

The Fun in Funeral

by

Mary Binninger

Submitted to the Board of Creative Writing
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May, 2022

Sponsor: Monica Ferrell

Second Reader: Amy Beth Wright

Cover Letter

My senior project will be a novella for a story called *The Fun in Funeral*. This story has been with me for quite some time, and definitely holds a special place in my heart. *The Fun in Funeral* follows Genevieve Collin, a mortician at Winston's Funeral Home. On a seemingly average day, the funeral home receives the body of 23-year-old Grace Carney, who drowned after slipping off a friend's boat. Genevieve goes about tending to the body as she usually does, but uses a new "embalming" fluid that the mortuary assistant, Jeremy Moore, had bought because it was cheaper than the regular fluids the home buys. When she comes back down to the morgue after talking to Desmond Chambers, the funeral director, about things regarding Grace's funeral, she shockingly comes to see that Grace has actually been brought back to life. Genevieve figures out that Jeremy had unknowingly bought a magical potion from a witch shop that is administered like embalming fluid, but instead of preserving the body, it brings people back to life. Genevieve then must figure out what to do in this unprecedented situation, as well as figure out how to deal with the dire consequences of messing with the order of the universe.

The general idea for *The Fun in Funeral* stemmed from a prompt that was given to us in my Fiction I class, back in the fall semester of 2019. The prompt we were given was something along the lines of this: an artist has a very particular downfall, go through the steps it took them to get there and where they are at now. I sat and thought about different types of artists, and the idea of a mortician as an artist popped into my head. In my notes I scribbled down a starting idea: a mortician who accidentally figures out how to bring someone back to life, and they start bringing people back on the low as a side job for extra money. I liked that idea, but couldn't figure out how the plot would go. Then I decided on the plot that my story follows now.

I was certain I wanted to have magic involved in this story, because as someone who loves fantasy and magic, I knew it would be fun to imbue into my piece. I grew up loving series like *Magic Tree House* by Mary Pope Osborne, *Goosebumps* by R.L. Stine, *My Sister the Vampire* by Sienna Mercer, *Maximum Ride* by James Patterson, *The Twilight Saga* by Stephanie Meyer, and *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins. Something I loved about all these series is how there were such particular worlds created, and how I was able to immerse myself in them every time while reading. I like that when you write a fictional story, you can have whatever you want happen. You can create all the little things about your world and how it works, which is so fun and cool to me. Whenever we had writing assignments in school where we had to create a story, I became so excited and would put my all into it, thinking back on the series and books I've read that contained all the elements I loved so much.

I always enjoyed writing and creating stories, but I didn't know that I wanted to be a writer until the 8th grade. In my ELA class we were assigned to write informational essays on any topic we wanted. Being obsessed with certain bands at the time, I decided to do my essay on the band Panic! At The Disco. I had a lot of fun writing it, mainly because it was something I enjoyed personally and wanted to learn more about. When I got the essay back from my teacher, Ms. Gray, told me something that I was not expecting. She pointed to the grade on the paper, which was a 100, and said, "Mary, you should write for Rolling Stone." I was shocked yet thrilled at that comment. I had never considered myself a writer until that moment. It unlocked so much inside me, so much excitement, potential, and passion. I loved reading as a kid, and the thought of the chance to write my own stories that could be published one day was exhilarating.

My main goal with writing is to have someone read it and be inspired, just like all those authors that inspired me. That is my great hope of being a writer.

After 8th grade ended and I went on to high school, I wasn't writing much for myself but still kept the idea of being a writer in the back of my mind. I remember scrolling through my school email one time during my freshman year. I saw something from one of the English teachers about a week-long summer writing program in the Bronx, called the Bronx Loaf Writer's Conference, a New York play on the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference in Vermont. I looked at the requirements for the program, and although I had some hesitation, I decided to apply. Months later I got a response back, saying that I was accepted into the fiction workshop group! I couldn't wait for the summer, but was also very very nervous about it. I kept telling myself, "this is for people who are actually writers," whatever "actually" being a writer meant to me at that time. After the week of the program ended, I immediately couldn't wait until next summer to come back, because I was met with so much kindness towards my work, helpful suggestions, and it was so wonderful to meet many like-minded people— people who were weird like me and loved to read and write. Since then, I have attended Bronx Loaf every summer, up until after I graduated high school. The year after that, I was no longer eligible to participate as a student, but still came back to work as an intern with Bronx Loaf, where I helped get everything set up for the conference, and even got to lead my very own mini-workshop.

Writing *The Fun in Funeral* did not come without some struggles though. Figuring out how Genevieve would accidentally bring someone back to life was difficult. I sat down with a friend from my class, and we started brainstorming ideas. We came up with the thought that maybe there would be something in the makeup she uses on the body, and then I settled on the

idea of her using some magical embalming fluid without knowing what it was. But that left me to come up with where the magical embalming fluid would come from. I thought about more ways that magic would be involved in the story, and soon all the pieces began to fall into place.

As a writer, I always begin my stories with the idea of wanting them to be a longer, full story, whether it be novella, novel, or short story length. However, I never knew how I wanted them to end after starting them, meaning I was left with a bunch of unfinished stories in my documents and on my computer. I always have the intention of going back to them though, but who knows when that time will be. But with *The Fun in Funeral*, I finally had a clear view of what the plot would be like, where I wanted things to go, and a general intention of how it would end. This story is special to me because it is the first one I have ever written more than 10 pages for, and as I said before, had a clear plan of where it was going— and let me tell you, actually knowing where your story is going is so refreshing and relieving. I didn't have to spend time wracking my brain about what would happen next.

Because of Genevieve and her coworkers' profession, *The Fun in Funeral* required A LOT of research, and my google search history was very questionable at the time of beginning this story. Thankfully, the internet is very resourceful. There have been a few YouTubers whose videos I watched to get more insight, some of them being Caitlin Doughty (Ask a Mortician), Lauren LeRoy (Little Miss Funeral), and Kari Northey (Kari the Mortician). I also had been gifted Caitlin Doughty's first book, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes: and Other Lessons from the Crematory* a few Christmases back, and unknowingly had it on my bookshelf for years. I was going through my books one time, and recognized the name, and I was like, "Hey, this is Ask a Mortician on YouTube! This would help my story!" I started reading it, and even modeled a

scene in my story after one of the passages in the book to give the readers more insight into the daily life of funeral home employees when they aren't accidentally bringing someone back to life. There are also some other books that I have used as research for this story, including, *The Undertaking* by Thomas Lynch, *Stiff* by Mary Roach, *Spook* by Mary Roach, *Thirty-Three Teeth* by Colin Cotterill, and *The Coroner's Lunch* by Colin Cotterill.

In February of 2020, I experienced one of the worst losses a child can experience. My father died, and my world fell apart. My dad was my best friend, we were very close, and I couldn't fathom living in a world without him. Everything I was writing about in *The Fun in Funeral* felt too real, aside from the coming back to life part. I wished so hard that it could be real, and I spent so long after hearing the news waiting for a phone call that would tell me he was actually alive. Right after that, the pandemic began, and I had to move off campus and go back home. I did not want to think about going home to an apartment that was dad-less. I couldn't wrap my head around it, and even though it's been two years, I still can't quite wrap my head around it. Life just sucks. I did not write a lot during the pandemic, mainly because of being swamped with online school, as well as trying to manage my increased amount of depression. When I did start writing again, I decided that I wanted to take my hurt and put it into this piece. I won't spoil it, but Genevieve also faces a very significant loss in her life, due to her bringing someone back to life and tampering with the order of the Universe. But because she did so unknowingly, it makes her loss even more tragic, and she feels a huge wave of different emotions.

This story has come very far. I hope that the readers of this piece will love it and feel the emotion that comes with it, but also get a laugh out of the dark humor, something that someone

working at a funeral home definitely needs. I hope that this piece will inspire and touch others, whether it be in creating their own stories, or just help them through a difficult time.

The Fun in Funeral
Mary Binninger

CHAPTER 1:

The body of Grace Carney lays lifeless inside the body bag on top of the silver examining table. The fluorescence of the morgue lights catches a gleam from the metallic instruments that sit next to the disinfectant on the rolling tray next to me. I pull the tray holding my tools closer to the table. I give my surgical gloves another tug to make sure they are on tight, and they snap against my skin. I smooth out the surgical gown that I wear over my scrubs and secure on my hairnet before beginning my work.

I unzip the bag carefully and remove it by gently pulling it out from under her. Her body was received at the mortuary of Winston's Funeral Home earlier this morning. Apparently, Grace Carney was only 23, and the cause of death was drowning, after slipping off a friend's boat.

Poor girl, so young, I think. Her body is tense, with her skin pale as the moonlight on a dark night. There are some sand and ocean particulates on her forehead, just around her hairline.

Every day I am presented with the question of death. If nobody dies, I don't have work. But my job is a stable one, and even in times of decline, I will always have clients. There's no

way around death. While my job is stable, it is grueling work. I am always on call, because there's only so much time for a corpse to stay in pristine condition.

I gently place a block under Grace's head to keep it elevated before I begin to set her features. I remove her clothes, placing them on the table next to me. I pour some of the disinfectant liquid into a bowl, and the chemical smell of rubbing alcohol starts to perfume the air around me. I dip my sponge into the bowl and wring it out before I start to slowly wipe down her body. I pay close attention to her mouth, knowing it'd be one of the first places where decomposition would take place. After, I place a towel over her genitals, you know, to preserve some modesty. I try to handle my bodies with as much care as I can. If it were me, I would hate it if my cadaver were to be felt up and thrown around brutishly as if I didn't matter. Famous writer and funeral director, Thomas Lynch might argue 'the dead don't care,' but I believe somewhere out there, their souls do, at the very least.

I check her vitals next. One might go as far to say this is a *vital* step of the many it takes to embalm a body. It's never happened to me in my many years of being a mortician, but I've heard horror stories of premature burial. What a disaster that would be, I mean, I could only imagine—the panic one might be consumed by once they realize they've woken up and are staring at the roof of a closed casket, six feet under. But her vitals are fine, I detect no pulse, and her corneas have already started to cloud as well. Rigor mortis already seemed to take effect too, since her joints and muscles feel tight. I flex her arms, legs, and fingers, relieving any muscle tension and stiffness. As I lightly massage various parts of her body, I feel them start to relax and loosen up. I take her arms and position one hand over the other, resting them on top of her abdomen.

I switch my focus back to her face and gather the materials for setting her features. With soft fingers, I massage around her face to further a more natural, sleeping expression. I grab the eye caps, the little discs that look like enlarged contact lenses, except they have tiny bumps over their surface, slightly resembling braille. I apply a thin layer of Stay Cream to the top of the cap, to keep them in place, and to avoid dehydration of the eyelids. Gently, I lift her eyelids and place the cap on top of each eyeball. The caps are used to keep the eyes from looking sunken in, which typically happens after death. Grace's irises are deep blue green, and her eyeballs stare back at me. My fingers graze the top of her eyelids, making sure they are closed.

Next I close her mouth. There are a few different methods to close the mouth, and each mortician usually has their own preference. Some prefer the suture method, where the jaw is wired shut through the septum, but I prefer to use a needle injector gun. I lift Grace's upper lip, and anchor the wire attached to the first needle into her maxilla, or the top gums, and do the same with her mandible, the bottom gums. Then, I take those two wires and twist them together, much like a twist tie on a bread bag, until her jaw is cranked shut, tucking the ends of the wire into one side of her mouth. I insert a small piece of cotton underneath her lips to form her mouth.

I put away the materials I don't need anymore and place the ones I'll need to carry out the arterial embalming within my reach. There are many different fluids we use to preserve a body, but there is a new brand of fluid that Jeremy, the funeral assistant and aspiring mortician, ordered online. The brand claims to be more environmentally friendly and less harmful to the living users who administer it, as opposed to the typical very-dangerous-if-ingested formaldehyde-based products. Part of me wants to question how well it would even work without a high concentration of chemicals, but I guess there's no harm in trying it— she is already dead, and

based on the way it's marketed, it's not likely for it to ruin the body tissue, as it's meant to preserve the tissue. I mix the fluid accordingly in regard to Grace's height and weight.

Taking the scalpel from my tray, I make an incision above her collarbone on the right side. I search for the carotid artery and the jugular vein and then make another tiny incision in each. I insert the arterial tubes, directing one towards her head and the other towards her heart. I pop the drainage tubes into her jugular to begin removing her blood, so that the embalming fluids can then infiltrate through her body as well as through her organs. I switch the embalming machine on. The sound of whirs and hisses of the machine mix with the bubbling of the fluids that begin to surge through the tubes and into her body.

I begin to wipe her down again with my sponge and massage her body to ensure that the fluids distribute evenly. As I press and pat her arms and legs, I see her skin tissue starting to regain its rosy appearance. I smile, as this is a normal indicator that the fluid is taking to her body and doing its job. It can take anywhere from 2-4 hours for the fluid to be distributed evenly throughout her body and organs; the embalming machine will turn off once it is finished. Because Grace is an average sized girl, and more on the smaller side, I estimate it to take about an hour.

