—" Eloise stopped, her eyes widening as her mouth hung open and she started to shake. She shouted, "Oh! Oh!"

Emery could already feel tears in his eyes as she practically tackled him with the force of her hug. She squeezed and rocked him until he winced from the pressure. But he held her back just as tightly. He felt like he'd gone back in time. Eloise's warm tears dripped onto Emery's neck as he separated them, looking into her full eyes.

"Eloise, it is so good to see you again."

"Oh, baby, it's good to see you too! So good!" She finally pulled away and released Emery, stepping back from the door. "Come in, come in, please!"

Emery saw Marcus lying on a cushion in the far corner, breathing steady with his mouth wide open. Emery whispered, “Wow, he’s gotten so big.”

“Yes, he growin’ like a weed,” Eloise said with a nod. “He gonna wanna see you too. Lemme wake him.”

“Oh, no don’t. He looks like he’s sleeping so well. I’ll make sure I get to say hello to him.”

“If you say so. We don’t need’a be dealin’ with him right now anyhow.” She paused and looked him up and down. “You look a mess, boy. What happened?”

“I’ll explain later. First, I—”

“You look like you ain’t eaten either. You hungry? I can—”

“Eloise, please. Tell me where Elijah is.”

She sighed and rubbed her forehead. “You just wanna get right on down to it, huh? Okay, baby, let’s sit.”

She led the way to ragged chairs arranged around a warped table that looked as though it had been slapped together from pieces of wood too useless for anything else, as it had been by Levi years ago. Emery saw how much more derelict the inside of the house had grown. Cushions used to line one wall, beginning in the near-right corner, five side by side, for the young children. Now, only one lay there. In the far-left corner, opposite the door, the wall used to be curtained off and divided in half, one for each married couple, the only privacy for which they could hope. That was now open, too much space for just one woman, especially one used to the company of so many. The fourth corner was reserved for a sort of dining area—calling it even that was an exaggeration. After they sat, Emery looked across the table at Eloise and saw how pained her smile looked.

“Where is he, Eloise? Is he all right?”

“Elijah’s fine. He safe and stayin’ with his momma, Liza.”

“His mother? When did that happen? I didn’t even know he knew where she was?”

“Yes, he done found her years ago. But, I should start at the beginning, that night your daddy found you boys in that barn.”

“Please,” Emery agreed fervently.

“Well, he come runnin’ down here all in a fit. I ain’t never seen the boy so scared. Levi calmed him down enough to figure out what happened. We had to get him gone. Lord knows I didn’ want him to leave, but your daddy’d’ve killed him if he found him when he come lookin’. Elijah been livin’ with Liza ever since.”

“But, how? He didn’t know where she was. I know he talked about wanting to meet her, wanting to get to know her and see where he’d come from. But that was only ever a dream. He didn’t have any way of finding her.”

“Oh, honey, he didn’ tell ya ’cause he knew you’d make him go. He didn’ wanna leave ya,” Eloise revealed.

“Didn’t tell me what?”

“He did find a way to start lookin’. Found his momma round about four years ago now. Started writin’ her letters and such. He wanted so badly to see her. Didn’ have no way to, unless he left and went to stay with her, found work where she was.”

“How could he do that though? I thought her former owner’s wife told them all he wasn’t allowed to be there?”

“Oh, Liza don’ work for those white folk no more. She left long time ago, I guess, moved on and found work here in Virginia. Doin’ real good for herself, according to Elijah’s letters. That’s where he gone that night he needed to escape your daddy.”

“Why didn’t he tell me?”

“Sweetheart, d’you really need to ask that? He wanted you more’n he wanted them answers. His plan before that night with your daddy was to stay here with you ’til you was both ready to leave. Then, he’d’ve told ya about his momma and probably asked to go an’ see her.”

“I can’t believe he would do that for me.”

“Yes, you can, child. You’d’ve done the same for him. That’s why you here now.”

“Where is he?”

“They’re in Williamsburg, last I heard. His momma got work servin’ and cleanin’ and other such things in some well-to-do family’s house. Elijah been staying with her and got hisself a job too. I’m awful proud. He just...”

Eloise’s voice got quieter and quieter until Emery no longer even registered it. He was in shock. He was there just a few days ago. *How is that possible? Here I am, in Elijah’s old house with his mother and brother, while Elijah’s back in the city I just escaped from, where I’d been a prisoner for three years, while Elijah worked for a family less than an hour away.* It was just too much for Emery to process all at once. He had to get back there and find Elijah.

“Emery? Emery, baby, come back to me.” Eloise was shaking Emery’s hand gently as she called his name. “You look like had a real long day, and it’s so late. Why don’ you lay down here and get some sleep? In the mornin’, we can get up an’ try to figure out whatcha need to do, okay?”

“I know what I need to do,” Emery said, his voice firm. “I need to get back to Williamsburg. I have to find Elijah.”

“That’s fine, child, but that’s a worry for daylight. For tonight, ya need to get some rest,” Eloise told him. “At the very least, let me make you up somethin’ to eat. You look like you ain’t

eaten a decent meal in weeks.”

Everyone keeps telling me that.

“No, really, you don’t...” But Emery cut off his arguments.

Eloise was already bustling about and putting things into the small pot she hung over the blackened logs of the extinguished cooking fire. While she did, Emery set about re-lighting it. As he knelt and blew on the paper and kindling, his mind returned to the night he escaped. As he built Eloise’s fire, he saw the inferno that led to his escape. He once again heard the screams of terror, saw the tears in the eyes of the patients, the buildings smoking and consumed, and he wondered again how many lives were lost that night, how much death he’d been immersed in as he ran. The cook fire grew and Emery jumped back as the flames licked and he saw them overcome the space, burst through the house, jump from roof to roof, killing even more than had already died. He panted, sweating running down his face. His eyes were wide with fear.

Eloise poured in water she retrieved outside, and as it hissed, Emery yelped and scooted further away. Eloise crouched next to him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He struggled against her, but she held him firm, stroking his hair and whispering to him, “Shh, it’s a’right, baby. You safe. Just breathe.”

The fire roared warmly, and Emery allowed Eloise to guide him back to his chair at the table. As the pot reached a boil, Eloise sat down to wait. Already an enticing aroma permeated the house. It smelled just like the vegetable soup he used to love so much. Eloise pulled back, patted Emery on the shoulder with affection, and took her seat at the table, gesturing Emery to take his.

“I am so sorry about Levi,” Emery said quietly before Eloise could speak on what had just happened. She opened her mouth and he knew she was going to ask.

Eloise stiffened a moment, her face a mask of emotion, and gave him an odd look. But she

shook it away and didn't push the subject right then. "I know, baby, I know. Ain't your fault. Your daddy..." She closed her eyes as her voice trailed off and she shook her head.

"And Hiram and Aretha?" Emery asked. "Where have they gone?"

"Oh, them." Eloise paused, laughing just a bit to herself. "They gone left just a few weeks after Levi...after what your daddy done. Said we was too much trouble. Never did find out what happened to any of 'em once they took off. So, now it's just me an' Marcus."

"That's awful. I can never tell you how sorry I am, Eloise. That must have been a hard adjustment for you."

"Stop apologizin' like you done somethin' wrong, boy. And yeah, maybe at first it was hard. In the end, though, it was good. The peace and quiet was good for the grievin'. We ain't gon' talk about that, at least not right now. How you here?"

"Well, I wasn't dead," Emery said dryly.

"Boy, I know that. Elijah told us everythin' when he come down after your daddy found you two together. But we already knew about y'all's feelings for each other."

"Wait, you knew about me and Elijah?"

Obviously she knew. She just talked about him not leaving to find Liza because he didn't want to leave me. What else could she have meant by that? I can't believe they knew...

"What kinda momma you think I am that I wouldn't know what's goin' on with my own son? Sure, you tried to hide it from us, but ya couldn't miss the way y'all looked at each other when you thought no one was lookin'. You remember that last time you came down here for dinner 'fore you left for that schoolin'? That evenin' cleared up any doubts. You an' Elijah could barely eat for starin' so hard at each other, like you was havin' a conversation with your eyes. Every time someone called either of y'all's names, you'd both look down all flustered and such. The

one time, I called Elijah's name three times 'fore he looked at me. I couldn' help but laugh. Can't be nothin' wrong with that kinda innocent."

"Yes, I remember that dinner. I guess we weren't careful enough," Emery said, smiling and making a mental note not to allow the same mistake a second time once he found Elijah.

Can this be real? I can't believe she accepted this. Elijah was afraid his parents would yell and beat him, send him away on his own. We didn't think people could react any other way to a relationship like ours. I knew she was a special woman. Elijah got lucky with Levi and Eloise.

"We just wanted Elijah safe and happy," Eloise said. "Levi wasn't exactly thrilled with the whole thing, didn' understand. Can't say as I really do neither. But he our son, an' I love that boy more'n life. We worried 'bout what could happen, with your daddy bein' who he is. And we was right to fear. Where he sent you puts the chills through me. That's Satan's foolishness, that is."

"Where he sent me? How do you know about that?"

"Miss Carolyn told me a few months back when she come to see me. Right before she runned off, come to think."

"She came to see you? What happened? Why did she leave?"

"I don' really know," Eloise admitted. She yawned and shook it away. "Sorry, baby, but I don' know where she gone. I thought she was gonna go find you, but I can see that didn' happen. Here you is, and I ain't seen your momma in months. I wish I could help ya. Maybe Betsy knows a bit more, spendin' all her time up in that big house and whatnot. You should ask her in the mornin', after you get some sleep."

Emery looked down thinking. Eloise took the pause to stir the pot of vegetable soup and dish some up for Emery in a clay bowl. He looked up and smiled at her as she set it in front of him.

"Thank you." He lifted a steaming spoonful to his mouth and blew on it before he ate. He

sighed lightly; it was just as good as he remembered it. “I spoke with Betsy last night. She doesn’t know anything either. Does anyone even know why she left? Come on, Eloise, you’re the one she’d have come to for information if Betsy couldn’t tell her enough to satisfy her.”

They were as close to Mother’s friends as Father would let them be. If she didn’t tell them, she didn’t tell anyone. What am I supposed to do then?

“Well, you right there,” she said, averting her eyes. “Your momma went lookin’ to Betsy first for information, like she would, but Betsy didn’ know nothin’. All’a this’s been the best kept secret I seen my whole life. Anyways, when Betsy couldn’t tell her nothin’, your momma did come to me.”

“So, you mean no one knew about me and Elijah? Not even Betsy?”

“No, child, they didn’. Some people probably had suspicions, but Levi or me never said nothin’ to nobody. Wasn’t our business to tell.” Eloise stared at Emery, waiting for him to say something.

“Except from Mother; you didn’t keep it from her.” Emery looked down at his hands in his lap.

“No, baby, I didn’.” Eloise sighed and rubbed her eyes. “When she come to me lookin’ for answers, I told her everything I knew. I finally told her about you and Elijah, I told her the real reason your daddy sent you away to that damned asylum, and I told her what your daddy done to my sweet Levi. As a momma, she had a right to know the truth about her baby. She...didn’ take it all very well.”

“So, she hates me just like Father did. She didn’t leave him to go find me. She didn’t want to bring me home. She just left.” Emery turned his head and shook it.

I knew it couldn’t be that simple, that Mother would accept me as Eloise accepts me and

Elijah, that she'd love me anyway.

“No. Emery, no, that ain't what happened at all. When I say she didn't take it very well, I mean she cursed your daddy with words I ain't never heard come from no lady's mouth, let alone a rich and fancy white one. She couldn't believe your daddy sent you there an' lied to her so she'd agree. The rage burnin' off'a her was hot to the touch when she left that night, yes it was.”

“Father lied to her? That's why she went along with his plan of sending me there? What did she think they were sending me there for, then?”

“I don't know, baby, she didn't ever say.”

“Well, what happened when she left here? Why didn't she come looking for me? Why didn't she get me out?” The pitch of Emery's voice rose with each question he asked as he grew more frantic and began to border on hysterical.

“Baby, I don't know. I really don't know. That's a question only she can answer for you. Only thing I know is she left here an' walked on back up to that house. She hadn't brung a carriage or nothin' down. Didn't want your daddy to know where she'd gone, I reckon. Few weeks later, your daddy was gone for some kinda business, an' she packed up an' left without a trace. Ain't seen or heard from her since.”

Emery didn't speak. *So Elijah's alive and in Williamsburg. Mother never wanted to send me to the asylum, so much so, she left Father to get me back. But then, why didn't she? She knew where I was, and she left me there all those months longer. Why? And how am I supposed to find her now. It feels so impossible, like I'm drowning in secrets and lies.*

They were quiet a long while until Eloise asked, “So, how are you, baby? Really? You was in a right fit gettin' that fire lit for me.”

“I'm...trying,” Emery answered as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Sometimes, I...I

see fire and suddenly it's all around me, and I'm trapped. Then, I'm back at the asylum that night, locked in my room, burning, my skin melting off, and I can't breathe. I..."

Emery rubbed the sides of his head to clear the images away. *As for how I am, I can't begin to answer that question. I don't even know how I am. The world is spinning, and I don't think I know what's real anymore.*

"Why fire got you all up in yourself like that? What happened to you?"

"There was a fire the night I escaped. That was how I escaped, in the commotion during the fire." Emery described the night to her, eyes glazing over as the retelling put him there once more.

"Oh, baby...so three years in a damned asylum and then you got a fire?" Eloise asked. Her concern left lines around her mouth and branching out faintly from her eyes. "I just can't imagine how you copin' with all'a this. What happened in that place though, baby? You ain't yourself, that's plain as the day."

Emery explained—in a little detail as possible—what he'd been through as he continued to eat the soup. He couldn't ever tell her what Dr. Moncure put him through down in that cellar. And what he'd done...there were no words. So he summed it up as best he could. "I've been through Hell."

"You poor child," Eloise breathed, her words a tragic whisper. "I won't press you though. It ain't none of my business. It's between you and God, and you'll talk about it when you ready."

"Thank you."

"So when you get here? You better have a darn good excuse not comin' to see me sooner if'n you been here longer than yesterday."

Emery laughed. "I got in this evening. It was a long journey. I'm looking forward to sleeping

in a real bed again.”

“I can only imagine. But in the house? Your daddy know you was there?”

“No, he’s not here,” Emery lied. Obviously Betsy could tell Eloise the truth, but Emery planned to be long gone before that could have a chance at happening. “Betsy said she hasn’t seen him in a few days, doesn’t know where he went or when he’ll be back. That’s why I can’t stay here too long.”

“Maybe he dead,” Eloise said distractedly. “But I understand, baby. I really don’t like it though.”

He reached across the table and grabbed her hand. “I think I should go back to the house now. The hour has grown quite late, and I need to lie down and think. I have so many things to consider and sort out.”

“That really ain’t a good idea. Your daddy...he was never a good man, but he got worse after that night in the barn, after he come lookin’ for Elijah and found out he weren’t here. Then, after your momma runned off, he became a tyrant. He drinks all hours of the day and it brung the evil outta him. You can’t stay up in that house, baby. I truly fear he’d kill ya, if’n he comes back and you’re there. Please, stay here with Marcus and me. It ain’t no imposition.”

“No, I’ll be quite all right, really. Thank you for everything. You have done more than enough for me already. Plus, I really think I’d like to be alone with my thoughts for a while.”

“I understand, baby, don’t you worry. Do come see me before you make your way back to Williamsburg, you hear? Marcus gonna be right mad when he wakes up and I tell him he missed you.”

“I’ll come see you before I leave in the morning. I promise. I couldn’t leave without seeing Marcus.”

“And when you see my baby, make sure you hug him real tight for me.”

“Of course I will.”

Emery rose from the table and Eloise followed suit. They hugged and held each other much longer than they ever had before. Eloise walked Emery to the door and hugged him once more. He started his long walk back up to the house, eager to sleep off their conversation. When he awoke, he would speak to Betsy and figure out how to get back to Williamsburg and to Elijah, but right then, he would sleep. It was early morning, and Emery felt like he’d been awake for days. On his way, he stopped to retrieve his satchel from the barn.

The sun was almost ready to peek over the horizon when Emery walked back up and around to the front of the house. The low, weeping boughs of the willows lining the pathway shifted in fluid motion, tousled by the wind. The Rovenholt house, tall, pillared, imposing, loomed just at the end of the path circling in front, right to the granite steps leading to the grandeur of Mr. Rovenholt’s accomplishments. Up the steps, Emery opened the front door slowly and tried to be as quiet as possible slipping inside. While all of the workers would be gone, as Betsy and Grady—the handyman—were the only two negroes who lived in the house, Emery knew Betsy would likely still be sleeping. He didn’t wish to disturb her. As he walked across the foyer toward the main staircase, all he could think about was crawling into the bed and hopefully getting a few good hours of sleep to prepare for his journey back to Williamsburg.

Up the stairs and down the hall, Emery faced the door of his old bedroom, pausing before he opened it. The air inside was musty and stagnant, like the room hadn’t been opened in months, perhaps even years. The temperature gave it an unpleasant odor. Emery ran first to open the windows, then he lit the candles. Stepping back, he closed the door and looked around, a wave of

nostalgia hitting him. Despite the thick layer of dust coating everything, it looked exactly the same as it had three years ago. It was jarring for Emery, being back in his bedroom, experiencing the place again, a place he'd thought completely lost to him.

His four poster bed still sat between the room's only two—now open—windows. The bedding was still made up exactly as it had been the afternoon he arrived home from the Academy. He wondered how that could be so. He approached the bed and sat on the edge where he used to each morning before getting up to start his day. A cloud of dust rose as he plopped down, disturbing that which was previously undisturbed. He looked at the closet, probably still full of his clothes, and saw the jacket he'd thrown inside before he went out and found Elijah. It still lay on the floor where he left it. The shelf of trinkets reminded Emery again of the lack of his father's presence in his life. Then he shook his head, trying to clear thoughts of his father out of his head.

Looking away and down at the floor, Emery remembered what he had so desperately wanted out of that room when he journeyed back. He knelt down on all fours and began searching the floorboards. He knew the general vicinity of the secret hiding place, but his three-year absence made it a complicated search. The loose floorboard was secure, so as not to rattle and give itself away should anyone unwelcome tread on it. As such, Emery was forced to pick at the ends of the boards in the area until he happened upon the one that would lift free at his bidding.

It took more than a dozen tries, but he finally found the board that, after some effort, popped loose in his hands. Removing it, he sat the piece of polished wood aside gently and stuck his hand beneath. He pulled out a small box, free of dust from being under the floor. The box was very worn, salvaged from the garbage. He lifted the lid and took out the photograph with tender fingers. In black and white, he and Elijah smiled up at him, shoulder to shoulder. There was not a

thing in the world he valued as much as that photograph after it was taken. He looked upon it often, especially while away at the Academy that first year. Even when he had foolishly tried to convince himself that he was wrong, that he should stay away from Elijah, even when he could feel the pressure of the stress and his difference about to break him, he would still pull out that photograph and stare at Elijah's handsome face until the storm in his mind calmed. Elijah always had that effect on Emery. And now, he was alive after all. Emery could find him and have him back. They could still go north like they'd discussed a lifetime ago.

Satisfied to see his love again, still floating on the knowledge that Elijah was alive after all that time, Emery laid the photograph on the stand beside the bed. After he placed his satchel in the closet, he removed the dusty comforter and crawled on top of the clean sheets beneath. He lay there, staring at Elijah's face until he began to fall into an uneasy sleep. Despite the giddiness he felt about the chance to have Elijah in his arms once more, he was plagued by the image of his father down in the cellar, lying on the hard ground, immobilized by his broken ankles, crying out in pain and desperation. Tears began to well up in Emery's eyes, and as one ran down his cheek, he pressed his face into the pillow to dry them away.

He didn't understand the guilt he was feeling. He'd had no choice with both his father and with Jane, but that didn't change the weight in his heart. He didn't want to be a monster like his father or Dr. Moncure. He hated the things he'd done. He just wanted to be free, wanted to find Elijah. Elijah...with his tender touches, his deep eyes and creamy coffee skin, he would need Emery to be better. And Emery would be. He was not a monster, no matter what people thought of his love. His next day would be about leaving for Williamsburg, returning to the city of his torment to find Elijah. Seeing Eloise again, who'd always been as a second mother to him, had brought him peace of mind. It calmed him, and these were the thoughts that brought Emery some

much-needed sleep at long last.

*

Saturday, September 29, 1883

I lie in my bed, lost in thought. I will not be leaving my room today and will not interact with anyone, not even for my meals, which are slid under my door through a slot that can be opened and closed only from the outside. I made Dr. Moncure mad yesterday, though he hid it well. So now, I'm on isolation for a week. It's not the first or even the fifth time he's assigned me this, so I know I'll make it through. He's warned me that if this last isolation doesn't open me up to treatment, he'll move on to more severe methods. I don't want to know what he means, though I have no say in finding out.

I distract myself with thoughts of Elijah. He's gone. And I don't know how to keep him with me. As I ponder this, I realize that the image of his face is growing fuzzy in my mind, and then, I remember the photograph Mother took of us that summer before I went to the Academy. It should still be under the floorboard in my bedroom where I hid it away long ago. I'd give anything to have it with me now, as I kept it with me at Farnsworth. If I ever get out of here, I have to get it back. I'm going to get that picture back.

All day long Mother had been playing with her new camera she bought in Alexandria. She was determined to snap photographs of everything in the house, all catalogued in grainy, black-and-white posterity. Father was away for some sort of business deal—as he always was—so there was a freer air about the house that day than normally. Elijah was coming up to have dinner with us just as soon as all of the negroes left the fields. Mother invited his whole family, but they politely declined as they always did. A cautious knock at the door as Mother finished her photograph of the staircase announced Elijah's arrival.

"Hi," I said quietly, a bit too much cheer in the word, beaming a smile—all teeth—at him.

"Hi," he repeated, blushing and looking down at his shuffling left foot.

"Are you hungry?" I asked.

"Starvin'," he almost sighed.

"Elijah!" Mother shouted, popping up next to me at the door and startling us both. "Come, come! Let me get a photograph of you both before dinner."

Elijah looked at her, confused, as he walked in, and I closed the door behind him.

"She bought herself a camera today and has been taking pictures of everything," I explained.

"I'm curious to see how a negro turns out on this film," she said, leading us into the sitting room.

"Mother!" I scolded.

"What? He's black. It will look differently than you or I," she said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Stand here in front of the fireplace."

I rolled my eyes but obeyed. Elijah stood in the center of the fireplace, and I went over next to him. Elijah wore brown burlap trousers and a cream-colored, heavily worn canvas shirt that tied near the neck to loosen or tighten as needed. I was dressed in a dark cotton shirt that fit me in a breezy sort of way with green trousers, dark like the leaves of the trees in the forest at twilight. I had to stop myself from grinning too largely at the prospect of having a photograph of Elijah and myself. To be able to look upon him whenever I wished, the two of us frozen in time together, it was the best thing I could imagine, especially when I was to be leaving for the Academy in just a few weeks. Now, I'd be able to take him with me in more than just my memory.

"Stand closer together. Act like you're friends, like you care at all for each other," Mother instructed us.

So we moved together, shoulders touching, hands behind our backs. I grew hot standing so

close to him, touching him, his presence always warming me, comforting me. He leaned against me, just enough to let me know he was doing it. My heart swelled. I heard the camera click, and we started to move away.

“No, no, no, not so fast. I’m taking another. Surely you each want one?”

I sighed, and Elijah laughed quietly. I acted like she was inconveniencing us, but really I was reveling in the moment. I wanted to stay there forever. Elijah and I together, Mother acting like we belonged together, no angry Father spoiling the mood with his anger, his slave owner mentality. We were at peace here. I couldn’t wait to see the photographs developed. I would treasure it above all else, I already knew.

And so I did and still do to this day. That is why retrieving it must be my first order business once I’ve escaped this hell. And I will escape. I have to. One day...until then, I can’t lose the image of him. He’s gotten me through so much already, and I’ll need him to get through this too.

Chapter Eight

Friday, June 12, 1885

Emery got up late the next day—the hour was almost noon—after a fitful night of constant waking, between nightmares from the asylum and pale visions of Jane and his father. He felt as though he hadn't rested a moment; his body was achy and stiff. When he sat up, he found a tray of food left for him on top of the chest of drawers. The bacon still steamed on the plate as butter slowly melted on the stack of toast set between the plate of fresh scrambled eggs and a glass of orange juice. Someone had gone all out for him, cooking a luxurious breakfast, and Emery smiled. Surely it hadn't been Betsy though, not after she'd been injured the night before.

Emery ate very little of the breakfast as his stomach was quite upset over his recent actions and all he learned from Eloise. Emery wished he could simply rush back to Williamsburg right then. But he had to ask Betsy about his mother. He couldn't possibly leave the plantation again without trying to learn all he could. After that, he would be on his way back to Elijah, somehow, some way. He shook his head and replaced all of the cutlery and china on the tray, then he set it in the hall outside the door, with a quickly scrawled “thank you” on a slip of paper. He went down the hall to the washroom and bathed, so comforted to wash away the journey and the physical stain of his sins, at least how he imagined it. Emery had not so much as wiped off since leaving Kendrick. He couldn't believe that had only been four days ago.

Back in his room, feeling refreshed, Emery pulled a fresh pair of basic brown trousers and a loose cotton shirt from the drawers and slipped them on. Clean clothes had never felt so nice. And they were his own. He never thought he would once again put on a set of his own clothes.

He retrieved the photograph of Elijah and himself from the stand, grabbed the satchel from the closet, and with one last look around his room, Emery slipped out. He went to Betsy's chambers and knocked, but there was no answer. He hoped she wasn't back in the kitchen, preparing meals again already. He decided to check there next.

At the bottom of the stairs, as he turned right to make for the kitchen, Betsy's voice called to him from the front sitting room. "Emery, dear, c'mon in here a moment. I'd like to speak with you."

Emery paused and turned that way. "I've been looking for you. Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, I'm fine. Already feelin' myself again." Betsy sat in an arm-chair near the front window, facing it. She leaned forward as if she meant to serve them both tea, but Emery couldn't allow that. "Come sit down, child. I had Vanzetta make us some tea 'fore she started lunch. Would you like some?"

"Now, now, you know you need to be resting," Emery scolded her, walking in to serve the tea. He took his to the arm-chair at the other side of the window, across from Betsy. The sitting room was the brightest room in the house and always had been. It remained so, even despite the thick and dark atmosphere the house and whole plantation had taken on. The walls were painted a light yellow, almost white, but still sunny even when the sun was overcast. The bay window in front let in enough light that no corner of the room was ever shadowed. Glass-faced curio cabinets, dark wood end tables and coffee table, antique arm-chairs and sitting-couches all decorated the room to give visitors and occupiers a sense of home and comfort.

"So," Betsy began, sipping her tea, "last time I tried talkin' with you, we got all interrupted. I thought we best finish that up. For starters, where's your daddy gone? I ain't seen or heard hide nor hair from him all day."

Emery looked at her, with her aged brown eyes full of sadness and concern. He stared into them and he lied. “I don’t know. We fought and argued a while but once I got the best of him, he took off, shouting about how he’d see me put back in that asylum if it was the last thing he did. He never came back?”

“Not that I seen, no, he didn’t. Now wait one blessed minute. Asylum? Whatchu talkin’ about, boy?”

He forgot they hadn’t gotten to that point the night before. His father had interrupted them too soon. He took a breath and explained to Betsy what happened the night his father sent him away. He glossed over his experiences in the asylum and told her about the fire. When he finished, she was quiet a moment, contemplative.

“Boy, that’s quite the tale you just told,” Betsy said, her mouth a firm line. “Why’d your daddy go and send you some place like that? What was he thinkin’?”

“He...well, I mean, he...”

Can I tell her about us? What will she say? Perhaps it doesn’t matter what she’ll say. Besides, it’s Betsy; I must be honest with her, about this at least.

“He caught Elijah and me together in the barn.”

She looked at him skeptically, and something about the expression on her face told Emery she knew what he was talking about. “So, what’s that matter? You and Elijah was always together when y’all was younger.”

I hate these secrets and the lies, all of the hiding. She’ll understand. She has to.

“He...damn it.” Emery struggled to find a way to say it without saying it. “Father caught Elijah and I in the hayloft. We...weren’t decent. You have to know what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Yes, child, I do believe I know what you tellin’ me.” She paused, looking down at her tea

and taking a thoughtful sip. Her eyes conspicuously avoided Emery's. "So, is that why your momma left? 'Cause of what happened with your daddy?"

"You mean you don't know either?" Emery's shoulders fell at the news.

"No, baby, I don't know nothin' more than any of these other poor old negroes. Same thing I told your daddy when he tried to beat it outta me."

"He did what?" Emery couldn't believe it, not Betsy. She was part of the family. Well actually, he believed it perfectly. None of the negroes were special or better in his father's eyes. Of course he'd had no problem beating Betsy. "Are you all right?"

"Oh, child, I'm fine," she said, waving off his concern as foolishness, even though he knew the power of his father's ruthlessness. "I got lucky. By the time he come for me, he's already three sheets to the wind. Half the time he tried to hit me, the old fool missed. I didn't get it like poor Lucile. She's stuck inside for a week when your daddy finished with her. Still ain't right, ain't got rid of that limp yet."

"That's...terrible." Emery shook his head, saddened for all those on whom his father had taken out his rage at him. "So, basically, no one knows where Mother went or what happened to her?"

"Emery, I'll tell it to you this way. If there's anybody here knows anything about where your momma gone, they smart enough to not say a peep to no one, not even they own mommas or daddys or husbands or wives." They were both quiet for a moment. Then she asked, "So when you leavin'?"

"This evening at dusk, after I go see Eloise and Marcus."

She put her hands up and rose from the arm-chair. "I'll tell the kitchen folk to prepare you some food for your trip while you gone seein' them. It's you, so I know they be more'n happy to

cook you up more'n you could even possibly need. Let's go up to your daddy's study. There's somethin' there you should have."

Emery hadn't expected her to offer him food to see him through his journey, though she was thinking better than he was. Of course he would need supplies to return to Williamsburg. Almost three days of travel was a long time. He hadn't planned for anything except leaving as soon as possible and getting back to the city.

Once they'd reached the study, Emery sat in his father's sacred chair at the desk. The study was in complete disarray, probably after the apparent breakdown Mr. Rovenholt suffered upon his wife's abdication. His normally dust-free and tidily arranged record books were strewn haphazardly on their shelves, obviously out of order. Business manifestos lay discarded on the floor, with some open to random pages where Mr. Rovenholt had thrown them. His Confederate battle flag that hung behind his desk had fallen down on the right side, so it was bunched loosely from the left where it still held to the wall like a forgotten curtain, unimportant. The room smelled of liquor and human odor, with a hint of poorly cleaned vomit beneath the surface. Mr. Rovenholt had lived disgustingly in that study for months, and the consequences were obvious. He'd devolved into drunken filth. Emery couldn't believe his eyes.

While Emery took in the mess, Betsy dug into Mr. Rovenholt's bookshelves. Emery wondered what she could be searching for, but he didn't have to wait long before Betsy came to him and revealed her intentions all on her own. She held a record ledger similar to all the others, yet while it was dated ten years ago, it looked as though it hadn't ever been used. Betsy opened it, and inside, the pages had been cut out and a well-stuffed envelope sat in the hole left between the covers.

"I want you to take this with you when you leave, you hear?" she said, handing Emery the

envelope that he saw was filled with money.

“I-I couldn’t! No, please, keep it. Where did this even come from?”

“Your daddy kept it hidden away in case of an emergency. I seen him puttin’ it away one time, years ago. Didn’t ever once tell no other soul. It’s his, but he a mess and don’t need it. So now I’m decidin’ it’s yours. You’ll take it with you like I told you.”