In the meantime, I take out my sketchbook. I remove my surgical gloves and dispose of them, then make my way over to where my bag is on top of the counter. I always bring my sketchbook and some pens and pencils with me wherever I go, because you never know when inspiration might spark. Inspiration hasn't exactly sparked me at this moment, but I flip to a clean page anyway. My go-to doodles when I am just trying to pass the time are usually something along the lines of what someone might call "spooky". Being a mortician and having

your life filled with death everyday, you learn to find the sweetness and beauty in something so macabre.

I ponder with my pencil for a second, and then put it to the paper. I sketch the outline of a little ghost. I don't want him to be just an ordinary ghost, though. I want him to be a cute, loving ghost. I think that having a mix of something deemed "scary" with something deemed "cute" always makes for an interestingly wholesome contrast. When I am finished drawing, my little ghost has hearts for eyes, and is holding a garland-chain of paper hearts. Then, the embalming machine beeps, signaling that it is finished, and I make a mental note to add color to my drawing when I have the time.

Turning off the machine, I snap on a new pair of gloves and remove the tubes. I meticulously stitch up the lacerations, moving on to treat the cavities, which is done in a similar manner. I wipe Grace off once more, this time placing some moisturizing cream on her face to prevent the skin from becoming dehydrated.

At this point I am almost done with the embalming process, I just need to do her makeup and dress her for the viewing. I grab my brush from one of the stainless steel cabinets near my workstation and begin to brush her long, blonde hair. It is mercilessly knotted and tangled, with some strands still feeling damp from being submerged in the ocean. It has some slight waves with gingery-golden highlights that look like they'd glisten in the sun. Her hair hovers just below the bottom of her ribcage, reminding me of the way my sister's hair does. My mind clings to the thought of my sister. I haven't seen her, Lena, in a while — perhaps I should call her tonight. Lena is four years younger than me, and like typical siblings, we went through phases of hating each other, but through it all, we only came out closer.

I shift my thoughts back to fixing Grace's hair. I only give it a few run-throughs with the brush to get the knots out, because I'll finish styling it tomorrow morning before the viewing, which will be later that evening. I clean up my station, lay a sheet over Grace's body, and dispose of my gloves and gown before I go back upstairs to see if her parents have dropped off the clothes to bury her in, along with any other accessories to be worn for the wake. The staircase of Winston's Funeral Home is old, and the stairs creak low and slow as I trudge up them. They make me feel as if I'm in a horror movie... I mean, not like my job doesn't do that already.

The stairs from the morgue to the foyer of the funeral home are dimly lit, so stepping through that door to the home's bright blue walls and small chandelier feels like a breath of fresh air. It seems like a stretch that a funeral home could elicit such a feeling, but after spending most of your day with dead bodies in a cold, metal room where the lights glare back at you, most anything will feel like fresh air. The mortuary and funeral home sure are places of their own.

I give a knock on the office door of my boss, the funeral director. Through a muffled voice, he tells me to come in. I open the door to see him at his desk, in the midst of eating a sandwich that looks like it is about to crumble in his hands at any second.

"Hi, Desmond. I just wanted to know if the Carney family stopped by with Grace's belongings for the viewing tomorrow," I say. Desmond swallows a big bite of sandwich and clears his throat before speaking.

"Ah, yes. They're right here," he says, motioning to the inventory dresser in the corner of the room. "Just give me a second." He gets up, opens one of the drawers, finds the items, and walks over to where I stand at the door frame. "Here ya go, Genevieve. The family told me you can call them if you need any more from them or have questions. They also left me with a list of

her favorite colors and such. Figured you'd want that when carrying out the cosmetic process tomorrow," he tells me, handing me the belongings. Grace's clothes are packed neatly in large Ziploc bags, as are her accessories that vary from earrings, rings, and necklaces. People like to be buried in their favorite things, and I think when a family sees their loved one in familiar things, it makes their last goodbye a little less painful.

"Thanks. This is all great, very helpful," I say. "By the way, is Jeremy around? I'm cleaning up for the night, and I think I might need a little extra help putting the body away."

"I believe he's stepped out for a smoke. I'll be sure to tell him when he comes back in."

"Wonderful," I say.

"Happy embalming!" He says as I turn to head back to the morgue.

"Always!" I shout with a tinge of sarcasm from down the hall. To the average person, embalming sure isn't happy. Each staff member here has their own varying degree of dark humor. When facing death each day, we just try to keep the air light around here. After all, it does get quite dreary. Desmond himself is quite interesting. He's an older man, maybe in his late fifties or mid-sixties, and is one of those people who seem like you can never make them mad. He comes to work every day with a chipper attitude and a smile on his face. I don't know how he does it, but I guess it's better than being pissy all day, especially when dealing with grieving families for most of his time. Desmond is genuinely a caring person though, so I guess he's the perfect guy for the job, anyway. I wouldn't mind him directing my funeral when the time comes, and I'm sure he wouldn't mind me being the mortician of choice at his.

Once I get back into the morgue, I place the clothes for Grace in one of the nearing cabinets above one of the many sinks down here. Not long after I get back down there, I hear the

groans of the stairs and footsteps that follow approaching the room. Jeremy walks in with his arms wide open.

“So,” he says as he puts his hands together before crossing his arms. “*You* finally need *my* help?” He laughs, and I give him a cutting smile. I open an empty cell of the heavy-duty, chrome-plated cooling locker. We both snap on a fresh pair of gloves and I pull out the shelf from the locker. I notice that he is already in his scrubs, which have Tweety Bird on the legs.

“Sometimes, not often— but sometimes, a girl gets tired of hanging out by herself with dead bodies all day long. They’re not as interesting as you’d think, and I can’t imagine you’ve got much to do. So, I figured, why not give the orderly a little ‘fun’?” I snicker before I shift my tone back to my inner medical-examiner. “Grab the end of this tray. We need to replace this one with her’s.” I nod toward Grace. He does as I say and then continues to try and get a rise out of me.

“Yeah, right. I think you’re just scared they’re gonna come back to life and wanna eat your brains. But it’s cool if you don’t wanna admit it. I get it— We’ve all got our fears,” he says as we take the empty tray from inside the locker and prop it up against the wall next to us. We step over to the table with Grace’s body. It’s the same kind of tray as the ones inside the locker, equipped with handles on each end and the sides, allowing for a smooth shift of trays.

“I don’t see you down here every day. You only come when you absolutely need to, and you think I’m the one who’s scared?” I chuckle and take the left side of Grace’s tray, Jeremy handling the right.

“Hey, I’m still just an assistant. Ain’t my fault I’m not down here full time,” he defends.

“What do you even do?” I taunt. “Last time I checked, you’re the mortician’s assistant, and I’m the mortician, yet your presence down here is sparse.” We back the tray into the cooling locker and slowly rest it into place on top of the shelf frame. Jeremy carefully pushes the tray shelf back in, and I close the locker door after him. He turns to face me, and I glance down towards him. “Nice scrubs, by the way,” I say. I try to stifle a laugh as his cheeks flush and his eyes act quickly to try and avoid meeting mine.

“They were the only ones the store had, okay! And I really needed a new pair, mine were getting sorta—” He huffs. “Whatever. Are we done?” He asks. It’s so funny to watch him squirm.

“See, you’re just itching to get out of here,” I tease.

Jeremy sighs, letting out an exhausted laugh and gives up his act.

“Anyways, thanks for your help. See you tomorrow,” I say to him.

“See ya Gen,” he says with a smile as he turns to leave. I clean up my station and begin to get my things together to head home. I turn off the lights as I shut the morgue door. That place sure is a hell of a lot scarier in the dark. I bet Jeremy has nightmares about getting stuck inside there when it’s dark. I give the door handle a good tug before locking it.



I start my car and begin to pull out of the parking lot of Winston’s. I turn onto the street and I drive until I hit the red light a few blocks down. Waiting for it to turn green again, I look around at the businesses on the adjacent strip. One store catches my eye, one I don’t think I’ve seen before. It must be new. I drive this way to and from work each day, yet I don’t recognize it. It looks small in width, yet deep. The windows look kind of dark, but even through the

semi-sheer curtains, I see a rosy violet glow of light from inside. I can just make out the eerie purple lettering on the store's awning. It reads: LUNAR GROUND . But before I can get too lost in my thoughts, the light turns green. I press on the gas and jerk my head back to the road in front of me. I frantically try to glance back at the store again while merging into the left lane. In the window, there is also a small neon blue sign that says, 'PSYCHIC' in all caps. Ah, it's probably one of those holistic-metaphysical witchy type shops. Lena's always been into those kinds of things. Right before I started at Winston's, she gave me a clear quartz crystal and black tourmaline stone. She told me they are meant to absorb negative energy and protect against malevolent forces. She knows that I don't believe a lot of that stuff, though I appreciate the gesture, and I do like the idea of crystals possessing magical qualities, but who knows how realistic it is? I think it just helps her sleep at night, knowing that I am protected— in her eyes, that is.

The car behind me honks angrily, pulling me from my thoughts. I start to speed up as I realize I'm about to miss my turn. I am just able to make it, but not without some more honks from Mr. Grumpy behind me. Out of annoyance, I curse under my breath and ease onto my street until I come to my driveway.

I toss my keys onto the counter once I get inside. I change out of my work clothes into more comfortable ones and situate myself comfortably on the couch. I get my phone out of my bag and begin to dial my sister's number. The phone rings and rings, and then I am hit with her inevitable voicemail greeting: *Hey this is Lena! Sorry I can't get to the phone right now, leave a message and I'll get back to you!*

I sigh at the *beep* before the answering machine starts recording. “Lena, it’s Gen. Haven’t seen you in a bit and was thinking we could get lunch next week or something. Anyways, call me back.” I hang up the phone and set it down next to me in disappointment. Lena is terrible at answering her phone. It’s usually so hard to get ahold of her, and for the many times I wished she’d get out of my hair as a kid, I never thought in my moments alone as an adult I’d spend so many of them missing her. Sometimes I just want to hear my sister’s voice and reminisce about the times when we’d dance in our childhood room to our favorite songs, using our hairbrushes as microphones.

Chapter 2:

“Morning, Genevieve,” Jeremy says as I enter the front door at Winston’s. I usually come in through the back door closer to the morgue, but judging from the thick clouds of smoke that are puffing relentlessly around the perimeter of the funeral home, it seems the crematorium is in use today. While the smoke tends to be odorless, I still like to be as far from pollution as I can be.

“Good morning, Jeremy,” I reply. I take a glimpse at my watch and turn to him as I place my coat on one of the hooks in the hall. “It’s like 9, what are you doing here so early? Doesn’t your shift start at 11:30? Was the little orderly hoping to get some more time down in the morgue?”

“No....” he says as his gaze shifts down, implying the opposite.

“Well, you might just be in luck today. I have a few things to do before Desmond gets here, and if you’re not doing anything, which I suspect you aren’t, I could use your help,” I tell

him. His eyes light up for a second, but he quickly changes his expression and tries to play it cool. “I’ll let you know when I need you,” I say.

“At your service, Miss Mortuary,” he says, pretending to curtsy. I roll my eyes with a laugh and then go downstairs to start preparing Grace for her service tonight.

I unlock the morgue door and push its heavy metal self open. I flip up the light switch and my eyes adjust as the fluorescent lights flicker to life, illuminating the silver and gray room. I set down my bag and dress in my morgue attire. I scan the rows of the freezer doors until I find the one that says, *CARNEY, GRACE*. I switch the lock, open the locker, and slowly pull the shelf out. I know I might need Jeremy’s help again to switch out the trays, but if I put the tray stand close enough to the locker shelf, I figure I can handle it just fine. I’d rather do things myself, anyway.

The examining table stand is similar to that of a stretcher. It can be lowered and raised as needed, so I lower the stand to the height of the locker tray and carefully try to slide the tray on. I’m able to do it, but I just need to keep one hand on the stand to keep it still and ease the tray out of the locker with the other. I get the tray onto the stand and I raise it to my liking. I retrieve the clothes from the Carney’s and place them on the countertop next to me.

Lightly, I lift the sheet from Grace’s body, elevate her head just as I did yesterday, and start to dress her. Her parents left a simple knee-length black dress and a pair of sheer stockings with flower detailings that run up the sides of them. I check the note left regarding how she should be styled. Attached to a paper clip is a photo that I assume to be from her college graduation. Her makeup in the picture was simple and looks easy enough to recreate. According

to the note, her favorite color was a light purple. I set my morgue-makeup bag on the rolling side tray aside from the examining table.

I start with a thin layer of foundation to even out the tones on her face. The makeup we use on corpses is different than the stuff you usually buy at a beauty supply shop or local drug store. Its consistency is thicker, much like the type of makeup you might find in a department store's seasonal Halloween display. I take a small eyeshadow brush and dash it in one of the mid shades of purple. I plan on creating a gradient with the shades, so I blend the first color over her lids as a base and then move on to the shimmery, lighter shade. As I swipe the brush over her lids again, her eyes begin to twitch... *twitch?*

I step back, stunned. I must've imagined that. I have to have imagined that! There's no plausible reason for her eyes to be twitching, the tissues inside her body should've solidified by now. I stare at her. Her eyes are still fluttering, except now more violently, as if she is trying to open them. Panic crawls up my spine, and suddenly, the draftiness of the room is gone and the morgue feels as hot as the crematorium must be.

I inch back near Grace's head to try and get a closer look. With the tip of my finger, I timidly lift one of Grace's eyelids. Her eyes blink furiously, and somehow she manages to push the eye caps out from under her lids and onto her cheeks. Her eyelids struggle to separate from the other. My hands shake as I try to snatch the soiled eye caps off her face, but I jolt my hands away as I see her chest start to rise and fall sporadically as if she is short of breath. How the hell could she even be *breathing* right now? Even more to my surprise, her chest then starts to heave into a hysterical burst of convulsions, which sends me stumbling backward into another examining table. It clangs loudly against another metal appliance. I gasp and try to catch my

breath. I almost fall but I manage to wrap my hand around one of the silver racks near me. I sure didn't learn about this in mortuary school, and it's not like I have any service down here to Google, "what to do when your fully embalmed body comes back to life," as if that would yield any helpful results.

I regain my balance and reluctantly go back over to where Grace is. Her chest is still heaving, but not in the thrashing manner it was seconds ago. When I get a closer look at her, her eyes are wide, wide open. Her corneas are no longer cloudy like they were yesterday. I notice the residue from the Stay Cream has clumped her lashes together, and I almost had my composure stable again until her eyeballs shifted to look me dead in the eye. What the fuck am I supposed to do?!

This doesn't seem to be the end of it, though. I hear a moan and whine escape from her mouth, the mouth that I literally NEEDLE WIRED SHUT yesterday. Her muffled cries get louder and more frantic.

"Shhh, shhh, umm, it's okay," I say as if I am calming a fussing child. I grab a pair of pliers from the hooks on the wall. Her arms reach up from their crossed position I set them in front, and she tries to grab my hands. "Grace... it's alright. I'm, um, I'm going to help you, stay still..." I whisper to her. I gently try to force her arms back down and hold her wrists together. "Just let me try to... um, remove this..." I push her lips apart to reveal her teeth, the cotton, and the wire locked in its twist. I quickly pick out the rounded piece of cotton, and I wiggle the twisted part of the wire up out of her mouth with the pliers before I snap them together to cut the external wire.

“Genevieve?” I hear Jeremy from the top of the stairs. “Is everything okay down there? I know you said you’d call when you needed me but I heard a loud bang and I thought I should come down to check since—”

Oh god, I do not need Jeremy and his vexing self down here right now.

“Jeremy, you, uh, might not wanna come down here... It’s pretty um—” The creak of the stairs echoes into the morgue. The trembling of my hands intensifies, but I lower the pliers down and fasten the tips around the pin in Grace’s maxilla.

“Gen, stop trying to act all tough like you’ve got everything sorted out. I don’t see the harm in letting me help now instead of later. I could use the experience anyway—”

“Really, Jeremy! It’s fine! Go back upstairs!” I screech. Grace’s whines become louder and I manage to get the first two wire pins out, and then the second ones in her mandible.

“Seriously... you don’t sound alright in there.” The floorboards of the stairs grumble faster. The pliers fall from my hand and crash on to the nearby metal tray with a bang. Now that her mouth is free, she lets out another louder, more defined cry.

“Jeremy you really shouldn’t—” His footsteps get louder and faster, my heartbeat following suit. I prepare to hear him protest again and tell me how I need to loosen up and learn how to let people help me. But instead, I’m met with silence, though not for long.

“What the actual... Genevieve.... what is going on?” he yelps. I turn to see him at the door. “Is she.... Alive?” he whispers faintly.

I try to talk but no sound comes out. “I have no fucking idea,” is all I can squeak. Jeremy stares at me with disbelief.

“Where am I?” Grace coughs out. Jeremy’s eyes grow wide with terror and my attention swiftly turns back to her.

“The, um, morgue,” I answer with a gulp.

“The *MORGUE*?” she exclaims, and somehow manages to quickly sit up. “What the hell am I doing in a morgue?!” she cries.

“Grace,” I say as calmly as I can. “You died about two days ago... you drowned.”

“Genevieve, how is she alive right now?” Jeremy interrupts. He’s a few more steps into the room now.

“Will you shut up? I honestly do not know!” I yell at him.

“Oh,” he chuckles through his distress. “You might be the first person to make Desmond mad.” He tightly grips a hand around the edge of a nearing examining table for support, and I can see his knuckles turning white. He brings his other hand to his head and presses two fingers firmly against his temple.

“You’re not helping,” I say through gritted teeth.

“How did I drown?” Grace asks.

“How am I supposed to know? I wasn’t there!” I blurt angrily. Grace gives me a dirty look and I remember who I’m talking to, and that she’s probably just as confused as I am. “You fell off your friend’s boat or something, I think,” I say to her in as much of a relaxed tone as I could manage. I guess the dead do care now.

“Didn’t you spend, like, all of yesterday embalming her?” Jeremy continues.

“Em-whating me?!” Grace says between our banter.

“No shit, Sherlock! I drained the blood right out of her fucking jugular!” I squawk back at him. Jeremy starts to say some retaliative bullshit and Grace’s face displays a multitude of expressions.

“Well, was there anything you did differently this time?” he then asks.

“No! My procedure is the same every time, aside from the fluid ratios, since those are specific to each person.” Then it clicks in my mind.

I walk over to the table near the wall where my bottles of fluid sit. I grab the new one and turn it over to read the back label. The ingredients are listed as follows: *garden sage, blackberry, calamint, almond, peppermint oil, bay leaves, eucalyptus extract, ground amber, black walnut, dragon’s blood, myrrh, tangerine zest...* Why are these all herbs and oils? There is not one ounce of formaldehyde, methanol, or glutaraldehyde, which are commonly used in embalming fluids.

“Jeremy, where did you get this shit?” I say to him.

“God, Gen, I don’t know. Some site online. The usual place we buy from was getting way too expensive, and this place was selling the same type of funeral equipment at a hell of a lower price. Their fluids were more than half of the price than our usual supplier. I think on the website it said there’s a store, and when I checked the address, cuz ya know why pay for shipping? But anyway, it said it was like down the block from here,” he responds.

Grace and I both look at him as if to say, *go on*, because it looks like he has more to say.

“So I go in to check the place out, and damn it just felt so creepy,” he says.

“What do you mean by creepy?” Grace asks, taking the words right out of my mouth.

“I don’t know, man! Like it just felt sinister in there. The lights were down sorta low, tons of shiny rocks, and there were plants everywhere. If I didn’t know any better I woulda thought I

was inside a forest!” He says. I can’t believe what’s coming out of his mouth right now. His description of the shop’s interior seems to match perfectly to the exterior of the shop I saw yesterday on my way home.

“Jeremy.” I take a deep breath before continuing. “That was a witch shop. You bought so-called embalming fluid from a damn *witch shop!*” I yell.

“Hey don’t get mad at me! I was just tryna do the home a favor and save some money.” He shrugs, annoyed. I look down at the bottle’s back label again and squint. In the smallest, finest print I’ve ever seen, it says at the bottom under the ingredients: *WARNING: this product is not a traditional embalming or preservation fluid! This magical mixture may have the reverse effects of traditional funeral fluids.* I wave the jug in the air at him before tossing it in his direction. He catches it and reads the bottom. Grace sits quietly on the examining table with her legs crossed and her hands in her lap. Her face is pinched in the same sour position it was in yesterday when I first received her body.

“This! Is! Not! Embalming! Fluid! And I guess, apparently, it has the capabilities of bringing people back to life!” I say. “There are no chemicals in here. I recognize some of the herbs as ones that are supposed to have healing properties or help restore energy. Whenever I’d be sick my sister used to make me tea with a lot of these same herbs.”

“C’mon,” he says. “You don’t really believe in this magic witchcraft BS. But regardless, I’m not the one who used it, and aren’t you always talking about how important it is to read the small print?”

I let out a frustrated breath. “What else could possibly explain how this girl, who had no pulse and cloudy corneas yesterday, is sitting upright on that examining table, breathing, and

forming coherent sentences?” Jeremy opens his mouth to speak again but I cut him off.

“Whatever, okay? We can argue about whose fault this is later. The service is in a few hours.

Now, what the fuck are we going to tell her family?” I say. All three of us look at each other just as clueless and stunned like a deer in headlights.

“Jesus,” Grace says suddenly.

“Jesus?” Jeremy and I question in unison.

“My family is like, super religious. We can say some miracle happened and God saved me or whatever. They’ll probably be so grief-stricken that they’ll believe any possible thing for this to happen. I know, it sounds like a long shot, but I fooled my mom into thinking I went to Sunday School for years,” she explains. Jeremy and I both give each other another look of confusion.

“Sure, I guess. Whatever works, right? I guess we can just say you were unconscious to the point where you exhibited symptoms of death... but then that might set us up for a malpractice lawsuit...” My thoughts are erratic and wander elsewhere. “But wait... are you even okay to go back to your family? What about your soul? There’s no way that whacky witch liquid brought your body *and* your soul back!” I’m about to continue but Jeremy cuts in before me.

“Jeez, Gen, don’t be rude! You can’t just go around asking people about their damn souls!” I want to hit him right now. I bet he wishes he had the kind of insight on death that I have. I shoot him a glare.

“Well, somebody’s gotta make the call,” says Grace, bringing us both back to reality.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say quickly before Jeremy can answer. “Come on Grace, let’s go upstairs and call your parents. We’ll get this all sorted.”

“Wait,” Jeremy says as we are about to leave. “What are we going to tell Desmond?”

“Shit.” My mind races. “I hope Desmond believes in miracles too,” I say, before turning back to the hall.

Grace follows slowly behind me as we ascend up the stairs to the main floor of the funeral home.

“So, how do you, you know... feel?” I ask her.

“Fine, I guess,” Grace says.

“Do you feel any pain?” I ask again.

“No,” she answers. “I feel great!” I turn to look at her as we reach the top of the stairs. She looks fine on the outside, but I would think that coming back to life wouldn’t be such a smooth ride. She’s oddly calm and composed for someone who’s just been brought back. That potion really must’ve been powerful. The neckline of Grace’s dress shifts slightly as she moves, and I notice the incisions near her collarbone I stitched up yesterday are completely healed.

I open the door to the foyer and the outside light cascades through the dingy staircase. As I step through the door and into the room, I hear a gasp and a slight cry escape from Grace’s mouth. She remains on the other side of the door, still in the staircase with her hands over her eyes.

“Grace? Is everything okay?” I say to her. I take a few steps back into the staircase so I am closer to her.

“It’s so bright out there!” she exclaims. She peers through the fingers covering her eyes to look at me.

“You probably just need a second to adjust to the natural light up here,” I tell her, holding my hand out to lead her into the home. She intertwines her fingers with mine, and chills are sent running up my arm. Her fingers feel like icicles and I try not to shiver. I don’t want her to think that I think there’s something wrong with her hand, she seems like a sensitive young woman. As we step into the funeral home, Grace shuts her eyes tight and then slowly opens them. I look at her, waiting for her reaction. “Does it hurt?” I ask.

“It just stings a little,” she says. I watch as her pupils expand and dilate, taking in the light. She squints a few times. She attempts to walk but stumbles a bit and squeezes my hand harder. I put my free hand on her back to brace her.

“Whoa, it’s okay. One step at a time,” I say. She stands up straight as she regains her balance.

“I think I’m good,” Grace says.

“Alright, let’s just get to Desmond’s office so we can call your parents.”

“Who’s Desmond?” Grace questions.

“The funeral director. He basically runs this place,” I tell Grace. “Don’t worry, he doesn’t come in until a little later, so we won’t have to explain to him how you’re alive just yet. He’s a nice man, but sometimes he can seem a bit intimidating.” Grace just nods and we continue walking down the hall to Desmond’s office.

“So how exactly am I here?” I was hoping she wouldn’t ask, but I guess this is just practice for what I’ll have to tell Desmond and possibly her family.

“Well, I mean, you were dead, like dead *dead*,” I begin. “I thought I was preparing your body as I usually do, but Jeremy, you know, my dimwit assistant, bought some knock-off

magical potion advertised as embalming fluid, that I used without double-checking the ingredients.” Grace was listening intently as I spoke. “When I did take a look at the ingredients, I recognized some of the herbs as ones that are said to have healing or revitalizing affects. I don’t know much about herbal magic, as I’ve only read a little about it and have heard some stuff from my sister, but I’m assuming this kind of blend is very powerful.”

“So magic is... *real?!?*” Grace whispers. I release her hand as I try the knob to Desmond’s office. I sigh. Locked.