Emery stared down at all the money and imagined how much good it could do the workers there while he searched for Elijah and then his mother. Betsy was going out of her way to help him, and he had no idea how to thank her. “But—”

“Take it, child.”

Emery bit back his argument. “Thank you.”

“How you gettin’ back to Williamsburg when you leave here, anyways?”

“I guess the same way I got here; I’ll walk. If I stay off the roads to avoid suspicion, I can be back there in a few days’ time.”

“You can’t be doin’ that. Not when we still got that smaller carriage here, that single-horse one. You gonna take that and get you back there safe, you hear?”

Emery laughed and smiled at her. “Oh the roadster. I forgot we even had that here. No one ever used it.”

“Your momma and daddy stopped using it once you was born. Needed somethin’ safer with more space.”

“Oh, I see. I really appreciate your help, but I can’t take that. I need to stay out of sight anyway. Traveling through the woods is my safest means of that.”

“No, what you need to do is take care’a yourself and make sure you get to Williamsburg safe. So, you’ll take that carriage, and that’s the end of the discussion about that. What I still don’t get

is why you goin' back. You just escaped there, and now, you wanna sneak back in? Have you lost all sense God gave you, boy?"

"You don't understand," Emery said in a quiet voice, standing up from the desk and walking to the door. They were finished in Mr. Rovenholt's study, and Emery had no interest in staying there any longer than necessary. "I have to go back."

"Why? What could possibly drive you back to that place where you was put through so much hell? Why, when you can stay here with people that love you and care about you?"

"Elijah."

"What about him?"

"He's in Williamsburg with his mother. I have to go back and find him."

"Boy..." Betsy had a motherly look of warning on her face: chin dipped to one side and eyebrows raised.

"What, Betsy?"

"You sinnin' against God, boy, that's what. What you thinkin', gettin' caught up in all that nonsense? You ought'a know better'n that. You was raised better'n that."

"And, Elijah wasn't?" Emery felt himself getting angry.

"That ain't what I'm sayin'!" She paused and inhaled deeply. "It ain't natural, and it goes against God. Says so right in His Holy Word."

"You don't understand." Emery shook his head, clenching and unclenching his fists. *How could she say these things? Eloise understood. Or did she only placate me? Maybe everyone sees us this way, thinks we're wrong. But we're not. We can't be.*

"Men don't behave that way. What about children? You ain't gonna have no babies? You ain't gonna have no family?"

“I don’t know! That doesn’t matter right now!” Emery ran his hands through his hair, gripping his head and shouting in frustration.

“What matters then, huh, boy?” Her voice was stern and hard.

“Elijah! He matters!”

“Child, you damnin’ yourself straight to Hell and takin’ that poor colored boy with you. Stay here, an’ leave it be. You better’n that.”

No!

“You don’t know anything!” Emery had never shouted at Betsy before. “You don’t understand! I love him! I don’t know how or why, but I love him! We’re in love. It just happened. And, if it says in the Bible that a love like this is wrong, well then, I’ll just have to talk to God about it Himself when I die and meet Him. I don’t need you or anyone to tell me where I’m going to go or what’s going to happen to me for loving him. But, I’m going to find Elijah, and you can’t stop me.”

Betsy was taken back by Emery’s anger, but she didn’t let that deter her. “As a matter of fact, I could, and it would be for your own good. I couldn’t, in good conscience, watch you ride off in sin. You need’a be a man, now more’n ever.”

“I’m being a man!” Emery was shocked at her words. “And you wouldn’t dare.”

“Boy, I been takin’ care’a you since before you even knew my name. If I gotta keep on doin’ it now, I damn sure am gonna. Don’t go givin’ in to the Devil’s temptations, damagin’ your soul, damagin’ poor Elijah’s soul. You older’n him, you educated, you s’pposed to set an example, not get him bein’ all unnatural with you. It’s a damn—”

“Shut up!” Emery screamed, tears in his eyes as he grabbed Betsy hard and shook her.

Betsy stared up at Emery, her face a mixture of astonishment and indignation. Most prevalent

was the disappointment Emery saw there. His scowl quickly began to melt into sorrow.

“No, Betsy, oh no, I’m so—”

“You just like your daddy,” she said in a voice full of hushed venom. She looked disgusted.

“I’m nothing like him!”

Emery was so angry. He pushed Betsy away from him, where her back hit the bookcase. She slid to the floor with her eyes locked onto Emery. He was too ashamed to meet them. Horrified by how he’d treated a woman who’d loved him like her own, Emery stormed down the stairs, snatching his satchel from the floor of the sitting room, and ran from the house, envelope of cash still in his hand. A sob erupted from him and he went from memory down to the stable, running all the way, his vision so obstructed by his many tears.

What’s wrong with me?

The sun was high as Emery led Marigold, his personal favorite horse, down to the carriage house. There, Emery strapped the mare and reined her into the front of the roadster buggy. Urging Marigold and the cart out onto the path, Emery paused as he wiped his face and looked back up at the big house through the trees for what he was sure would be last time. He’d never be able to go back to it, not after all he’d done, all the wrongs he committed. Emery guided Marigold down the lane toward the road. He took the photograph out of his pocket and gazed longingly at his lover a moment before tucking the photo into his satchel for safety. Then, with no provisions whatsoever, but with more cash than he’d ever held in his entire life, Emery snapped the reins and fled the Rovenholt plantation for the city of Williamsburg to the south.

*

Thursday, November 1, 1883

“You are quite the tough case to get through,” Dr. Moncure says, more to himself than to me, as Lawrence leads me down hall after hall beneath the building. “More stringent exposure to and opportunity for reflection seems to be required.”

We enter a room off an interior wall with only three candles burning in the small space. Against the wall, I see a strange chair I’m directed toward. Lawrence straps my arms to the chair, armrests like boxes, my legs similarly boxed, wood lining them up past my knees and to my elbows. I’ll have no mobility whatsoever, even to twitch an ankle or wrist. A thick leather belt is fastened around my torso.

“So,” Dr. Moncure says, seated in front of me. “Can we talk?”

“Sure.”

“How are you today?”

“Constricted.”

“Yes, well, you will have that. How do you feel about this?”

“I feel like it’s a good thing I can’t move right now.”

“Anderson, this hostility is not helping you. I just wish to bring your mind out of the dark thoughts plaguing it.”

“By dark, you mean the color of Elijah’s skin?”

“No, that is not what I mean!”

The doctor’s temper flares, and I struggle to maintain the innocent demeanor on my face. He doesn’t often react; this is satisfying.

“You are not well, boy. Physically, mentally, or spiritually for that matter. Your parents have entrusted you to my care in order to remedy your ill health. Why do you resist my help?”

“I’m not sick, and I’m not crazy. My parents didn’t trust you to do anything. Father abandoned me here to be rid of me, and Mother let him. You can go to Hell.”

The snap of the switch on my bare thighs brings tears to my eyes as I seize and clench, hiss, anything to relieve the pain I can’t touch or rub or move to alleviate. Dr. Moncure rises and walks behind the chair.

“There is a way to fix you, to treat this plague upon your mind. I will find the means by which to do so, as only a doctor of my caliber can. Mark my words.”

Fabric, smelling of greasy hair and stale, weeks-old musk, falls over my eyes, bunching where it meets my shoulders. I feel a strap over my forehead; it tightens, and I can’t move at all. The hood is so thick, it’s as though I’m back in the pitch of Father’s cellar, without even the freedom to scratch my nose. It itches now that I’ve thought of it. I want to explode. Dr. Moncure says nothing more as I hear his footsteps recede out of the room and down the hall from whence we came.

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Chapter Nine

Monday, August 17, 1885

Emery loaded the last crate of wooden beer steins into Mr. Tinden's cart and climbed into the seat. Sweat ran down his cheeks, his neck, and down his back beneath his shirt as he snapped the reins and guided Fire and Susan—Mr. Tinden let his two kids name the horses—down the block toward the Blue Shield Tavern. That became his routine after he had arrived back in Williamsburg a little over two months before. He made deliveries for the city's cooper, one here and there, across town, usually on foot. If a bunch of items or a particularly large order were supposed to go out at once, then he would have to load everything into the cart and drive around the town dropping off orders. Emery never complained though. He was thankful he'd been given the opportunity to make enough money to survive while he held out and tried to find any morsel of information about Elijah. But, it wasn't exactly a situation he could just walk around asking random people on the streets about. No, he knew he needed to handle it delicately.

He still grieved over what he'd done to his father, what he'd done to Jane, though by that second month, it only haunted him when he lay alone in bed in the room he had rented at Widow Swartz's boarding house. No longer did the visions cloud his thoughts throughout his waking hours. It would always be on his mind, though, penance for the actions he had taken to escape, to stay free, to protect himself and Elijah. The cost had been worth it, but he didn't know how to live with it all.

He'd kept a low profile since he arrived back in the city. The trip took longer than he'd wished. The roadster had not been built for the speeds at which Emery pushed it, trying to get

back to the city as soon as possible. A wheel broke off early that first morning. Abandoning the carriage, Emery walked Marigold but quickly noticed she had injured her leg when he wrecked the carriage. Unable to carry on with her and without the means to put the poor mare down properly, Emery reluctantly tied Marigold to a tree on the side of the road in hopes that someone would soon come along, take her in, and care for her. With a last look back at her, Emery set off. It took him two more full days to reach the outskirts of Williamsburg.

His first morning in the city, Emery procured a room and set about finding possible information concerning Elijah's whereabouts. After two weeks of nothing and his money supply dwindling, Emery realized he needed to find some sort of employment in order to stay in the city longer than expected. He hadn't given serious enough thought to just how large a city Williamsburg was, but when he still hadn't learned anything, and only had the money for another week's rent, he started working for Terry Tinden, the cooper, delivering his wares wherever they needed to be taken.

Then, there he was, two months of menial labor later with nothing to show for it, no closer to finding Elijah. All he knew was Elijah found work with his birth mother, Liza, who was employed by one of the wealthy families in the city. But he didn't know if that meant inside the city proper or in one of the elaborate homes just outside the city. As a result, every wealthy home he passed, he found himself wondering, *Do you work there? Or there? Maybe there.* It frustrated him to no end; dwelling on it distracted him so completely that he drove the carriage straight past the Blue Shield and had to circle back to drop off Paul's five crates of new steins. Emery guided Fire and Susan down the alley to the right of the tavern and brought them to a halt at the backside of the building. Waste littered the cracks where the walls met the ground and discarded crates were piled haphazardly to the left of the back door of the tavern. Any time Emery had a delivery

for Paul—who refused to let Emery call him Mr. Wilson—it always had to be stacked by the back door. Then he was to knock loudly three times when he finished to let whoever was nearest know that a delivery needed to be brought inside. That seemed to be the situation with everyone who delivered to Paul.

The tavern really stood out as one of a kind, with Paul having done his best to remain true to the tavern’s colonial origins. The history was important to Paul, and he only replaced that which it was impossible for him to fix and maintain. He was constantly sanding, polishing, and replacing wood panels and roof shingles, repainting what had chipped or faded. That day, when Emery knocked and he stepped back toward the cart, the door opened, and Paul stood in the frame, smiling out at Emery. He and Paul had grown close in the past weeks. All Paul’s children had died young, so with Emery alone in the city, Paul took a parental liking to him. Paul was probably in his fifties and already more of a father figure than Emery’s own ever was. Emery went by the tavern for a pint any time he could afford it, and Paul was always good to him: slipping him extra food and refilling his mug without Emery asking and without Emery paying for it. Once Paul even tried to slip Emery some cash “just in case he needed it.” Emery turned it down of course; he couldn’t just take money from Paul like that. Emery found it in his pocket when he returned to his room that same evening. He still had no idea how Paul got it in there without him noticing.

“Ho there! Good afternoon, Emery! How fare your deliveries?” Paul asked, approaching the cart. He was a portly man, round in the middle, with a very large mustache that seemed to connect his nose to the corners of his mouth. Unlike his hair, streaked with gray, the mustache was still a deep brown. It quivered whenever he talked, and Emery always chuckled at that.

“Just started actually. You’re my first stop. So far, so good.”

Paul laughed and shook Emery's hand once he'd reached him. "That Widow Swartz still treating you all right?"

"Yes, sir, she's taking really good care of me."

"Good, good. She can be a strict old crone, but she's good people. Terry doesn't have you working in the shop yet? You still only doing his deliveries?"

"Well, that and sweeping up in the shop and stuff. He let me take a couple of orders at the end of last week, but no, I'm not actually doing any apprentice work. I'd be content if he even just let me observe some, so I can see how he does what he does. But, no."

"Be patient. He'll get you into the workshop before you know it." Paul clapped Emery on the shoulder and flashed him a reassuring smile. It made Emery feel safe. So, he decided to take the risk. "Hey, Paul, I was wondering if you could help me with something."

"What's that, son?"

"There was a gentleman who visited the boarding house last night, asking around for a runaway sharecropper skipping out on his lease. Offered me a reward for information. Lord knows I could use the money. The Swede boarders and Widow Swartz are in no shape to help. I told him I'd ask around while I was out today. Would've come into town looking for work around three years back? You know of anyone like that?"

"I'm afraid I can't help much. This here's a big city. We get all sorts of niggers wandering through, looking for some kinda work. Some get lucky, some keep moving. And, the ones that stay, they're just niggers. Long as they're quiet and out of the way, no one pays them no mind. So, unless he finds his kin himself, he's out of luck. Not many would help him if they could, which most can't."

"Oh." Emery tried to hide his disappointment even as he stewed over Paul's word choice.

“Well, I’ll let him know. Thank you for your help, Paul.”

“You’re most welcome. You know that.”

“Yes, sir, I do.”

“You got a good heart, Emery. You’ll do all right in this life. Keep your head high.”

“I will, sir. I better get back out there and make these deliveries, or Mr. Tinden will have my hide.”

“Yes, he will.” Paul laughed and shook his head as he stepped back from the cart. “I’ll see you next time, Emery. Have a good evening.”

“Good evening to you, Paul.” Emery snapped the reins and guided the horses down the alley and out onto the road. They headed left toward the next delivery.

Emery was right to leave when he did. The deliveries took him the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening. It seemed like he got delayed at every stop. Mrs. O’Flannery needed to check every item in the order twice “because she don’t trust no one.” She was always bitter, and it seemed like each item reminded her of some old grudge or wrong done to her that she of course had to tell Emery all about. No one answered at the Governor’s stable, so Emery didn’t know where to put the ordered barrels. Finally, he just put them all in a line along the house starting at the servants’ entrance at the back corner. He was sure he’d catch hell for that later. Then, Tom Sanders wanted to chat. He had to tell Emery about his daughter and son, the funny thing that happened to him when he first moved to the city—Emery had heard it five times already—but when Tom wanted to show him “the funny thing growin’ on his thigh” because he “wanted Emery’s opinion,” that was when Emery really had to go. Emery didn’t mind that so much, because Tom ended up tipping him twenty-five cents. He could go to the Blue Shield that night for a pint with it.

The descending sun was setting in a crimson glow about the sky as Emery returned to Mr. Tinden's shop with the cart. Mr. Tinden stood outside, waiting for Emery and watching him approach. With his hands on his hips, he tapped his foot and glared at Emery all the way until he stopped the cart and climbed down. Mr. Tinden was a burly man, built like an ox, with a full beard, like he'd never shaved a single day in his life. His chubby cheeks made his dark eyes look small on his face. If he weren't so gruff, he could have passed for Saint Nicholas when the Saint was middle-aged and not yet an immortal Christmas myth.

"Where the hell have you been? Do you even know what time it is?" Mr. Tinden shouted at Emery as he stormed over to unbuckle the horses from the cart. "Six o'clock! You were gone four hours!"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Tinden. I got held up quite often. Mrs. O'Flannery was relentless."

He growled angrily beneath his beard. "Oh, that woman! She'll be the death of me yet. There's never anything wrong with any of my product she orders, yet she persists in combing over every single detail of every single piece. But, that ain't the point. You need to work through that and be back sooner! The family's waiting on me for dinner, but I can't lock up and leave 'til your slow-moving behind comes back with my horses and cart! That's twice now you've pulled this!"

"I know, sir. I know, and I'm sorry. It won't happen again; you have my word."

"It better not. You wanna start working in the workshop? That can be dangerous stuff. Need to be responsible. I ain't putting you in the shop 'til I know you're responsible enough to finish deliveries in a timely manner. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I understand. I won't let it happen again."

Mr. Tinden held Emery in his hard gaze a moment longer before his face softened and he

sighed. “All right, it’s fine. Get on home, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you, sir. Tell the missus I said hello.”

“I’ll do that.”

Rather than walk home to Widow Swartz’s to have dinner with her and the only other two boarders, a Swedish couple who spoke very little English, Emery made his way back across town to grab a bit of food and a pint with Paul at his tavern. Provided he wasn’t too busy, Paul would sit with Emery and keep him company. Otherwise, Emery would dine alone and think about how he needed to find Elijah. Every day he spent there in the city was one day closer to an incident that could prevent him from ever getting away again. Someone was bound to recognize him eventually. He couldn’t risk that.

Emery approached the tavern, and the streets were sparsely populated, with most citizens eating home cooked dinners with their families on a weeknight such as that. Emery walked inside and the seating was equally barren around the Blue Shield’s dining area. An older man and woman sat across from each other against the side wall, talking quietly over a shared plate of some sort of greasy meal. The rest of the dozen or so tables were empty. The bar, running along the wall on the opposite side, had just one man seated there at the far end, an untouched sandwich sitting in front of him while he threw back the last gulp of his ale. He belched loudly once he’d swallowed and sat the glass down for an immediate refill. Emery thought nothing of him at first, but upon a second glance, he realized it was Kendrick. He was sitting where Emery usually sat, and while Emery wasn’t feeling much for casual conversation that day, he couldn’t act like he didn’t see the man who’d helped him in his time of need and knew the story of all he’d been through—more than most anyway. Plus, Emery thought maybe Kendrick would be able to help him again. He’d thought of Kendrick many times since he arrived back in the city

but could never quite bring himself to seek the man out. Kendrick made Emery nervous, and Emery had enough to be concerned about without adding more. But he was growing evermore desperate, and now that Kendrick was right there in front of him, Emery couldn't find a reason not to take the chance and ask. Emery walked over and sat on the stool next to Kendrick.

"Fancy meeting you here," Emery said casually as he adjusted the placement of the stool. If Kendrick had still had any beer, Emery was sure he'd have spit it all over the bar from the way his eyes widened in shock and his mouth hung open a bit. When Kendrick seemed he couldn't find any words in his surprise, Emery continued. "Thought you might have sold the store and moved north by now, gone back to your travels."

"Oh, umm...yes, I'm actually working on that as we speak." Kendrick finally found his voice.

Dell, Paul's main barmaid, popped up in front of Emery, setting down a mug of his usual beer. "How you doing, darling?"

"I'm all right. Long day at work. This is much needed," Emery said, grabbing the mug and taking a long drink from it. "Thank you, by the way."

"You're mighty welcome, sugar. You want anything to eat? Or, just another beer waiting?"

"Oh, I'm definitely eating too. Can I have a sandwich? Surprise me. And, maybe some French fried potatoes?"

"Sure thing, sweetie." She turned to head into the back to the kitchen.

"So how exactly are you working on it?" Emery asked Kendrick as Dell walked away.

"Well, I sold my father's store, closed on it just a few days ago. Now I'm just in the process of going through my belongings, deciding what to take with me and what to leave here. A friend wrote me about a place that recently became available up in New York City. It's obviously much

less space than I have here, but I'm confirmed to begin renting it as soon as I get to the city."

"Oh, you aren't selling the house when you leave?"

"I thought about it but decided it's better if I keep it, have some place permanent to fall back on. Or escape to. So the things I don't take will just stay at the house and collect dust like they did for my father before me. Except he lived there while it happened." Kendrick chuckled at his own joke as Emery took a sip from his mug. Dell came back and refilled Kendrick's mug.

Emery just took another drink. "That's really great. You've wanted this for so long, it seems. I'm happy for you that it's finally working out."

"Thank you, thank you." Kendrick raised his drink and they touched mugs, each taking a long gulp. "So, what about you? Tell me what's gone on in your life since I saw you last. You seem much more...comfortable than when you walked into my store that day so many weeks ago."

Emery almost laughed out loud at how little Kendrick knew. Though he knew what the man must have seen in him. It wasn't comfort, though, no, it was something else, something better, but more fragile. He saw Emery's hope. Emery didn't want to tell Kendrick too much of what he'd been through since they were together last. It wasn't any of his business.

"Well, I made it where I was planning to go, but come to find out, there wasn't really anything there for me anymore except some information I didn't even know I wanted. Other than that, I've had a pretty uneventful few months. I've been in the city about eight weeks now."

"That's good, I guess. No news is better than bad news, right?"

"That's what they say."

Dell set Emery's plate down in front of him with another mug of beer to go with it. "Here you are. Let me know if I can getcha anything else. If not, you can pay whenever you're ready."

“Thanks, Dell,” Emery said. She smiled and turned back toward the dinner doors, disappearing behind them. Emery turned back to Kendrick. “Paul and Dell, they’re good people.”

“I don’t really know them,” Kendrick said quietly as Emery put a fried potato in his mouth. Then, with a long pull from his mug, Kendrick asked, “So, what was the information you didn’t know you wanted? If you don’t mind me asking, that is.”

Emery stared at his sandwich a moment. It was now or never. He knew that. But he still found it hard to start saying it out loud. He knew that of all people, Kendrick would understand the necessary discretion. *But will he help me?*

“I found out the location of someone I thought I’d lost a long time ago. Turns out he’s been right here in the city all this time.”

“Who is this person?”

“He’s...someone I’ve known nearly all my life, someone very special to me.”

Kendrick’s face lit up with realization and his voice lowered quieter than a whisper. “It’s your ‘someone else’, isn’t it? The boy you love so much you can’t even look at, let alone entertain, another man.”

Emery felt the blush rising in his cheeks as he looked away to take a large bite of his sandwich. He nodded his head slowly, glancing sideways at Kendrick who smiled his classic, large smile, the smile that took up his whole face.

“So, where is he? Have you found him yet? You’ve already been here two months!”

Emery had to swallow, and then he rinsed the meat and bread down with a drink from his mug. “That’s the problem. I don’t know where he is, only that he found work here about three years ago.”

“That shouldn’t be too hard. We can go down to the county clerk and find out where he’s been working, who hired him, then you can go get him.” Kendrick was as excited about the search as Emery had first been.

Why does he care to be this energetic about my situation? It doesn’t concern him in the slightest. Unless...yes, for all his talk of needs, I bet a part of him wants a person to love and be loved by, to think about when his thoughts stray. Everyone probably wants that to some extent.

“It’s not that simple. A family hired him in. And, Paul told me this afternoon that no one really keeps track of the negroes unless they’re stirring up trouble or stepping out of line.”

Kendrick’s face scrunched in consternation. After a moment, shock spread over his face as he made the connection. Emery waited for Kendrick to have something to say about Elijah being a negro, but the man just shook his head before he looked down and thought for a minute. “I don’t really know exactly. I’ve never needed to look for a ni—a negro before. Your best bet is to try Father Schwann at Bruton Parish Church. The church will have the best records of everyone in the city, including the negroes. Past that, I can’t offer you much in the way of advice. I’m sorry.”

Emery wondered whether the man really couldn’t help any more or if he just didn’t care as much once he found out Elijah was black. Either way, Emery had barely listened to the apology. He was immediately excited about Kendrick’s suggestion. Of course the church could help. Emery was angry for wasting so much time when that should have been his first stop in the city. All of the sudden, with barely half his dinner eaten, Emery was no longer hungry. It was early enough that perhaps he could find Father Schwann still at the church right then. He practically jumped off of his stool. “Thank you! Thank you so much. I really have to go.”

“I understand. Good luck, Emery. I hope you find everything you’re looking for.”

“I hope so too. Please call on me at the Swartz house before you leave to head north.”

“I’ll do that. And if you find what you’re looking for, call on me before you leave the city for good.”

“Of course. Thank you again.”

Kendrick nodded to him as Emery took off toward the door. Before he could open it, however, Dell was at his side. “Where you runnin’ to, sugar?”

He kept to the door then stopped abruptly. “Oh! Dell, I didn’t pay for my meal or my beer. I’m so sorry. Sometimes I get an idea in my head and can’t think of anything else.”

“Oh, honey, I wasn’t worried about that.” But Emery had already pulled the coins out of his pocket and handed them to her, tipping her generously, as she was always good to him. “Boy, where you goin’? You know you can’t afford to do all this. Take this money back.”

But Emery was too elated to worry about money. He practically floated out the door as he left, telling Dell that he couldn’t hear her. As he made his way, the city sprawled out before him. He walked past brownstone houses built side by side, a few with children playing and giggling on the stoops and sidewalks out front. There were various shops, all closed for the evening, and when the steeple of Bruton Parish appeared from behind a building, Emery began walking toward it. But the nearer he got to the church, the more a cold pit grew in his stomach until he finally stopped. Betsy’s words of condemnation were echoing continually louder in his ears, to the point Emery could barely even hear himself breathe. Terror then gripped him at the thought of walking into a church to ask a reverend to help him find his male lover, to help him commit sodomy. *I can’t. I can’t go in there. Is Betsy right? Were Moncure and Father? It’s Elijah, but...not there. Not yet. I just can’t.* Panting and dizzy, Emery ran off away from the church in the direction of the boarding house instead.

Perhaps tomorrow, he thought to himself, fearful and defeated. He arrived back at the

boarding house still no closer to Elijah. It seemed there was always yet one more obstacle.

*

Tuesday, November 20, 1883

We'd been out all day, roaming for miles, wherever our hearts desired. After swimming in a creek we happened across, we decided to trek back home rather than light ourselves a fire as we'd originally planned. We held hands, stopped to kiss—a lot. At one point, Elijah ran to this tree, and started climbing it.

“Where do you think you're going?” I asked.

“I'm gonna climb this tree,” he said, matter-of-factly. “And you gonna climb it with me.”

“And why would I do that? We're both exhausted. I thought we were going home.”

“We are. Right after we climb this tree. Hush now and get on up here. I wanna be on top'a the world with you a while.”

Well, that had gotten me right in the heart. I sighed and smiled, blushing a bit before I started up the tree after him. We climbed until the branches grew too small to hold us, then stopped and leaned on the trunk, he against the bark, me against him, his arms around me. It was so peaceful. I rested my elbows on his thighs, and something squished there unnaturally.

“Is there something on your leg?”

“Shouldn't be.”

He reached gingerly and felt what I had. With some readjustment, he pulled down his pants until we could both see the three black masses attached to the skin and the red inflammation around them.

“Leeches!”

“El, it's okay. They come off. Father showed me how to—”

“Oh Lord, get'em off! Get'em off'a me now!”

“Elijah! Calm down. I know how to get rid of them. Let's go back to the ground, and I'll be

able to get them off of you.”

“No! Get ’em off now!”

“I can’t up here! There’s too much of a breeze. I have to use the matches. Come on, just climb down with me. It’s all right.”

Once we got to the ground—Elijah almost tumbling from the tree on more than one occasion—I lit a match for each leech to burn them off. One burrowed deeper though, at the heat, and his father, had to cut it out with a knife. The next day, Elijah couldn’t go out to work the fields. He was feverish for nearly two weeks after, some sort of infection from the bites.

I dwell on this memory as Dr. Moncure removes the last leech from me. This is my second treatment with them, and I’m dizzy. Oh, I am so dizzy.

*

Chapter Ten

Tuesday, August 25, 1885

It was mid-morning that Tuesday, over a week since Emery had spoken to Kendrick about going to the church and still Emery had not mustered the courage to walk inside. Whenever he drew near, Betsy's outburst aroused his doubts and fears, and he fled. Emery swept the floor of Mr. Tinden's shop absently, shuffling the dust and dirt back and forth without ever actually making the shop any cleaner. He was too distracted by the fact that he had no options. He just had to go. With a sigh, he resigned himself to visit the church after work and ask Father Schwann for his help, risks and insecurities be damned. Emery wanted to go right then, get it over with quickly, instead of dwelling on it. But waiting and hoping were all he had left. He wanted to hold on to that a little while longer, so he tried to get some work done.

The shop was a wooden structure with rough beams and walls and un-sanded floorboards beneath Emery's feet. A large table sat in the center where Mr. Tinden put the finishing touches on smaller pieces, like his steins. Half-finished barrels and butter churns were scattered about, lining the walls, and tools hung from nails in the support pillars, out of the way but always nearby to be of use. The floor was littered with saw dust and wood scraps, the air smelling of cedar. It was a well-worn workshop, popular as Tinden was. That dust and those scraps were Emery's responsibility to sweep, and yet after over an hour, the pile was barely the size of a small rodent.

"Emery!" he suddenly heard Mr. Tinden shout from behind him. He scared Emery, and Emery dropped the broom, scattering the pile he'd managed to accumulate.

“What? I mean! Sorry, what can I do for you, Mr. Tinden?”

“I hollered your name at least four times!” Mr. Tinden scolded. “You still ain’t got this floor swept yet? What the hell you been doing in here?”

“No, but I’ve been working on it. I’m almost done.”

“Almost done, my white behind! Well, you can start over and finish it when you get back. Need you to make a delivery.”

“This early? We don’t usually do any deliveries until the afternoon.”

“Yeah, well, this here’s one of them high class uppity customers. Wife thinks she’s some kinda queen, and the husband treats her like it. Daughter’s the only one down to earth, but she’s a different kinda crazy, ya ask me. Gonna be an old maid, that one. Anyways, they demanded their order be delivered by noon. Need it for this evening, I reckon. That’s where you come in.”

“Okay, sure. Where am I going?”

“It’s the Montaine residence, up over that hill just a few miles outside the north end of the city. You’ll recognize the unique brick pattern they had the damn thing built with. You can’t miss it on the left, ’bout another mile after you crest that hill. Their order is sitting back behind the workshop. Get the horses tied to the cart, take it around back, and I’ll help you load ’er up.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Tinden.” The name Montaine sounded familiar to Emery, a name he’d heard before. But he just couldn’t put his finger on it.

“When you get back, I want this shop spotless, and I want it done in time for the regular afternoon deliveries to be made. So, no lollygagging on this one. Make it quick, boy.”

“Lollygagging? Wouldn’t dream of it, sir.”

Emery set the broom aside and went out to do as he was told. It wasn’t long before he was seated atop the cart, guiding Fire and Susan north and out of the city. The city felt strange to

Emery at that time of day. He was typically only out in the early evenings or when he ran errands in the late afternoons. There was a calmness that Tuesday morning, despite the clouds. They actually added to the serenity, keeping the heat under control. It was an earlier hour of the morning, and the streets had no people out on them quite yet. A breeze blew through the streets, wafting city stench, and it tumbled a crumpled newspaper leisurely across the empty street in front of Emery driving the cart. Emery didn't know if that was the way of things every morning, or just Tuesday mornings, or maybe even just that morning in particular. Either way, it was no matter to him. He only rode along and enjoyed the peace of it. Simple freedoms like these were what Emery liked to take notice of and enjoy. After being locked away for so long, after believing Elijah was dead, there was something so pure, so hopeful, about the open air, being out in the streets of the city to do as he wished. He'd never appreciated something so basic before and was glad of the awareness now.

The sun was rising higher and higher between the clouds, but the heat of the day was not yet unbearable and didn't appear as though it would become so as Emery neared the hill beyond which rested his destination. The air was still moist, but much less so than previous days, and as it looked like a storm was coming, Emery hoped the humidity might all be gone for at least a few sweet hours. Once he left the city behind for the space of the countryside, a cool wind wafted over him and he smelled the rain on it. The horses slowed their pace considerably as they began climbing the soft dirt road up the grassy hill, like a quiet knoll. Tufts of small white flowers peeked up in clusters about the grass. Weeds, to be certain, but still pretty, and they were just fragrant enough to tickle the pleasures in Emery's nose.