“I guess it is,” I say to her. I mean, I never doubted the existence of magic. I just never thought it existed in this kind of capacity— you know, the ‘raising the dead or turning people into cats’ sort of thing.

“Why would a witch shop be selling fake embalming fluid?” She asks me.

“I’m not really sure, honestly. Maybe they think they’re trying to help families retrieve the ones they’ve lost?” I start to ponder the question but I stop myself, as right this moment really isn’t the time. Grace hums and considers my answer. “Anyway, the door’s locked. I need to ask Jeremy for the key. Please don’t move,” I start to say, but before I can turn to leave, Grace steps forward.

“Here, let me try.” She grips the knob and turns it forcefully to the right. The metal in the lock sounds like it’s crunching and clanging together, and then Grace gives it one more final forced twist. The door bursts open quickly, and Grace turns to me smiling from ear to ear. My eyes graze past her as they focus on the now ajar office door.

“How did you...?”

“I thought about how in some TV shows or movies dead people brought back always seem to have super strength, so I figured I’d give it a shot!” Grace says cheerfully.

“Riiight...” I say awkwardly, as I consider asking more questions. But for time’s sake, instead, I give her a quick smile back. We enter the office and go straight to his phone. I would’ve used my phone, but in the age of Caller-ID, I thought it’d be best to use the funeral home’s phone.

“What’s your mom or dad’s number? I ask her, taking the phone from its base. Grace reminds me of her mom’s name and tells me the number. I punch it in with caution, reciting it back to her as I went to make sure it was correct. She nods in confirmation.

I put the receiver to my ear, waiting for the first ring. As the rings go on for longer and longer, my heartbeat speeds up with each ring. I focus my eyes on the floor but jerk my head up when I hear a frantic voice answer at the other end. My eyes dart to Grace. She gives me a hopeful look and I concentrate back on what I am going to say.

“Hello?” the woman says. I try to speak but my throat tenses up. “Hellooo?!” she says again. I can hear the strain and despair in her voice.

“Hi ma’am, is this Nicole Carney?” I ask politely, putting on my phone persona.

“Yes,” Nicole responds. “What’s going on?”

“This is Genevieve Collin, I’m calling from Winston’s Funeral Home in regards to your daughter, Grace,” I choke out as calm and unsuspecting as I can.

“Yes, what about my Gracie? Is something wrong? Is everything okay?” Nicole’s voice grows more frantic. I can hear her short breaths over the other side of the line.

“Well I wouldn’t say anything’s wrong, but I have some news that I think you’ll be delighted to hear.” I take a deep breath. “Grace is alive,” I say. There is silence from the receiver for a second before I start to hear muffled cries and sobs.

“She’s *what?!?*” Nicole screams into the phone, making me remove the receiver from my ear for a second. I wince slightly.

“She’s *alive*, Mrs. Carney,” I calmly say again. “Would you like to speak to her?” I ask, looking over to Grace. She steps over to me.

“Is this for real? Put her on,” Mrs. Carney says. I hand Grace the phone, and she accepts it timidly. I nod to her as she puts the phone to her ear.

“Mom?” Grace says. “It’s me, I’m really here.” Her voice is soft and tender.

Through the phone I can faintly hear that the sobs are more pronounced now, and Nicole is yelling to someone who must be in another room. Grace appears slightly on edge. She’s leaning against Desmond’s desk and is staring at the floor, biting at one of her nails.

“Yes,” Grace says into the phone. I can’t hear what her mom is saying now. “Hold on,” Grace hands the phone back to me.

“How is this possible?” Nicole sniffles out.

“Well, if you’d like to come to the funeral home to see your daughter and take her home, I’d be more than happy to explain things,” I say, thankful that she isn’t able to see the weary look on my face through the phone. My time to think of a believable story is beginning to run out, I hope they really do believe in blessings and miracles from above. I finish up on the phone with Grace’s mother, say goodbye, and slam the phone back onto its base.

“So?” Grace says. I meet her eyes.

“Your mother said she and your father are going to come by now to pick you up. In the meantime, I can continue to do your makeup downstairs if you’d like, seeing as I never got to finish...” I trail off, observing the contrast of the one naked eye next to the one with the purple shadow on it, and the moment of her sudden resurrection is recalled in my mind.

“Okay,” Grace says. We start to leave Desmond’s office to make our way back downstairs.

“You can’t tell your parents how this really happened, okay? I’m still trying to figure out what exactly I should say to them.” Grace trails behind me and nods.

“Yeah, I swear I won’t say anything,” she reassures me. “I don’t think they’d believe you anyways. They think coming back to life was strictly reserved for Jesus,” she says. I let out a breath, continuing to walk with her down the hall.

“How ‘what really happened’?”

Chapter 3:

I stop dead in my tracks and feel the blood drain from my face as I am standing face to face with Desmond. I don’t even try to hide my panic as his eyes make direct contact with mine. For a second they bounce back and forth from me to Grace, me to Grace.

“G-Genevieve?” He stammers, putting his hands up in front of him as if to say *stay back*. “Wha— how is she...? why—” Desmond inches backwards with each stuttered word. “How is Grace... *alive?*” he finally manages to sputter. I take a deep breath. Desmond looks absolutely horrified, and his brows furrow.

“Yeah, so, uh... here’s the thing.” I let out a nervous laugh to try and lighten the mood. I reluctantly recount today’s events to Desmond. A grimace paints its way onto my face as I struggle to anticipate Desmond’s reaction. As I finish retelling the story, I gesture to Grace, “Here....she...is....!” I awkwardly look down at the ground, and after a few more menacing seconds of silence I look back up at Desmond. His facial expression has only changed slightly from scared to confused. I can see in his face that he is having trouble processing everything, rendering him speechless. While I am struggling to find the words for this cumbersome moment, Grace speaks and any thoughts I have vanish.

“We just called my parents,” she says, as if nothing is wrong. Desmond gently pushes his glasses up his nose and re-focuses his gaze on Grace.

“Oh, really? And just what did you tell them?” he says, shifting his head to look at me.

“Well just that she’s alive and—”

“Genevieve,” Desmond starts. I wince internally while embracing the condemnation of his tone. “Jeremy I would expect this from, but— *you*? Of all people, I would not think *you* would let something like this happen.”

“Well I think it’s pretty fucking great that she did,” Grace interjects before I can even think of how to respond to Desmond. I didn’t expect such profanities to come out of her mouth.

“Excuse me?” he says with a scoff.

“My death was an accident! You think I meant to slip and drown? Genevieve gave me a second chance at life and hey, I’m grateful for that. Even if her doing so was not intentional.”

Now I am the one with the furrowed brows, and confusion spreads across my face. I find it interesting that Grace is sticking up for me, only after having known me for about an hour or two. But I guess she's right, technically I did give her a second chance.

Desmond still has a look of disappointment smeared onto his face, but he takes a deep breath and exhales loudly. He pulls me aside, crossing his arms before he speaks again.

“Genevieve, I need you to understand this. The dead are meant to stay dead, accident or not. I know it might sound like I am being harsh, but as death workers, our jobs are very important. The death industry plays a vital role in maintaining the natural order of the Universe. It seems there is something very powerful at force here.”

“Desmond, she didn't deserve this! It wasn't her time,” I say. I don't know what it is about Grace, but I feel connected to her in a way. I want to fight for her. She deserves to live.

“Yes, you may feel that way— you're allowed to feel that way. But I promise you, this will have its consequences.”

“Like what? What is at force here?” I almost cry.

“It is unknown to me, but I can tell you, it is not natural.” I try to take in his words. He looks over to Grace.

“What am I supposed to do, then?” I say. “Her parents are on their way.”

Desmond looks at me deep in the eyes. “Genevieve, be careful,” he says.



When downstairs, I resume styling Grace, which is odd for me because I rarely do makeup on any living individuals, other than myself. I don't see Jeremy as I re-enter the morgue, so I assume that he's probably gone back upstairs to his lame excuse of an office, or he went out

for a de-stressing smoke, where he's most definitely avoiding confrontation from Desmond.

Desmond's words keep getting stuck in the back of my mind. I can't wrap my head around the whole 'natural order' thing. I bet Lena would have some insight on this, I really wish she'd call me back.

"So," I say, focusing myself on Grace again. "If I may ask— what's dying like?" After years of preparing bodies and being so close to death each day, of course, the question would circle around in my mind. I grab the makeup bag and find the eyeshadow palette I was using earlier. Grace is quiet for a second. I am about to tell her she doesn't have to talk about it if she doesn't want to, but then she speaks.

"I couldn't quite remember a lot, but after you mentioned how I died, the sensations came flooding—" she pauses to laugh and roll her eyes. I smile at her ironic word choice and she resumes, "—back to me. It was really weird. I remember I trying to flail my arms but I couldn't move... and I tried so hard to hold my breath, but eventually, a wave came over me so strong that I couldn't take it anymore and I inhaled— of course, only to be greeted by the sting and burn of saltwater as it went up through my nose and into my lungs," she explains.

I dash some powder onto her cheeks as she continues to talk. "I vaguely remember my friend trying to help me. We were on one of those medium sized motorboats, you know ones that can fit a few people. I'll admit, I might've had a little too much to drink, because I remember laughing and singing to the songs we were playing, and I was having so much fun. But then, I stood up, probably to get another drink, and ultimately slipped. It was a risk to even go with my friends on the boat in the first place— I'm not that great of a swimmer and we weren't wearing life jackets— and I bet you're thinking 'why weren't you wearing a life jacket?' well because

one, they're not the cutest, and two, nobody thinks that they're going to slip and drown. And most people know how to swim. So really I guess it was my own reckless doing." She focuses on the ground.

"Oh, c'mon. You had no way of knowing that would happen! It was an accident," I say. She smiles at my kind suggestion, even though she said it herself to Desmond earlier.

"I know, but I should've taken the precaution anyway. And I know I technically wasn't dead for that long after I died, but I also don't remember much from the period between actually dying and waking back up in here. It was just kinda dark and pitch black, and once I woke up it felt as if I was waking up from a fever dream," she finishes. I reach for a lipstick I set aside that resembles the color from the photo and start to apply it.

"Wow," I say. "And you feel alright now?" I know I asked her earlier, but there is something in the back of my mind that doesn't believe that the fluids brought her body to function normally as it did before she died. I drained her blood for Christ's sake! It seems the fluid is only affecting her body, rather than her brain and personality. But that still leaves the question of her soul...

"Yeah, I told you before. But I guess my jaw kind of aches, 'cuz I did have needles and wires in them a few hours ago," she says, shooting me a playful look. I chuckle and put the makeup brush down, and start to fix her hair.

"Grace," I begin to say. I don't know how to finish my sentence. I try to form what to say in my head. "I don't think you're entirely human anymore— undead, perhaps. After thinking I went through the process of 'embalming' you, I can't imagine your inner-bodily functions are suddenly back to normal. I know I don't know much about that herb mix, but it doesn't make

sense.” I hold out two fingers and move my hand towards her neck. “May I?” I say. She nods, and I press my fingers to her neck, feeling not even a faint beat. “You don’t even have a pulse,” I say quietly.

“So what does this mean?” she asks.

“I guess, just be aware of the fact that you’re not technically ‘alive’ in human terms anymore. No pulse, no bloodstream I’m assuming. I bet you don’t have to worry about breathing either,” I tell her. Grace doesn’t say anything for a second. She looks like she’s trying to process everything, which I understand. I’m still processing things too.

She tries to take in a deep breath. She holds it for a second before exhaling.

“It just feels like nothing,” Grace says. I put my cosmetic utensils away and zip up my bag.

“I’m sure we’ll figure things out soon. Let’s just get through tonight and seeing your parents.” I gently rest my hand on her shoulder and she silently nods. “When you get home, call me if you need anything or just someone to talk to.” I grab a piece of scrap paper from my drawer and scribble my phone number onto it, and then hand it to her.

“Thanks,” says Grace as she accepts the piece of paper. “You’re really nice. I wouldn’t expect many people to be so nice to a dead girl. I know this is probably weird for you,” she says.

“Weird for *me*? Try weird for you!” I laugh and she smiles. I reach over behind my makeup bag to retrieve the accessories her parents left. I pull out a long silver necklace with a heart charm on it. She moves her hair as I get up to fasten it around her neck from behind her.

“What made you wanna be a mortician?” she asks me. I am slightly thrown off at the question, despite having many people ask me about it over the years. I think for a second. I come to sit back down next to Grace.

“I guess the tradition of funerals are a vital part in the grieving process. It helps families when they see their loved ones for the last time in a way that they’d want to remember. I think it’s owed to them, and if I can help in that process, I am more than happy to. I think seeing their loved ones made-up in a casket helps them come to terms with the reality of death too.” I see she is carefully listening, just as she was earlier. “I lost my mother when I was 15, and it affected my sister and I a lot. But at the funeral, I noticed how beautifully peaceful, and almost angelic she looked. I admired that, as it brought me some harmony in thinking she’s in a better place now. Though I will admit, open casket services are not for everyone.”

“How did she die? If you don’t mind me asking,” Grace says politely.

“We still don’t know. She just collapsed at work. There was no autopsy either... and it makes me so mad. If I was a coroner I’d never consider myself finished without finding the cause of death. How are you a good coroner if you can’t even find the cause of death? Is that not your whole job?” I stop myself before entering an imaginary room of grief.



“GENEVIEVE,” I hear Jeremy’s voice yell, along with the sound of the stairs creaking together faster than usual. He comes into view at the doorframe of the morgue and appears out of breath. He rests his hand against one of the examining tables and I glance over at the clock.

“Grace’s family is here,” he says. I look at him quickly and then at Grace, and I can’t tell whose face is more stricken with anxiety.

I breathe in deeply. “You ready?” I ask her.

She is still for a second, but then says “Yes,” as she rises from her seat.

“She looks great,” Jeremy says to me.

“I know,” I say back.

The three of us climb up the stairs, not a word escaping either of our lips. I open the door and catch a glimpse of Desmond speaking to Grace’s parents. Nerves swim through my body. I hope all goes smoothly.

The door slams loudly behind us and, as if on cue, Grace’s mother turns to look at us. Her eyes grow wide and her face scrunches as it does when people start to cry. She walks towards us as we are walking towards her and embraces Grace with wide arms. From the look on Grace’s face over her mother’s shoulder, I can tell her mother is squeezing her tight. I don’t blame her. Jeremy walks over to stand by Desmond, where I can see Desmond giving him a glowering side-eye.

“Oh, Gracie!” she wails when she pulls out of their hug. Grace smiles and her father approaches behind her mother, and pulls his daughter in for a hug too.

“What happened, Gracie?” he says softly, looking her in her eyes. I step a little closer and offer my hand to Grace’s mom.

“Nicole? I’m Genevieve, we spoke on the phone earlier. I’m the mortician here at Winston’s,” I say. Nicole accepts my hand and shakes it.

“Oh, yes! Please tell me what has happened!” she says.

“Well, I was getting ready to tend to Grace’s body as I usually do, and thankfully before I started any procedures, I saw her blink and realized she was alive. Her body must’ve been in some sort of stasis, but I’d say it’s truly a miracle, wouldn’t you?”

Guilt surges through my body and I feel terrible lying to these poor people, but what else am I supposed to tell them? To my surprise, Nicole pulls me into a hug and continues her sobs on my shoulder. I awkwardly pat her back.

“Oh, I’ve prayed endlessly these last few days for this moment, and I could just feel that the Lord was listening! A miracle indeed!” she declares through happy tears.

As I pull away from the hug, Grace’s father turns to face me. He looks me deep in the eyes.

“Do things like this happen normally? How often do you have people not turn out to be dead? I mean, I just can’t believe this— we were so sure Gracie was dead— the coroner said she was dead!” he says all jumbly.

“I can surely tell you that things like this don’t happen often, they don’t tend to happen at all, it’s truly rare... that’s why I whole-heartedly believe this to be a blessing from above!” I say to him.

“I’m just so glad she’s alive. I’m so happy to have her back.” He looks over at Grace and smiles so big that I can tell his heart feels warm again.

“We all are, Ted,” Nicole says to him as she puts a hand on his shoulder.

Desmond begins speaking softly to Ted and Nicole, and I can hear him telling them that he’ll take care of calling off Grace’s service. Just as they’re about to leave, Grace pulls me aside.

“Thank you,” she says, squeezing my hand. I squeeze it back and our eyes meet. Her eyes glisten in the light, like they are truly shining. God, she looks so much like Lena right now.

“Be well,” I say to her. “Remember. Anything you need.”

Grace nods before hugging me and turns to walk out with her parents. It’s nice to see them leave here as a family. I am standing with Desmond on my left side, and Jeremy on my right. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Jeremy trying to slink away. Right as the funeral home’s doors close and the Carneys have left the building, Desmond steps in front of him.

“Not so fast,” Desmond says.

Jeremy sighs.

“Do you know what you did?” Desmond’s voice is stern, but I also hear the slightest cry in his voice. Jeremy doesn’t answer, and his eyes are focused on the ground. “Where did you even get this ‘magical’ liquid Genevieve says you bought?”

“According to her, a witch shop,” Jeremy says. Desmond’s hand raises to his face in disappointment and he rubs his eyes hard.

“The one down the block?” Desmond says, exasperated.

“Yeah, what about it?” says Jeremy.

“Was there a woman working there? Dark red hair, emerald eyes?” Desmond asks.

“Yep, she’s the one who checked me out. Her eyes were like a cat, man. So creepy.”

Jeremy shudders as he speaks.

“Helena,” Desmond concludes to himself.

“Who is Helena?” I ask, putting myself into the conversation.

“Her and I have a lot of... history.” Desmond isn’t making eye contact with either of us, but Jeremy and I exchange glances, as we’ve never heard anything in regards to Desmond and his dating life. It is a strange thing to think about. I have a hard time picturing him with anyone. Not that that’s bad, I feel he thrives in his alone time the same way I do.

“What kind of ‘history’?” I ask. Desmond finally looks at me.

“She was who, so I thought was the love of my life.” His voice is soft but shakes a little bit. “She’s the person who scared the skepticism out of me,” he says. “There’s still a little in me, but after her, there’s really not much left. Believe me, when I say, there are much larger and more powerful things at force here. Don’t ask me what they are, because I don’t know. I don’t think I want to know.”

“So, Desmond,” Jeremy begins. “Are you saying that you dated a witch?” He tries to stifle a laugh. Oh god, Jeremy. Shut up.

“Yes,” Desmond says quickly. He rolls his eyes. “What I’m trying to say is that she must have it out for me!” he exclaims.

“What happened between you two?” I inquire further. I cross my arms and shift my weight.

“I... I really can’t talk about it,” he says.

“Desmond, it might be helpful to know what happened so we can understand her motives,” I tell him.

“Genevieve, don’t push me. If funeral service has taught me anything, it is not to push people.” He straightens his suit jacket in a huff. “It’s been a long day. There isn’t much to do around here now, since tonight’s service is not happening. Why don’t you two just go home?”

This is all over— for now,” Desmond says. His eyes dart to me, and a chill is sent down my spine at the sound of the words ‘for now.’

Jeremy and I exchange looks and disperse from the lobby of the home to gather our things. I go back down to the morgue to clean and lock up. As I am wiping down the various silver surfaces, there is a faint knock on the door before it is pushed open with a creak. Jeremy timidly walks in and leans on one of the surfaces.

“Hey, I just cleaned that. I don’t need your clothing fibers on it,” I say to him.

“Sorry,” he says, pushing himself off the counter. “I just wanted to come down and check-in with how you’re doing. Today was a lot,” he says. I nod and continue cleaning.

“I’m alright, I think, thanks. There’s just so much that went on that I still need to process,” I tell him. “How are you?”

“Yeah, I’m okay-ish too, I guess,” Jeremy says, folding his arms. “I hope Grace is okay.”

“Me too.” I sigh. “There’s just something about her, Jeremy. I can’t place my finger on it, but I am just so drawn to her. I want to help her,” I tell him. He studies the ground for a moment before looking back up at me.

“Maybe you see something in her that we can’t or don’t. You did resurrect her, afterall,” he says.

“But I feel like it’s more than just bringing her back. My intention wasn’t to bring her back at all, it was a mistake, but it ended up having a more-so positive outcome.”

“Perhaps she reminds you of someone dear to you,” Jeremy says after a second. I think about his words and my mind wavers back to Lena. Grace’s quirky attitude is so similar to her’s.

“Maybe,” I say back to him. My sister swims around my mind.

Chapter 4:

As I toss my keys onto the kitchen counter once I get home, I sit down on the couch and start to take off my shoes, but I am startled by my phone's persistent ringing. I yank my tote bag over to me and rummage around inside, hoping that it's Lena who is calling me. But when I finally am able to grab my phone, I see that it's Grace. God, already? I wonder what's up. I answer the call and put the phone to my ear.

"Grace? Are you alright?" I say into the receiver.

"Genevieve," she says.

"What's going on, are you okay?"

"I can't eat," she tells me.

"Okay, well, what do you mean exactly?" I ask.

"On our way home my parents picked up a pizza and I had some but now I can't stop throwing up and it doesn't make any sense because there's nothing inside me to throw up! What do I do! My parents are going to be concerned if they don't see me eat like a normal person," she says all fast as if there are no spaces between her words. "Genevieve, I don't know what to do!" She sighs loudly and I can tell in her voice she's on the verge of tears.

"Grace," I say before I take a breath. "Remember, your body functions differently now. You don't have natural fluids circulating your body that aid in digestion or processing food anymore." I think for a second. "I am going to research the ingredients in the potion to try and understand how they affected your body," I tell her. "Then we can go from there."

"Okay," she says through sniffles. "What should I do in the meantime?" she asks.

“Tell your parents that you’re not feeling well and that you think you just need to rest,” I say. “If you want, sometime within the next few days you can come back to the funeral home and we can run some tests, and try to figure more stuff out. How does that sound?”

“Good. Thank you so much,” she says.

“Can you drive?” I ask before changing my mind. “Actually, I’ll come pick you up just in case your motor skills aren’t as they were before. Don’t worry, we will get you through this,” I reassure her.

“You are the best, Genevieve. Thank you so much for helping me. It means a lot.” I can almost hear her smile through the phone.

“It’s not a problem, Grace. I’ll shoot you a text when I’m clear at the home later this week, if that’s okay with you,” I say.

“Sure,” Grace says. “Thanks again,” she says again before hanging up.



I leave the house 40 minutes earlier than I usually do in order to get to my shift at Winston’s on time. I decide to stop at the alleged witch shop, Lunar Ground, before work. As I pull into the parking lot I notice that today, the lights glowing from the inside are green and blue, as opposed to the pink and purple luminescence I observed a few days earlier.

I retrieve my keys from the ignition, grab my tote bag, and get out of the car. As I walk into the shop, I am immediately hit with the smell of some type of incense. I see that there are quite a few sticks burning, emitting swirls of lacey smoke. Slow, dark music with occasional chimes plays low in the background.

“Welcome,” a sultry female voice says. I turn to my left to see a woman with the same features Desmond described to Jeremy and I. She must be Helena.

“Thank you,” I say as I begin to browse the store.

“Let me know if you need any help, darling,” she says, sending chills through my body.

I wish I had prepared what I wanted to say to her. I honestly don’t even know what I thought I was going to do when I got here. I look up at a shelf full of books and different decks of cards, ranging from Tarot to Oracle. I squint to read the spines of the books: Crystal Magick, Herbal Encyclopedia, Chaos Magick, Deities of Greece... I wiggle the Herbal Encyclopedia off the shelf and think back to the herbs included in the fake fluids. I think there was something about bay leaves. I go through the B’s until I find what I’m looking for. In the book it says: *Bay Leaves - Offer great healing powers, enhances the effect of other healing herbs.*

Of course. I then remember another herb from the mix, one called calamint. The book says, *Calamint - Soothes sorrows and helps in recovery from emotional pain. Increases joy and restores a bright outlook on life.* Maybe that’s why Grace seemed so cheery when she was brought back, and perhaps the other ingredients are why she didn’t feel much pain either.

I hold on to the book. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the jugs that look like the one Jeremy had bought days earlier. I pick one up and pretend to read the back.

“Excuse me?” I say while walking to the counter. “What is this?” I ask as I place the jug on the counter. Helena looks at me for a second.

“Oh, this?” she says. “This... is very powerful stuff. It is not to be used lightly.” I meet her gaze.

“So, what does it do?” I ask again, playing dumb.

“To be short, it restores and revitalizes life. I noticed you looking at a book of herbs, and if you look at the ingredients on the back, all of these herbs and oils are said to have magical reviving effects, especially when mixed together. It is a very powerful mix and is not to be used by amateur practitioners,” she tells me. Oh, great. Jeremy might be the most amateur practitioner there is. Though I am the one who administered it.

“So it has the ability to bring people back to life?” I continue. She looks down, to her right, and then back at me, as if to check if anyone else is listening. She lowers her voice.

“Yes. But be advised, if not used properly it could have horrible side effects.” I don’t even want to ask what the side effects are. I am reminded of Desmond’s note about the balance of the universe. I contemplate asking Helena, but I glance down at my wristwatch and realize if I don’t leave now, I’ll be late for work.

“Thank you,” I say. I push the jug to the side and put the book on the counter. “Just this.” I get out my wallet as she scans the book.

“Need a bag?” she asks.

“No thank you,” I say back . She slides the book back over the counter to me. “Thanks.” I slip the book into my tote bag.

“Blessed be,” Helena says as I walk out.