When he finally came upon the Montaine house, Mr. Tinden was right; there was no way he or anyone else could have missed it. The brick "pattern" wasn't so much of a pattern as it was the

most uniquely ugly style Emery was ever misfortunate enough to lay eyes on. The builders had used every color brick imaginable, all slapped together haphazardly. There was no visible pattern to the layout of the many colors either. The house just looked like a brown heap. Hideous.

The grounds were kept in mediocre fashion. While presentable enough, instead of improving the look of the house or distracting from it, they almost seemed to mock it, standing in the background as if they refused to associate with the house. The grass was well manicured, though the trees of the landscape could have used better bough arrangement, as if they were all grown intentionally awkward. The flower gardens looked nice enough, but the colors of the buds failed to “pop,” as his mother always said hers popped. The woods providing the rear boundary of the property were more ominous than becoming, like they opened up for a new kind of haunt where the Montaine property began.

The wind rustled the leaves as a shadow settled across the countryside from the clouds that had slowly been gathering above the city and its surrounding areas all morning. The breeze was cooler, comforting the sweat on Emery’s brow. The clouds, white like freshly picked cotton that morning, had gradually grayed, looking more and more dangerous. By the time Emery drove the cart up to the front door of the elegant mud ball house, the sky was darkening as the clouds thickened. The light dimmed, and the wind was picking up. Emery stopped the cart and tied the reins of the horses to a post at the left side of the stairs leading up the porch to the door. With the cart secure, he ascended to the door and knocked twice sharply.

He only waited a moment or two before a beautiful, young colored woman opened the door. “Yes? May I help you?”

She had dark skin that looked soft, protected from the sun, as though she’d taken great care to keep it so. Her head was wrapped in a plain, neutral scarf, which matched the also plain

clothes she was apparently to work in. The harsh angles of her face were in complete contrast with the gentle sparkle in her brown eyes. Emery marveled briefly at how pretty she was, probably thirty or so at the oldest, judging from the faint lines at the corners of her eyes, but she could have easily passed for younger. She was so familiar.

“Excuse me, sir, but is there something I can help you with?” she asked again, pulling Emery back to reality as she looked past him and out to Mr. Tinden’s cart parked in the gravel drive.

“I...yes, I’m sorry, I...you look like someone I used to know.”

“No, sir, I’m quite certain that we ain’t ever met before. Now, is there something you need here? I can’t just be chattin’ away at the door with some young man. I have a lot of work I’m expected to be doin’.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry. Yes, of course. I have a delivery for Mr. and Mrs. Montaine from Mr. Tinden. I was told I’d be expected.”

“Oh, yes, we been lookin’ for you. The missus would like it taken ’round back to the barn at the tree line. Start unloadin’ when you get there and one of the colored boys’ll be around to help you after a bit.”

“Sure, I’ll do that. Thanks for your help, miss.”

“Good day, sir.”

“Liza!” a woman’s voice called from deeper inside the home. “Do come away and close that door! You must be letting in all sorts of bugs and pests. I know you were used to that sort of thing in Africa, but this is America. We’re far too civilized for such things. Come, come!”

“I was born in Georgia, you foolish old goat,” Liza mumbled under her breath as she started to close the door and called back, “Yes, ma’am! So sorry.”

Emery still stood on the porch, open-mouthed. He didn’t snap back to his senses until the

door was nearly shut. With a twitch, he jumped forward and held out his hand to prop the door open and keep Elijah's mother from shutting him out. He had finally caught a bit of luck and he couldn't let it slip away that easily. "Wait!"

His shout startled Liza, and she looked suspiciously at him as she continued to push on the door. "Whatchu want now?"

"Liza? You're Liza?"

"That's been my name since I can remember. You gonna get me in trouble if you don't get gone."

"Wait, please. Where is—?"

"Liza! Door!" the same regal, female voice yelled.

"Where—?"

"I can't. You will go now. Find me later or ask me another day. I'll try to answer whatever it is you wantin'. Now, go."

With that, Liza forced the door closed, and Emery asked his question to the dead air of the porch. "Where is Elijah?"

Emery waited on the porch a few moments longer, hoping against hope that she might return and give him the few seconds he needed to find out where Elijah was. He was so close, and yet far enough away that Emery still couldn't have him back. He wondered if he would ever have Elijah back. As Emery turned away, he kicked at the floorboards beneath his feet, then he walked back to the cart and climbed into the seat, dejected.

He's here, somewhere, he must be! I have to—No, I have to relax. Drawing too much attention, causing a scene, these will be too dangerous now that I'm back in Williamsburg. I'll find him, that much is now clear.

Around behind the house at the tree line where the incline of the hill stopped, Emery saw the barn where was he supposed to leave the delivered goods. Emery steered Susan and Fire there in a moment. As soon as he had parked the cart under the posted awning, a steady rain began, and he cursed his poor luck. He lifted the butter churn over the side of the cart and set it in front of the barn, then did the same with each of the stacks of buckets. The wind picked up, whipping his shirt around him and blowing in heavier drops of rain that soaked him. Emery hooked the ramps to the back of the cart and did his best to carefully roll both of the barrels down to the ground. As he unloaded the second barrel, a loud boom of thunder sounded, followed closely by a bright crack of lightning that fractured the sky. It startled Emery just enough that he lost his grip on the barrel, and the thing tumbled down the ramps and out into the storm. Emery cursed again as he hoped to get done soon enough that he could return to the house for a word with Liza.

The rain was falling so heavily, Emery couldn't even see where the barrel had rolled. Rolling thunder and flashing lightning fought back and forth for dominance in the sky. Emery was about to head out after the barrel, but then decided against it. The rain wouldn't hurt it, and he still had to unload the tub the Montaines ordered. Getting the tub out of the cart ended up being a smoother job than he had anticipated. The wet wood of the tub slid easily down the wet wood of the ramp boards. The problem once it reached the ground was how he would get the tub from where it sat in the middle of the area under the awning over to the wall of the barn so that it was out of the way. Emery tried, but the muddy ground had made it impossible to move the thing any further. The tub was suctioned into the sopping earth, and Emery wasn't wasting any more time. He still had to get that barrel and wanted to ask Liza where Elijah was. Emery couldn't leave until he tried once more to speak with the woman.

Out in the open fury of the still building storm, the full force of it struck him. He knew then

that he was not going to be able to leave the Montaine property until the weather had sufficiently cleared. This fact pleased him as he would have the time and excuse to seek out Liza. Emery walked away from the barn, head bent down against the howling wind and piercing rain. The storm spit the rain out sideways. It stung where the droplets pounded away at his exposed skin. On the air, he could smell the water and the dislodged grass, washed away in rivers of runoff. There wasn't a sound but for the wind and thunder battling to be the loudest noise.

Not until Emery was soaked through to his bones did he finally get close enough to the runaway barrel to lay eyes on it. Quick as he could, Emery got around it and began rolling it back toward the barn. It was rough going between the wind fighting against him and the rain making every step difficult, not to mention the muddy grounds pulling at his boots in places as if trying to hold him there. As he finally neared the barn, Emery barely heard a voice call out over the storm, "Hey there! I's told to come down and help you with gettin' this order unloaded and put away right!"

Well, by then, Emery didn't have any need for the boy's help. He was wet and chilled and annoyed, so he didn't even acknowledge the boy, let alone respond. He kept his head bent low and rolled the barrel straight past him under the awning and set it up next to the other one. Straightening, Emery stretched out his back, sore and tight from hunching against the wind after unloading the whole order.

Emery couldn't turn and speak for a second. He wanted to ask where the hell the boy had been and why he hadn't helped him unload it all like Emery was told he would. He wanted to yell, expel his frustrations about that job and about everything else as well. But, when finally he rounded on the boy, ready to scream and shout, all of his anger got balled up and caught in his throat. Emery coughed with his eyes wide, unable to take a breath.

“Elijah?”

*

Friday, February 29, 1884

“Anderson, today I think we should just talk. You have been treated a number of times, so I thought perhaps we could have a session where we discuss things, talk about what is happening, what you are feeling. Does that sound good to you?”

“I think I’d rather shove that lit candle in my ear,” I tell him, my voice flat. “And would you stop with that ‘Anderson’ nonsense? No one else is in here with us. Call me by my name.”

“Young man, as your treatments progress, the stress upon your mind will increase. The illness is rooted in your whole being, your very mind, body, and soul, and it will take extreme efforts to remedy. As such, forcing your mind to cope with two names under varying circumstances is an unnecessary added stressor. Thus, you will be ‘Anderson’ for the remainder of your stay until such a time as I have cured you of the plague of sodomy. Because I will in fact cure you. Do you understand, Anderson?”

I glare at him. “And what if curing me is beyond your means? What if there is nothing wrong with me to be cured?”

Dr. Moncure laughs openly at the suggestion. “Oh, Anderson, there is something very, very wrong with you. It is an issue of which man has tried to rid itself for millennia. Until now, however, they have tried to treat the problem spiritually. Mankind has believed this disease to be a choice, the result of the temptation of Lucifer. That is not the case. While, yes, the individual does choose to act on the carnal urges, that is a drastic oversimplification. The urges do not stem from something so...banal as ‘temptation’ from some ‘ruler of sin’. The urges are an illness rooted in your brain, in the brains of every man—and to a lesser extent woman—like you. Emery, my peers do not see this yet, believing mental illness to be part of a person. This is not true. You choose to give in to these urges, yes, but what other choice could you have? The

disease has convinced your brain and your body that you can only have sexual release with members of the same gender. It has convinced your brain that it has been changed—and perhaps it has—which is why you are here. Anderson, I have discovered this, have come to this conclusion. With this knowledge, I alone am capable of finally solving one of humanity's most pressing challenges: the bane of the newly coined 'homosexual' existence, sodomy as you know it. That is where you come in, young Anderson."

"So, I'm here to help you show off how important you are?"

"Of course not. You are too simple-minded to comprehend the grand nature of what I shall be accomplishing when I have rid you of this plague. Humanity the world over will know the name 'Moncure'."

"Unless you fail." I have to slip that in there, the doubt. Whether or not his ego can even accept that possibility.

"Oh, but I will not fail. You will be the crowning moment of my career. I have failed with others before you, yes, but in studying those cases, I am more confident than ever about what needs to be done. A harsh combination of treating both the body and the mind simultaneously is the only way to purge this darkness from its hold over you. You will be made better. Then, you will be displayed to the world as Emery Rovenholt, former sodomite, and I will emerge as the doctor who corrected the course of humanity itself."

I let him go off on his little tirade of grandiosity and mutter under my breath, "Challenge accepted, Doctor."

Chapter Eleven

Tuesday, August 25, 1885

Before Emery knew what he was doing, his arms were around Elijah, bodies pressed together, and Emery kissed him. The world dissolved as the cool summer rain, the thunder and flashes of lightning, all created a bubble for the boys beneath the awning of that barn. Emery ran his hands over Elijah's head as Elijah's shock faded and he practically collapsed into the embrace, opening his mouth slightly and deepening the kiss. Their passion began to relax into tenderness, and with that softening, the world returned. Emery realized their exposure and pulled away, taking a step back and clearing his throat. A grin spread over Elijah's face as he averted his gaze, blushing and running a hand down over his chest.

"You here," Elijah whispered.

"I am. My God, you're beautiful. I have missed you every moment." Tears ran from Emery's eyes as he spoke. He was overwhelmed. Elijah cried too, and Emery already longed for his touch again.

Emery couldn't believe his eyes. His mind was awash with memories, overwhelming him to the point that he tipped backward, resting against the dry barrel. He saw Elijah in the meadow beside him, Elijah sitting between his legs, high up in their favorite oak tree, Elijah covering his face as Emery splashed water at him in the pond, Elijah trembling in the hayloft the first night they'd been intimate, Elijah blushing the next day when Emery smiled at him.

With those memories came the nightmares through which the memories had comforted him for those years in the asylum. The leeches squirming against his skin as they fed on him, the cold

terror as the generator buzzed the instant before he was electrocuted, the negro man Dr. Moncure made strip naked and touch Emery to check his progress, reaching out tentatively, not wanting it anymore than Emery did. Emery still felt the man's touch on his face.

"No," Emery whispered, then shouted, "No!" He pushed the man away and crouched, hating himself.

"Emery, stop it. Em, c'mon please. It's me. What's wrong wit'chu?" Elijah's voice cut through the terrors.

"What?" Emery mumbled as he looked around.

"You started talkin' about some man and got all sweaty. I reached out to touch your cheek, and you yelled and shoved me away. What's goin' on wit'chu?"

Good question. I don't know what happened.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"You different. The way you carry yourself, your face, the way you talk. I can see it already. What happened to you?" Elijah moved closer to Emery, crouched beside him.

Elijah moved his arm slowly toward Emery, and Emery wanted it around him so badly. But they couldn't; Emery couldn't take the risk. He reached his hand out and caught Elijah's, lacing their fingers together. He guided Elijah down to sit beside him, their backs against the barn wall between the two barrels. The storm raged on around them with the pounding rain and hearty booms of thunder. He ran his hand over Emery's head.

"And your hair's all gone," Elijah whispered. "Nothin' blockin' that flood of blue from them beautiful eyes."

Emery shivered at the touch, closing his eyes and waiting a moment before he spoke. "I've been through a lot the past couple of years. I guess it...changed me. Let's not talk about that just

now. It's been three years. I don't want to think about...other things." He traced his thumb over Elijah's knuckles, and Elijah gave Emery's hand a squeeze.

"Whatever you want. You workin', right? D'you wanna wait 'til later, this evenin' maybe? If you gotta get back, we can wait."

"Mr. Tinden won't want the horses out in a storm like this, so no, I don't have to get back just yet. As for here and now? I spent three years thinking you were dead and two months looking for you alive. I'm not waiting another second. Please, let's just talk."

"Okay, if you sure. But how'd you get here? I know your daddy put you in that asylum, but how'd you get out?"

Emery wiped his face and looked at Elijah, really looked at him, for the first time in years. Elijah looked older—which of course he was—but he was still exactly as Emery remembered him. He was taller, his shoulders even more broad, his chest thick, his body slimming down to his narrow waist. He looked strong. He had let his hair grow some, a thin layer covering his head, tight curls clinging close to his scalp. His face was the same soft, smooth face Emery recalled, full of kindness; his light brown eyes still shone with innocence and wonder. His lips were full, parted slightly, and Emery longed to feel them against his own again. At seventeen, Elijah was practically a man, but Emery saw the same boyhood friend he'd always loved.

Emery released a heavy exhale, running his free hand over his head. "I escaped. The night of the fire, I managed to get away."

"I was so worried after that night. I was afraid..."

"I was fine. I'm here now."

Looking into Elijah's eyes, Emery didn't have the strength to tell his lover the truth about that night. He explained the fire but didn't give Elijah any details. He couldn't bring himself to

admit it. The lies of omission made Emery uncomfortable, and he found he couldn't look into Elijah's eyes anymore as he relayed selections of his experiences.

"Wait, you gone back to your daddy's plantation?" Elijah interrupted when Emery reached that point of the tale. "Why the hell'd you go and do a fool thing like that?"

Emery couldn't help but laugh. "That picture of us, the one Mother took? I thought you were dead and that was the only piece of you I could have. I couldn't do anything else until I had that picture back."

"You still got that? After all these years?"

"Of course. It's hidden in my things, back at the boarding house."

Elijah looked down, smiling with blush rising in his cheeks. "Lord, I forgot all about that, it was so long ago. But wasn't you afraid of your daddy finding you? Did he see you? What happened?"

More lies.

"No, Father wasn't there. They told me he was off on some kind of business." He told Elijah about talking to Betsy, her admonishments and trying to convince him to stay there. Emery told him about seeing Eloise, which Elijah was particularly interested in. He got distant though, when Levi came up.

"I still can't believe I wasn't there when he...when your daddy...when he died."

Emery explained how he'd been living in the city for the past two months, staying at the Swartz house and working for Mr. Tinden. "And here I am. I'm really glad I didn't end up having to go to that church. Not after everything Betsy said to me."

"What you think about that?" Elijah asked. "Betsy, I mean."

"I don't really know. I don't pretend to understand this, but I can't help how I feel. I know

Betsy didn't mean to be cruel or hateful. She just cares and doesn't understand. I wish she did...I wish a lot of people did. Hell, I wish I did."

"Can't believe all you gone through. The asylum especially. How awful was it?"

Emery shuddered when Elijah brought it up, feeling the switch on his legs every time he dared say Elijah's name. Elijah realized his mistake as a tear ran down Emery's cheek from his glazed eyes. Emery cleared his throat, swiped at his eyes, and sat up.

Elijah reached out to stroke Emery's face as he said quietly, "It's okay. I'm so happy you here with me again. It's okay."

They were quiet, the only noise around them was the pounding rain and the less frequent booms of thunder accompanying the crackles of lightning. The storm was slowly but surely calming, and Emery knew their time together grew shorter. There was so much he wanted to know. "So Eloise tells me you've found your birth mother? Apparently, even before that night in the loft."

"Yeah, I have. Couldn't leave you though, so I couldn't tell you. Knew you'd've told me to go and see her. But I couldn't."

"I know, I know. I talked it over with your mother. She explained everything. I understand. How's that going though? How's Liza?"

"She good. Things was rough when I first got here, us learnin' about each other, gettin' to know each other and stuff. Things is smooth now. She's a great lady."

"How'd you get here though? What happened that night?"

Elijah took a breath, pausing to gather his thoughts. "I ran, had to. When I got here, Liza was real surprised to see me, askin' what I's doin' there and such. I told her how I'd gone and gotten on your daddy's bad side, and she hid me right here in this barn." Elijah stopped and patted the

wall.

“So you call her Liza then?”

“Well, yeah, we...we ain’t got there yet. Eloise is my moms, no matter who birthed me. I’m gonna see what happens. Nothin’ wrong with two mommas, if Liza’s up to it after all this time. But yeah, I only got to hide in this barn ’til Mr. Montaine found me one morning. He’s gonna kill me ’til Liza explained and begged for my life. Had to work a year for free, then he hired me once I proved myself.”

Thank God for that. He was safe. All this time, and he was safe.

“That’s a lot. I’m really happy it all worked out for you.” Emery smiled at him, and Elijah squeezed his hand again.

“Me too. I mean, it was tough at first, but things is good now, especially since your momma got settled in. I was real lonely, not knowin’ nobody but Liza, and then—”

“Mother is here? How, when?” Emery was taken aback. He didn’t quite believe Elijah, though he’d never had a reason to distrust him.

Settled in where? Here? How is that even possible?

“Your momma, she here,” Elijah said, like Emery just wasn’t keeping up. Then, he took in the look on Emery’s face and his eyes went wide; the hand he rose to his mouth muffled his words a bit. “Oh. Oh, no. You ain’t know she was here.”

Tears gathered in Emery’s eyes as he shook his head slowly back and forth.

“Emery, look at me,” Elijah said, reaching up and raising Emery’s chin. Once he’d caught Emery’s eye, he continued. “What you doin’ here if you didn’t even know your momma was here? Why’d you come back to this place?”

“For you!” Emery shouted, much too loudly for how calmly the storm had settled. He

lowered his voice considerably. "Of course for you. What else?"

"Oh, Em." Elijah's voice was sad as it trailed off.

"It's the same as you not telling me about finding Liza and not meeting her because you didn't want to leave me. So, don't start, Elijah."

Elijah chuckled and put his hands up in surrender. "You right, you right. But how come you didn't know she's here?"

"Because no one else knows she's here! Father, Betsy, you mother, everyone swore they had no idea where Mother had gone when she left Father. They all think she just ran off in grief or something. Are you saying someone did know?"

"No, Miss Carolyn didn't want me tellin' nobody, didn't want your daddy findin' out and comin' lookin' for her. I'm sorry. I should've told someone."

"No, this was better. I found out. I know now. That's all that matters. But how did Mother end up here? Why did she leave?"

"I can't speak on why your mamma left. I ain't never felt like it was my place to ask. Alls I can tell you is how. A couple months back, I got a letter from your mamma. Shocked the hell outta me, it did. She asked for my help movin' her outta your daddy's house. Letter said she couldn't say too much, just that she talked to my mamma and found out the truth about everything. Said she needed to leave your daddy and move to Williamsburg as soon as possible, asked if I'd be willin' to help her. I wrote back and told her of course I'd help. Then I waited.

"Got a letter the very next day, quicker than I ever seen. Come to find out, she sent it without ever seein' my letter, said if I's willin' to help, I had to be at the plantation on March 18, just a week away. Your daddy was gonna be outta town and that was when she wanted to be leavin'. I talked to Liza and a couple other negro folks we work with and we figured somethin' out. I

‘borrowed’ one’a the Montaines’ carriages; they got so many, they’d never notice one missin’, so long as I wasn’t gone too long. And they didn’t. Notice, I mean.”

“What about you being gone? The Montaines didn’t notice?”

“Oh, they don’t care what negro does what work, so long as it’s a negro doin’ it and it gets done right and quick like. Long as I hurried, the others said they’d lie and cover for me whenever I needed.”

“Okay, so what happened?”

“I left that evenin’, once the Montaines were fed and settled in for the night, and I drove like hell straight to the plantation. Your momma was surprised when I pulled up in the carriage. We loaded all her things and left that minute. We’s back by late morning the very next day. I dropped her off at the boarding house and sneaked the carriage back to the Montaines.”

“Boarding house? Which one?”

“I ain’t for sure. Swartz or somethin’?”

“Widow Swartz’s? She stayed there, where I’m staying now?”

“Sure, if that’s the one. She was there only a couple weeks at most. Said it smelled funny.”

Emery shook his head and laughed despite the situation. She was right; it did smell funny, like dirty house pet and moldy food, vegetables to be specific. “Where did she go when she left the boarding house then?”

“She bought herself a house. Been livin’ there about three, four months now, I’d say. Just north of the university. I been there for Sunday lunch with her a few times. She likes to keep in touch, make sure I’m okay. Mostly she always talks about you up in that asylum and tryin’ to get you out.”

“Can we go there? Right now?” Emery jumped up, ready to abandon everything now that

he'd found Elijah and could find his mother as well.

Elijah chuckled at Emery's enthusiasm. "You know darn well we can't do that, ain't no way. I got work to get done still and you gotta get back to that cooper. Ain't you gonna be in trouble, bein' gone long as you have?"

He knew Elijah was right. They'd been talking for over an hour at the very least. Mr. Tinden was going to have his hide if he didn't get back soon. And yet, Emery found himself not caring, irresponsible as he knew that was. The storm had cleared up. The sky was lighter, the clouds were barely moving, and there was only a light sprinkle falling, which Emery knew would soon stop as well. "You're right. You're right, I have to get back. And I can't keep you from your work any longer. You've gotten into more than enough trouble on my account. When could you take me to see her?"

"We can't go right now but why don't I take you to see her Saturday evening?"

"I can't wait until Saturday! It's only Tuesday!"

"Emery, she left yesterday to visit your Aunt Edna. She ain't gonna be back 'til Saturday morning sometime anyway. We'll meet and I'll take you then."

"Okay. Yes, if that's the soonest we can, that will have to be fine."

Four days? The anticipation will kill me. I've waited this long, though, and it seems I've no other choice. And, I have Elijah. That was the most important thing. Everything else can wait, even Mother.

"Saturday, then." Elijah squeezed Emery's hand that he still held and smiled.

When Elijah turned and began to pull his hand away, Emery gripped it tighter and pulled him back. "El, wait."

Elijah spun into the pull and landed against Emery's chest into a passionate kiss. Elijah's

lips, their firmness against his own, felt new to Emery, and so familiar all at once. He used to know their every line and movement. Slowly, he was remembering and couldn't wait to reacquaint himself all over again. Lightning struck and thunder rolled inside Emery. A storm built, winds of happiness and hope whirled him into a frenzy he floated on. He broke the kiss, and Elijah beamed at him, cheeks bright. He looked down shyly, taking a step back. Emery exhaled heavily and returned his smile.

"Can I see you tomorrow?" Elijah asked quietly.

"There is nothing I would rather do. Just tell me when and where, and you know I'll be there."

"After dinner. We can go for a walk and just talk. There ain't gonna be many people out then. Can we do that?"

"Of course we can. How about down by the university, the Main Building?"

"Yeah, let's do that."

"I'll see you then, El."

Elijah smiled again. "See you tomorrow."

With that, Elijah turned around and trudged back up the hill to the Montaine house. Emery watched him the whole way, unmoving, until Elijah disappeared from view into a side door. Even once he was gone, Emery kept watching, waiting for one extra glimpse, though he knew it wouldn't come. Emery was in a daze as he climbed into the seat of the cart. As he snapped the reins, sending Susan and Fire up the hill and onto the road, Emery felt like someone else was controlling his limbs, going through the motions. Emery's mind remained back at the Montaine house with Elijah, always with Elijah. It wasn't until he brought the horses and cart to a stop that Emery realized he remembered nothing of the trip back. He hadn't noticed a single house,

person, tree, or garden. He couldn't believe he made it back to the shop without incident.

Emery stepped down from the cart and started undoing the harnesses holding the cart to the two horses. He was sure there were supposed to be afternoon deliveries that day. Mr. Tinden had said as much before Emery left for the Montaines'. However, now it was much too late to be taking deliveries out. The storm had delayed Emery, and Elijah had delayed him even longer. He was sure the storm would be enough to keep Mr. Tinden off of him. It wasn't quite yet dinner time; Emery knew from the position of the sun. He had just released the last strap of the harness when he heard the door of the shop slam open with such force, Emery jumped back a step. Mr. Tinden stood in the doorway, scowling like Emery had never seen before.

"Tie them to that post and get in here, boy," Mr. Tinden commanded.

"Sir, I can have them put away in just a second, that way you don't have to worry about it." Emery offered. "Then, I'll be inside right after. I'm really sorry I came back so late. That storm was so intense. I'm sure the customers will understand."

"Tie them to post. Now. And get your ass in here."

Emery swallowed hard and did as he was told.

*

Friday, April 11, 1884

There is a new volunteer in my ward. She has to be new, as I would have noticed her before, the way she makes eyes at me when she walks into my room carrying my meals. Today was the first time I saw her. She carried in breakfast, lunch, and dinner with a cheerful “Hello,” but she said nothing else. She stared a lot, though I don’t know why. Perhaps I’m the first asylum patient—the first lunatic—with which she’s ever interacted. But that can’t be true, as she must deliver meals to more than just my room.

I know also that she must be a volunteer. She is young, plain looking, with not much remarkable about her, but young, too young to be a nurse, new or not. And she is too well put together to actually be working. Her hair and her makeup are signs of her high-class status, though clearly she left her jewelry at home. Smart woman. Who is she? Why would she come here, willingly, to an asylum? I realize she must really come from some nobility or money. Only that can explain her willingness to work here in a place of such dark torment and twisted mentality. She is ignorant of the world around her, sheltered by her money, the way I was for my entire life until the day Father found me with Elijah and changed everything. Since then, I’ve learned what sort of place the world really is. Dark and twisted, kind only to those who “fit” into a proper place. That is not me, and it has never been. And now, it never will be again.

*

Chapter Twelve

Wednesday, August 26, 1885

The campus of the College of William and Mary was quiet that evening as Emery walked across the front of the Main Building, watching robins flutter between branches of the many trees shading the open yard separating the college and the beginning of the merchant square. He stopped at a plaque and read about the building, a beautiful brick structure built between 1695 and 1699, after the college was chartered by King William III and Queen Mary II, for whom it was named. Emery had planned on attending the college once upon a time, when he graduated from the Academy. Now, that was little more than a glimmering dream. At least it had been, before he found both Elijah and his mother. Since the previous afternoon, his head had been filled to the brim with visions and dreams of what his life might become now that he'd found the two people who mattered most to him in the world.

Emery had fantasies of being back on the plantation, everyone freed from the overbearing shadow of his father. He would run things side by side with his mother, and once they rebuilt everything his father had let fall into ruin when his mother left, the plantation would flourish again. He could pay the workers better, certainly treat them better than his father did, and best of all, he would have Elijah there with him through all of it. Betsy would cook their meals then sit down to eat with them. Perhaps he would even invite Eloise and Marcus to move up into the big house with them. Lord knew there were enough rooms for them. Emery would work down in the fields, get his hands dirty, do whatever it took, just like he used to. He wasn't above the same hard labor his workers did, and his father wouldn't be around to stop him. Then maybe, once the

plantation was running smoothly again, he really could go to university. Not at the College of William and Mary, of course, as there was no chance of going there, or anywhere in Virginia really, but he could go, perhaps somewhere in the north, like New York. He could do anything now. He felt like the world was in the palm of his hand. He had choices now, options, for the first time in his life.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Emery caught the motion of a person walking and flashed his attention that way, expecting it would be Elijah. However, it was just a young boy, likely on his way home from some class at the William and Mary Grammar School. Emery sighed. He was so anxious, had been all day, and there was nothing to distract his mind or occupy him whatsoever as Mr. Tinden had fired him the previous day because of how late he returned. Emery had been upset about it at the time, because of the storm and all, but that night he realized it didn't matter. He wasn't in the city to become a cooper; he'd accomplished what he came back for, and so had no need for Mr. Tinden. The man had sure torn into him, though, about bringing the cart and horses back so late.

Emery found the whole situation just the slightest bit amusing, as he never intended to really apprentice with the man. He simply needed a way to make money in the interim. And he had done just that. He'd made money, he'd survived, and now, it was time for him to move on to better things and places. As such, he had the whole day free and so he had explored a bit, trying to keep his mind off of the wait for evening and his seeing Elijah once more. He walked about, looked in a few shops, but he never bought anything. He couldn't afford to be frivolous with his money. He tried to go by Kendrick's shop and pay him a visit, but the shop was closed down, probably because Kendrick had just sold it. Emery could have gone to Kendrick's house, but he wasn't in the mood for such intimate conversation.

Emery was just beginning to contemplate sleeping arrangements back at the plantation as far as he and Elijah, imagining the glory of falling asleep in each other's arms and then waking still in each other's arms, when he felt a hand gently fall on his shoulder and grip it lightly. Despite the affection of the touch, Emery jumped to his feet, startled and afraid he'd been found by the wrong sort of person. He saw Elijah smiling at him and immediately felt foolish.

"Hey," Elijah said with a nervous quiet in his voice.

"Hey yourself. You okay?" Emery asked.

Elijah didn't speak at first; instead he simply looked into Emery's eyes, contentment washing over his face. After a moment, Elijah closed his eyes, shaking his head, and exhaled softly.

"Yeah, Em, I'm great now. Had to make sure it was real, that I hadn't just dreamed the whole thing last night."

"Good. And yes, it is very real. So what shall we do?"

"Why don't we walk through the campus, maybe up 'round the north side of the city? We can just see where the evenin' takes us."

Emery laughed. "I've actually been through the campus already today. I had a while to wait."

"You wasn't workin' today?"

"Umm...no." Emery laughed again, running an awkward hand over the top of his head and through his short hair. They started walking off the campus toward the north side of the city.

"The old man fired me yesterday when I got back. Said I'm too irresponsible to train in his shop anymore."

"Oh, no. I'm sorry. It's all my fault, I never should'a kept you talkin' and such like we was. I'm real sorry. Please—"

"El, hush," Emery said firmly as the boy kept on with his apologies. "It wasn't your fault. I

didn't need to work for him anymore. I can get out of here now that I've found you and Mother."

Elijah's face changed at Emery's words, falling like he was disheartened, and his eyes were sad. He looked down and away. "So you leavin'. When you plannin' that for?"