I walk into Winston’s and hang my coat up on the rack. I say hello to Desmond and make my way down to the morgue. I put my bag on one of the metal tables, and I pull out the Herbal Encyclopedia from it. I walk over to where I keep my fluids and grab the bottle that Jeremy

bought. I sit down on one of the metal stools and begin to re-read the ingredients while looking them up in the book. The book says as follows:

***Almond** - Promotes Alertness, Awakeness. Promotes Heart Health.*

***Blackberry** - used for Healing and Protection.*

***Black Walnut** - Mental Powers, Good Health, Abundance, Heart Health.*

***Dragon's Blood** - Love, Protection, Potency.*

***Eucalyptus Extract** - Spiritual cleansing, Purification, and Healing.*

***Garden Sage** - Cleansing and Purification.*

***Myrrh** - Healing, Spiritual Opening*

***Peppermint oil** - Purification, Healing, Sleep, Love*

***Tangerine zest** - Promotes Strength, Vitality, and Energy.*

It makes sense that this bunch of herbs would be able to bring someone back to life. They all have something to do with healing or strength or health. Now it's time to figure out how this potion affected Grace's body. The only thing that I can't find in this book is ground Amber. It must be a stone or something. I make a mental note to look up "amber" later once I get home. Wifi doesn't exactly make its way down to the morgue.

I take my phone from my bag and begin to dial Grace's number as I walk back upstairs to get service. She answers cheerily.

"Hi Genevieve!" she says. "What's up?"

"I've just looked more into the herbs in the potion, I was wondering if I could pick you up and we could do some tests and try to figure more about your body now," I tell her.

"Sure thing! I'm available all day."

“Perfect,” I say. “I have a few things I want to look into but I will text you when I’m on my way. Can you text me your address?”

“No problem. See you soon Genevieve,” she says. We hang up and I go back downstairs to resume looking more into the herbs inside the book, as well as the aspects of herbal magick. I begin to think about how I normally embalm a body and what that does to a body’s insides. Usually, the chemicals in the embalming fluids are made to preserve and harden the body tissue, so I guess it would make sense for the potion to soften the tissue and bring it back to its normal texture. Because I drained her body of fluids, I’m assuming she still has none. I doubt this potion can restore bodily fluids. But then again, I know almost absolutely nothing about how it truly works, so bodily fluids could be back on the table.

I suppose a similar aspect to the chemical fluids of the magical one is making the body appear life-like... that can be assumed because of its ability to bring people back to life. As I’ve already seen, Grace doesn’t need to breathe, and she said she felt sick whenever she ate. But I still don’t understand how it works. Then I remember that magic is magic, and it’s much different from science. With science, there is a process behind how things happen, and with magic, things just happen. There is no magical method like there is a scientific one.

After some more thinking I gather my things and on my lunch break, I go pick up Grace. I text her to let her know that I will be on my way, and she responds back with her address. According to the GPS, her house is only 30 minutes from the funeral home, so I reach her house pretty quickly, thanks to there being no traffic.

When I pull up, I let her know I’m outside and she comes out moments later. She looks well for someone who’s just been brought back to life. Her hair bounces as she walks down the

porch steps and into the passenger side of my car. She smells of floral perfume and is wearing a gray sweater dress, perfect for this autumn day.

“Hi, Gen!” she says.

“Hey Grace, how are you doing?” I ask as I put my car back into drive. She chatters her mouth off for a few minutes, but I’m not really listening much as my mind begins to wander. Each time I see Grace I can’t help but think of Lena. What could Lena possibly be doing that she hasn’t had time to call me back?

“Don’t you think?” I hear her say in the midst of my thoughts of Lena.

“What?” I say, her words pulling me back to reality.

“That I would’ve had a nice funeral? All things considered, you made me look so nice!”

“Oh, right, yes— I mean, I try my best with my clients,” I respond with an awkward chuckle. “Anyways, I’ve been doing some research, and it seems that all the herbs and oils in the potion were specifically curated together to bring people back to life. I even went to the place where Jeremy bought it and talked to the lady there. Apparently, Desmond knows her, and they have some beef, which might be why she started selling the fake fluid and opened up shop so close to Winston’s.”

“Wow, really? Desmond knows her?” Grace says. I keep my eyes focused on the road.

“Yeah, they used to date or something, but he refuses to tell Jeremy or I what went on.” I pull into the parking lot of the home and we get out of the car. I click the button on my keychain to lock the car. It beeps in return.

“I wonder what went on between them,” she says.

“Me too,” I say. “If we can figure out what happened between them, we could probably figure out Helena’s motive.”

We enter the home and Jeremy greets us.

“Whoa! Grace! What are you doing back here so soon?” he says.

“Gen is gonna run some science-y tests to figure out what’s wrong with my insides,”

Grace says. It still amazes me how quirky and cheery she can be even in the strangest of situations.

“I’ll be doing some extractions first,” I say to Jeremy. He tilts his head and a confused look spreads across his face. “Basically we’re going to see if the potion was able to restore her bodily fluids or not. You can come watch, it’ll be good to observe— though I can’t imagine we’ll be having any more situations like Grace’s.” His face lights up when I mention he can accompany me.

I motion the two of them to follow me down to the morgue. Jeremy and Grace creep down the dark stairs timidly, while I descend them with ease. I’ve walked up and down these old stairs enough times that they no longer scare me. I unlock the big iron doors as we approach them. I flip on the lights and we all make our way into the chilly metal cased room.

Grace sits on one of the silver stools near an examining table and waits for direction. Jeremy hovers a few feet behind her. I waltz with myself around the morgue for a second to grab my materials. A fresh needle, a syringe, alcohol pads, and a medicine cup. I fasten the needle into the syringe.

“I hope you’re not afraid of needles,” I say to Grace. She grimaces and Jeremy offers out his hand to squeeze. She grabs his hand within seconds.

“Thanks,” she says looking up at him. He smiles.

I open an alcohol pad and gently swipe it across the bend of her arm.

Grace focuses her gaze away from the needle. “So, what exactly are you going to be doing?” she asks.

“Well, I’m going to see if I can extract any liquid or particulates from your body, and if that doesn’t work, I’ll make a small incision on your arm to see if you bleed, if that’s okay with you,” I say. Grace swallows and nods.

“Alright,” she says with reluctance.

“Make a fist please,” I tell her. She does so and I fasten my free hand above her elbow, as if I were taking blood. As gently as I can, I insert the needle into her arm and begin to pull back the top of the syringe. Grace squeezes Jeremy’s hand tight. He winces, having forgotten about Grace’s new-found super strength.

To my surprise, the tube in the syringe begins to fill up with a pale red liquid.

“What is *that*?” Jeremy says with a jolt.

“I have... no idea,” I respond. I remove the needle from Grace’s arm and hold the syringe up to the light. The red liquid inside looks almost translucent, unlike blood that would look more opaque.

“So... does this mean I do have bodily fluids?” Grace asks.

“Maybe,” I say. Then something sparks in my head. “I have an idea.” I put the syringe down and head over to one of the cabinets close by. I open the left door and retrieve a tiny bottle marked with the words FLUIDIC REACTOR. Both Jeremy and Grace give me a puzzled look when I return to the table.

“Fluidic Reactor,” I say, opening the bottle. “When mixed with bodily fluids, it should turn a light blue-green color. If these aren’t bodily fluids, it would stay the same color of the fluid— a light red— when mixed.”

“Wow, I didn’t even know we had that,” Jeremy says.

“Learn your mortuary science, Jeremy. Maybe then you’ll be on your way to being a full-time mortician,” I say back. He crosses his arms with an added *hmpf* from under his breath. Grace passes a slight giggle at our banter.

I take the syringe and dip the needle into the bottle, pulling the top to extract the FR into the tube so it can mix together. We all stare at the tube with anticipation. A minute has gone by and nothing has changed.

“Sometimes... it uh... takes a bit to sink in,” I say. The three of us exchange uncertain glances.

Suddenly, the liquids begin to twist and turn into each other as if they were dancing a great dance, and blue-greens begin to emerge from the fair red color. It looks like true magic— hell, it might just be.

“Well, I think we have an answer,” I say, setting down the syringe.

“So my fluids were restored?” Grace asks timidly.

“I guess so. That potion really is powerful,” I respond with a deep breath. “I just can’t wrap my head around this whole magic thing.”

“Neither can I,” Jeremy says.

“Same,” says Grace. “But it is pretty cool to have another chance at life. You saved me, Genevieve, and I cannot thank you enough.”

Shivers are sent down my spine at the sound of her words. I give Grace as much of a heartwarming smile I can muster up.

“You’re welcome,” I say. I begin to clean up the materials on the table. “Well, I guess that concludes our so-called ‘tests’,” I announce. Jeremy starts to help me clean things up and Grace watches intently. I throw out the needle and toss the syringe into the sink for cleaning. Jeremy caps off the bottle of FR and puts it back into the cabinet I retrieved it from.

“So, Grace, since we are assuming that you do have fluids of some sort, I think it’s safe to say that you can try to eat again, but try to avoid spicy or acidic foods that may upset your stomach. Maybe your body fluids just needed time to settle and readjust,” I say to her.

“You got it,” she answers.

“I’ll drive you back home now, if you’d like, and remember, just like before, if anything else happens, you need something, or just want a friend to vent to who understands this whole situation, don’t hesitate to reach out,” I say. Grace just nods and smiles toward me.

Jeremy is awkwardly standing behind us, I assume waiting for instructions from me.

“Thank you, Genevieve. You have been such a help to me and my family. I hope you know how much this means to me,” Grace says.

“Of course, Grace. I am here for you,” I respond. I gather my bag and we all begin to walk back upstairs. Jeremy walks us to my car.

“Get home safe,” he says. Grace and I nod with a smile as we get into the car.

Chapter 5

I get home after a late-night shift at Winston's. There are a few new funerals planned over the course of the next few days, so I should be relatively busy. However, if I'm being honest, it has been quite hard to focus on work as of late. I can't seem to stop thinking about Grace or Lena, how the two of them feel like they are connected to each other in a way. I know that realistically they are not actually connected, as Lena is my sister and Grace was supposed to be a client, but there are just so many similarities between them. Their optimism, their love for the world, the way they are just happy to be alive. I envy their outlook a bit, because of my job it gets hard to think of life when I am surrounded by so much death.

Part of me feels like Grace and I were supposed to cross paths, that I was supposed to resurrect her, though Desmond might not think so. Grace and I barely know each other yet I feel so close to her. This makes me want to know her more.

Suddenly, my phone begins to ring. I see that it is Lena and I answer it immediately.

"Lena?" I say into the phone.

"Gen?" her voice says, sounding softer than usual.

"Lena, what's up? Did you get my message? I've been trying to call you."

"Yes, Gen, I did, I'm so sorry."

"What's wrong?" I say.

"I just haven't been feeling so great lately, but I want you to know that I love you and that I miss you."

"What is it, what's going on?"

“It’s nothing, Gen, please don’t worry,” she says even softer.

“You can’t tell me not to worry, Lena, of course, I’m going to worry,” I tell her.

“I just haven’t been feeling so good about the world lately,” she answers.

“What do you mean? Are you okay? I can drive over to PA to see you.” I shift my position on the couch.

“No, you’re so far, Connecticut is so far... I’m with dad, please don’t worry.” There is a silence for a second before she speaks again. “I have to go, I love you.”

“Wait, Lena, I have a question about something—” She cuts me off.

“Gen, I really don’t feel well or have time for—” Now I cut her off.

“What do you know about the balance of the universe?”

“What?” she says, taken aback a bit.

“The balance or order of the universe,” I push.

“Well... it is simply not to be messed with. If you mess up something you’re not supposed to, for example with life and death, there will be consequences. As above, so below. As within, so without. It’s just the Laws of the Universe, Gen.”

“What does that exactly mean though,” I try to understand but I just can’t get it into my head.

“Gen, I have to go. I’ll see you soon.” And with that, she hangs up.

God. What could possibly be wrong? She’s never been like this before. She’s always been such a cheery person like Grace. To hear her speak about not feeling great about the world worries me to no end. I really do hope we can see each other soon.

I compartmentalize my thoughts about Lena and shift my focus to looking up ground amber, the only ingredient I was not able to find in the book I bought from Lunar Ground.

I move to the section of my home that I consider to be my home office. I open my laptop and type into the search bar, “properties of amber.” A plethora of search results come up quickly, and I browse through them until I find a site that seems reputable enough. It is called Crystalhealing.com. I’m not sure how crystals can really heal you, but at this point anything is possible. Before I dive into the article about amber, I check out the website, just to see what it’s all about, where the sources are from, etc.

I click on the *about* section and skim through the writing. The website was created by someone who claims to be a crystal enthusiast, having researched them for years before deciding to put all their knowledge in one place online.

Apparently, amber isn’t actually a crystal or mineral, it is the fossilized resin from ancient evergreen trees and it takes a long time for it to appear in the form of stone. I could only imagine all the old energy associated with it. It says that insects can become fossilized within the amber too. Wow, so I pumped Grace full of herbs and ground insects. Great.

The website also says that amber is good for getting over illness or injury, and increases vitality in someone. It has a high vibration of life force, and it brings warmth into your life. It heals emotions and supports positive energy. Perhaps that is why Grace doesn’t seem to display any symptoms of trauma regarding her death.

I scroll through the page for a little longer, taking in the rest of the information before I close the tab and shut off my laptop. I decide to go to bed, as it is nearing midnight, and I have to be up at eight tomorrow for work.



I walk into Winston's and Desmond greets me at the door. Jeremy is already here, looking eager as ever. It seems he already knows what Desmond is about to tell me.

"You two've got a house call today," Desmond says as I hang my coat on the rack. "It came in about 15 minutes ago."

"Oh, great," I roll my eyes. House calls with Jeremy are the worst. If it were up to me, I would go it alone. But house calls are a two person job.

"What?" Jeremy says defensively.

"You always bump and crash the stretcher into the wall which causes a commotion in front of grieving families!" I respond.

"Why don't you try wrangling that thing this time, huh?" he says.

"There's a reason why it's your job," I say with a wink. "Work on your embalming skills, then we'll talk." I turn to face Desmond. "So where are we off to?" I ask.

"44 Saxon Street, down the road a piece, you know across from the Broadview Mall," Desmond answers.

"Alright. Guess we better get going." I grab my coat from the rack again, get the van keys from Desmond, and Jeremy follows me outside behind Winston's where we keep our body-pick-up-van.

Winston's body van looks like your typical creepy, white, and windowless van, except for the fact that it says "Winston's Funeral Home" on the side in a fancy yet sad looking font. While it doesn't look very interesting from the outside, the inside of the van is equipped with all sorts of tools to help make the process of transporting a body easier.

I climb up into the driver's seat and Jeremy gets in on the passenger side. I input the address into the GPS on my phone and we're on our way. It doesn't take us too long to get there, only about 14 minutes or so.

"So, who are we picking up?" Jeremy asks. I glance down at the little card from Desmond.

"Mr. George Summers. He was 87." Jeremy nods. We don't talk much on the way, aside from your average chit-chat. Soon I pull into the driveway of 44 Saxon Street. We get out and Jeremy opens the back of the van, removing the stretcher from it. I quickly go over everything with Jeremy so he makes no mistakes. I retrieve the big white sheet from the back of the van as well and place it onto the stretcher.

"I got it, Gen, jeez. Your lack of faith in me is kind of insulting," he says as we walk up to the door.

"Just making sure," I tell him. I knock pensively. A man opens the door slowly. He looks to be about 30.

"Hi, we're from Winston's Funeral Home, we're here to pick up George?" I say.

"Ah, yes. Do come in. I'm Max, George's son," he says.

"We're so sorry for your loss," Jeremy says, putting on his somber body-collecting face.

"Thanks... Um, he's right over here," Max says, leading us to the bedroom where his father took his last breaths. Max stands at the doorway as Jeremy and I enter the room. Jeremy drags the stretcher behind him, and it bumps into the wall every few seconds and I sigh. Jeremy pushes the stretcher so that it is lined up next to the bed, and adjusts its height accordingly. He gets George's feet and legs while I lift his shoulders. We move him on to the stretcher slowly and

carefully. After we get George on to the stretcher, strap him in, and put the sheet over him, Jeremy begins to wheel him out. Before I leave the room, I stop to talk to Max.

“Hi, I’m Genevieve Collin, the mortician at Winston’s. Is there anything you’d like us to know about your father while preparing him?” I ask.

“No, ah, I told the man on the phone, Damon was it?” he says.

“Desmond,” I say.

“Yes! Desmond, I told him everything. I’ll be sending over some items and the photos later today or tomorrow,” he tells me.

“Great! Again, so sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” Max says awkwardly. He shuts the door to his house and I make my way back out to the van, hoping that Jeremy has managed getting the body into the van without my help. I see him already in the passenger seat, so I assume everything went smoothly. I get into the van and strap myself in before turning on the engine.

“Any issues?” I ask Jeremy while backing out of the driveway.

“Nope. Well, I mean he almost fell off the stretcher a few times but I caught him,” he says.

“Did you not strap him in tightly enough?” I say with annoyance, my voice getting the slightest bit higher.

“You helped me strap him in!”

“I know I made sure my straps were tight,” I say. Jeremy scoffs in return.

When back at the funeral home, Desmond informs Jeremy that George is to be cremated, and he gets right to work. I am heading down to the morgue when Desmond pulls me aside. He

suggests that after Jeremy is done with the cremation, that he get some practice embalming, since he is still just an assistant after all. By now he should be an expert at working in the crematorium.

Typically, when we have new hires at the funeral home, they start in the crematory and work their way up to embalming. Once you've mastered embalming, it is likely to move to a more administrative position like funeral director, just like Desmond.

The cremation process takes about 3 hours, and then processing the cremated remains can take anywhere from 1-2 hours. Since I have no bodies to tend to at the moment, I decide to take my break.



Margie Walters sits on the examining table covered only by a thin white sheet.

I prep my station with the tools Jeremy and I will need when Jeremy waltzes into the morgue with a smug look on his face. I notice he is wearing his Tweety Bird scrubs again.

“What’s with the face?” I say to him. We snap on a fresh pair of surgical gloves.

“I’m just ready to show you that I’m ready for embalming,” he says.

“Really? ‘Cuz last time I checked, embalmers don’t buy magic fluids.”

“I’ll never live that one down, will I?”

“Nope,” I say, pulling my tray with our tools closer to the examining table. “Alright. Let’s get started. This is Margie.” I pull the sheet down just so we can see her face. I gesture towards the corpse on the table. “What comes first?” I say to Jeremy.

He closes one eye and his mouth twists into a sour look. I assume this is his thinking face.

“Uhhhh,” he says with one eye still closed. “Check her vitals?” he answers.

“I guess the order of the beginning steps doesn’t matter— so, sure. Typically we’d wipe her down first and then check her vitals, but it’s communicative. It won’t change our outcome,” I say to him. He looks a little defeated but he picks himself back up, and begins to check her vitals. I pour the disinfectant into the bowl and after Jeremy declares her corneas are cloudy and a lack of a pulse, I remove the sheet from her body so we can start to wipe Margie down.

Jeremy stares at the floor, averting his eyes from the corpse. “So, uh, massage time?” he says after we finish the cleanse. I notice his body language is stiff, and it suddenly occurs to me the reason for his awkwardness.

“She is dead, you know. It’s okay, it’s not as awkward as you make it out to be,” I say.

“Yeah, I know— I’m just not used to looking at naked old lady bodies,” he answers.

“Yeah. It doesn’t get easier,” I say. “But it does help when you remember this is part of the job, and that we’re not doing anything with malicious intent. We are not trying to harm her body. We’re just doing the job.”

“Right,” he says. “Of course. Just doing the job.” He refocuses himself and puts a new look on his face. “So, now we set the features?”

“Correct,” I say. I retrieve the eye caps, Stay Cream, and cotton from the cabinet and place them on the tray next to us. I let Jeremy do the features on his own since it isn’t too difficult, and he seems to have the hang of it. But when it comes time for the arterial embalming, I take over again. “Just watch for now,” I tell him. I go through the process of arterial embalming, explaining each step to him. He chimes in with questions occasionally.

Chapter 6

I finish embalming my latest client, Brian Peters, a middle aged man, mid 40s, who died of kidney failure. I made sure to use formaldehyde this time, not making the same mistake I made with Grace. I feel a twinge of guilt for thinking it a mistake, because after all, I don't think it was. Grace's death was an accident. Not to say that Mr. Peters had it coming, but health conditions can be ruthless.

I place a sheet over Mr. Peters before I exit the morgue to go upstairs and have my lunch break. When I get upstairs, I see that I have quite a few missed calls from my father. I hear distinct whispers and chatting coming from Desmond's office. I walk over to take a peek into the room, perhaps it is Mr. Peters' family. I always like to talk to the family to let them know that their loved one is in good care with me. But the person I see in Desmond's office is certainly not anyone from Brian Peter's family.

"Dad?" I say. He turns around and gets up from the chair facing Desmond's desk. His face is distraught, and Desmond's is somber.

"Genevieve, I have been trying to call you," he says, exasperated.

"I'm sorry, I've been downstairs working, there's no service down there. What's going on, what are you doing here?" A pit settles in the bottom of my stomach. Why would my dad drive all the way to CT? What couldn't he tell me over the phone?

"Oh, Genevieve." He pulls me into a hug. "It's Lena." His voice breaks.

I pull away slightly to look at his face. He's looking down at the ground. "What about her?"

“She’s... your sister passed away last night,” he half whispers. I pull away out of his arms fully.

“*What?!*” I gasp. “How— I mean, why, what? No, that can’t be, you’re wrong. You’re lying.” The words come out jumbled. My eyes begin to well up and not soon after the first tear falls. Desmond gets up and leaves us be. I can just feel myself shutting down. This can’t be. Lena can’t be dead.

“I wish I was lying, Gen, but she’s gone, baby. Gone,” he says, pulling me back into his arms. I rest my head onto his shoulder, drenching his blue button up shirt darker with tears.

“How?” I whine under a snuffle. “How?” I repeat. My father is quiet for a moment, like he wishes he didn’t have to tell me.

“She killed herself,” he murmurs, eliciting tears from his own eyes. “She did this to herself.” I jerk away again.

“*No, no, no!*” I screech. My hands cement over my face. “Oh my god, no, she couldn’t have. Lena? Never! She would never,” I sob, muffled through my hands. She couldn’t have. Why would she? How could she?

“Why?” I cry. Suddenly, I am reminded of our brief phone call. She said she wasn’t feeling so good about the world lately. I should’ve known. I should’ve driven to fucking Pennsylvania the moment I heard her say those words. I could’ve saved her.

“She left a note,” my father says. He retrieves it from his pocket and hands it over to me.

Dearest Dad, my beloved Genevieve,

I want you both to know that I love you so very much. But something just isn't right. The world isn't right. It's my time. My time to go. It's supposed to be me. I have to fix this. Leaving is the only way to do so. I haven't felt right for so long. It's been months of feeling like this and I can't take it anymore. I'm sorry. I know you both won't understand and you both won't be happy, but you don't understand these feelings. This urge. This hate. The world will be better once I do this.

If there is such a thing as heaven or the afterlife, just think about how now I will be with mom. Together, we will be watching over you two, protecting you both from above the clouds. Please envision me in a better place. I know that is where I will be after all this. Remember, I love you both forever.

Yours truly,

Lena Marie

My hands drop to my sides when I finish reading her suicide note. Suicide note. Fucking hell. I can't believe this has happened. There's so much I could've done. I could've stopped her. I know I could've. But I didn't. I couldn't.

"How did she... you know... do it?" I choke out softly.

"She... well, um, drowned herself in the bathtub," he says.

“Oh my god,” I cry out. She drowned herself? This reminds me all too eerily of Grace’s death. And that’s when it hits me. The order of the universe. Lena’s words from our phone call echo in my mind... *As above, so below. As within, so without.* I can’t at all begin to think about what it means, all that consumes my mind is the fact that my sister is dead.

Desmond quietly enters the room again, with Jeremy in tow. They offer their condolences and their sorrows in muffled whispers, almost as if they were not trying to break the delicateness and aching in the atmosphere of the room, an atmosphere that is common in the funeral home. A few minutes pass before I finally speak again, breaking away from the hold of my father’s arms.

“I have to do it,” I say.

“Do what?” My father asks.

“Her funeral. I have to prepare her body. I have to make sure it’s done right.”

“Genevieve...” Desmond, Jeremy, and my dad all say together concerningly.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, honey,” my dad says.

“You’re not in the right state of mind, Genevieve,” Desmond says.

“You need time to grieve,” Jeremy says.

“This *is* my way of grieving. My work is a huge part of my life. What else am I supposed to do? Doing this would be my way of putting her to rest. It’ll be the only way to say goodbye that feels right to me,” I declare to them. Desmond pulls me aside for a second.

“You better not do what I’m thinking,” he says low, under his breath. I wrench myself away from him. Would he really think I’d do such a thing? Look where it’s gotten me now. God— if there is a god— only knows who else would die if I brought Lena back.

“You really think that low of me? That I’d be that stupid?” I practically screech, most definitely shattering the tenderness of the air.

“Genevieve— I didn’t mean— I just don’t want you to be tempted,” Desmond says.

“Tempted to do what?” my dad interjects.

“Nothing,” Jeremy, Desmond, and I all say sternly, to which a confusing look paints its way onto my father’s face. He doesn’t push for more information, he is probably too overwhelmed as it is.

“Let me prepare her body. I promise you I will tend to her with the utmost care,” Desmond tries to argue.

“No,” I say flatly. “I *have* to do it. No one else. This is non-negotiable. I have to be involved every way I can.”

“You can help plan her funeral with your father and I,” Desmond pressed.

“Nope,” I say. “I’m doing it. Weren’t you the one saying not to push people? Stop pushing me on this.”