Emery was confused by Elijah's despondent tone, but it quickly dawned on him. "I haven't planned that far. It all depends on you, whether or not you'll come with me and when you can leave if you'll come."

Elijah's head popped back up, eyes wide and smile large, all teeth. "You ain't leavin' me? You want me to come with you?"

"Of course! Did you think I put so much effort into finding you just to say 'hi' and 'bye'? It's you and me, El. However...I can't stay in this city. It's too dangerous, and I'll always be hunted. So it is my deepest hope that you'll be willing to leave with me."

"Well...when we gotta leave?" Elijah's voice turned uncertain. "I just...I don't wanna have to leave Liza so soon if I don't gotta."

Emery thought about that. "We don't have to leave right this minute, but...I don't want to stay in the city any longer than necessary. Every day, a staff member from the asylum could recognize me, Moncure could drag me back and bury me so deeply I'd never see light again. Things are probably still a mess after the fire, but I was too important to Moncure's work for him to ever give up on finding me."

"Sure, I know. I just gotta figure stuff out. But you right, it wasn't even safe for you to be here this long."

"It was worth the risk." Emery reached out and gave Elijah's hand a brief squeeze.

They walked on in silence for a while, just looking around at the scenery outside the busier metropolitan area of Williamsburg. They watched as buildings separated and lawns grew; trees

accumulated more frequently. The silence was companionable; they enjoyed the simplicity of just being near one another. After a time, they happened upon a small tavern, if they could even call it such. The roof had shingles missing, a few of which still lay in the yard where they'd fallen. The wood siding was rotted in places, with gaping holes revealing the wood beneath. Of the five stairs leading up to the doorway, only two remained: the second and the fifth. The fourth, split in half, was still where it had been broken in two. The windows were covered in such grime that neither Emery nor Elijah could see inside well enough to tell whether it was lighted, indicating whether or not it was even still open for business. As they stopped at the bottom of the two-fifths staircase, Emery looked at Elijah with one raised eyebrow and a smirk.

“What?” Elijah asked, looking from Emery to the rundown tavern and back again. “Wait, you wanna go in here? It don’t even look open. The ale’s probably watered down and the food ain’t gonna be anything but bad.”

“Did you eat anything before you came to meet me?” Emery asked. Elijah shook his head. “Okay, I thought so. I haven’t eaten either. What better place to have a bite of dinner together than here? No one of import is likely to stumble across us in a place as much in shambles as this tavern.”

“You right, but...you gonna be comfortable eatin’ food outta a place like this? I ain’t sure I am. Besides, they won’t let me in here anyways. And we can’t just sit down and eat together.”

“A shabby place like this? They’ll take any business they can get, I’m sure of that. Do you have a better idea of maintaining discretion?”

“Well, not sitting down together would be discrete. We could always go back to your room at the boardin’ house,” Elijah suggested. He wrung his hands as his foot dug into the dirt of the pathway.

Emery tensed instantly. He did in fact have a bit of food back at his room in the icebox, but he was nervous about having Elijah alone in his private quarters. The thought excited him while at the same time making him anxious. They had been apart for over three years. He wasn't sure how exactly they would find their way back to each other. Plus, they had only reconnected yesterday, and Widow Schwartz could evict him if she caught him fraternizing with a negro in his room. Emery tried not to think too hard about what it would be like if they were alone in such a confined place, with nothing but a bed for them. So instead, he lied again. "I don't have anything of substance in my room. Let's just eat here. I'm sure everything will be fine."

"No, it won't. C'mon, I don't wanna go in there."

"Elijah, no one will do or say anything, I promise. Let's just have a nice meal together," Emery insisted.

"I said no!" Elijah shouted, startling Emery for a moment. "It ain't gonna be 'fine'! But you ain't got no clue what it's like bein' black. Your thinkin' don't work like that! What you think's gonna happen in there? Whatever dirty old white hillbilly's behind the bar is gonna let a negro just sit there, drink outta his glasses, and eat off'a his plates? Hell no! You settin' us up for a fight, not listenin' to me! I don't wanna deal with that!"

Emery's eyes were wide open as his jaw hung in shock. Elijah's words chastised him, but he knew he deserved it. He couldn't understand how he'd been so naïve. But deep down, he knew he had become too blinded in his ecstasy of having finally found Elijah, having found his mother. He couldn't afford to be that careless.

"You're right," Emery said, so quietly Elijah barely heard it at all. "You're right, and I'm sorry. It won't happen again, I promise."

Elijah exhaled a heated breath and kicked sharply at the dirt path. Hands on his hips, he

inhaled slowly to calm himself. “It’s all right. The way you was born, the way you was raised, it’s a wonder you got any heart at all for us negroes, let alone the love I know you hold in your heart. I can’t expect you to know things that just ain’t part of your world. I shouldn’t’ve got so mad.”

“Yes, you should have. I had no right to be so presumptuous. My eyes aren’t as open to the world as I’d have myself believe. You’re right to be angry with me. I really am sorry.”

Emery closed the gap between them and put his hand on Elijah’s shoulder. Elijah lifted his own hand and placed it atop Emery’s. He nodded, looking down at his feet. Emery looked around at the few people out on the streets and pulled his away. Neither said a word until Elijah changed topics.

“So where we gonna go now?”

Without hesitation, Emery answered, “My room.”

Elijah’s eyes popped open a moment before a shy smile crept onto his face. “Okay,” he muttered, turning in that direction as Emery led the way to the Swartz house. Walking through the outskirts, it took the boys about thirty extra minutes to get there. As they went down the block, Emery had to first scope out the house to see the easiest way for sneaking Elijah inside without the notice of Widow Swartz or her two Swedish boarders. It wasn’t that Emery couldn’t have guests; he was renting the room, so nothing could be done, save for the fact that Elijah was black, a fact certain to get Emery evicted. And, neither Emery nor Elijah needed the attention of anyone noticing Elijah going up, especially in the event that anyone should start asking questions.

The house was a Mansard style home with three stories. The top two floors had been reconfigured into rooms for rent—both short and long term—and boarders shared the existing

bathrooms. Widow Swartz mainly kept to the first floor, having moved her bedroom there before opening her doors to others. With a front porch of painted oak, the outside was part brick, part siding, and the siding was painted a rose color. A stone chimney ran up each side of the house, and there were many windows. When the two drew nearer, Emery peered in those windows to see where everyone was. It was late and Emery hadn't expected to still find the three residents seated in the dining room, yet there they were when he crouched under and past the window. That meant the back door would be clear for Emery and Elijah to slip up the rear staircase and into Emery's room.

Inside and halfway up the stairs, Emery heard Mrs. Swartz calling to him, and he stiffened. "Mr. Smith? Emery, that you, boy? You gonna come have a bite to eat with us?"

Let her kick me out. I've found Elijah and Mother. I'm done with this city and everything in it.

Elijah gave Emery a questioning look, but Emery waved him off and pressed a finger to his lips. Then he called to the woman, "Not tonight, Mrs. Swartz. Thank you, but I had a really long day and just grabbed a snack on the way back. I'm going to head to bed and get some sleep."

"Okay, sleep well." Then her voice got quieter as she spoke to the Swedish couple. "He's such a nice boy, always workin' so hard."

"We should be good now," Emery whispered as they sneaked up the last few steps and down the hall to Emery's room. The hall was sparse on decorations, with but a few floral or landscape paintings attempting to create a feeling of homeliness.

"Mr. Smith?" Elijah asked with a smirk.

"Well, I wasn't very well going to give my real name here, though I went back and forth on it. She thinks I'm Emery Smith."

Elijah laughed as Emery locked the door behind them, then he looked around and took in the few comforts and amenities of the room. The single bed crossed the room horizontally in front of him with the head in the center of the left wall. Inside the door, a wall ran along the left side of the jamb, breaking a few feet in, where a closet was set into the alcove. Across the bed from the closet ran the wall facing the street where a single window looked out. A dresser and vanity mirror were set against the right wall, a few feet from the foot of the bed. The striped wallpaper clashed with the bright floral pattern on the bed spread. The dark cherry wood of the dresser was in contrast with the blonde oak of the bedside table. It was a hastily prepared contradiction. Elijah could only smile at it, shaking his head slowly.

“So this where you been sleepin’?” he asked Emery.

“Yes, this is where I’ve been calling home.” Emery walked over to the closet inside of which the icebox was located. He pulled out two hunks of cheese and some dried cured meat for the two of them. “Would you like some? I’m sure you’re at least as hungry as I am.”

Elijah eyed the food suspiciously before reaching out his hand. “Thought you didn’t have anything ‘of substance’ here in your room? Ain’t that what you done told me outside that awful tavern?”

“Oh. Yes, well, I thought I’d eaten it last night, but I was so overwhelmed by everything that...” Emery’s voice trailed off at the look on Elijah’s face. It was clear he didn’t believe Emery. “Okay, I lied. I was nervous about being alone with you and so close, so I tried to put it off. But after the tavern, I realized I didn’t need to be nervous. You’re you and I’m me. We’ve known each other longer than almost anyone else has known us. So I invited you here after all. Are you upset with me?”

Elijah sighed and rubbed his face. “No, I ain’t upset with you. I just wish you didn’t feel you

had to lie to me. You can tell me anything, Em. You should'a just told me how you was feelin'. I would'a understood. I do understand."

"I'm sorry. Again. I have much to be sorry for," Emery said.

"What you mean?"

Emery looked at Elijah a moment then averted his eyes to the floorboards. "Nothing. It's nothing, El."

Elijah watched Emery but said nothing more about it. He took a bite of the meat and chewed it thoughtfully. Emery ate in silence as well, unsure about what else to say next. But Elijah had more curiosities. "Tell me about how you escaped. All you told me last night was you managed to get out during the fire. But how?"

Emery sat down heavily on the bed on the opposite side of Elijah. He set his remaining cheese down, no longer concerned with food as his anxiety got the better of his stomach. He couldn't tell Elijah what he'd done to Lawrence...what he'd done to Jane, he just couldn't. So, Emery told Elijah the other details of the night, only admitting to stealing supplies in the city. That was the most minor of his sins, so he felt he could divulge that. He made sure to tell it all with enough detail that hopefully Elijah wouldn't ask again. Not that Elijah should have had any reason to suspect Emery was leaving anything out. Emery knew he was simply concerned.

"I still just can't believe it," was all Elijah said in the long pause after Emery finished.

"Yes, it was quite an interesting night," Emery said cagily before a thought clouded his face. "So you and Mother were both in the city, but...no one ever tried to get me out. I was there for so long, and neither of you tried to get me released."

"Oh, that ain't true. Em, you gotta know that ain't true." Elijah rose from the bed and went to sit next to Emery, wrapping his arms around the boy. "Your momma tried, but that's her story to

tell. And I'm just some negro. What was I gonna do to get you out? We didn't know what you was goin' through, Em. If we had, I'd've burnt that place to the ground myself to get you out. I'm so sorry all that happened to you there."

"Okay, and what about Mother?"

"I don't know. She stopped havin' me over after that fire. I seen her walkin' through town one evening, looked like a ghost, she did. She mumbled how worried she was a few times, fearin' the worst, then she was gone with not even barely a word. Ain't seen her since. She sent word to me Saturday last about goin' to visit her sister. So I wouldn't worry, she said."

Emery was quiet, his heart hurting for his mother, still hurting himself as well, wondering why she left him inside that terrible place even when she was right there in the city. "How am I going to see her Saturday then, if she turns down your requests to see her? You can't really tell her about me in a letter to get her to accept."

"I thought about that and we just gonna go knock on her door that evening. It ain't really proper to show up all unannounced, but we don't got the means to be proper right now."

"You're right, of course. That will be fine. I haven't been concerned with propriety in a long while now," Emery said with a short, humorless laugh. When quiet fell, Emery reached out for Elijah's hand, caressing his palm and playing with his fingers.

Elijah cupped Emery's cheek, pressing his forehead against Emery's. They breathed in time with each other for a few moments, eyes closed. Elijah leaned his face in until his lips found Emery. It was soft at first, tentative, but soon they were a flurry, mouths opening, tongues intertwining. They lay back on the bed as their hands slipped inside each other's clothing. With much effort, Emery pulled back and Elijah kissed down his neck instead.

"Please," Emery panted, "stay with me tonight."

Elijah stopped, facing Emery and looking deep into his water blue eyes. “Of course.”

Emery nodded, taking his mouth down to meet Elijah’s skin once more, and they both tasted each other for the first time in years, all of their various parts reacquainting. Elijah’s hands held Emery’s head as Emery’s fingers danced up and down Elijah’s taut chest and stomach. Elijah’s grip moved down Emery’s neck to his back where Emery felt him kneading the muscles. He moaned at the tingle Elijah caused him. Their touches were gentle but intense, each taking his time so each moment lasted longer.

Crickets chirped and the occasional owl hooted as Emery and Elijah matched with noises of their own, trying so hard to contain and muffle their gasps and moans. But they found this to be quite a challenge. Long into the night and into the wee hours of the morning, the two never once separated. Some part of Elijah was always touching Emery, while a part of Emery never left Elijah. They explored each other more thoroughly than either ever had before.

*

Wednesday, May 7, 1884

“Anderson, after almost two years, I do believe we have reached a point where it is time for a firm progress evaluation,” Dr. Moncure announces when he enters my room.

“Not my...” I let the words trail off, because I just don’t know anymore. “I’m better. I’ve told you I’m better. How are you going to test whether or not I’m still having the thoughts? They’re going away. Why don’t you believe me?”

Panic. I can’t imagine in what manner he wants to evaluate me, but experience tells me it will be bad. Painful. It’ll hurt like the crib when I’m a baby. Hurt like the leeches when they drain the bad things from me.

“Calm down, just breathe.” His voice is relaxed, trying to soothe me. The scars won’t let him. “This will not hurt. It is a simple evaluation, just to make sure your treatment is having the desired results.”

“But I’ve already told you it is! Why don’t you believe me?”

I’m weeping now, unable to control myself. Pathetic sobs, like a small child torn from its mother. I don’t want him to do anything else to me. I don’t want...

“Anderson, I do believe you. But the mind can play funny tricks on a person. Results must be tested, verified. This will not hurt.”

“But, how can you test my thoughts? You can’t unless you—no! Please, don’t cut me open. I’ll do anything, please!”

“I am not going to cut you open. I will tell you for the third and final time that I am not going to hurt you. Do not make me send for the ether. I need you awake for the evaluation. While, no, I cannot test your thoughts, I can test your body’s reaction to stimuli. Remember, I said both mind and body need treated, as the disease is embedded so deeply. If it can be dislodged from the

body, the cure for the mind will follow shortly. The body is not so fickle as the mind. So we test reactions, adjust treatment accordingly, and plow ahead. We will make you whole again. Are you ready to begin?"

My breathing evens and my pulse slows. I guess I have no choice but to believe him. He'll do what he's going to do either way. I nod my head once.

"Very good," Dr. Moncure says then calls toward the door. "Will you come in here, please?"

I'm surprised a moment at the young man who enters my room. He's black, probably in his twenties, and looks as though he should be out in the fields right now. His hair is longer, standing like a bush atop and around his head, but his face is clean-shaven. Surprise turns to confusion. He obviously doesn't work at the asylum. Why has he been brought into this room with me?

"Just as we discussed," Dr. Moncure tells him, nodding in my direction. The man hesitates, and his eyes dart around the room, never once resting on me. "Do it now, or I will see to it your family is removed from the plantation and your children starve."

The man's glare could wilt Mother's tulips, but he hangs his head and approaches me. At the end of my bed, he stops and begins undressing himself, eyes never leaving the window at the ceiling across the room I've been brought to for this test. I stare at the wall, too embarrassed by the idea of seeing this stranger naked.

"Look at him, Anderson. We need to see if his actions cause a reaction in you."

My gaze drifts over as understanding dawns in me, and I'm hooked. His wide shoulders introduce a broad chest and taut abdominals and...Elijah.

I look away, feeling a blush fill my cheeks. He's going to know; a pressure mounts in my

trousers. He's going to find out I've been lying; the fabric begins to pull. He'll put me back in the crib, purge me again, and the venesection, the leeches; no, I can't. I'll think of anything else. I can't let him know. I can't react. Don't look.

"Look!"

The sharp sound pulls my attention to Dr. Moncure, who stands next to the nude man. I won't—Elijah.

The man walks over to me and sits next to me on the bed. He turns his head to the doctor, who nods affirmation. The man sighs. Leaning over me, he braces himself with an arm on either side of my body, caging me in with his. His skin is dark and smooth; he must not grow much body hair. My erection is stiff and throbbing, and I hate myself. The man frees it from my trousers and grabs it, stroking me up and down. I hate it and love it. As I try to move away, Dr. Moncure speaks.

"No. You will continue." He holds a notepad and pencil, taking notes.

"Please. Don't. I'm sorry." I'm crying now, squeezing my eyes shut and shaking my head back and forth.

After what seems an eternity, I orgasm, and the mess is all over my shirt. I curl into a ball and sob, not even bothering to re-cover myself with my pants. The man rises without a word and goes to his pile of clothes to dress. I don't move, don't look at them; I can't open my eyes.

"I figured as much. Thank you. That will be all."

I don't have any words. I hear them leave and the tears continue to stream down my face as snot runs out of my nose and into my mouth. I don't even wipe myself off. Terror over what Dr. Moncure might do to me next consumes me. I don't know what could possibly be worse or more effective, but Dr. Moncure seems to be a creative man. He will come up with something. I just

want to die. I pray for it as I clutch my knees to my chest and rock back and forth.

*

Chapter Thirteen

Saturday, August 29, 1885

Saturday came, and Emery was a nervous wreck. He'd been pacing Mrs. Rovenholt's block from corner to corner. Elijah followed behind, trying to calm him down, but Emery's stomach was a mess of knots and had been all morning as he waited for four o'clock to come around. Elijah couldn't meet earlier because of his duties for the Montaines, so the two boys met at the gazebo on the north end of the university campus, as it was only a few blocks from Mrs. Rovenholt's residence.

All day, Emery had straightened and re-straightened his clothes for that evening, refusing to put them on until the last possible moment, for less risk of soiling them in any way. He scrubbed his shoes for over an hour until there couldn't have been a trace of anything on them. He couldn't stop fidgeting no matter what he did. His body was so energized with nerves, he felt like he would explode if he sat still for even a moment. Hence the pacing up and down the block as Elijah tried to convince him that he just had to walk up the porch steps and knock on the door.

"No, I just can't. I don't know what to say. How will I face her? No, let's go. We'll try some other time." Emery rambled excuses and questions and denials.

This is such a bad idea. We should have waited. Elijah should have told her first, then brought me to her, only if she wanted. She probably doesn't. This is dumb. What am I even doing?

"Stop this right now," Elijah scolded him quietly. "We ain't doin' this another day. You been waitin' to see her, and she deserves to know you all right. I know it's hard, and you nervous. But

it's gotta be done, Em."

Emery ran a flustered hand through his hair as a matching flustered noise escaped his lips. "What do I say to her? How do I act? I don't even know if I'm still mad at her. I'm so afraid of what's about to happen, because I just don't know."

"I know you scared," Elijah said, reaching a hand up toward Emery's face, only to catch himself halfway and snatch his hand back, scratching his nose instead. Emery wished Elijah had touched him like he tried. "But why would you be angry with her? You said my momma explained what happened. Your daddy lied to her to get you into that asylum. It weren't her fault."

"Wasn't it, though? No matter what Father told her, she still *let* him lock me away in that hellish place. She rode next to me, wouldn't look at me or speak to me, like I wasn't even there! She watched as that man took me inside, and I never saw her again! She didn't have to let that happen!"

"No, she didn't have to, you right. But Emery, you don't know the whole story. No matter what you feel, ain't it gonna make more sense once you got all the answers, whether you still mad or not? And you can only get those answers from your momma."

"What if she doesn't want me?" Emery asked, his whole demeanor changing. His voice was so quiet it was almost inaudible.

"Of course she gonna want you! Why you think she even in this city? She don't care about what's between you and me or any of your daddy's lies. She loves you because you her baby. And you need to hear her tell you that herself."

Emery nodded slowly at the ground as he watched it pass beneath his feet. But Elijah didn't know Emery's true fears. *Will she want me, though? I don't know how can she love me after all*

I've done, all I had to do to escape and protect myself. She wouldn't still be in the city at all if she knew about the fire, what I did to Jane and to Father. Then there's me and Elijah...Eloise said that Mother understood, but how could she possibly know? Mother ran back to the house after they talked. Eloise thought she ran away to get me out, but she had months to do that and didn't. She left me in there.

He sighed heavily as Elijah guided him into a turn, and when he looked up to wipe the tears from his eyes, Emery found Elijah and himself standing at the foot of four stairs leading up to an elaborate white painted porch. The trim around the windows and door were white to match while the wood-paneled siding was painted the softest of yellows. It was one of the smallest two-story houses Emery had come across, less than half the size of his family's plantation house, but it was quaint in a way he felt was fitting for his mother.

"So this is..." Emery started to say, letting his voice trail off as he took in every detail.

"Yeah, this the house your momma bought after she runned off from your daddy."

Flowers bloomed in the window boxes, already bold and beautiful. Emery could only imagine what the garden in the back looked like, especially if his mother had needed to distract herself from her grief, since Elijah implied she'd been deep in that grief. Emery's heart ached for the afternoons spent in the plantation gardens with his mother, chatting idly while they pruned bushes and weeded flowerbeds. They had negroes enough for that, but Mrs. Rovenholt always said they were her flowers, and she wanted to be solely responsible for their beauty. The negroes had enough work to do anyway, and she was more than capable of tending to her gardens on her own, as she would say.

"I can't. No, I can't. No, no, no, no," Emery repeated as he tried to back away down the walk.

Elijah caught him by the shoulders, slowly working Emery toward the stairs and up them one at a time. “Em, we already here. We doin’ this. You doin’ this. Just knock, and everythin’ else’ll just happen from there.”

Emery stood at the door and raised his fist, then put it back down before his knuckles could meet the door. With a deep breath, he tried again, but it met with the same result: his hand at his side and no knock. He closed his eyes and raised his hand a third time, but his fist only shook a few inches from the door. Before Emery even had a chance to lower the arm again, a sharp knock resounded twice, echoing into the house beyond the door. Emery turned as Elijah put his hand back down, his face blank.

“Elijah, what—”

“We ain’t standin’ here all night watchin’ you raise and lower that fist. Now it’s done.”

“One moment, please!” a woman’s voice called from within the house.

The voice was of course Mrs. Rovenholt’s, and at the sound of it, Emery wilted like a thirsty flower petal in the afternoon sun. He started to shake and appeared as though he was physically folding in on himself. Emery was suddenly a small child again, anxiously awaiting his punishment for some misbehavior or another. The knob turned and the door started to open. Emery rounded back toward the stairs but Elijah stopped him and held him firmly in place. Emery was thankful for the support, because once the door opened and he was in full view of his mother’s gaze, he would have collapsed right then if not for Elijah’s strong arms. At first, she didn’t recognize him, but that lasted mere seconds. Her face seemed to fall from her head as tears streamed down past her chin in a moment, like a dam broken open.

Emery felt his own tears begin at the sight of her, and somehow he managed to croak out, “Hello, Mother.”

A sob erupted from her as she closed the one step separating them, wrapping Emery tightly in her embrace. She was talking, but neither Emery nor Elijah could make out a single word of what she said, as her words were made unintelligible by the force of her sobs. She turned to Elijah with what he could only assume was either a greeting or some word of thanks. He simply nodded and said “hello” as she rocked her son side to side. Emery was holding on to his mother just as tightly, his eyes clenched shut as he cried quietly right along with her. Eventually, Mrs. Rovenholt seemed to realize what a spectacle she’d made and straightened herself rightly, releasing Emery from her grip. Removing one of her gloves, she dabbed her eyes and swiftly swiped the remaining tears from her cheeks.

“I am so sorry. I cannot believe I just fell apart like that.” Mrs. Rovenholt laughed with obvious force and no humor, her voice shaky with emotion, fake with concealing it. “Please, come inside, both of you.”

She gestured them both through the door and led the way into the parlor. Emery and Elijah took seats next to each other on the sitting-couch as Mrs. Rovenholt hovered over them, wringing her hands, her eyes too wide open.

“Mother—”

“Would either of you fancy some sweet tea? I just got done making a pitcher. It should be ready. I’m going to get us all a glass of tea.” She practically tiptoed from the room.

“She almost as nervous as you was outside,” Elijah whispered with a sly smirk.

But Emery was too busy taking in the room to pay enough attention to respond. It was bare, like anyone hardly lived in the house. It was so very unlike his mother. In front of the couch sat a simple coffee-table, with two mismatched arm-chairs at opposing corners across from the couch. There was a fireplace in the wall to the left, with a mirror on the mantel. A fire burned there.

Behind Emery and Elijah, a large window looked out toward the small yard in the front. Sheer curtains hung from a rod to cover it and obscure views from both inside and out. There were no end tables or knick-knacks decorating the room, not even a rug in the center to cover the polished wood floorboards. All the walls were a plain white, and the paint looked fresh, like the previous uniqueness had been covered over so Mrs. Rovenholt could make it her own.

“Here we are,” Mrs. Rovenholt announced with too much cheer in her voice. She set down a tray and handed each boy a glass before setting a third for herself at the corner of the coffee table in front of the arm-chair nearest Emery.

“Mother, we—”

“What about snacks? Or dinner? Have either of you eaten? You must be quite famished. I am just going to go put together a tray and while you eat that, I’ll prepare us a nice, quick meal, and we can all talk over that.”

“Mother, no—wait, you can cook?” Emery asked, confused.

She laughed again, less nervously, and Emery was pleased. “Yes, of course I can cook, boy.”

“How did you learn to cook? Did Betsy teach you? I never knew you had an interest in cooking.”

“Oh, dear, it wasn’t an interest; it was a necessity. And no, I knew how to cook long before I met your father or Betsy. My mother taught me when I was just a little girl. I didn’t grow up as...privileged as you and your father. My family was barely middle-class; we had no slaves or the extra amenities to which you grew up accustomed. We did our work ourselves. My father worked from dawn until dusk six days a week while my mother kept up the house, raised us children, and prepared all of our meals.”

“I...never knew about your childhood. I just assumed you and father were...” Emery’s voice

trailed off when he couldn't find the words he wished.

"Cut from similar cloth?" Mrs. Rovenholt offered, smiling. She was still pacing about as she spoke, like she was eager to get away to the kitchen for a moment. "No, far from it actually. He forbid me from talking about my...meager background. His family was ashamed when he courted me and eventually married me, so it was something I was simply told never to discuss.

"How did his family ever let you marry, then?" Emery asked.

"Oh, they didn't so much let us as they had little other choice. See, the only thing worse for the Rovenholts than letting your father marry me would have been word getting out that he'd fathered an illegitimate child and abandoned the mother."

What! But I was born years after their marriage, after Father returned from the war.

"Yes, yes, it was not you," she said. Emery tried to mask his shock but had been unsuccessful. "I miscarried a few weeks after we were wed. Then, your father went off to war."

That explains a lot. Maybe father never wanted to marry her. Or maybe he blamed her for the loss of that first child. Or, more likely, he simply came home from the war a broken and bitter man.

"But we can speak of that later. Let me go start dinner and—"

"Mother," Emery said firmly, silencing Mrs. Rovenholt's ramblings. She still wrang her hands in a twitchy motion. Emery rose and went to her. He stilled her shaking hands, clutching them in his own, and pulled her toward him to kiss her forehead. She removed her hands from his and gripped him in another hug. After a moment, he whispered, "Please, Mother, sit down. Thank you for the tea, but we don't need drinks or snacks. We need to talk and you're making both of us very anxious. We have more important things to discuss than cooking. Can you please sit down with us and calm yourself a moment?"

She laughed out one short note, then spoke as if to herself, "Calm, yes, quite simple enough, given the circumstances."

"Miss Carolyn, it's all right," Elijah assured her softly as Emery returned to his seat.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm so sorry." She sighed, lowering herself into her chair as she closed her eyes a moment. With slow movements, she wiped her face needlessly before clasping her hands in front of her, opening her eyes and turning her sad smile on Emery. "My son...oh, I never even imagined it would feel *this* good to see you again, to hold you again. How are you, my love?"

"I'm...coping, Mother, but I'm better than I've been in years," Emery said, looking briefly to Elijah, who blushed the slightest bit. Mrs. Rovenholt appeared to wince ever so slightly at his words. "And, how are you, Mother?"

She laughed again, only that time genuinely. "I've been better, dear. Though today I am better than ever."

"Mother, why are you here?" Emery asked abruptly, with perhaps more firmness than he initially intended. Then again, perhaps not. Both Elijah and Mrs. Rovenholt took on startled looks at his tone. "I'm sorry, I just don't understand what brought you to the city like this. And for so long."

"For you, of course. I came here for you," she said, like it ought to have been the most obvious answer in the world.

"What did you hope to accomplish as a woman here, without Father?"

"I am more than just a woman. I am the wife of a prominent Virginian plantation owner, and I am a mother. There's nothing I wouldn't do to protect my child. I felt certain I could come here and take care of this whole business."

“But then, why didn’t you? You’ve been here for months. Why did you never come to see me? Why did you never get me out? Why did you leave me in there like that?” Emery’s voice got steadily louder with each word until he had practically shouted the last question at her.

Mrs. Rovenholt looked down, unable to meet his gaze. “I tried, honey,” she muttered under her breath. “I tried so hard to see you, to take you from that place you never belonged, to bring you home with me, where you did belong. I tried.”

“But why didn’t you? Why didn’t you try harder?” All of Emery’s years of hurt and abandonment were poisoning his words with malice, weakening his already frail mother, who could barely handle her own guilt, let alone Emery’s encompassing pain.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, repeating the phrase over and over again. “I am so sorry. I tried everything in my power, but he wouldn’t let me. He’d made it impossible. *They* made it impossible.”

“Who? Who are you talking about, Mother?” Emery demanded.

“Your father!” she shouted. “Your father and that heinous snake Moncure! The first time I tried to see you, I gave your name and was told there were no patients by that name in the asylum. It was about a month after we’d...after you’d been sent there. I had forgotten that your father placed you there under a false name. I didn’t know what name to ask for, so I returned home and spent months trying to get the name out of your father, but he refused to even acknowledge my questions. Finally, he was drunk one night, and I kept pressing him until he eventually went into a rage and admitted he didn’t know. The doctor never told him, and he hadn’t wanted to know. So when I finally left your father and moved here, I didn’t know how to see you. I tried describing you to the nurses, telling them I was your mother, but they wouldn’t let me in. I suppose I looked rather foolish, asking to see my ‘son’ whose name I didn’t even

know. I have never felt so helpless in all my life.”

“What about the doctor? You couldn’t see the doctor and tell him to let me out? Why didn’t you go straight to Moncure?”

“I tried! Baby, I tried to go to him! He refused to see me! I sent nurses to him, I wrote letters, I even tried to wait outside that building where he had his office, but he avoided me there too, and attendants escorted me off the property. There was nothing I could do, my son. I am so, so sorry.”

Emery didn’t know what else to say, what else his mother could explain that might abate all of the anger he felt. She couldn’t have done more to help him, and he knew that. So he didn’t say anything for a moment. Instead he studied the grain pattern in the floorboards beneath his feet, watched the lines of previous life flow, shift, and bend. He eventually sighed. “But why did you let Father put me in that place at all? You sat there and let him!”

“It...it wasn’t that simple,” she said under her breath in avoidance, looking away out the window like she was embarrassed.

“Then uncomplicate it.” He couldn’t figure out where so much of his anger was coming from in that moment. “What could Father have told you that made it okay for him to banish me to that hell?”

Mrs. Rovenholt sighed heavily and stared at her son with haggard eyes. “He told me you’d killed Elijah.”

Emery paled and looked at Elijah, whose eyes reflected Emery’s shock. Emery whispered, “What?”

That’s ridiculous. And she believed it? That’s why she let him send me away? It’s like she never knew me at all.

“Yes, that is what he told me when I saw him walking toward the cellar with you slung over his shoulder. He said you’d gone crazy, attacking him like a savage. I couldn’t believe it, I wouldn’t.”

“Then why did you?” Emery asked quietly.

“Elijah...sweetheart, I am so deeply sorry,” Mrs. Rovenholt said to him, her voice choked with emotion, then she spoke again to Emery. “He...he showed me the body. Or, more accurately, what he told me was Elijah’s body. However, as in everything else, your father lied.”

She went quiet, and Emery was confused, but Elijah got her meaning much more quickly. “It was my daddy.”

Mrs. Rovenholt nodded, covering her mouth. “I know I should have seen the difference, but when I saw all the blood and thought about you, Emery, I could not look at the poor soul for even a second longer. He was so badly beaten, I could not recognize the face, not as Elijah or as anyone else. I’m sorry. I truly am so sorry.”

Emery heard a sniffle as Elijah stared away from both of them at the fire crackling under the mantle. Mrs. Rovenholt was crying softly. Emery asked in a gentle voice, “What did Father do, Mother?”

“He killed Levi.” She could barely get the words out.

“No, Mother...I mean, yes, I—we knew that already. But what did he *do*?”

“H-he said he had to bring the body up out of the woods, so no one could find it and ask questions. He said you weren’t safe, that we needed to keep you locked up until he could figure out what to do with you. He said you were crazy, that he should kill you...I couldn’t let him do that, not my baby. Then, h-he found a place, he told me there was a place we could send you, a place where they can protect people...people like you from others and from yourself. It was a

hospital, he said, where they might even make you better, make you stable.”

“How could you believe I’d ever do such a thing? How could you?”

“I don’t know...I’m sorry, baby. I’ve never forgiven myself. But I thought if this place could help you, maybe I could have you back, and everything would be fine again. I was lost in grief, confusion, and delusion.”

“You thought you could have me back? When Father told everyone I was dead? You hosted my funeral!”

Mrs. Rovenholt sobbed into her hands. “I wasn’t thinking. I was so lost, and your father, he’s a smart man. He had all the right words. I can’t ever tell you I’m sorry enough. But, baby, I am.”

“You thought I killed someone.”

But I did. Two people actually. My own father among them...That was after though. I never could have done such a thing before the asylum.

Mrs. Rovenholt cried on, but she didn’t get anymore words out, she didn’t apologize again. Emery waited until her tears slowed. He realized he couldn’t be as mad at her as he wanted. He was angry that she believed his father’s lies, but he had proven them truthful after the fact. He hadn’t and could never have killed Elijah, but he killed that poor lunatic woman in the woods, and he killed his father. *Why shouldn’t she have believed Father?* Emery shook his head to clear those thoughts away. He couldn’t drown in anymore grief right then. Not with his mother gurgling on her own. “Mother, why did you go see Eloise that day?”

“I’d wanted to for so long,” Mrs. Rovenholt said, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose on a handkerchief. “But I avoided her, couldn’t bear to face her, to apologize. Then, on your last birthday, my heart couldn’t handle all of the pain anymore; I had to do something. Before I could talk myself out of it, I told your father I’d be out in the garden for the rest of the evening, and I

marched myself down to Levi and Eloise's. I felt I owed her an apology for the terrible night that changed both of our lives."

Yes, because I had killed Elijah. Emery rolled his eyes.

"Eloise told me the truth about the night in the barn and about...what close friends you and Elijah had become. I was madder than hell. I cursed and raged, and back at the house, I moved my things to a spare room. I wrote Elijah that letter. It was serendipity to find out from Eloise that he was living in Williamsburg too. I carefully started packing my belongings little by little, and when Elijah got to the house, I left your father and never looked back."

Elijah was simply sitting back, observing mother and son sort out all of the secrets and lies. Emery thought about all she said, nodding slowly. *Close friends? What's she on about?*

When Emery still hadn't spoken, Mrs. Rovenholt looked to Elijah. "Honey, I know I've said this often, but it could never be often enough. Thank you, from the depths of my heart, for helping me get here, and for bringing my boy back to me today. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

Elijah blushed slightly. "It's my pleasure, ma'am. I'd do anything for Emery."

"I know you would, dear, and that means the world to me. He has always had you, even when he had no one else. At least growing up. You had each other, and I think it did you both a world of good. You've grown into such fine young men."

She talks like she knows what's between us but can't bring herself to admit it outright. We're talking around it at best. Is that as close as she can get? I don't want to force the issue if she's not ready. There's no telling how she'd react, no matter how calm she seems about it.

"Mother, how could you leave Father, though?" Emery's mind was buzzing in a million different directions.

“Did you expect me to stay with the man? After everything he has done?”

“I just mean...you should have nothing of your own if you divorced your husband. Divorcees are like pariahs. How could you do that to yourself?”

Mrs. Rovenholt laughed at her son, a real wholesome laugh. “Oh, honey, who said anything about divorce? I’m smarter than that. I just said I left him. Technically, we’re still married and what’s his is mine, if I’m careful and convincing enough about it, which I’m quite confident I have been. If I learned one thing being married to your father, it’s that a good lie can go a long way.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I bought this house with your father’s money, and I’ve been living on the little bit of money I inherited when an aunt of mine died years ago. Your father and I never needed that money; the Rovenholt family has always been quite wealthy. So I’m sure your father has long forgotten the money ever existed.”

Emery felt a swell of pride for his mother. He never knew she possessed such intellect and independence. It was no wonder she’d thought she could get Emery out of the asylum on her own. “I am impressed, Mother.”

“Thank you.” She smiled with pleasure at the compliment as she leaned back in her chair and took a few drinks of her sweating glass of tea. “So yes, that’s how I’ve managed to make my way here and try to figure out a way around that blasted doctor. Then, there was that horrible fire...I’ve been a wreck ever since. I had no way of knowing whether you’d even survived. When I saw the blaze that night, I knew immediately where it was coming from. That area, somehow I just knew it was the asylum. Mother’s intuition, I suppose.”

She shuddered at the memories. Emery sat forward and reached his hand out to her, which

she took in her own, gripping it firmly as he spoke.

“I’m sorry I’ve put you through so much. If I had known you were here in the city that whole time, I’d never have gone back to the plantation at all.”

“It’s okay, dear. You’re here now. My Emery.” She squeezed his hand again then pulled hers away quickly, like his was suddenly scalding hot. She narrowed her eyes at him. “What do you mean you’d have never gone back? Tell me you didn’t go home to that place after you escaped the asylum.”

Emery rose and started pacing around as he once again told the story of the fire and everything he’d gone through until he had finally gotten out of Williamsburg. He still couldn’t bring himself to admit what he had done to either Lawrence or Jane. As he finished, his mother watched him like a small, injured child. It made him rather uncomfortable.

“Oh, sweetheart, that sounds just awful,” she said, her voice quiet. “But you said you went back to the plantation? When? And why would you do that? My stomach is queasy just thinking about you back there, near that man.”

“I didn’t know what to do or where to go after I got out. I didn’t have any goal or destination, and I thought Elijah was dead. I wanted that picture you took of us the summer before I went to Farnsworth. I thought it was all I had left of him, so I had to have it. And...I wanted to confront Father. I wanted answers from him, and I wanted to know what he’d done to Elijah.”

“You didn’t...” Mrs. Rovenholt hung her head in her hands, speaking to the floor. “Oh, no. Please tell me you didn’t.”

“Yes, I went back, Mother. I had to.”

She sighed, exasperated, shaking her head back and forth. When she raised herself upright, straightening her back, her eyes were still closed, like she thought that could keep out what she

was about to hear. “What happened, Emery? What happened when you saw him?”

Mrs. Rovenholt opened her eyes and they met Emery’s. He immediately looked away from her and told her the same lie he told Elijah. “He wasn’t there. He was gone for something. Betsy didn’t know where he went.”

“Not even Betsy knew where your father was? That’s very strange. Did anything seem wrong?”

“No, things seemed normal. Father just wasn’t around.”

“But how? It was June. There are things that needed done, things that needed attention and coordination. How could he just not be there?”

“Mother, I don’t know. I couldn’t ask him.” Emery was growing defensive.

“Honey, I’m just trying to figure out why your father would be gone.”

“I don’t know. I guess all he does is drink anymore anyway, so he’s not doing much either way. Things have started to fall apart, according to Betsy.”

“I thought you just said things were normal.” Mrs. Rovenholt was questioning in her statements, like she could sense that things were not adding up the way Emery was describing them.

“I just meant, nothing was off, like as far as Father causing trouble.”

“Emery, if he’s not taking care of the plantation, he’s doing more than just causing trouble.”

Why is she pushing so hard about this? She doesn’t care that I lied for years about my feelings for Elijah. She still hasn’t even mentioned that. But Father being gone, that she holds onto like a vice.

“I don’t know! I wasn’t there long! And I haven’t been there in years! I was locked away, remember?”

“Okay, okay, never mind.” Mrs. Rovenholt put her hands up in a placating gesture. “Well, how did you know to go to Eloise to find out where Elijah was? How did you know he was alive?”

“Yeah,” Elijah cut in, “why did you go down to my momma’s house before you left that place? Wasn’t you afraid your daddy would come home while you was still there?”

Emery was beginning to get flustered with all of their questions, especially his mother, almost like she was digging for the truth in his lies. He wished they would just accept his explanation and move on. He needed them to stop pushing. “I didn’t *know* to go to Eloise. I just felt like I should go see her. She was always so good to me, treating me like a member of the family. Since Father wasn’t there, I figured Eloise would be able to tell me what happened to Elijah that night. I couldn’t leave without knowing.”

“No...that ain’t right,” Elijah said, scrunching up his face in concentration. “You told me that day at the Montaines’ barn that you had to go to my momma to find out where I was so you could come find me. Don’t that mean you already knew I was alive?”

“Well, no, I—”

“Darling, what’s going on?” Mrs. Rovenholt asked gently.

“Em, just talk to us, please. You can tell us anything, especially after everythin’ we been through. What ain’t you sayin’?”

Emery felt his fragile contentment crumbling around him. He felt the cracks spreading. Realization set in that his fantasies of life back at the plantation with Elijah and his mother were solely that: fantasies. He could never return after all of his sins. Between his father, abusing Betsy, all of his lies, he wouldn’t ever be able to have the life he’d dreamt of there, not after he told them. He knew he would have to tell them, but he couldn’t. He wouldn’t. He’d say anything

to keep from revealing that sin. Still, that reality breaking was a crushing blow, and Emery could barely hold himself upright.

“Emery? Talk to us, dear.”

Emery raised his head and looked at his mother like he had only just then seen her in her chair. “Hmm?”

Her concern etched lines in her face. Elijah reached out and held Emery’s hand. He whispered, “Baby, what happened?”

“Nothing. You were right; I had a feeling Elijah was not as Father claimed. Something Betsy said had given me the idea that there were secrets about.”

Leave me alone! Please don’t make me say it!

“Well, what did she say?” Mrs. Rovenholt asked.

“Yeah, my momma said no one knew nothin’ about all that happened that night. What Betsy find out?”

“Well, she said...” Emery paused.

He couldn’t come up with more lies as quickly as the two questioned him. He looked away and the fire caught his eye, the way the flames moved and danced over the logs, the smoke rising, the pop of the wood in the heat. As he watched and thought about his actions, the fire, what he done to Lawrence, to Jane, to his father, the way he’d treated Betsy, it was overwhelming. He’d hurt so many people, killed people. The flames crackled and rose. Emery saw faces in them: Jane’s shriek, his father moaning, the patients in the asylum, the ones who may not have gotten out, the terror in their eyes as they realized their demise. He clenched his eyes and rubbed his head up and down with balled up fists. There were too many secrets, too many sins. He couldn’t hold it all in alone anymore; he was going to have to tell them.

“Baby, tell me what happened with your father. No more lies.” Mrs. Rovenholt’s voice was calm but firm.

Damn it all...now they’ll know I’m the monster Father and Moncure think I am. They’ll know that I shouldn’t be allowed outside the asylum. I belong there after all.

Emery sighed and rubbed frustrated hands over his face and into his hair. He braced himself before he could force the words out. “I did see Father when I went back to the plantation. I saw him the night I returned.”

Mrs. Rovenholt nodded like she had feared as much, but Elijah was astonished. “You did? What happened? Was you all right? What he do to you? He still there?”

Emery shook his head furiously. “No, he isn’t there anymore. He’s gone.”

Elijah looked confused still, but Mrs. Rovenholt seemed to pick up quite quickly on the implications of Emery’s tone. “Emery, where is your father?”

“In the cellar,” Emery answered quietly, his voice a shallow breath. “He’s dead. I...I killed him.”

Elijah stiffened beside Emery, his hand releasing Emery’s and slipping away. Mrs. Rovenholt gasped and put her hand over her mouth. Emery’s guilt consumed him, regardless of the necessity of the crime. He also felt guilt at feeling pounds lighter after finally admitting the action, finally saying it aloud. He was so very conflicted and the two did anything but help matters. Admitting something so heinous to the two people who mattered most to him was a pain that stuck him deep in his heart.

“How?” Mrs. Rovenholt murmured, almost to herself. “How did you...how did it happen?”

Before he could stop himself yet again, Emery told them about his return. He retreated into himself, telling the story like it had happened to someone else. It was the only way he could

make it through. When he talked about the cellar, he heard Elijah gasp and his mother made a soft “oh,” like she couldn’t believe her ears. When he’d finished, Emery stared down at his hands in his lap, unable to look at either Elijah or his mother, both of whom were silent.

After what felt like an eternity, Elijah broke the silence. “You done what you had to. I ain’t got no sympathy for that man and we all safer with him gone. I know that.”

It doesn’t clean the blood from my hands.

Elijah took Emery’s hand again though the touch was different that time, hesitant, more uncertain. Mrs. Rovenholt looked at the touch; Emery saw the jerk of her eyes, but her gaze quickly flitted away. He knew she wasn’t as ready and accepting as she’d have him believe. Emery still couldn’t look up, and Mrs. Rovenholt made not a sound.

Elijah tried to prompt her. “Right, Miss Carolyn? We know he didn’t have no other choice.”

She was staring down at her fingers drumming in rhythm on the armrest. For a long moment, she seemed not to register Elijah’s voice, not to even register either of their presences in the room. She coughed and absently rubbed the space between her collarbones. Emery looked up as she spoke. “Yes, of course, dear. You couldn’t have done anything else. Your father was always a determined man. He’d never have stopped, knowing you’d gotten out of that asylum, not after all his efforts to put you there and keep you there. It’s...tragic, but...what’s done is done.”

Her mouth said the words and her smile enforced them, but neither the words nor the smile reached her eyes. In those eyes, Emery saw reflected not sympathy or understanding or consolation. In his mother’s blue eyes, still glassy with restrained tears, the same blue eyes he saw every time he looked in the mirror, in those, Emery saw her fear at his actions. Those eyes revealed how his words had disturbed her. And Emery himself was disturbed along with her. Disturbed at himself and disturbed at the fractured life he’d caused for all of those around him.

“You’re my son. I will always love you and protect you, no matter what.” Mrs. Rovenholt’s voice was firm and more convincing, but Emery couldn’t help his doubts.

She doesn’t mean it. I can see it in her eyes. Elijah is sincere, but he looks at me like he doesn’t know me anymore. They both do. And perhaps they don’t, not really.

“Thank you, Mother,” Emery mumbled.

“So,” Mrs. Rovenholt began abruptly, obviously eager to talk about something—anything—else, to get all of their minds off of what had just been said. “Where do we go from here?”

Emery looked at her, unsure of what exactly she was asking. He could feel the effort in her push for normalcy, but he answered anyway. “I don’t have any idea.”

Mrs. Rovenholt thought a moment. “Well, the plantation would be mine now, mine and yours. We can’t simply let it fall to ruin, not after all the damage your father’s drinking and disappearance have likely already caused. Someone needs to be there, running things, watching closely for opportunities for improvement.”

“That would have to be you, Mother,” Emery said. “You’ll have to go back and oversee things. I can’t do that, can’t be back there.”

“Yes, you can. It’s yours. You’ll come home and you’ll run it with me.”

“With Elijah, of course.”

She paused. “Of course with Elijah. Both of you will come back.” Mrs. Rovenholt looked to Elijah with an attempt at a warm smile. It quivered away and back on her face.

Emery knew there was no point to arguing the case with his mother. She wanted what she wanted and she wouldn’t change her mind. However, there was no doubt in Emery’s mind that he could never return home to that place. It was no longer his home; it wasn’t his anything. He would just have to let her think whatever she was going to think until she left and had gone back

to the plantation. “Of course, Mother, but Elijah and I can’t return with you right away. Elijah has Liza now, as you know, and I have some business of my own to which I need to attend.”

She scowled a bit. “How long shall you need?”

Emery looked to Elijah, who simply shrugged his shoulders. He looked at Emery. Emery said, “One week at least, possibly two.”

“That’s too long, I won’t be able to wait.” She tapped a thoughtful finger on her chin as she watched the branches of a tree outside the window sway in the first darkness of night, the sun having set a few minutes ago. “I’ll have to go on ahead of you, and you can meet me back there once both of you are ready. Understood? I expect to see you both back here tomorrow for Sunday dinner as well.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the two men said, almost in unison.

*

Monday, August 25, 1884

The chair with the limb boxes again. Lawrence attaches wires to my temples; they tickle my ear as he adjusts the machine in front of me. Dr. Moncure sits next to it with a portfolio of papers and images, drawings I can see parts of peeking out of the folder. The nurse sits against the wall, pencil and pad of paper at the ready. She begins her scratching the moment he speaks.

“Anderson, today we will begin to train your mind to negatively view the types of thoughts and scenes that feed the psychosis with which you are infected. We must poison that which nourishes the disease. Electroconvulsive therapy is a means of negative reinforcement that will condition your mental landscape against the temptations of the infirmity. The seizures induced will help to remove the condition from you.”

Dr. Moncure opens the folder and holds up the first of the images and drawings. It’s a naked man, lying on his back, erect, touching himself. I turn away as much as the confines of the chair allow, but a charge bounces across my scalp, infusing the follicles, and I snap back to Dr. Moncure. My eyes widened, he smirks—or maybe I imagine he does.

“That was a warning, your only one. The conditioning is dependent upon your viewing and training against negative reactions to such images. Look away again and the shocks will be more severe. These are for your own good. These will instruct appropriate responses from your body. Your entire being educated as one whole.”

Reluctantly, I gaze back at the renderings, reining in the lust coating me. My eyes caress each image. Before I even recognize the lifting of my pants, a white inferno erupts in my skull, the two forces meeting inside my brain like lightning striking a rod. I’m blind, the men vanish, the room ignites. I recoil, furling in on myself.

The men are back, fucking with abandon before my field of vision. Dr. Moncure is speaking,

but to me or the nurse, I can't tell. Static in my ears prevents me from knowing. Sexual ecstasy like a kaleidoscope whirls, my mind, fractured in pain, blends them together in an orgy of ill-fated insanity. The tug of my groin against the resistant fabric, the trained heat of response frying my very thoughts, the rank of hair burned in lesson. Darkness melts away in orange glow, fades to purity. Cauterized mind, scorched flesh, cure. Charred nothing. I pant and the world goes black.

*

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday, August 29, 1885

The entire walk from Mrs. Rovenholt's house back to the Montaine property was silent. Elijah offered a few small attempts at pulling Emery out of his own head, but those efforts were fruitless as Emery continued to dwell. So stuck in his thoughts was he, Emery walked straight past their destination. Elijah had stopped beneath an elm tree that stood near the road, but Emery had strolled on like he didn't know Elijah was with him at all. Elijah called quietly after him, but Emery didn't register the noise. Elijah then picked up a handful of gravel and threw small stones at Emery one at a time until he hit Emery in the back of the head with a little pebble.

"Ow!" Emery said, much too loudly, raising a hand to the spot as he finally turned back toward Elijah. "What did you do that for?"

"Get back over here," Elijah whisper-shouted, pointing to the ground beside him.

Emery started to walk back to Elijah. "Why? We're not even there—oh."

He saw the house and looked back at Elijah. "Yeah, that's why I threw them pebbles at you. You all right?"

"I just..." Emery tried to say something about what he felt, then he rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't know. I just need some time to think about everything and sort it out in my head. There's too much happening all at once."

"D'you wanna talk about it any with me?"

"No. Maybe. I don't know. I think I just have to take the night to mull it all over."

"Okay." Elijah nodded slowly. "Talk tomorrow, then?"

“Tomorrow.”

They looked at each other a while, neither wanting to be the first to leave, neither wanting the other to leave. When finally Emery couldn't take it any longer, he stepped to Elijah, placing his hands on Elijah's hips. Their foreheads met as Elijah draped his arms over Emery's shoulders. It had been dark for a few hours by then, and it was darker still under the boughs of the elm, where not even the light of the moon or stars could reach them. Emery was comfortable with the risk as he brushed his lips over Elijah's, and Elijah moved into the kiss. Things were much less complicated for Emery in that place with Elijah so close. The darkness and the quiet were intimate, isolating even. He leaned harder against Elijah.

“I told you I saw the stable boy kissing another man the other day!” a female voice said loudly from behind Emery.

The boys broke the kiss immediately, and Elijah gasped looking over Emery's shoulder. Emery turned around, using his arms to keep Elijah behind him in case the situation was dangerous. Carina and Lawrence stood before them, mouths hung open in surprise. They had just walked up holding hands.

Carina sounded astonished, anguished, when she recognized Emery. “Anderson?”

“Who's Anderson?” Elijah asked, oblivious.

“Well, you were...umm, you're kissing him,” Carina said, glancing away, uncomfortable.

“Em, how do you know Miss Montaine?” Elijah pressed, while Emery still hadn't spoken, still hadn't taken the whole situation in, still hadn't taken his eyes off of Lawrence. “And why she callin' you Anderson?”

Emery shook his head. “We'll discuss this later. We have to go. Now.”

“Oh, I don't think so,” Lawrence said, stepping forward.

Emery was briefly startled by his appearance. His arm moved in an odd manner, like it didn't work quite the way arms are supposed to. It was the arm Emery remembered breaking. Lawrence's nose was crooked, bending just slightly to the right one, and his left eye didn't move in unison with his right, like it was a bit slower, a bit lazy.

He caught Emery staring. "You like? Compliments of our scuffle. Don't worry, things'll go different this time."

"Emery, what's he talkin' about?" Elijah asked.

But Emery ignored him, too focused on the large looming threat in front of him. "How's the back of your head, Lawrence?" Emery knew Lawrence remembered what a threat Emery could be as well.

Lawrence growled like an animal, then spoke to Carina behind him without looking at her. "Carina, go into the house, now. We'll send for Dr. Moncure when I finish with this here lunatic."

"Why is my stable boy with him? Why's he calling him 'Emery'? I knew I saw the negro kissing some man, but why was he just kiss—?" Carina stopped abruptly when Lawrence cut her off.

"Enough! We can figure all that out later. Right now, you get on inside. We know how dangerous he can be."

"You know, I thought I killed you last time, and it haunted me," Emery said. "I was relieved when I was wrong. But I should have known what trouble you could later be. Let us go."

"That ain't happenin'. You're gonna spend the rest of your life as Moncure's play thing, I'll see to that myself."

"I'll kill you this time, so I know you'll never be able to hurt me again."

“Emery!” Elijah sounded like he didn’t know who he was talking to anymore. “What you sayin’? Stop this! We gotta get gone! Come on!”

“Oh, he ain’t going nowhere,” Lawrence said. “Neither of you are. I’ve waited for this moment. Never thought it would come. You a special kind of lunatic if you been waiting around in the city all this time. Dr. Moncure will be overjoyed with me when I’ve returned you to him.”

“I’ll never go back there!” Emery screamed, moving quickly at Lawrence as Elijah shouted protests at his back.

“So I guess that means I’m dragging your body back. Fine with me.”

Lawrence dodged Emery’s punch, and hit Emery in the stomach. Emery doubled over just long enough for Lawrence to kick him, also in the stomach. Emery went down on his knees, and Lawrence reached for him. Emery ducked and rolled out of the way then punched Lawrence in the jaw. Lawrence grunted. His lip started to bleed. Emery punched him quickly again before the man could react. His fist connected with Lawrence’s nose, breaking the barely healed bone. Lawrence howled in pain. Emery swung his leg and kicked Lawrence in the side of the head. With as easily as he fell, Emery could tell the man was still healing from his injuries after their last encounter months ago. Emery knelt over the man. He reached for his throat and felt two arms clamp around his waist and bodily fling him back away from Lawrence. Furious, Emery turned with his fist raised. He stopped dead when he saw Elijah standing between him and the attendant. Elijah’s mouth was set in a firm, angry line. His brows were furrowed furiously. Emery imagined he could see the steam rising from Elijah.

“You’re done,” Elijah said to Emery.

“No, I—”

“It ain’t a question. I’m tellin’ you, you done. You won. Now we goin’. You ain’t that

person, no matter what you done to your daddy, and you don't wanna be that person. We leavin'. You got some things to explain to me."

Emery hesitated. He knew Elijah was right, but they couldn't just leave Lawrence there. He was too dangerous. Between Lawrence and Carina, they would tell the doctor Emery was still in Williamsburg, that he was with Elijah. They would never be safe that way. Lawrence had to be taken care of—silenced—somehow, then they needed to leave the city at once. Emery would die before he let anyone lock him away again, before he let anyone take Elijah to that asylum.

"Come on!" Elijah demanded, already having taken a few steps away.

"Elijah, listen. Please, just listen to me. We can't leave like this. It won't be safe. It'll never be safe again. He will come for us; he won't ever stop coming for us. We have to do something."

"You done plenty already. I don't wanna be this kinda person. I wouldn't've thought you'd wanna be either. But if this who you are now, I don't want no part of it. None." Without another word, Elijah turned and began walking down the road away from the Montaine residence.

Torn between the two, against his better judgement, Emery followed his heart, ignoring his head. "El, wait. I'm coming."

Elijah stopped walking but didn't turn or look at Emery. Once Emery was at his side, Elijah resumed his pace. "I wasn't sure you's gonna come. That scares me."

"I'm sorry, El. There's so much happening right now. You don't understand how much danger we're in, how dangerous Moncure is."

"That's because, even after all the lies you been caught tellin', you still ain't told me everythin'. Why?"

"It's...it's complicated. I—"

"No, it ain't! Trust me enough to tell me what the hell's goin' on! That ain't complicated!"

Emery paused, looking around quickly. “Where are you going?”

“Where am I—Don’t go changin’ the subject! You gonna explain all this to me before the night’s through.”

“Sure. Fine. But where are you going right now?”

“Back to your room at the boarding house,” Elijah snapped. “Where else would we go?”

“We can’t go back there!” Emery stopped at the side of the road, just at the crest of the hill leading back down into the city. “What are you thinking?”

“What am *I* thinking? What’re *you* thinking?” Elijah was growing more and more irate with every word. “You wanted to kill a man just for seein’ us! I’m thinkin’ no one that matters knows you stayin’ at that boarding house, so it’s gotta be the safest place we can stay tonight. Unless there’s even more I don’t know, makin’ that place unsafe too.”

Emery winced at that last comment, though he knew he deserved it and more. He sighed. “I’m sorry. You’re right. We should be able to stay there tonight. We can talk, then we’ll leave in the morning.”

“Good.” Elijah stormed off in that direction without another word.

Emery followed at a dejected pace behind him. “El, I don’t—”

“You know,” Elijah cut him off, “that whole walk back from your momma’s house, you was silent as the grave, even when I tried to get you to talk a little. So I let you have your silence. Now, I’d like that same respect. I really don’t think I can talk to you right now. That okay?”

Elijah walked ahead without an answer from Emery. So Emery mumbled to himself. “Yeah, that’s okay. But I’m sorry.”

They walked on, the hour quite late by that point, until finally they reached the boarding house. The city was an entirely different place so late at night, darker obviously, but more

sinister as well. The tree boughs made strange noises in the wind with the streets so quiet. Stray cats skittered in alleyways and mewled in blackness. Emery's paranoia heightened as he looked everywhere for something, someone, out to get them, to take them away. Danger was around every corner for Emery. At the house, not a light was on in any of the rooms, and not a candle was lit anywhere that Emery could see from outside. They slipped quietly inside, and Emery led Elijah by the hand up the stairs and down the hall, doing his best to avoid the creaky spots he'd detected in his comings and goings. Once he closed and locked the door, Emery lit a single candle that gave them just enough light by which to see each other. Emery sat on the bed, his heart racing, while Elijah paced the whole room back and forth, lips pursed in concentrated thought.

Finally, Elijah stopped and looked straight at Emery. "Will you please tell me what Lawrence was talking about, Emery? Will you tell me everythin' now?"

Emery nodded absently and continued nodding long after his answer had been received. He watched the floorboards as he spoke. "I didn't tell you everything about my escape. Before I managed to get over the fence, Lawrence caught me at the edge of the grounds. He was drunk and tried to drag me back to where the other patients were being corralled. He'd been the attendant who always helped Dr. Moncure when I was being...treated in the cellar. He would restrain me for the various procedures the doctor subjected me to. When he caught me at the fence, the only thing standing between me and freedom, all those tortures rushed back to me. I was...overzealous in our confrontation. I beat him unconscious with a branch before I got over the fence and escaped. I thought I'd killed him, and it haunted me. Even after I found out he'd survived, the guilt of my actions plagued me. I couldn't admit to you what I'd done. I'm sorry..."

Emery stayed looking down as Elijah took in his words in. Elijah released a heavy sigh, eyes wide, and while he didn't speak for a moment, Emery sensed they weren't finished just yet.

"Is there anythin' else?" Elijah pressed.

Emery saw Jane's dead body with a background of raging fire as Elijah asked his question. He should admit to all of it, finally clear the slate. *But, who could tell him? No one we'll see, if we're careful enough, if anyone even knows I did it.* Emery knew he couldn't admit even one more thing to him. And there was no way Elijah could ever find out about the woman.

With the pit of guilt in his heart growing, Emery told another lie. "No, that's all. I promise."

Elijah nodded once, though he still looked uncomfortable. "So, Anderson? That was the name the doctor gave you?"

"Yes, I was Anderson Smith in there. Not exactly unique." Emery tried to laugh, but Elijah didn't follow suit.

"And Miss Carina? You knew her in the asylum too?"

"Umm, yes, we...spent some time together," Emery answered awkwardly. When Elijah gave him a look of confusion, Emery went on. "Remember that woman I flirted with? The one who kind of helped me escape, though she didn't really know it?"

Elijah nodded, still looking at Emery as he waited on the rest of the explanation. But Emery was watching Elijah back, waiting for him to connect the pieces together. Elijah's eyes shot open and his mouth formed a round "O" once the realization finally set in. "Oh! Oh, goodness, you mean that was Miss Carina you was leadin' on in there, hopin' she'd be some kinda useful?"

"Yes." Emery smiled, waiting for Elijah's reaction.

He stared at Emery, as though frozen, before suddenly bursting into laughter. Tears formed in his eyes, he laughed so hard, and he held his stomach with one hand. He fell sideways onto the

bed as the hilarity subsided and he took a deep breath, wiping his eyes. Emery smiled again, more meekly. Laughter didn't feel like something he was capable of in that moment. He just wanted Elijah to understand, to forgive him his atrocities and hold him. He desperately wanted Elijah's arms around him, comforting him.

"Oh, boy, that really is just about the funniest darn thing I think I ever heard in my whole life. I just can't believe it."

Emery laid back next to Elijah and the two were quiet a moment. As Emery rolled toward Elijah, Elijah sat up and rose from the bed. "It's late. I'm gonna make up a bed on the floor. We should get some rest; got a long day tomorrow. Lots to do."

"Aren't you—" Emery started to ask, but then he thought better of it. Elijah needed space, time, and Emery could give him both if that was what it took.

When Elijah had settled in, lying with his back to the bed, Emery blew out the candle and crawled back into the bed on top of the blankets. He faced Elijah, longing to slip onto the floor with him. Emery sighed, closing his eyes. He knew he would never be able to sleep, even before Elijah spoke for the last time that night.

"I don't know how we gonna go on from where we at now. I just don't see how."

*

Thursday, November 20, 1884

That new, plain volunteer knocks and enters my room with a lunch tray in her hand. Chicken, of course, a slice of bread, and steamed broccoli and carrots. It could be worse, I suppose.

“Good morning, Anderson,” she says, surprising me when she uses my name. Well, my name here anyway. “I wanted to introduce myself. I’m Carina.”

She holds out her hand for me to take it, and I’m not sure what to do. None of the other staff have ever treated me with such care, like I’m not different from them. Like I’m a person. Am I allowed to take her hand, to shake it? Is this another of the doctor’s tests? I’m suspicious of everyone ever since he made that colored man get naked in front of me. I’m starting to wonder if I even know what’s real anymore.

“It’s just a handshake, silly.” She giggles, probably sensing my unease at a gesture so unfamiliar in this hell they call a hospital.

I reach out gingerly and grip her fingers lightly, but I don’t shake her hand, so she shakes mine. I tell her, “It’s nice to meet you.”

She caresses my fingers as she pulls hers away. “It is a pleasure to finally, officially meet you as well.”

I go to the desk where she has set my lunch, and I sit to eat it. The chicken is dry and the vegetables were not steamed long enough, but it’s food nonetheless, and I’m grateful for it. While I take bite after bite in silence, I can once again feel Carina’s eyes on me. She is standing closer than usual and not saying a word, but I feel her there, staring, drinking me in with her eyes.

“So, I’ve been wondering for weeks,” she says quietly, placing her hands on my shoulders. “How did a handsome young man like you come to find himself in a place like this?”

She starts kneading the muscles, softly at first, then harder, deeper, massaging the tension of which I've amassed more than my fair share. I groan a little at how good it feels, but I can't escape the strangeness I feel at the encounter. She can't possibly want what I'm thinking she wants.

"It's a long story," I finally admit cagily. "They say I have problems. Dr. Moncure is working on fixing them."

"I don't like him," she says, her tone blunt as she continues to rub me. "He gives me the creeps, but I can't put my finger on why."

Trusting her intentions even less now, I stay silent, not even nodding my head in agreement, though I do in fact agree. More than that, I can put my finger on exactly why he should give her the creeps. I hate the man like I've never known hate before. But I could never trust this woman enough to say so. So I finish eating the lunch before me and slide the tray to the side of the desk.

"Oh, you're done already?" she asks, looking down at the empty tray and sounding disappointed. "Guess I'll have to be going now."

"It was nice talking to you," I offer, as if it were a question. The whole interaction has unsettled me. I wonder if Dr. Moncure told her to behave that way. Though, I don't have any idea what he could be using her to test. Maybe for a reaction to female stimuli? Or perhaps she could just be flirting? But no, that isn't possible. Not with me. It has to be the doctor. I will need to be wary of her.

"Maybe next time you could take a little longer to finish your meal," she suggests, running her fingertips across my back as she walks to the door and out through it. The touch sends a shiver down my spine. The implications of her visit leave me confused for hours after she's gone. Surely she can't mean to court me, given my position and situation, not to mention hers. I know

one thing: I'll need to be wary of her. Though, perhaps she could be useful as well.

*

Chapter Fifteen

Sunday, August 30, 1885

The next morning brought Emery a sleepless headache as he watched the sunlight slowly rise over the horizon. Dust particles danced in the rays that broke through the windowpanes. He continued to lie there, not wanting to disturb Elijah, who deserved all the sleep he could get. Emery's mind buzzed too much with all that needed to be done, all that could go wrong. They needed transportation, but he had no idea where they were even going. And he couldn't predict how they'd avoid capture before they fled the city. They had to be out, to gather supplies and find transport. They would be wide open for Dr. Moncure and Lawrence. Emery thought maybe they should just run away on foot after quickly gathering what they could. That seemed to him the best plan; it worked for him after the fire. The odds were certainly against them; Emery knew that. He would wait as long as it took for Elijah to wake but no longer. They would have to leave that instant.

Elijah groaned on the floor next to Emery, and Emery risked a glance over the side of the bed at him. Elijah's eyes were still closed but so was his mouth; he usually slept with it wide open. Emery figured he must have slowly been waking up. The sun had been fully risen for over an hour, and Emery was eager to be up and preparing to leave.

"You can stop watchin' me. Been awake a little while now," Elijah said, his voice deep and gravelly with sleep. "Tried to get a few more minutes in, but my mind was already workin' too hard. Guess I can get up."

"Good morning," Emery said cautiously.

“Morning.” Elijah’s voice lacked emotion, and he didn’t look at Emery when he spoke. He gathered up his makeshift bed from the floor and piled it at the foot of Emery’s bed. He walked to the door but remembered he couldn’t simply walk out as he pleased. He turned back around to face Emery. “So what we gonna do?”

Emery told Elijah all he’d been thinking that morning and all through the long night before. He finished with his suggestion that they leave that morning, as soon as possible.

“We can’t be leavin’ right this minute,” Elijah said firmly. “I ain’t leavin’ without seein’ Liza one more time.”

“You can write to her. We can come back and visit sometime, but we’ve got to get out of town before someone finds us. Before someone finds me. They could be heading here right this second. I can’t go back there. Not ever. I’ll die first.”

“So you keep saying, Em. Ain’t nobody gonna take you back to that asylum. I won’t let ’em,” Elijah assured him. “But I ain’t leavin’ without seein’ Liza. She...She’s my mamma, and I gotta at least say goodbye. She done a lot for me and deserves a goodbye. You ought’a go tell your mamma goodbye too. Miss Carolyn deserves that much after all she been through.”

Emery nodded. He knew Elijah was right. “I can’t see her, not knowing it might well be the last time. I couldn’t do it. But I understand. We won’t leave. You can go see your mother, and we’ll just leave once you’ve come back. Can you...If I wrote Mother a letter, would you take it to her on your way back from the Montaine house?”

With a defeated sigh, Elijah shook his head. “Sure, I’ll take your mamma the letter. But I don’t like it. Your mamma’s a good woman. She deserves to see her baby one more time. She deserves to hold and kiss you again. This all been so hard on her.”

“It’s been hard on all of us. I just...I can’t. I can’t do it. Leaving her again after so long is

hard enough. But having to face her, having to say goodbye...I can't."

"Okay, fine."

Emery took a scrap sheet of paper from the dresser and a pencil from a drawer. He wrote as they talked.

"What you gonna be doin' while I'm gone gettin' this done?" Elijah asked.

"I'm going to try and find us a safe way out of the city. I don't have much money, and we'll need some supplies—food at least—for the trip, so I don't know how many options we'll have. I'm just going to see what I can do once I've bought food. I have a water canteen we can use."

"How you gonna do that though? Won't that be pretty conspicuous? What if that doctor's warned folks someone might be tryin' to do just what you tryin' to do?"

Emery had thought of that but came to a realization. "He won't have done that. My presence there was a secret, and while that doesn't matter anymore with Father gone, Moncure's treatment methods are now apparently frowned upon in the field. He's been ridiculed as archaic; his peers claimed the field had evolved past his harsh efforts. He was determined to prove their worth in his successful treatment of me. He won't be anxious for too much information about me or my time there to get out. Not to mention the blemish my escape would be on his reputation. No, we only really need to be wary of the doctor, Lawrence, and possibly the rest of the asylum staff. And even most of them won't know about me."

"Well," Elijah said with a tone to his voice that Emery couldn't put his finger on, "you've certainly given this some thought."

"Thought about it all night. Couldn't sleep. Too much happened yesterday, and I was full of nerves that someone was going to come breaking through the door to carry us both away in the night. So, no sleep for me. Lots of time for planning out today though."

“I’m sorry you couldn’t sleep. You should’ve woke me. I could’ve kept you company.”

“You made it clear you needed time, so I respected that. And regardless, you needed sleep for today. I wouldn’t have woken you either way. You seemed to be sleeping so peacefully.”

“I wouldn’t call it peaceful, but I slept well enough.”

He and Emery stared at each other a long while. Emery stayed still, didn’t speak, not wanting to break the moment. Finally, Elijah coughed, turning away to the door.

“Well, I ought’a be sneakin’ out so I can get back, then we can figure all this out. You done with that letter?”

Emery nodded and handed it over to Elijah, folded into quarters. “Thank you for taking it.”

“Sure. I’ll be back soon as I can.”

“El,” Emery called to him.

Elijah stopped but didn’t turn around.

“I love you. And I’m sorry. Please be careful out there.”

“I will.” Elijah walked to the door. He paused as he opened it. “I love you too.”

As Elijah crossed the threshold, Emery couldn’t stand the tension any longer. He called after Elijah, “Wait, please.”

Elijah stopped again. He turned slowly as Emery rushed him and pulled him back into the room by his waist before closing the door hard with a kick. Emery sat down at the foot of the bed, holding Elijah, who stood between Emery’s knees. Emery looked up into Elijah’s face, which softened as their eyes met. Emery’s voice was barely above a whisper as he spoke. “El, I’m sorry. I know I’ve lied to you, and I know what a monster I acted like last night. I…”

Emery let out a breath when his voice trailed off, unable to find the words he wanted and needed. Elijah filled the silence as he started to back out of Emery’s grip. “Look, you don’t

gotta—”

“Please,” Emery cut in, “let me get this out. I have trouble controlling myself. Something broke inside me in that place...but you make everything better. You always have. I just...I need your help. I need you to be patient. I need you.”

Emery leaned his forehead against Elijah’s taut stomach, happy just to feel Elijah against him. Elijah didn’t move for a long moment, and Emery began to fear that Elijah’s anger was such that Elijah couldn’t forgive him. Emery was ready to pull away and let Elijah leave when finally he felt Elijah’s arms wrap around his head and clutch him tightly. They stayed like that for some time before Elijah’s hands moved to Emery’s cheeks and guided Emery to standing. They kissed, one long, extended kiss, holding onto each other.

“I forgive you, and I ain’t goin’ nowhere,” Elijah said once he broke the kiss. “Well, I gotta go see our mommas, but I ain’t leavin’ you, okay?”

“Okay,” Emery said quietly. “Just don’t be seen leaving.”

“I won’t.” Elijah kissed Emery on the forehead before moving toward the door. “I’m gonna go so I can hurry back, and we can figure out what we gonna do. See you soon.”

With that and a wave from Emery, Elijah was gone, closing the door softly behind him. Emery stared at the door a while even after Elijah had long since walked down the hall and out of the boarding house. Eventually, Emery gathered up his few belongings and packed them away inside the satchel for an easy getaway later. Emery set the satchel on the floor and then made the bed and straightened the bedding Elijah had used. He moved the satchel to the bed then went downstairs to clean himself up a bit from the dirt, sweat, and blood he’d accumulated the previous evening. He thought about what he could get in the way of food for their journey. He had a few dollars but they would need most of that if he hoped to pay someone to get them out of

the city.

Back at the room, Emery got his money from where he'd hidden it under the mattress. He counted out just over five dollars and was slipping it into his pocket as he remembered it was Sunday and cursed himself. Not a single business would be open that day. He didn't know how he could have not realized something so important. Now, he had to figure out what he and Elijah would do. He wasn't even sure how he could find someone to transport them out of the city. There had to be another way.

Perhaps we could stay with Mother. I just really don't want to press this upon her more than I have to, especially since I have no intention of moving back to the plantation with—Kendrick! Of course!

Emery remembered his last conversation with Kendrick a couple of weeks before, when Kendrick had revealed the sale of the store and the planned move north. Kendrick hadn't called on Emery, so unless he forgot and left anyway, the man was still in the city, preparing to move. Perhaps he would be willing to leave sooner and would take Emery and Elijah with him if Emery agreed to pay him. Money in pocket, Emery ran to the door, down the hall and the stairs, and out the door, headed for Kendrick's house.

He couldn't take the direct route to where he remembered Kendrick lived; that would have taken him down too many crowded main streets. As such, Emery walked in the opposite direction, as though headed out of town, then walked along the smaller roads with fewer houses that were more spread out. Emery couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on him with every step he took. With good reason for the paranoia, Emery cut up and down side streets and took his time weaving around as he tried to lose and confuse anyone who might have been following him. Over two hours later, Emery finally walked up the pathway onto Kendrick's property. He

wondered briefly if he was putting Kendrick in danger associating with him.

But it's not as if they would know about Kendrick, and no one followed me. Plus, if he agrees, we'll soon be leaving all of this behind us anyway.

Around the house, Emery saw Kendrick's cart and horses were parked out back. He audibly sighed and ran back to the front door. He knocked loudly and didn't stop until the door moved beneath his fist.

Kendrick was startled to see Emery standing before him, this was evident on his face and in his voice as he asked, "What are you doing here? And why are you pounding on my door like that?"

"I need to speak with you. Please, I need your help," Emery said. Kendrick stepped aside and ushered Emery into the house. Emery looked around and saw Kendrick had packed most of the house as far as what he was likely taking with him when he moved, like he had explained at the Blue Shield. While Kendrick hadn't moved yet, he was clearly leaving very soon. "You're packed. When are you moving?"

"I leave this weekend, Friday morning." Kendrick led Emery down the hall into a small side room. There was nothing in the room but a bunch of stacked boxes and a plain wooden chair. "This used to be my bedroom, once upon a time. Dad used it as an office after I was grown."

"Oh, I see." Emery didn't know what else to say to the unsolicited detail. The room was small, as small as the pantry back at the Rovenholt plantation. It was just large enough for a single bed and perhaps a chest of drawers. One miniature window was set into the wall opposite the door. Emery tried to imagine briefly what a childhood would have been like under such circumstances, but he found himself unable. His privilege had made life too different for him.

"The place in New York is ready for me now, but I wanna make sure everything is situated

here, so I don't gotta come back down for some unexpected, unfinished business."

"I see," Emery said again, nodding slowly as he thought for a moment, trying to find the right words. "What would it take for you to leave this evening? And to take us with you?"

Kendrick coughed, looking at Emery like he was insane. The irony was not lost on either of them. "Like, in a few hours? I can't—I mean, I would have to...Emery, that's asking a lot."

"I know, I know." Emery hung his head in his hands, not answering Kendrick's question. "I can pay you, if it's a matter of money. It's not much, but I can pay you more once we're settled in the city and I find work."

"Emery, Emery, Emery, slow down, boy." Kendrick put his hands up in front of him like he was guiding a carriage to a stop. "I can't just up and leave for New York City in a few hours. I ain't ready for the move yet. We—"

"Kendrick, please, I'm begging you. You have to help me. We can't stay here. I'll do whatever it takes. Please."

Kendrick rubbed both hands up and down his face and groaned. "Before I agree to anything, you need to tell me what's happened. Why all of this urgency? And, who is this 'we'?"

Emery started to shake. Kendrick guided him to the chair before pulling over a stack of boxes and sitting on top of them, right in front of Emery. "Just tell me what's going on."

Emery took a breath and began by telling Kendrick he had found Elijah. He didn't go into detail concerning how, as those were details irrelevant to his pressing needs. He explained what had happened the previous night at the Montaine house and cried through the story, unable to contain all of the emotions he felt, all of the guilt. His voice was like a ghost. "He found me. I wasn't careful enough, and he found me. Dr. Moncure found us. It's all my fault."

"He didn't find you. Lawrence did. The doctor still doesn't know where you're staying, even

if this Lawrence or Carina did go and tell him they saw you. Where is Elijah now?"

"He went to see his birth mother and say goodbye. I didn't want him to go back there but he was adamant. Then he was taking a letter to my mother, because I couldn't bear to face her and say goodbye. He should be returning in a couple more hours. I'm worried something bad will happen to him, and it will be all my fault. I didn't want him to go back there."

"Okay. Okay." Kendrick was nodding in thought. "I'll head out once you leave and see what I can do about leaving sooner. That's the best I can tell you right now. You need to go back to the boarding house and wait for Elijah. I'm sure he's all right. When he returns, pack your things and bring him here. The two of you will stay here with me until I can be ready to leave. I will do my best to leave this evening, hopefully by first light at the latest."

Emery was astonished. "Really? You mean it? Oh, Kendrick, I'll never be able to thank you enough. I swear I will find a way to pay you back for this."

Kendrick waved him off. "You have nothing to repay. Like I told you before, we gotta help each other when we can. Men like us, no one else is gonna help us out. We're on our own in this world when it matters. Now, you gotta get going and wait for Elijah. If I'm not here when you return together, hide out back in the barn. When I get home, we'll work out a more specific plan."

Emery stood, nodding his head furiously. "Yes, we'll be here the moment we can. Thank you. Oh, thank you so much."

"You're welcome. I—" Kendrick's voice cut out when Emery wrapped him in a tearful hug. He stiffened at the unexpected embrace but quickly relaxed and put his arms around the young man. "It'll be all right. Hurry back now. And good luck."

Without another word, Emery walked out of the office, down the hall, and out the door.

Leaving the property, Emery wished he had a means of buying some food for the journey or something he could contribute. However, contribution would sadly have to wait until they'd left Williamsburg far behind them. Emery pondered their escape as he wandered back streets, killing time on his way back to his room. The day had grown overcast, as though it might rain, but the air was still, not rustling the leaves in the slightest and not removing the humidity in the air or alleviating the heat bouncing up from the ground.

Another two hours passed before Emery was again approaching Widow Swartz's house, sweating as though he'd never cleaned up at all that morning. He'd been half-afraid Elijah might have returned before he got back and not known where to go. Emery hoped that wasn't the case as he walked through the front door. Inside, Mrs. Swartz sat in an arm-chair in the parlor, reading the newspaper. She looked up and smiled at Emery as he passed her with a quick wave of his hand.

"Emery, dear," Mrs. Swartz called to him. She was a plump older woman, one of the heaviest Emery had ever seen, but she was so warm that her weight was hardly the first thing noticed about her. Her hair was sheer white and rather thin, typically braided down the back of her head nearly to her shoulders. Her face was full of the wrinkles of a life hard-lived, but her smile lit up her face, brightening the twinkle that already existed in her light, gray eyes, which she could barely see out of past a few feet. Her husband had passed away a decade before in a farming accident. Since then, Widow Swartz, as she was known all around town, had been making ends meet—for the most part—by renting out rooms in her boarding house.

Emery sighed, returning to stand in the doorway. "Yes, ma'am?"

"A man came 'round lookin' for ya about fifteen-twenty minutes ago," she said. "Real respectable looking man, from what I could tell, though you know I couldn't see him worth a

damn with these old eyes. He seemed to know ya real well, so I let him wait for ya up in yer room. Hope that's all right."

"Why would you—" Emery started to ask but stopped himself upon realizing that it was likely Elijah, returned from visiting their mothers. Relief swept him upon knowledge that Elijah had safely come back. And, he was ever more relieved that Widow Swartz couldn't see Elijah well enough to be suspicious.

Her eyes must be worse than I thought. Though, Elijah is lighter-skinned, so maybe...

"Yes, of course, that's fine. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, boy. I just wanted to make sure I let ya know before ya got up there and got startled outta yer skin by someone being in yer room."

"That was very thoughtful of you. I should see to my visitor now. Good day, Mrs. Swartz."

"Good day, dear."

Something had finally gone right; he and Elijah might finally have a quick and secure means of fleeing the city, and Elijah was back even sooner than expected. They could be at Kendrick's in just a couple of hours—sooner if they took the most direct route—and then, with a bit more luck, they would be out of the city by nightfall. Emery hadn't felt so relieved since he landed on the ground outside the asylum fence all of those weeks ago, though he was angry with himself for taking so long in returning. He shouldn't have made Elijah wait for him like that. Taking the stairs two at a time, Emery practically crashed into the locked door in his eagerness to be through it and back to Elijah.

"Elijah?" Emery asked, excited as he unlocked and opened the door. He couldn't see anyone from the doorway. He stepped inside and stopped dead, paling so quickly he could feel the blood fall through his body down to his feet and leak through his toes into the rug and the floorboards

beneath.

Dr. Moncure sat on the bed, right leg crossed over his left, clasped hands resting on his knee. He wore a wide grin, like he'd just won an extravagant prize.

“Well, if it is not my favorite patient. Hello, Emery. I'm afraid your negro has not joined us.”

*

Saturday, February 14, 1885

I'm back in my room, and my stomach, my intestines, my entire being is the open sea, roiling in a storm of fury. My body clenches as my bowels expel things I didn't even know could still be stored within my imploded form. There can't still be any drop of matter remaining. And yet the force sends me reeling.

My disease is too deeply rooted in my body, I'm told. It has escaped my mind and taken hold of my physical form, anchoring more firmly inside. He says he should have realized; it's unfortunate, he says. Treatments of the mind aren't enough. It's time for more invasive tactics, treating the body to loosen the hold on the mind. I need purging of all the nothing in my body, room made for something. For sanity.

Oh, the smell. The foul odor poisons the air around me. Despite all failures, I continue at attempts to avoid breathing the expulsion, to spare my nostrils from the assault, and I cough, sputtering, vomit in the corner, unable to even make the receptacle. It's so potent, it burns my eyes.

The waves calm, enough that I can lie down without the purge shifting my body against me. I breathe deep, testing, and cough once more, spitting the acrid air back to the ground. I'm sure now that I cannot possibly have any more to expel, lest my organs and flesh begin to dislodge even themselves from within me. I hope—just a moment—for death, to be free of it all. To join Elijah beyond this life, wherever that takes us.

And there is more. My abdomen is clenched like a vice, with a power that squeezes a shout from my throat. There is still plenty inside, my blood is only the beginning.

*

Chapter Sixteen

Sunday, August 30, 1885

The scene before Emery had played out so many times in his nightmares that he actually had to pinch himself on the thigh to ensure he really was awake, that Dr. Moncure really was sitting on his bed in front of him. Dr. Moncure's appearance contradicted itself. His face had aged years in the stress from the aftermath of the fire. His hair was falling out and his skin sagged, the pallor less than healthy. But those eyes. His eyes were as young and sharp as ever, and Emery could tell he was in complete control. Emery didn't even have time to take in the situation before a second presence further complicated the confrontation.

"Told ya you wouldn't get away this time, lunatic," Lawrence said as he stepped out of the shadows, his voice full of glee and menace. Lawrence was bruised and discolored, with a blacked eye and his lip split.

Emery became lightheaded, swaying slightly on his feet. He felt like the ground had dropped out from under him. He attempted to take a step but found he couldn't control his limbs. His body was seized, stuck in the downward spiral of hell as torment after torment washed over him, drowning him in all the pain the two men had inflicted upon him over the years. He struggled against the tide, desperate to get his head above it all, to move, to get away. He couldn't go back. They'd have to kill him. With a gasp of air, he managed to clear enough of the panic from his mind to regain control of his legs. He took a step back, hand braced against the wall.

"Doctor, I believe he's gonna run," Emery heard Lawrence say, his voice muffled, like he was talking through a thick cloth.

“He is going nowhere,” Dr. Moncure replied, as muffled as Lawrence.

Running his hand over the wall, Emery tried to ground himself in the room, place himself in order to plan the quickest way out. Once he started running, he didn’t want to ever have to stop. He would run until the tortures of his past were nothing but dust and smoke behind him, so far back they didn’t even exist any longer. Emery turned and tumbled more than actually ran to the door. He collided with it, that door the only force keeping him upright. He wrapped his fingers around the knob and turned it as Dr. Moncure spoke again, his tone calm and assured.

“If you leave this room, I will kill your colored friend.”

Emery stopped dead; he couldn’t breathe. He didn’t move.

“He will die as slowly as you can imagine, in more pain than you ever experienced under my care. Do you understand?”

Emery remained standing at the door, hand still on the cold metal knob, breathing heavily in and out, in and out. He closed his eyes, tried to calm his mind. He turned around, glaring.

“Please, don’t hurt him. What do you want?”

“That is a good boy now,” Dr. Moncure said, clapping his hands together once as a knowing smile split his old face and deepened his wrinkles. “Return to the asylum with me, where you belong, and I shall release the colored boy without harm. Do you agree to these terms, son?”

The word sent Emery into a rage. “Son? Son! I’m not your son! You are a monster worse than my father, and I am *not* your son! You expect me to believe you’ll let Elijah go if I come back to that hell with you? I’d never believe that! You’ll keep him and ‘treat’ him too, one more subject to try and prove your worth!”

Dr. Moncure chuckled to himself. “Okay, you have caught me. Of course I will not release another test subject when one falls so easily into my lap. However, whether or not you believe

me is irrelevant. The only way you are leaving this boarding house is with myself and Lawrence. Your choice is whether you come quietly and peacefully, ensuring the colored boy's life, or you cause a scene, ensuring his death. What will it be? Decide quickly."

Emery's thoughts were frantic. He didn't know what to do. While he struggled for an idea, he tried to keep Dr. Moncure talking. If there was one thing he knew about the man, it was that he loved to describe his brilliance to all who would listen. "How? How do you have Elijah?"

"Oh, that really is quite a fascinating story," Dr. Moncure said. He moved to adjust himself to a more comfortable position. "Please, sit, and I will tell you."

"I'd much rather stand."

"Suit yourself." Dr. Moncure shrugged. "Well, it all started last night when Carina Montaine turned up on my doorstep, panting and rambling about Anderson Smith kissing her stable boy. She was not making much sense, but you can imagine my surprise once she calmed down and told me the entire story. I could not believe my luck. Here you were in Williamsburg all along."

"I was not here all along," Emery corrected him. "I came back."

"Tit, tat, it matters not." Dr. Moncure waved his hand in the air. His eyes were unfocused, as though he told the story to himself.

Emery started to have thoughts of escape, but one look at Lawrence stopped all of those. The man was staring so firmly into Emery, Emery could feel it almost like a touch. Lawrence ignored the doctor's story completely.

"Anyway, Lawrence turned up early the next morning with Carina by his side, and he told me of your little scuffle and how you and the colored boy had run off into the night. I paid a visit to Carina's parents, specifically to speak to Liza. Once I told her of her son's...inclinations, she was quite disturbed and could not have been more helpful. She did not know where you lived,

but she knew you worked for the cooper, Mr. Tinden.”

“His mother is the reason you found us? Liza told you?” Emery asked with wonder in his voice. *Her own son...*

“But of course! She knows her son is ill and, loving mother that she is, she wants him in my care so that I might cure him of the ailment and return him to her,” Dr. Moncure explained in a proud tone.

“D’we really gotta do this, Dr. Moncure?” Lawrence demanded. His foot tapped on the floor, and Emery wished he would just jump out the window. “Ain’t it time to just take him and get outta here?”

“Oh, Lawrence, if the boy is curious about our grand exploits, who am I to deny him the splendid details? Now, do be quiet,” Dr. Moncure told him before turning back to Emery. “As I was saying, Lawrence and Carina remained at her parents’ house while I paid old Tinden a visit. He was able to tell me that you have been living here at this boarding house for a few months now. When I returned to my new office to make arrangements for your return, Carina awaited me to tell me Lawrence was outside with the stable boy bound in the back of their carriage. Once the boy was secure, Lawrence accompanied me here to find you. And here you are!”

“Yeah. Here I am,” Emery said sardonically.

Dr. Moncure rose from the bed with a groan. “So, shall we make our way to the asylum now?”

“Not so fast,” Emery said, the wheels in his head finally turning toward a plan. “I want Elijah released. I want to see him set free, then I will go with you.”

Lawrence barked out a laugh. “You crazier than I thought. I can drag ya back, real easy like.”

“Lawrence, Lawrence, calm yourself. I really must insist we forego any violence unless

absolutely necessary.” Dr. Moncure looked at Emery, his eyes almost pitying. “The colored boy will not be released. However, he will remain unharmed if you are again secured within the asylum. Otherwise, he will be killed. Simple as that. You have nothing with which to bargain, so this is the last time I will ask before I make it for you: what is your decision?”

Emery had one good chance, but it was one that he was pained to take. More than anything, he did not want to involve his mother, but he saw no other choice in the matter. “Actually, I do believe I have something to bargain with, something you don’t know yet.”

Dr. Moncure narrowed his eyes at Emery. “I highly doubt that, boy. But I shall entertain you; what do you think you could tell me that would in any way interest me? What could you possibly have to offer that would alter our terms?”

“My father is dead,” Emery said flatly. He waited for his words to sink into Dr. Moncure.

“What does that have to do with...” Dr. Moncure started to say, then Emery watched realization make his face fall momentarily as his voice trailed off.

Emery smiled at him. “Yes, you know what that means. No more ‘donations’ to fund your torture. You never wondered why the money stopped abruptly just a couple of months ago?”

“I have been quite busy since that fire, as I am sure you are well aware.” Dr. Moncure paused here to glare at Emery. “I vaguely recall noticing once or twice, only to become distracted by some other, more pressing matter. However, I fail to see what this changes. The donations were solely to pay for your care and to keep your presence off of the record. Without it, the state should compensate for your care, unless I can tap your father’s estate for payment, as he placed you here with me.”

Emery raised his eyebrows and wagged his finger at Dr. Moncure, acting far more relaxed than he felt in his terror. “Ah, but he didn’t place me there with you, did he? Not officially. As

you have just pointed out, my presence was kept off the record. I don't see any government funding coming in for a patient who doesn't exist. And there is no estate, you old fool. My mother inherited it all." He paused to watch Dr. Moncure's face blanch. "Yes, you know my mother won't allow Father's estate to pay you one red cent. And she would die before she signed me back over into your care officially. What will you do?"

Here, the tone of the room changed. Emery felt it and by Dr. Moncure's face, he could tell the doctor felt it as well. Lawrence seemed oblivious to the change, but he had no stake in the matter, save for his wounded pride. Where before the tone had been haughty and triumphant for Dr. Moncure and one of cold terror for Emery, there now was a note of uncertainty in the air. Dr. Moncure furrowed his eyebrows in thought as he looked at the floor. Emery crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against the wall as he sensed the first glimmer of hope that he might just thwart Dr. Moncure one last time.

"That is...well, I—of course the state will still, they would..." Dr. Moncure stuttered and stumbled. He tried to act as though Emery hadn't just thrown a pile of muck into his elaborate plans, but Emery could hear the uncertainty in the doctor's normally controlled voice. It was exactly the reaction he had counted on.

"You seem to doubt yourself." Emery couldn't help but toy with the man just a moment. "There is another way, you know. You could still have what you want most. What's a new case when you can have the patient back that you labored over for three years?"

Emery saw the interest flash across Dr. Moncure's face even as he tried to mask it. "Cease your prattling and stop talking in half-baked riddles. Tell me what you are planning and let us be done with this."

"My mother has been living in Williamsburg. She'll pay you what you wish, if you agree to

release Elijah.”

“Bah! I knew you were worthless. Of course your mother is here in the city, fool. She has been bothering me for months! She wanted nothing more than your release from my care. Now, you claim she will pay me to keep you there again? Nonsense. Grab him, Lawrence. We need to be on our way.”

Lawrence took a step toward Emery, but Emery put his hand up. “Stop! Wait, she will pay if I tell her to. I’m sure she’ll want some concessions, but I can convince her. Please.”

Dr. Moncure considered this a while before a sly grin spread over his face. “Fine. Return to the asylum with me, and I shall send for your mother. Once she and I have reached a suitable agreement, your colored boy shall be free to go.”

“No deal.” Emery shook his head. “I’m not nearly as crazy as you seem to think I am. You’ll never release him if I come back with you now.”

“It would appear we have reached impasse then,” Dr. Moncure said, stroking his jowls thoughtfully.

“Why don’t I just knock the lunatic out and carry him back? Then all our problems’re solved!” Lawrence shouted in frustration.

“Calm yourself, Lawrence. I will not ask again.” Dr. Moncure glared at the attendant a moment before returning his attention to Emery. “You will take me to your mother. We shall figure out this arrangement. Lawrence will return to the asylum, and once our deal has been struck, I will return there with you and release your negro. Is this suitable to you?”

Emery considered this only briefly before shaking his head. “Again, no deal. I have no reason to believe you will release Elijah once the deal is struck. You’ll get nothing until I see Elijah outside of that asylum with me. Then, I’ll return with you without a word, alone.”

Dr. Moncure cursed under his breath. “How about I simply sic Lawrence on you, and we lay this whole matter to rest right now!”

The suggestion elated Lawrence, who stepped forward. There was venom in the doctor’s words, and Emery could tell his patience was wearing thin. But Emery refused to give in. He couldn’t let this happen, couldn’t let the monster in front of him keep Elijah. “Because, then you won’t receive a dime, of which we both know you need many. Bring Elijah to my mother’s house. We’ll settle everything there, and I’ll return to the asylum with you.”

“Oh, so I should just trust that you will meet us there at the designated time? Stupid boy, I will not let you out of my sight again until you are locked up, once and for all.” He paused, thinking, then turned to Lawrence. “You will bring the colored boy to Mrs. Rovenholt’s residence. Once you have arrived, we will escort this patient back.”

“But, Doctor, no, why are you bargaining with this—” Lawrence tried to argue.

“Have I made myself clear?” Dr. Moncure’s voice was loud, forceful. Emery knew Lawrence dared not argue more.

“Of course, Doctor. It’ll be done.”

“Excellent.” He scowled at Emery. “Are you satisfied now, boy? You will take me to your mother’s house, where we will settle on an agreement. Once Lawrence arrives with the boy, he and I shall leave with you. Understood?”

Emery was not at all comfortable with the plan. There were so many things that could go wrong, so many ways Dr. Moncure could double-cross him, but it was the best deal he was going to get under the circumstances. He honestly couldn’t believe the doctor had even agreed to that. He must have really needed outside funding for the asylum. Emery was satisfied, as this plan gave him more time to come up with a way to get both Elijah and himself out of the predicament

entirely. He nodded at Dr. Moncure. “Yes, we have a deal.”

“Perfect!” Dr. Moncure clapped his hands together as a joyous, if pained, smile took over his face.

He began speaking to Lawrence, but Emery could no longer hear anything around him. At his words of agreement sealing the deal, the weight of it crashed over him like the waves of a storm, smashing him down to the ground, battering his mind. He was going back. After all that time, all he’d been through, after all his plans and everything he’d done, he was returning to Eastern Asylum. He was returning to isolation, restraint, leeches, switches, electricity; those would be his future. He would never see light again, never know love or peace or even contentment. He couldn’t stand under the weight of it all. Emery slid to the floor, braced against the wall, head hanging in his hands. He didn’t know how he could survive it again. He found himself praying he might die under the strain of Dr. Moncure’s treatments, sooner rather than later. He would accept death if it meant true escape from the asylum’s hell.

Amongst all of those painful realizations, as Emery doubted whether or not he could even go through with the return, he found that only one thing could see him through it. He was making the sacrifice for Elijah. If his imprisonment could ensure the safety of Elijah’s life and freedom, he had to agree to take the deal. It was the only way, and while he didn’t exactly find peace in that knowledge, he found a semblance of it. He felt confident that knowing Elijah was alive, safe, and free would sustain him that second time around if he was forced to survive at all. Emery picked himself back up off of the floor and wiped his eyes. Determined and glaring, he focused his attention back on Lawrence and Dr. Moncure.

“...Carina and one of the nurses prepare a place for him downstairs,” Dr. Moncure was saying to Lawrence. “Once that is in motion, get the location out of the colored boy and bring

him there at once. I would like to be back in my office no later than nightfall, with all of this messy business behind me.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Be on your way then, Lawrence,” Dr. Moncure ordered a moment later when Lawrence hadn’t moved.

“What about him?” Lawrence gestured to Emery, speaking like he wasn’t still there.

“Oh, he will not be a problem. Correct, Emery? We have a deal, and he does not dare break it lest I kill the colored boy. I will be fine. Go now and see to our preparations.”

Lawrence walked to the door without another word, glaring sharply at Emery as he passed, shoving him aside with his shoulder. When the door had closed behind Lawrence, Emery turned back to Dr. Moncure. They were alone and Emery’s mind was an instant flood of ideas. There was no way the doctor could hold him off. He could finally have his vengeance. He could strangle the doctor, wrap his hands around his throat, squeeze until he felt his windpipe collapse, keep squeezing as his face turned purple, grip the frail skin until the life finally left his bulging eyes. He could snap his neck, quick and clean, hold his jaw and the back of his head, wrench it to the side, hear the satisfying *snap*, release him and watch the dead heap crumple to the ground. He could grab the candlestick from the chest of drawers, bring it crashing down on the doctor’s head, feel his skull give way as it cracked; or he could take his time, use the stick to bludgeon the doctor all over, vent his anger and hate in swing after swing of the weapon, breaking bones, leaving clotted welts, until finally he stopped moving, stopped resisting, finally succumbed to the injuries, dying as he deserved. The possibilities were limited only by Emery’s imagination. And Dr. Moncure deserved the worst he could imagine.

But no, he couldn’t do that, couldn’t do anything to act on his thirst for retribution against Dr.

Moncure. The doctor would be dead, but Elijah would still be lost to him inside Eastern Lunatic Asylum. While he had no way of knowing whether they actually had Elijah, he couldn't take the risk with Elijah's life. He'd thought him dead once. He'd never risk that again. Emery had no way of even getting inside the hospital, let alone finding Elijah and getting him back out. And Lawrence would surely kill Elijah the moment he realized something was amiss. Emery could not risk that; Elijah was all that mattered. He was all of the best parts of Emery, the only good parts, Emery was beginning to think. No, Emery would have to think of something else, some other way. He had to find a way not to return to the asylum. Until then, he had no choice but to play along with the deal he'd struck with Dr. Moncure.

"Emery?" Dr. Moncure said, ripe with impatience. "Shall we be on our way now?"

"Yes, let's go." Emery led the way out of the room and out of the boarding house. He felt Dr. Moncure's eyes boring holes into his back as they set out on the walk to Mrs. Rovenholt's house.

*

Thursday, April 2, 1885

Carina is here again, this time with breakfast. I sit up as she walks in, having been asleep. The knock on the door woke me, and I'd been having a...quite exciting dream—about Elijah, of course. She looks at me once she's through the doorway and stops as she starts to say something. She is staring down, and it takes me a moment to realize the excitement from my dream followed me into waking. I cross my legs and avert my gaze to the ground. Embarrassed, I mumble an apology as she sets my meal on the desk.

“Oh, don't apologize for that,” she says in a hungry voice. “It's nice to know seeing me excites you as much as it excites me.”

It takes a moment for the innuendo to register, and when it does, I feel my face flush. I notice she has a red, open sore on her lip and it nauseates me with her comment. I stand and hurry to the chair at the desk as Carina crosses the room to stand behind me and rub my shoulders like she normally does. Recently, she's also taken to rubbing over them and down my chest. It feels wonderful, but I can't stop wondering what she hopes will come from this. I'm a patient in a lunatic asylum for God's sake.

I put my hand on the back of the chair to pull it out and sit. She meets me there. She's standing very close. Before I know what's happening, her hand is wrapped around me, stroking my penis through my pants. I step back abruptly, and there's the same hunger in her eyes.

She giggles. “Oh, I didn't mean to startle you. I'm sorry, that was too forward. Here, sit and eat. I'll just rub those tense shoulders of yours.”

My eyes flash from her to the tray and back and forth again. I am incredibly uncomfortable and just want to crawl into bed. It feels like I'm curling in on myself, and I can't stop it. I don't move. Play along, I tell myself. You have to play along. You need her.

She tries again, pulling the chair out for me and removing something from underneath the food tray. “Here, come now, you must eat. I’ve brought you a book. This is a science journal, just like you asked for. I glanced through it, and it looks like a whole foreign language to me. I can’t for the life of me figure out why you’re wanting to read about electricity of all things. Anyhow, sit now, dear, I promise I’ll just rub your shoulders. I really am very sorry I’ve frightened you.”

Not seeing as I have any other choice, I move uneasily toward her, sitting quickly and immediately digging into the meal. My stomach is queasy, so I’m not hungry, but the woman won’t leave until I’ve eaten. And I really want her gone. The only bright side is her bringing me the science journal I asked her for. I’ve learned she really is flirting with me, uncomfortable as that is, but it has worked to my advantage. She brings me whatever I ask for, which is very convenient. She’s brought me extra pillows and bedding, extra food, specific food if she can manage—things not served here—and she even sneaked me in a bit of moonshine. I don’t care much for the stuff; I just asked to see if she would do it. Now though, I’m slowly putting together a plan in my head. I’ll need to be careful about it, read and plan accordingly. Carina will be most useful.

Once I finish my meal, Carina grabs the tray and starts for the door. I call after her. “Oh, Carina, is there any chance you could find me information on the fire department in the city?”

“Wait, really?” she asks, confused.

“Yes, I think it would be very interesting to see how all that works as far as keeping the people safe.”

“Oh, umm...sure, I’ll see what I can find.”

“And, Carina,” I call again when she turns back to the door. “Could I get you to bring me a

screwdriver?”

“Oh, Anderson, I could never bring you something like that. It’s just too dangerous, too much of a risk. I’m sorry, but I can’t.”

I get up and walk over really close to her. I run one finger down her cheek like a ghost. “But, I would be so very thankful for it if you could help me with me this. It’s just for a personal project of mine. No one will get hurt. I’d never bring harm to anyone. Pretty please?”

“Anderson...” she whines, drawing my name out. “I could really get into a lot of trouble. And if anyone got hurt because I brought you that...Even if you didn’t do it...”

“It’s a tool, not an instrument of death,” I say. “I would guard it with my life. You know, if you could do this for me...what you saw this morning has been a challenge for me since I’ve been here. There is no...release for me here.”

That perks her attention and dispels whatever uncertainty she felt a moment ago. The queasiness is back in my stomach, but I have to push it down, ignore it. This opportunity is too valuable to let preferences get in the way.

“I-I suppose there wouldn’t be a problem bringing you what you need. It’s just for recreational purposes, this project of yours. Yes, I’ll get it as soon as I can.”

“You’re a wonder, Carina. Thank you so much.” I tip my head and kiss her lips lightly, to the side so as to avoid the sore.

She reaches and grabs me below the waist again. I cringe and she interprets it as an excited twitch. I pull away, and she turns to close the door, her breathing heavy. I feel dirty and can’t wait until I don’t have to entertain her any longer.

Chapter Seventeen

Sunday, August 30, 1885

The journey to Mrs. Rovenholt's house wasn't particularly long, yet Dr. Moncure was quite winded by the time they stood at the end of the walkway leading to the front porch. He had paled and was covered in a sheen of perspiration. His breathing was shallow as he panted for air. Emery didn't care. On the contrary, he took this to be a good omen for his being able to get away, so long as Lawrence arrived with Elijah before Dr. Moncure had fully recovered himself. The air outside was cooling ever so slightly as the sun was close to setting into the night, but Dr. Moncure seemed to find zero comfort in this.

"That was...taxing," Dr. Moncure said between labored breaths. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his face. "So this...must be...the lovely...Mrs. Rovenholt's house."

"Sure." Emery's tone was haughty as he stood looking up at the house. He was having trouble making himself walk up to the door, not wanting to involve his mother in the mess he'd just assured her was over the very night before. Oh, how quickly the winds shifted and everything changed.

"Well, are you not...going to knock...on the door?"

Emery said nothing as the guilt in his belly grew over the trouble he had just brought—quite literally—to his mother's doorstep.

"Boy, this had better not be some ruse," Dr. Moncure said with warning in his voice. "If you have led me anywhere except your mother's dwelling, I swear I will—"

“You will do nothing,” Emery snapped, turning on the old man. “I’ve kept my word. We are where I said we’d be. Now—”

“Emery, dear,” a voice cut in from the now open doorway of the house. Mrs. Rovenholt had seen them gathered outside. “Where have you been? I was expecting...you...who is that?”

Her voice trailed off upon noticing that her son’s companion was not Elijah as she assumed it would be. As she took in the older gentleman’s presence, he smiled up at her, bowing his head in greeting. “Mrs. Rovenholt! So lovely to see you again. I know it has been a few years, but surely you must recognize me.”

“You,” Mrs. Rovenholt practically growled. “Emery, come inside this instant and get away from that man.”

“Mother, I’m so sorry. I can’t.”

“What do you mean ‘you can’t’?” she demanded.

“Ma’am, why don’t you invite me in? We have much to discuss, and none of it is the business of your neighbors or any passersby.”

“I would *never*—”

“Mother, please,” Emery said, walking up the pathway toward her. She took a step in Emery’s direction when Dr. Moncure started following Emery up the walk. “Mother, stop. He has to come inside. It’s the only way. I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

Mrs. Rovenholt continued to block Dr. Moncure even as she shepherded her son behind her. Finally, with an angry sigh, she moved aside and nodded once curtly. Dr. Moncure beamed as he walked quickly past her.

“Thank you kindly, ma’am. We have much important business to discuss,” Dr. Moncure said.

Inside, Mrs. Rovenholt directed them into the same sitting room where she had hosted Emery

and Elijah the evening before. Emery went to the couch, but Mrs. Rovenholt grabbed his arm and moved him to the armchair closest the door. She sat in the second chair nearest the fireplace, which left the couch for Dr. Moncure. Once they were seated, not a word was said. Mrs. Rovenholt glared at Dr. Moncure, head resting on one hand between her thumb and pointer finger. Dr. Moncure looked all around, smiling and admiring, oblivious to her glare; or so it appeared. He seemed to find pleasure in completely ignoring her, which further infuriated the woman. Emery was watching Dr. Moncure carefully, and he noticed that the man's breathing had steadied; he was recovering much more quickly than Emery hoped.

"Will you not offer us some tea? Or perhaps some cakes?" Dr. Moncure finally asked.

"Tea and cake are for guests, friends, welcome visitors. You are none of those."

"Ah, yes, well, cannot blame an old chap trying for some hospitality."

Mrs. Rovenholt gave him a look like she certainly could blame him. "What exactly do you want, you monster?" she demanded when Dr. Moncure still had not stated his intentions.

"We have business to discuss," he repeated merrily. "Let us talk money."

"Money?" Mrs. Rovenholt roared, loud and incredulous. "What could we possibly have to discuss about money? You know what, don't answer that; I'll never pay you a half cent! That deal with my husband was made with the Devil! I have my son back, and I shall never deal with you again!"

"On the contrary, madam. You and I shall be dealing for a long time to come. Is that not right, Emery? You see, I have reached another deal with another devil."

Mrs. Rovenholt looked to her son in disbelief. "Emery? What is this old fool talking about?"

"Please, Mother, hear me out." Emery paused, and she didn't say another word. He sighed and rubbed his face. "Dr. Moncure and I made a deal. I'm going to return to the asylum with

him, and I need you—”

“No! Hell no!” Mrs. Rovenholt jumped to her feet, pointing at Dr. Moncure, who leaned back, crossed his legs, and smirked at her. “That will never happen! Over my dead body! I won’t—”

“Mother!” Emery cut her off firmly. “He has Elijah.”

“I—” Her voice trailed off as the reality of the situation settled in upon her. Her rage seemed to deflate like a balloon, likely escaping from her mouth, which hung open silently. She sat back down in her chair, staring at her son. Her eyes begged him to explain how such a thing could have happened, how they could have arrived at such a scenario just twenty-four hours after she finally got him back.

“He found me at the boarding house today, was waiting for me when I got back. He told me about Elijah and said he’d kill him if I didn’t return quietly with him. I had to think fast, and I remembered that Father had been paying him to keep quiet about me.”

“But, he’s dead, he—”

“He knows, Mother. That’s why we’re here. I told him I would convince you to resume Father’s payments if he released Elijah. Then, I would go back to the asylum with him willingly.”

“How do we even know he will release the poor boy? His word? No, never, I will not allow this. I cannot let you go back there, especially not after what you told me, and I will *certainly* not pay him to continue such mistreatment of you. I’m sorry, Emery. You know I love Elijah, but I will not sacrifice you to get him out. *You* are my son, not him. There has to be another way. There just has to be.”

“I assure you there is no other way, ma’am. An associate of mine is on his way here now

with the young colored boy. My word is good. We will reach our agreement, at which time I will leave with your son while the boy will be free to go.”

“How much will it take to make you go away and forget you ever knew my son?”

Dr. Moncure tipped his head back and laughed. “That is not what is on the table for negotiation, my dear.”

“Everyone has their price, Doctor. So name yours.”

“Mrs. Rovenholt, Emery is returning to the asylum with me. That is a fact. The only thing up for debate here is whether or not the colored boy returns to the asylum as well. So, we will...”

Dr. Moncure’s sentence trailed off as a knock at the door interrupted him. Mrs. Rovenholt rose to answer it. “Who would be knocking today?”

“That will be my associate arriving with your son’s colored boy,” Dr. Moncure reminded her. Emery rose to follow his mother to the door to make sure Elijah was all right. Dr. Moncure cleared his throat to catch Emery’s attention. He opened one side of the gray waistcoat he wore and revealed the handgun inside. His voice became quiet, menacing. “Sit back down, boy. Do not get any funny ideas. You try anything with that boy and I will kill your mother. Mark my words.”

“I—” Emery started to shout. Dr. Moncure silenced him with a finger to his lips, closing his jacket.

Mrs. Rovenholt opened the door with a startled “oh!” and stepped back from the doorway as Lawrence gruffly forced his way through, practically dragging Elijah behind him by his upper arm; Elijah was barely able to keep his feet beneath him to stay upright. Once they were inside, Lawrence stopped, allowing Elijah to right himself. He looked unsteady on his feet. Emery could see that his bottom lip was swollen, and he had a fresh cut on his left cheek, just below his eye.

Emery wondered whether his wounds were from his capture or from his trying to keep Mrs. Rovenholt's location from Lawrence.

Mrs. Rovenholt stood back from Lawrence in the foyer, glaring with her arms crossed. She didn't say a word. Dr. Moncure called to Lawrence from his seat on the couch. "In here, Lawrence. Do bring the colored boy with you."

Lawrence did as he was told, and Mrs. Rovenholt returned to the sitting room after them, reclaiming her chair. Lawrence stood in the doorway, never releasing his grip on Elijah's arm. Dr. Moncure looked around at them all before resuming his explanation of the deal. "Wonderful! Now that we are all here, let us settle things. As I was saying, Mrs. Rovenholt, you and I will agree to the terms of your continued donations, then the boy will be freed to your care."

Elijah's head snapped up at this. Emery caught his eye and tried to offer him a reassuring smile.

"Yes, but we still have the issue of Emery returning to your care. I will not agree to anything until the option of his freedom is on the table for discussion as well."

"Mother, it has to be this way. I've accepted it, and I'll gladly do it if means Elijah is safe."

"Em, you can't! I ain't gonna let you go back there! They ain't—"

"Shut up!" Lawrence said as he smacked Elijah so hard in the side of the head that he fell to the floor. "Niggers don't get no say in this."

"Lawrence, I will kill you," Emery hissed, rising from his chair. Mrs. Rovenholt put her hand up, directing him back into his seat.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you," Elijah said to Emery from the floor. "Maybe I should've let you kill him."

"I said, shut up!" Lawrence kicked Elijah in the back, eliciting a grunt.

“Enough!” Dr. Moncure roared from the couch, surprising all but Emery with the force of his voice. He paused to see if they all had their attention on him. “Lawrence, we are negotiating the boy’s release. That becomes more difficult if you continue to damage it. Now, control yourself, or I will give you a lesson in control once we return. A bit of shock therapy would work wonders on your anger and outbursts.”

Lawrence blanched, his eyes widening. Dr. Moncure waited patiently for a response. Lawrence nodded slowly, saying nothing. Satisfied, Dr. Moncure continued. “Good. Now, as for you, Mrs. Rovenholt, delusions of keeping your son are exactly that. So, can we negotiate like civil beings, or do I simply have Lawrence drag Emery from this house and kill the colored boy while he is at it? Choose quickly. My patience is running out.”

Please, Mother, don’t press too hard. I know what he’s capable of. How am I going to get out of this mess I’ve created?

“I’ll alert the authorities. This is blackmail. Extortion! I will not stand for this!” Mrs. Rovenholt said, her voice laced with desperation. “Those awful tortures you call treatment cannot be legal! I’ll see you removed from that asylum! I’ll see you arrested! I won’t stand by and let you take my son from me again! I will not let you keep him!”

“The authorities? What authorities?” Dr. Moncure shouted even as he laughed in her face. “Your son is an abomination. A sodomite. Not to mention a murderer. He killed his father, and he killed a patient named Jane the night he escaped me! The ‘authorities’ will arrest him and place him back in my care!”

No! How does he know about that? They found her; he must have. If we were the only two who escaped, he knows I killed her. Now Mother and Elijah do too. Elijah will never forgive me for this.

Emery looked at Elijah but couldn't gage his reaction. Elijah held Emery's gaze with an impassive face, but it registered neither forgiveness nor condemnation. Emery watched as Elijah tried to force a smile—Emery hoped—but only the corners of his mouth twitched before Elijah looked away and down at the floor. As for Mrs. Rovenholt, Emery noticed in her pause that the doctor's revelation had caught her unaware and affected her quite as much as the doctor had surely hoped. That didn't last long though, and she was back shouting at him, defending her son to the last.

"That is not my son! That is not who he is! He is a product of your torture! You made him into that! I will not allow you to do even worse to him!"

Maybe she understands after all. She's trying to at least.

"You foolish woman. Claim what you wish, but the fact is that any court in the nation—hell, any court in the world—would *sentence* your son to my care based on his crimes and sinful nature. That is, if they did not lock him up in prison and throw away the key. You think prison would be better for him than my hospital? I am in control here, and you will do as I say!"

"Anywhere would be better than your house of horrors! You control nothing!" Mrs. Rovenholt had lost some her vigor. She realized, as Emery knew, Dr. Moncure was right about Emery and society's reaction to him. If they even suspected Emery of sodomy, he would be arrested and, depending on the trial, sent to Eastern Lunatic Asylum anyway. Not to mention the murders, if they could be proven. Emery wouldn't let it get that far. He was desperate for a way out.

"You know I am correct. There is nothing to be done." Dr. Moncure's tone had calmed; now he was simply condescending to her. "Your husband was paying me—ah, apologies—donating one hundred dollars every month. Considering the fire has changed our circumstances quite a bit,

I think I would like to see two hundred dollars a month from you. Surely you can arrange this, yes?”

“Two hundred...you must be out of your mind! Perhaps you could do with a few of your own treatments!” Mrs. Rovenholt actually laughed at him this time, though it was a dry, humorless laugh. “Two hundred dollars? Who ever heard of such a thing!”

Mother couldn't afford that, not with the state of the plantation. What's Moncure playing at?

“Oh, I am not finished. You will make these payments. And in addition, should you miss even one payment, I will turn young Emery here over to the authorities myself and personally see that he is given harsh sentencing far away in the deepest, darkest hole they can find to lock him.”

“I've had enough of this!” Mrs. Rovenholt screamed, leaping up from her chair with such force it tipped over backward. Her eyes were wide in her rage. “I want the two of you out of my house! So help me God, I will kill you both before I let you lay one more hand upon my son! Get out! Now!”

“This is gettin' ridiculous. I'm grabbin' the boy and we're leavin' with both of them. Decision made.” Lawrence shoved Elijah over to Dr. Moncure for him to watch while he went toward Emery. Emery stood up quickly, more than ready for another fight with Lawrence, but Mrs. Rovenholt grabbed Emery's wrist and pulled him nearer the fireplace with her. As she reached for a fire poker, she pushed Emery behind her. Putting herself between her son and Lawrence, Mrs. Rovenholt raised the poker in front of her like a sword.

Lawrence had to look away for laughing at her, and Dr. Moncure joined him. Lawrence wiped at his eyes before speaking. “That's a good show, lady, but what d'you think you are? Some kinda knight of the round table? What're you gonna do with that? Gimme that thing before

you hurt yourself.”

He reached his hand out toward the iron poker, and Mrs. Rovenholt smacked his hand with it. He winced and grunted as he pulled his hand back. “Bitch! I’m done. Gimme that damn thing right now before I knock you out and take it from you.”

As Lawrence stepped closer to Mrs. Rovenholt, she swung the poker again and hit him on the shoulder. Emery went to move around his mother to help her, but she grabbed him and pushed him backward into the mantle. “Stay there.” She swung her makeshift weapon at Lawrence a third time, only he caught it and tried to wrench the poker from her grasp. She held on tighter, struggling against the attendant, determined to defend what remained of her family. Lawrence was obviously stronger than Mrs. Rovenholt, and Emery could see her slowly losing her edge, being out maneuvered by Lawrence. Emery moved again to try and help his mother; she was too entangled to stop him that time. But a rush of movement and a *click* gave Emery pause. He looked toward the couch and saw Dr. Moncure had risen from his seat and moved toward the doorway of the sitting room, which gave him a better vantage point on everyone in the room.

“Do not move, boy,” Dr. Moncure told Emery as he steadied the handgun aimed at Emery’s chest. Elijah moved to stand, but Dr. Moncure stopped him without taking his eyes off of Emery. “If you so much as put one foot under you, I will shoot Emery dead, and then, I will kill you. Stay on that floor, and do as you are told.”

“Mother, stop, please,” Emery called.

Elijah remained frozen, halfway to his feet, his fearful eyes on Emery, who couldn’t look away from his mother.

“Get...that gun...away...from my son!” Mrs. Rovenholt strained to shout, as her energy and focus were concentrated on Lawrence.

“Stop!” Emery shouted.

The sight of her son held at gunpoint lit a fire within Mrs. Rovenholt. She struggled against Lawrence with renewed vigor, knocking the end of the poker against the side of Lawrence’s head. The blow loosened his grip, and she regained control of her weapon. Lawrence moved back toward Mrs. Rovenholt as she was working to stand. She moved one way and Lawrence moved the wrong way. With a shriek, Mrs. Rovenholt was suddenly holding one end of the poker with the sharp point embedded in Lawrence’s abdomen. Lawrence collapsed to his knees, mouth open, eyes bulging. The room was silent until Mrs. Rovenholt found her voice.

“Oh no, what have I done?” she mumbled over and over. Her hands let go of the poker and rose to clutch her face as she stared at Lawrence’s wound. Her face was white as a sheet, as though the blood pumping out of Lawrence was coming from her.

Elijah’s mouth hung open as he stared. Emery was relieved his mother hadn’t been hurt, but the shock of it all stole his voice from the throat. *She...she stabbed him, killed him, all to protect me. But look at her. She’s traumatized by what she’s done.* Elijah’s hand moved to cover his mouth as he looked away from the sight of the wound and Mrs. Rovenholt’s horror at her action. Emery stepped toward his mother, wanting nothing more to hold her as she shook and stared, tears running down her face.

“Stop,” Dr. Moncure commanded. “Move one more time without my permission, and the colored boy dies. She is a big girl. Leave her be.”

I should’ve killed you at the boarding house when I had the chance, you bastard.

Lawrence reached down with tentative hands and wrapped both around the rod. The agony in his scream as he tore the weapon out of himself made Emery cringe. Lawrence’s blood, no longer impeded by the weapon, flowed even more freely from the wound. Lawrence whimpered

as he pressed his hands against the wound in an attempt to staunch the bleeding. He turned to Dr. Moncure, tears leaking down both of his cheeks, to his chin, and dripping to the floor.

“Doc...Dr. M, please, help me. You gotta do—” Lawrence begged.

“There are more pressing matters at the moment,” Dr. Moncure told Lawrence. As the situation was as good an opportunity as any other, Dr. Moncure coughed once into his hand then said, mostly to himself, “Well, I shall be leaving with the boys now. You are aware of my terms, so I will expect a check early next month. Your husband has the address. Well, he had it. I am sure you can find it somewhere. Feel free to write should you have any questions. Good evening, Mrs. Rovenholt.”

Mrs. Rovenholt was unaffected by Dr. Moncure’s words. Her eyes remained fixed on Lawrence, who continued to wince and whimper. She had not stopped mumbling, “What have I done?” and persisted as Dr. Moncure rounded up Emery and Elijah. Her eyes were like freshly blown glass with tears filling them and streaming down her face. She kept wiping her hands up and down the skirt of her dress, frantic, like she couldn’t get the blood off even though there wasn’t a single drop on either one of them. As Emery watched her remain lost in the accident she’d just had with Lawrence—as of course it was an accident—he feared for his mother. He wondered how she might ever come back from such a thing, how he might bring her back.

“We are not going—” Emery started to argue. Dr. Moncure silenced him when he pointed the pistol at him and Elijah and cocked it.

“There will be no debates. Not this time. Stand up. Now! Obey me or I will kill you. Only one of you, so the other will know the guilt of his misbehavior. We are leaving now. Tell your mother goodbye, Emery, though I am not certain she will even hear you.” Dr. Moncure turned then to Lawrence, who didn’t even appear to still be conscious. “I will return for you once the

patients are secured.”

“Mother...” Emery pleaded, taking a step in his mother’s direction. He stopped with his foot still in the air for a second step when Dr. Moncure fired his gun at the ceiling, causing a thin cloud of dust and small chunks of plaster to rain down for a moment.

The doctor spoke with quiet menace. “Do not move anywhere but to the door! Go! Quickly now! Before any of the neighbors want to know what the ruckus is about. Move!”

Dr. Moncure’s mistake was that second gunshot threatening Emery. Mrs. Rovenholt had become lost inside herself after stabbing Lawrence, but she was a mother first and foremost. With that gunshot, she found herself. Drying her eyes, she rose on unsteady feet and held her head with her hand. It took but a moment for her to realize what was happening.

“No,” she said quietly, her voice a soft croak. She tried again, more forcefully. “No!”

That stopped all three of them as they had just entered the foyer. They turned to face her with Dr. Moncure moving away behind the boys, so he could have them all in his sights should the moment move out of his favor. “Mrs. Rovenholt, this has all gone on long enough. I do not want anymore trouble tonight. It has been a very long day, and I want nothing more than to get these two secured at the asylum so I can sit down in my office and rest a while. Is that too much to ask? Now, please, clean up that mess there, and let us be on our way already. I will send attendants to retrieve Lawrence momentarily.”

“No, I will not let you go anywhere with my son! I will die before I—” Mrs. Rovenholt’s voice cut off mid sentence as a bullet buried itself in her forehead.

“That was unfortunate. Can we please be quietly on our way, boys? I am already quite tired of killing today. Once was enough.”

Emery watched as his mother seemed to hang upright in the air after he heard the *crack* of the

gun that made his ears ring when Dr. Moncure killed her. The bullet struck her and her face changed; shock spread over it and chased away the anger. Her mouth opened like she had one last thing to say, but all that came out was a strangled gurgle. She slowly reached a hand up toward the entry wound but started to tip backward before she got her hand to it. When she hit the floor, her eyes were still wide, but they had changed. They were dull, as though there really had been light in them, light that Dr. Moncure extinguished like dousing the flames of a fire.

The ringing in Emery's ears persisted, drowning out all sound. The gun had been so close to him it was like the sound, the pressure, had damaged something. Elijah grabbed him, shook him, and Emery saw his lips moving, frantic, like he was shouting at Emery, but Emery couldn't make out a single word of it. As if in a daze, he looked at Dr. Moncure, barely having processed what the man had done. The doctor's lips moved as well, slow and calculated, calm, and Emery knew that was wrong. He shouldn't be calm, collected, not after what he'd just done. It enraged Emery, the doctor's lack of emotion, his careless demeanor.

Emery didn't think about it so much as feel the urge on a primal level. He flew at Dr. Moncure, colliding with him like a speeding steam engine. The gun fell from the doctor's hand when Emery landed on top of him. But Emery barely realized, barely registered it at all. He felt nothing but rage, saw nothing but blood, heard nothing but the pounding in his head, thought of nothing but death: the patients in the fire, Jane, his father, his mother, probably Lawrence, and now, Dr. Moncure. After Emery tackled the man, he grabbed the lapels of the doctor's jacket, slamming him up and down. His fist cracked against Dr. Moncure's jaw, and Emery released a beastly roar. Tears streamed down his face as spittle flew from his mouth. Dr. Moncure tried to fight, but he was no match for the storm of fury swelling larger and larger inside Emery. Everything he had lost came back and built to the death of his own mother. It had been his last

straw. He'd broken. Wrapping his hands around Dr. Moncure's throat, Emery squeezed as he pounded the man's head against the floorboards.

"Emery!" Elijah called behind Emery.

But Emery couldn't hear over the rage thundering away in his chest. He continued to batter away at Dr. Moncure, like the tide against the shore during a hurricane. Emery hit him and hit him. His vision was obscured for all of the tears he couldn't stop, but he had no need for sight. A trail of snot ran down to his mouth, over his quivering lip, but he took no notice of this either. He was screaming and cursing unintelligibly, continuing to hit the doctor.

Eventually though, the power of Emery's blows lessened as his emotions began to settle. The anger ebbed away, dulled, as his limbs became heavier with the exertion of the beating he doled out. Roars of rage slowly became wracked sobs. Emery tried so hard to maintain his momentum. Without the anger, all he would have left was the all-consuming loss, and it was too much for his heart to bear. So he punched again and again, though by then, the punches were not so much punches, as they were simply his clenched fists falling lazily onto Dr. Moncure.

"Emery, the gun!" Elijah shouted as he ran to pick it up. He put his hand on Emery's shoulder.

This was the first thing Emery registered outside of himself. When Emery's onslaught ceased, Dr. Moncure's feeble hand was still fumbling for his now missing gun. Emery took the gun from Elijah and rose to stand above the doctor who panted and groaned beneath him. He pointed the gun at Dr. Moncure, who didn't move.

"Why? *Why?*" Emery shouted at him repeatedly, spit flying in the rage of his words.

Dr. Moncure simply moaned, moving his head only slightly. He didn't answer, his face too battered to put the strength into forming words.

“You killed my mother! *My mother!* I should shoot you in every most painful place on your body! And once you’ve suffered a few hours, only then will I finally kill you! My mother! Oh, God, Mother...”

Tears, different than those he wept as he’d pummeled Dr. Moncure, ran down his face, dangling from the tip of his nose. They moved slower, the pace of sadness, which of course moved more lethargically than anger. Sadness and mourning, these were sapped of energy, weary emotions that settled more slowly over a person, yet sadness, in its melancholy speed, lingered much longer than anger, left a thicker trail, and it was so much more difficult to forget about and let go of. Anger was quite the opposite. Anger was a force of nature more powerful and brutal. It came quickly, in a blink, an instant, with hardly a trail to follow. But when it passed, anger was gone, sometimes as quickly as it arrived. Often it changed much in its brief visit, but it faded like blowing out a candle, very soon replaced by other emotions, whose slow arising began with the anger, but their arrival came into the void anger left. Emery lamented the loss of his anger even as it left him; he’d tried to cling to it. The tears he wept as he stood above Dr. Moncure were different; those were tears of sadness, slow to come and slower to leave. The gun shook in his hand, still pointed at the doctor. He couldn’t believe it. His mother was dead, and it was his fault. All he’d ever done was bring more hardship down upon those around him. He hadn’t really even been able to save himself. He was useless to save his mother, useless to anyone; he was sure of it. But he was not a monster; he was also sure of this.

“I should shoot you in that manner. And I could. But I won’t. God help me do I want to. But I refuse to be the monster; not even in the name of freedom or safety. I will carry the lives I’ve taken with me for the rest of my life, but I won’t add to that weight even for the likes of ridding the world of your menace.”

Emery took the bullets out of the gun and threw them down at Dr. Moncure before he chucked the gun across the room, where it skittered and tumbled through to the dining room. Without another word to the doctor, Emery turned to face an open-mouthed Elijah. He tried to smile at his lover, gesturing his head toward the door. “Come on, El.”

“But, Emery, we can’t just—He gonna keep comin’ after you! Shouldn’t we—” Elijah’s words caught as Emery reached him and caressed his cheek.

“No, Elijah, you were right before. I’m not this person. I don’t want to be a killer, a monster. I don’t ever want to be that person again. I need to be better. You make me want to be better.” Emery kissed Elijah, long and deep.

When he broke away, Elijah’s eyes were wide, and he looked at Dr. Moncure behind Emery, too beaten down and bloodied to have noticed. And Lawrence had long since lost consciousness, either from the pain or the loss of blood. *Why should I care if they see*, Emery wondered. *Obviously both the doctor and Lawrence knew about us. And Lawrence looks as though he’ll be dead soon anyway.*

“Wait here,” Emery whispered to Elijah.

Elijah nodded and said not a word.

Emery walked away and up the stairs, his movements slow and distracted. On the second floor, Emery opened closets and bedroom doors, down one end of the white-painted hall and up the other, until he finally found a closet where Mrs. Rovenholt had kept her linens. He took out a white sheet, fresh and laundered, only the best for his mother. Alone on that second floor, facing the closet of his mother’s things, he collapsed against the shelves and wept. He thought back to how close they had been, especially with his father’s absence in his life. He remembered the Centennial Festival, where she let him pet the animals and see the balloons; the days spent in her

garden, weeding and chatting about nothing; and most specifically, he remembered the day Elijah had dinner with them, when she'd taken the photograph of them in front of the mantle. That had been such a special day for Emery.

And now, she's gone. Mother...

Wiping at his eyes as he stood, Emery took the sheet back down the stairs, past Elijah, Dr. Moncure, and Lawrence, to his mother's corpse. He knelt next to her, taking her hand in his own. It was cold, colder than he'd expected. He clasped it, wrapping both hands around her one, whispering to her through more tears.

"I'm so sorry, Mother. I brought all of this down on you. I never should have brought you back into this. I should have let you think me dead in the fire or lost to you. I'm so sorry." His voice broke as a sob left him, and he pressed his mother's hand to his forehead, rocking back and forth in his grief.

"Em," Elijah said gently as he crouched next to Emery, wrapping an arm around Emery's shaking shoulders. "It ain't your fault. She knew what she's doin'. You was her baby, and you gave her peace 'fore she died. I can't think of any way she'd rather go than protecting her baby."

Emery nodded even as he continued his grieving; he couldn't bring himself to speak. After a fashion, he wiped his eyes, nose, and mouth sloppily with the front of his shirt. He laid her arms across her chest in an arrangement he'd seen at funerals in the past, an arrangement of peace. Bending down, Emery kissed his mother's forehead, a single tear falling from his cheek into her hair. With gentle fingers, he closed her lids over her eyes before sitting back and examining her one last time. Emery sighed as he opened the sheet to spread over his mother's body. Elijah rose and moved to the other side of the woman. When he held out a hand, Emery gave him the other half of the sheet. Together, they draped the linen to cover her body.

Emery took Elijah's hand, and after a moment's silence, the two walked from the house, with Emery leading the way out toward the street. Elijah squeezed Emery's hand, tugging for a stop. Emery obliged and turned to look into Elijah's sympathetic eyes. "Em? Whatchu feelin', love? Talk to me, please."

"I—" Emery started to say. He stopped himself and thought for a moment. He looked about and saw movement as neighbors likely sought the source of the nighttime commotion. He removed his hand from Elijah's as he said, "I really can't talk about it right now. I want to. I do. But I can't make sense of it. I can't accept the fact that she...that Mother is...I can't. I'm sorry, I just can't."

"Okay. Shh...okay." Elijah ran an affectionate hand through Emery's hair once they'd reached the side of the carriage that blocked them from the view of the neighbors who seemed curious to know what was happening as they sneaked and crept closer. Elijah gripped Emery's neck and kissed him. "When you ready. Okay?"

"Thank you," Emery said. He looked at the ground, lost.

"Em," Elijah started again. Emery didn't look up as Elijah paused before he asked his question. "Was you...was you really gonna go back to that asylum? You said you wasn't never gonna go back. No matter what."

"Of course I was going to. There was no other way to get you out."

"But...why?"

"For you, of course. It was the only way Moncure would ever release you. I'd have run back there in a heartbeat if it spared you any of that suffering. I couldn't ever let you stay in that place. I know what happens in there, what Moncure is capable of."

"I'm sorry I got caught, that I screwed everything up." Elijah's voice trailed off as he grew

more and more uncomfortable. He changed his topic just then. “But, I’m awful proud of you though, for not killin’ that doctor. I was ready for you to do it and really have it all done. But you was the better man and didn’t shoot him. Maybe we make each other better...”

“We most certainly do,” Emery agreed, pressing his lips to Elijah’s forehead before he climbed into the seat of Dr. Moncure’s carriage, the one Lawrence had used to deliver Elijah to Mrs. Rovenholt’s home. “Let’s go.”

“Where we goin’?”

“We’re leaving the city,” Emery explained, “heading north, just like we always said we would. I have a friend.”

Where normally Emery knew Elijah to be skeptical, the boy just nodded and climbed into the carriage. Emery snapped the reins and they were off, headed toward Kendrick’s home and their final freedom.

*

Tuesday, May 19, 1885

They're talking over me, around me, but their voices barely register, sounding far away and tinny, as though echoing to my ears through a long can, a metal tube, something. The whole world rattles after that last burst of electricity Dr. Moncure sent coursing through my body. I vomited down the front of myself. I couldn't help it. Snot runs down my lips into my mouth, the salty mucus mixing with the bile and acid and chunks of last night's chicken and corn as it spews out around the block between my teeth that supposedly prevents me from biting off my own tongue. It also muffles my screams.

"Turn it up again," I hear Dr. Moncure order. The click of the machine signals Lawrence's obedience.

"You sure about this, Doctor?" Lawrence asks with wariness in his voice. "This voltage is real high, higher than the board and association allowed for even when they endorsed this kinda treatment."

"Lawrence, are you beginning to feel sympathy for these patients? Pity, perhaps?" Dr. Moncure asks, his tone mocking. "That is so very unlike you."

"N-No, that ain't it," Lawrence stammers. "But what if someone found out about what you doing here?"

Dr. Moncure slams something. "And, how would someone find out, Lawrence? You and I are the only two who oversee these kinds of treatments, after Carter, that is. My notes of such cases are well protected. Unless you discuss these things outside of this cellar, who could possibly find out?"

"I would never! I-I was just saying—"

"Lawrence, let me explain something to you. It is not that the Association no longer endorses

such methods, but in this gilded age of excesses, especially in the North, those Yankees in New York have looked away from the harsh reality of what it takes to be rid of illnesses of the mind. They are now focused on such things as comfort and happiness and tranquility. While these are good for mental health, they do nothing to cure disease. Illnesses of the mind are dark, tricky little devils. They are not warts to be quickly sliced off. They are not boils and blisters to be lanced and bandaged. And they are not an infection for which a pill can be taken. Ridding a mind of disease takes time, patience, intense training, and yes, sometimes unpleasantness. My colleagues in the North, across the country and the world, have begun to lose sight of this. I, however, have not and will not. Our successful treatment of young Anderson Smith here will show the medical world just how necessary these treatments are. Once I can remove the plague of sodomy from first this boy and eventually from the world, my word will be law in the field of psychology. I alone have the sight, knowledge, and means to see this accomplished.”

“I get it, Doc. I apologize.”

“I have told you never to call me that. Show the boy the next image and treat the reaction.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

I see the chiseled naked man, and before I even have the chance to react to his beauty, the volts scream through my body, race over my skin, burn my insides. I seize and convulse, and then, everything is blackened silence.

Chapter Eighteen

Sunday, August 30, 1885

Emery brought the horses and carriage to a stop outside of Kendrick's home just a short while later, extinguishing the candles the moment he parked. He didn't want to draw any undue attention to his and Elijah's arrival, especially considering the bloody scene they had left behind at his mother's house. There was another carriage on the street in front of his own, one with four horses bridled to it and an empty cart tied to the back. Emery led Elijah up the front walk, and before the two were halfway to the front door, Kendrick opened it and ushered them quickly inside.

"Where have you been? I thought you would be back in just a couple hours?" Kendrick asked, his voice abuzz with worry and concern.

"We...there were some very big complications," Emery answered vaguely. He put his hand in the small of Elijah's back and prodded him forward. "Kendrick, this is Elijah. Elijah, this is my friend Kendrick."

They shook hands in an awkward sort of manner. Only Elijah spoke. "Nice to meet you. How do y'all know each other?"

"Kendrick helped me out before I left the city and went back to the plantation, before I found out you were alive and came back," Emery explained.

"Emery, what's going on?" Kendrick asked. "Where were you? I thought he'd gotten to you."

"Well, he did," Emery said. "Can we sit? There's much to discuss."

Kendrick directed them into the sitting room. Emery looked around; the room seemed so much bigger than when he had seen it earlier that day. Upon closer scrutiny, he realized that it wasn't bigger, it just had so much more space, as it was nearly empty. The boxes it had been filled with were all gone. Only the furniture remained lining the room around the walls.

"Kendrick, where is everything?" Emery asked.

"Either in the carriage or in the cart. There are a few boxes left and the furniture, then I'm ready to ship out. I arranged my leaving tonight and all I was waiting on was your return to pack the heavy things and get out before it got too late."

Emery's mouth dropped open. "We're leaving? You'll take us with you?"

"What's goin' on? Where we goin'?" Elijah asked, confused and skeptical.

"Kendrick has been planning to move north, to New York. I asked if he would take us with him. I explained the situation with Lawrence and he knew of Dr. Moncure. He said if he could arrange leaving a few days early, he'd take us. And he has!"

Elijah nodded but still seemed uncertain about the whole thing. Kendrick spoke up again.

"All right, so what happened tonight?"

Emery needed a couple of seconds to sort out his thoughts and figure out how to describe what they'd just been through. The difficulty lay in his inability to put to words what had happened to his mother. Then again, perhaps Kendrick didn't need to know every single detail of what had happened to them back at her house. Kendrick listened intently as Emery explained, and he blew out a long breath from his puckered lips when Emery finished. His face stayed that way as he searched for the right words to respond.

"That's...a lot," he finally managed, finding nothing better in his now seemingly inadequate vocabulary.

Emery laughed a dry noise. “Yes, that’s one way of describing it.”

“But what about your mother? Isn’t she still back at the house? Couldn’t you leave with her? Shouldn’t you? You can’t really just leave her with that messy situation to deal with alone, can you?”

Emery’s breath hitched and his eyes immediately blurred as he held back the tears, gulping short breaths to keep his composure. He couldn’t talk about that. *I won’t. How could I?*

“She...well, she’s...I mean, he...”

There was a brief silence as Emery fumbled over the gravity of his mother’s death, silent tears rolling down his face. Elijah came to his rescue, his voice also choked with emotion. “She...didn’t make it. Emery can’t talk about it yet. And we ain’t gonna make him. Whatchu need help with before we can get gone?”

Kendrick looked at Elijah with a squint, his head cocked to the side, but didn’t say anything about it. Instead he gestured down the hall. “There are some boxes left, mainly just the contents of the office. Then, we need to load up the furniture from here, the kitchen, and the bedroom. After that’s all tied off and secure, we’ll be ready to get out on the road.”

“Then, let’s get it,” Elijah said, popping up from the couch where he sat next to Emery.

Emery was staring down into the floorboards, eyes wide but not seeing a single grain or dust particle. He didn’t even feel Elijah’s hand on his back, the caresses up and down for attempts at comfort before he pulled it back and walked away. His mind was a whirlwind and every gust pounded him with the vision of his mother’s dead eyes, the instant coldness of the pallor of her skin, the way her mouth had hung open and never closed, the sound of her body, heavy with the lack of life, hitting the floor and the echo of it through the then empty house. He didn’t know how he could go on, how he could survive life when he knew his mother’s ended because of his

own carelessness. *What if I bring similar fates to Elijah or Kendrick? What if I can't ever do anything but bring down hardship upon everyone I care for? Maybe I should just slip away into the night so I can't get these two hurt like I got Mother killed. It would be better for them if...*

"Emery! Come on, love." Emery registered Elijah calling his name, though he had no idea how long he had been calling. Elijah's hand gripped his shoulder and started to shake him gently.

"Huh?" Emery mumbled. He looked up to Elijah's concerned eyes and blinked rapidly.

"What are you doing?"

"We packin' so we can leave. We got some of the smaller pieces of furniture in the cart, but we need to load this couch you sittin' on."

Emery glanced down at the couch, confused a moment. Kendrick stood nearby, looking uncertain of what he should do besides watch and wait. "What do you...oh! The couch. I'm sorry. I just...I don't know where my head's at."

"Yeah, you do," Elijah told him. "And that's okay. You gonna grieve and you can. You sit down outside while we get the rest of this packed. I'll come get you once we ready to go. Okay?"

Emery nodded absently a few times before shaking his head with a sigh. "No, no, I'm going to help. I can't just sit around like that when there are more important things to be done, like leaving this godforsaken city behind forever."

"You sure?" Elijah pressed.

"Emery, really, don't worry about it. Elijah and I can manage this stuff," Kendrick said.

"No, I'm helping." Emery's voice was firm, harsher than he meant, but the other two put their hands up and backed away to start loading the furniture again.

"So, Emery," Kendrick began uneasily as he, Elijah, and Emery moved the couch out to the cart, "you never really told me how exactly you came to find Elijah. Did you end up seeking out

Father Schwann at Bruton Parish?”

“No, I didn’t make it there but found him nonetheless,” Emery said.

He went on to tell Kendrick about the events of his and Elijah’s reconnection. Kendrick actually laughed and clapped his hands as Emery finished telling of their long talk. Elijah remained silent throughout the exchange, letting the conversation distract Emery.

“That can’t possibly be what happened!” Kendrick said, the smile on his face beaming.

“That’s like a fairy tale or something. And fairy tales don’t happen much to people—men—like us. Unless of course we’re the goblin of the story. That’s something special, Emery. I hope you know that.”

“I do know that,” Emery said. “But you’re right; fairy tales certainly do not happen to men like us. This hasn’t been a fairy tale. Fairy tales have magic and love and happy endings, not evil doctors, years of torture, and dead mothers. This is a nightmare. I don’t believe in fairy tales. They’re for children.”

“Fairy tales is for everyone,” Elijah told him.

“Right he is!” Kendrick agreed. He set the chair he was carrying into the cart and waited until Emery and Elijah had set theirs into the cart as well. Then, he went back to Emery and put his hand on Emery’s shoulder. “First of all, what mattered most to you through all of this? What got you through every second of torture and every dark place you ever been in? What was it?”

“Elijah,” Emery answered quickly, then a half smile curled his lip and he corrected himself. Elijah blushed, looking away. “It was my love for Elijah. It’s gotten me through everything.”

“Exactly. You loved him so strong, so deep, that even when you thought he was dead, you held on to that love, and it got you through. Right?”

“Yes, you’re right. I see your—”

“Hold up, I ain’t done just yet. Now, you couldn’t get yourself to go to that church. You finally had a means of finding that boy you loved so much, but deep, dark fear kept you away. Then, you happen upon him on a delivery that same day you resolved to go to Bruton Parish. He just shows up in the pouring rain, right in front of you. There ain’t no one around, you don’t got anywhere to be, ’cause of the force of that storm, so you can kiss and talk and be alone a while. Now, what would you call that, Emery? What could you possibly call that?”

“Coincidence,” Emery answered flatly. “Plain and simple coincidence. Magic doesn’t—”

“Magic! Exactly!” Kendrick cheered, drowning Emery out. Emery couldn’t help but smile at the man as Elijah laughed. “Now you have escaped and defeated monsters, you’ve saved your lover, and tonight, you’re going to ride off into the sunset with him. I don’t know that any happier endings have been written into a fairy tale yet.”

“They probably haven’t,” Elijah agreed, smiling a shy smile at Emery, who returned it.

Emery sighed and rubbed his face. He put his hands up in surrender. While the picture wasn’t as bright and shiny as Kendrick had just painted it, Emery knew he did have a point. “Okay, okay, you win. I still don’t believe in fairy tales, but good things have happened, you’re right.”

“Thank you.” Kendrick puffed himself up, obviously pleased with himself.

The three walked back into the house with Emery feeling lighter than he had since the day he found Elijah outside that barn. As he looked around, he realized they had finished packing while they talked. He and Elijah went through the house with Kendrick for one final sweep, but all that remained were those things he was leaving behind. Kendrick led them outside, waiting by the door for them to exit. Elijah closed it behind him, and Kendrick locked it. Emery walked to Dr. Moncure’s carriage, in which he would follow Kendrick driving his own.

“Wait,” Kendrick said as he walked away from the house. “Neither of you have any of your

things. We gotta figure out how to get into that boarding house before we leave too.”

“I ain’t got nothin’ I’m interested in takin’ with me. Clothes on my back is about all I ever had,” Elijah said with a simple shrug of his shoulders.

“No, I’ve never had much either, not since Father sent me away. Nothing I have there is worth the risk of going back for. I have my money and that’s all I needed. I didn’t have food or supplies, just one extra set of clothes. The photograph is there, but I don’t need that anymore. I have Elijah back. I don’t want to waste the time or take the risk. Let’s just go.”

Elijah took Emery’s hand and squeezed it.

“Okay then. I guess we can get gone,” Kendrick said as he led the way to the street.

They each climbed into their respective carriages, and Kendrick called back, “Until we’re out of the city, keep your eyes open for anyone who seems to be paying us too much attention. We don’t know what people have found since you left your mother’s house, and they might be looking for Moncure’s carriage if they find it’s missing. We gotta be careful.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Emery said.

Without another word, Kendrick snapped the reins, sending his team off at a trot, and Emery followed suit. As they drove, Emery did as he was told and kept alert, but thoughts and images of his mother distracted him. Those tore at him the deepest, seeing his mother lying on the floor of her house, no one mourning her, no one to give her a proper burial. She deserved so much better than she got in her life. If anyone put together the happenings in Williamsburg that summer, if Dr. Moncure and Lawrence could alert others, if they found out what he’d done to his father, their faces would be on bulletin boards nationwide, and Emery would have brought down more tragedy on Elijah and Kendrick. There would be no escape. There would be no peace or life, just running, hardship, and tragedy.

Eventually, as if sensing Emery's unease, Kendrick called back to him, "New York won't be so troubling for you as Virginia was, most especially New York City. It's a better place, with far more men like us. There's practically a support system there, once you've found your way into their codes and social circles. I have a few friends in high places, men with similar inclinations. We'll be safe there, safer than in Virginia—or anywhere in the South, really, that's for certain."

Emery took in his words and felt the tension in his shoulders relax a bit. He would never let go of the grief of his mother, but he was getting away, with Elijah, alive and well. Despite his uncertainty in believing Kendrick's bold announcements, Emery said, "Thank you."

They left the city behind them, and Emery knew he would never again set foot within its limits.

*

Saturday, June 6, 1885

Carina sleeps on the unmade bed of the vacant room she sneaked me out and into. I struggle to take as much care as possible to extricate myself from her and the creaky, musty bed without waking her. This is the opportunity I've been planning and flirting toward these past weeks and months. Now, I'm here and it must be done perfectly. If I wake her, my chance is ruined until such a time as I get out again. I have waited long enough. It is time.

I flirted with Carina for months, always toeing the line between too much and enough to make her want more. Once upon a time, I would have felt guilty for such a manipulation, but my days here have squashed that empathy. If this is my only means of escaping this hell, I will do what I have to do, no matter the cost. It took time, but eventually, Carina couldn't stop herself; she had to have me, needed me inside. I don't know how I've kept the charade going this long, but with any luck, it all ends tonight. She wanted to do it right there in my room, at one of the meal times. I convinced her that was in poor judgement. We had to go somewhere, later at night, when patients were asleep and a skeleton crew kept watch over the grounds. I recommended she escort me to the main building, so if anyone saw us, she could claim the doctor required me for some new treatment he wished to try. She agreed, and now, she has served her purpose.

While Carina snores away in the bed of the unused room, I sneak along the corridors to find what I need. I know I should leave now, slip around until I reach the front door and escape out into the night, never to look back. And I will do that, but there is something I must do first. While I have to get out of this hellish place before it kills what's left of my soul, saps my remaining humanity, that could never satisfy all of the rage with which I'm poisoned. Dr. Moncure has taken so much from me. I can't possibly leave without taking all I can from him as well.

I reach the door labeled "Superintendent" and remove the screwdriver from the waist of my

trousers and the nail from inside my shoe. I worked for weeks to pry it out of one of the floorboards underneath my bed. Worked my fingers bloody for the first few days. It takes me longer than I like, but I am finally able to pick the lock and let myself into Dr. Moncure's office. I shut the door without a sound behind me. Now that I'm inside, I need to find the places in the room where the electricity is wired. I know the general vicinity but it's so dark in the office and my eyes need to adjust. I can't risk turning on a light or even lighting a candle. I can't mess this up now. I'm too close.

None of this would even be possible without Carina. She turned out to be even more useful than I intended her to be. I started reading up on electricity when the asylum got wired for it, and she thought I might be interested in the wiring schematic for the asylum itself, said, "Wouldn't it be fascinating to see the plans for the very place you're living?" Yes, Carina, yes it was in fact fascinating. Once she brought me those, my timeline for my plan was accelerated tenfold and relied solely upon convincing her to sneak me out for a late night romp. Small price to pay for both vengeance and escape.

Locating the switch that turns the lights off and on, I remove the covering and look to the wires connected to the switch itself. From what I've read, all I have to do is make sure the different wires are touching each other while the switch is off. Then, once someone flips the switch on, the current will spark at the connection and will eventually combust in a fire. With the screwdriver and a scissors I find on Moncure's desk, working as carefully as possible, I remove some of the coating and touch the wires together, twisting one around the other to make sure their copper stays in contact. Satisfied, I put the cover back on the switch, paying special attention not to flip the switch on accident. With that secured, I go back to the door and slip out into the corridor. I've one more stop to make before I am out those front doors, running for the

woods and the great world of freedom beyond them. First stop, Father's plantation for answers and my photograph of my sweet Elijah.

But before all that, down to the cellar. The primary electrical box for the whole building is down in the cellar. All of the currents to and from the rest of the rooms flow through that box. The trick with the wiring was personal, for Dr. Moncure alone. This, though, this is to make sure the rest of it burns down around him too. In order to get to the electrical box, though, I must first fight through the ghosts and demons of the torments I endured in this cellar. I reach the bottom of the stairs and can immediately hear the screaming, feel the terror and agony. I turn in the direction of the noise, stopping, listening, going off again. Not until I'm halfway down the hall—in the opposite direction of my intended destination—do I realize the screaming was inside my head; it was my own voice. My body is shivering from a cold chill, yet I'm sweating everywhere, all the way through my clothes, can feel it running down my back, gathering into beads on my forehead; I turn and run back the way I came. I need to do this damn job and get out of this place. I need to leave all these nightmares behind or they'll consume me. Perhaps they already have...the idea terrifies me.

When I finally reach the box, I open the front panel and see all of the wiring and connections inside of it. It's too dark and cluttered to find a specific wire or connection if I wanted to. However, I don't need to do that. I loosen a few of the wires, connect a couple together like I did in Moncure's office, though with less precision here, and I take a few wires from their connections and attach them to other connections. I don't know where these fires might start or how long they'll take to burn, but what I do know without a doubt is that they definitely will burn. Closing the front panel, I click the latch back into its notch, breathing a sigh of relief. I'm going to leave now. I am actually going to leave Eastern Lunatic Asylum and never look back. It

feels so good, I say it out loud. And then, it sounds so good, I tear up at the joy of the moment.

I take the stairs two at a time to return to the first floor. Stopping to listen, I hear no other noises. I peek out slowly, but there is no one in the corridors. The night attendants are elsewhere. Now, I just have to be very cautious as I make my way back to the front of the building, past the empty nurses' desk and out those double doors. I turn around my second corner and am taking silent steps down the hall when I think I hear a noise behind me. Panic floods me as I slide into one of the inset doorways and press myself as flat against the door as I'm able. My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that I'm sure whoever made the noise I heard can follow the sound and track me to where I'm hiding.

And that's when I hear it, the desperate whisper-shouts of a desperate woman. "Anderson? Anderson! I've already seen you down by that door. Come out this instant! Where the hell have you been?"

I step out, putting on an expression of relieved panic. "Hello, Carina, dear. I wandered off to find a washroom and didn't want to wake you. Took me the longest time and by the time I relieved myself, I was so turned around, I couldn't find my way back. Thank the Lord you stumbled across me."

I don't know what to do. I'm so close. So close. What options do I have? Run, let her sound the alarm? Attack her? God forbid, kill her?

"I've been going absolutely mad out here searching for you and avoiding the night attendants." She gets very close to me and runs her hand up my chest as she speaks into my neck. "How could you scare me like that? And after we spent such a beautiful experience together?"

No, of course I can't do any of those awful things to this poor, misguided woman. She was

never anything more than a means to an end; she is still an innocent bystander in my experiences. But I can't let her take me back to my room. I could knock her out quickly on our walk back and make a break for it. Or perhaps I could—

"What are you doing out here at this hour?" a gruff male voice demands. I don't recognize it, as I've never interacted with the night staff before.

I tense, unsure of what will happen. Carina handles it though. "Dr. Moncure requested the patient for some kind of new treatment. We've finished and I was returning him to his room, but I got a little turned around."

"The doctor isn't here." The attendant looks ready to lock both Carina and me in rooms.

"Well, of course he isn't now." Carina laughs anxiously. "He's finished and gone home."

The man looks us both up and down, calculating. "And, where are the patient's restraints?"

"Oh, Anderson here is very well behaved. We have never had an issue with him."

"All patients are to be restrained at all times outside the confines of their rooms," the man declares as he takes a set of restraints off his belt and straps me into them. "Return him to his room immediately. I will discuss this with Dr. Moncure when next I see him. I'll be watching."

"Of course," Carina says, hurrying me along.

"I apologize for causing you such worry," I say once we're out of earshot of the attendant.

"That was never my intention. I hope I have not gotten you into trouble."

Outside, instead of answering, Carina loops her arm through mine and laces our fingers together despite the restraints. I pull away though, patting her on the shoulder.

"We can't risk someone seeing us in so close a state. For all intents and purposes, we must appear as though you are returning me to my room after a session with Dr. Moncure."

"Of course," she whispers. "We really must do that again soon though."

“Yes, we really must,” I tell her in a dry voice.

Unless of course I manage to escape during the fire tomorrow, whenever it finally breaks out. I was so close. I won’t let freedom slip through my fingers again. The next time I have the opportunity, I will get away, no matter the cost. To Hell with any and all who get in my way.

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