Desmond recoils with a sigh and folds his hands together behind his back. The tension in the air is thick and stuffy. I want to go outside for some fresh air and call someone, but everyone who I’d call is either here already, or dead. The idea to call Grace jumps into my head, but what would I even tell her? My sister is dead and because I brought her back she is the reason? No. I couldn’t do that to Grace. I don’t want her to feel like this is her fault. It is no one’s fault but my own— but then, there was no way I could’ve known that Grace would be brought back, only if Jeremy would’ve read the stupid label on the magical fluid. I had no way of knowing the consequences either.

“I don’t know about you all, but I’m going to head home. We don’t have any bodies coming in right now— as far as I know, and I’ll need to prepare for the next few days. Dad, you are welcome to stay with me until you are ready to go back home,” I say after a while of silence.

Jeremy pushes himself off the wall he was leaning on, and all of us except for Desmond exit his office. My father sits down at one of the chairs outside of the office, I can tell he is not sure what to do with himself. Desmond sits at his desk as we leave, and I imagine he will soon be starting the paperwork and preparation required for us to start Lena’s funeral at the home. I fight the urge my eyes have to well up and spill over at the thought of *Lena’s* funeral.

I go downstairs to the morgue to gather my bag and clean up. Jeremy makes his way downstairs as well, to help me put away the body of Brian Peters. We successfully stow him in the body freezer. We do not speak, you can only hear our slight inhalations and exhalations as we switch the tray from the examining table to the one that goes into the freezer. Once we finish, I nod my head, thanking Jeremy for his help, and I grab my tote bag from one of the hooks on the wall. Jeremy is the first to break the solemn silence.

“Gen, I’m really so sorry about your sister... I swear if there’s anything I can do to help, I’m here for you and—”

The words spill out of my mouth before I have the chance to think about their impact.

“Why couldn’t you have just read the fucking label?” My voice breaks and I feel that hot tingling feeling in my nose that is common when you force back tears, similar to the one that happens when you get soda up your nose.

Jeremy is speechless. His body almost recoils into itself, like a scared dog with their tail between their legs. He looks down at the floor, crossing his hands in front him.

“I— I just wasn’t careful, I didn’t know what would happen and I will never forgive myself for it. I would never wish this on anybody, Gen, and for this I am eternally sorry,” He finally says, quietly. I just let the tears fall. I sigh deeply.

“Jeremy, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. It just came out, my brain is all over the place right now and I am feeling so many things. It’s not your fault. We had no way of knowing what would happen.” Now it is my turn to look at the ground. “I don’t blame you.” I motion for us to head upstairs. He doesn’t say anything in response, but I know he recognizes the state that I am in— we see it in people everyday at Winston’s.

Once we are back upstairs, I meet my dad and we make our way outside. The sun is beginning to set. He takes my hand and squeezes it.

“We will get through this together, Pookie,” he says. I smile at his use of his childhood nickname for me.

“Together,” I say back. I hug him tight and remind him of my address, then we walk to our separate vehicles.

My mind is in a whirl as I exit the driveway of Winston’s and turn onto the street. I don’t live that far from the funeral home, but far enough to be left alone with my thoughts for too long. Thinking about my sister’s funeral is sending me into overdrive. There is so much to do that driving home feels like a waste of time. I should just stay at the funeral home to get everything ready. But her body is still in Pennsylvania, and it will be a race against time before decomp really starts to take its toll, so there is nothing I can do right now besides mentally prepare myself. I have never felt this way about a funeral before. Nothing can go wrong, it needs to be

perfect— I mean, as perfect as a funeral for a loved one can be. It is certainly not the greatest of situations.

I should probably call Grace after all, I would like her to be there. She is the closest thing I have to a sister now, seeing as we've been through quite a few interesting things together. This all must be why I felt so damn close to her. I still don't know how to break the news to her though, everything is just so sticky and peculiar.

While driving I pass the “witch shop”, Lunar Ground once again. Part of me wants to go in there and confront Helena. Why on Earth would she be selling such a potion? If it all comes back to the order of the Universe, why does she want to mess with it? Or, rather, why does she want other people to mess with it on her behalf? I remember Desmond's reluctance to discuss his past relationship with her. What could've possibly gone down between them that made her want to do this as a form of revenge? She must've known Jeremy is a cheapskate and would be looking for some affordable alternative brand for fluids, so she set up the website to provoke him to come into the shop, as I presume she must be the “psychic” that is advertised in the neon sign in the window of the shop. She has to have known what would have happened when we used her magical fluid. She knew Lena was going to die, right from the start. If she wanted to get revenge on Desmond, why did *my* sister have to die? Was this really what she intended? Did her spell or potion potentially backfire on her? I guess magic never really goes the way you plan, afterall.

My thoughts consume me once more as I almost miss the turn for my street again. I sharply turn the steering wheel to the left, and I am just able to make it. I cruise down the street until I reach my house, and my dad pulls his car into the driveway next to mine. We get out, I unlock the front door and let us in. I toss my bag and keys onto the kitchen table, and he shuts

the door behind us. I stand at the table, unable to move, and place my hand over my eyes. I hear my father's footsteps walk over to me. He places his hand on my shoulder.

"What's going on in your head, Geneveieve?" he says calmly. I remove my hand from my face and my arm just drops to my side.

"Everything. I'm... just in shock," I say, turning to face him.

"Me too, honey," he responds. "It makes no sense. I can't understand why she would do such a thing to herself. I mean, it's just so out of character for her. She loved this world, despite its flaws. She always found some way to find the beauty in her life. "

"Did you notice her acting differently, at all, recently?" I ask. He ponders his thoughts for a second.

"Well, she seemed a lot more quiet. Spent a lot of time by herself, in her room. I didn't really think much of it, I just thought she just wanted some time to herself, she seemed so tired. I thought maybe there was something going on with work, but I didn't know how to approach her, but now I wish I did." I can hear the guilt he is putting on himself in his voice. I feel the same guilt.

"Weeks before, she finally returned my calls. She told me she wasn't feeling right, but I didn't know what she meant, or why. And she didn't let me ask many questions, either. The phone call was quick. Like she wanted to get it over with," I tell him.

"Perhaps it hurt too much to talk to you, if she was in such a distressed mindset," he says to me.

"Maybe," I respond. "Anyways, the guest room is open if you're tired and want to get settled in for the night."

“Right, of course. I don’t really have anything with me, so I’ll probably have to drive back home tomorrow to get the things I need for the next few days.”

“Of course. Don’t worry about the funeral either, Desmond, Jeremy, and I will take care of it. We are the professionals, after all— Well, maybe Jeremy not so much.” I give a soft laugh and begin to move from the kitchen table.

“Don’t work yourself too hard, Pookie. You deserve to just let them take care of things for once,” he says.

“I have to make sure everything goes smoothly. I don’t want anything to go wrong, dad.”

“I’m just worried about you, that’s all.”

“Thanks. I’ll be okay though. I’m heading into my studio for the night, going to do some painting to try and self-soothe,” I tell him.

“Sounds good. Goodnight, Gen.”

“Night, Dad.”

Before settling into the small, colorful, and messy room that is my art studio, I go to my bedroom to put on some more comfortable painting clothes. I find my black sweatpants and plain white shirt that have paint stains all over them, which makes them feel like an art project in and of themselves.

I flip the light switch up to my studio. There are canvases littering the room, some propped up against the wall, on the floor, on the tables. Some have finished paintings, some remaining a work in progress. I sort through my supplies and pick out the size of canvas I want to use, as well as all the colors I will need. I love working with acrylic paint, it is forgiving when it dries and the texture of it is so satisfying. I grab a pencil and begin to sketch a portrait of

someone, not knowing yet who it will be, but I know it will be a woman. Women are just so beautiful, and are more than worthy to be the subjects of paintings. Portraits are fun to do, my favorite thing to do is to paint a realistic portrait of someone, with an abstract or graphic background, so that it makes the subject person pop. It's very exciting to work with different colors, and gives me a break from the dull grayness that fills my daily work life.

I sketch the outline for a few more minutes before putting down the pencil and picking up the paintbrush. I pick up my palette, squeezing out the colors I want, making sure to leave room to mix some together when needed. I begin by painting the eyes. I swipe my brush gently across the surface, reveling in the way that the paint sits in the dips and valleys of the canvas. I dip my paintbrush into a bit of viridian and ivy green, blending them together until the color is smooth. I take the thinnest of my brushes, in an effort to make sure her eyes are painted with precision. With soft strokes I fill her eyes with the color of the sky and the sea. I make her pupils wide with black, invoking a raw version of this mystery woman, and then add the smallest dot of white to show the light reflecting the delight and brilliance in her.

I block out the highlights and shadows in her face, then add the midtones and blend them in. I take a step back to assess the progress of my work thus far. Suddenly, a realization washes over me, the brush strokes connecting the dots in my brain. This mystery woman is Lena. I have begun to paint Lena. I am overcome with a very strange feeling— something along the lines of heart stopping waves of hurt, but also an almost serene-like calmness. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to laugh. I want to smile because she was so beautiful, truly a brilliant, wonderful woman and sister. In the span of a few minutes I do all those things, except scream, not wanting to alarm my father, so I scream internally. It doesn't really suffice, but it will have to do for now.

I pull myself together and continue to work on the painting. This can be part of my way to honor her. I am doing this for her. Perhaps instead of having a large photo of her at the entrance of the viewing, the painting can be displayed instead. I make a mental note to bring this idea up to my father in the morning.

It takes me hours to get everything just right in the painting, and I stay up all night working on it. For the background, I decided on using colors like a forest green and a yellow-orange that are reminiscent of leaves in autumn, Lena's favorite season.

Chapter 7

My alarm blares loudly at exactly 7 AM. I press the button on top of the clock to shut it off and roll over with a groan. I pull the covers over my eyes, shielding myself from the sunlight that shines through my sheer purple bedroom curtains. Today is the day, and I absolutely do not want to get out of bed. I stare at the wall for a moment, battling the thought of closing my eyes and getting a few extra minutes of sleep, even though it will make no difference except put me behind schedule. My body feels heavy, like I am cemented to my bed. *C'mon, Gen. GET UP*, my mind screams at me. I violently toss the blankets over my shoulder with a heavy sigh, swinging my legs over the side of the bed, planting them on the floor. I stagger for a second, needing to brace the edge of my bed with my hand. My head is dizzy and cloudy, the way it sometimes gets when you get up too fast. I am seeing little silver stars everywhere, and it is a few seconds before my head clears and I can see straight again. I breathe deeply and begin my morning routine.

Lena's body is to be received at Winston's Funeral Home around 9 AM. I want to get there before her body arrives, so that I can ensure the process of preparing her body gets started

right away, and that there are no mistakes. I do not want Jeremy anywhere near my sister's body until I am done preparing her. I absolutely do not need his side comments or his potential for error today. Everything must be perfect.

I get dressed in my regular clothes, a black button down collared blouse and some black trousers. But then I think it might be better to arrive at work already in my scrubs, so that I can begin right away. I hastily take off my nice clothes and search through my drawer for the undergarments I like to wear under my scrubs. Once I have everything on, I grab my bag and head outside to my car. I step outside, locking the door behind me. It is a hot July morning, the heat of the sun caresses my face. I get into my car and begin driving to Winston's.

Desmond and Jeremy greet me when I enter the home. I suppose they had the same idea as me, to get here early. It is just about 8:30 AM. Desmond, Jeremy, and I all say our hello's and good morning's, and there isn't much more said than that. I can sense the tension in the air and it starts to make me uncomfortable, so I go down to the morgue. I don't feel like making awkward small talk with either of them to distract from the larger-than-life elephant in the room. I have work to do anyways.

I set my bag down on one of the counters. I prep my station with my materials so that I can start working on Lena right away. I take out the disinfectant, wash cloths, eye caps, Stay Cream, moisturizer, cotton, the needle injector gun, the wire pins, the list goes on. I organize everything on the table next to me in the order I will need it.

At 8:57 AM, I hear Jeremy yell my name from the top of the stairs. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before walking upstairs. When I reach the top, I follow him outside to the back where the body van usually parks. Desmond is already outside, chatting with the driver,

asking him how the drive was, and so on. They turn towards us when we enter the vicinity. The driver doesn't hesitate to open the back doors of the van and removes the stretcher with the body carefully. I keep my hands behind my back. My fists clench themselves together. From the outside, it just looks like a normal stretcher with a black body bag strapped to it. I see them almost everyday. But knowing that the body inside is my sister is sending me into spirals. I do my best to keep my composure, however. I do not want to lose it in front of Jeremy or Desmond. I don't want them to see my distress, fearing Desmond will be more adamant about not letting me prepare Lena.

"Let's get her down there," I finally say into the warm air. Desmond quietly thanks the driver and hurries to grab one end of the stretcher. Jeremy stands idle, off to the side. I can tell he doesn't know what to do with himself. I open the back door to the basement and Desmond wheels the stretcher inside. I close the door behind us.

"You're sure you're alright?" He says as he pushes the stretcher down the hallway to the morgue.

"Absolutely," I lie. He gives me a concerning look. "I'm fine, Desmond." I try to reassure him.

He settles the stretcher next to the examining table. I grab the top of the bag while he takes the bottom. We slide the body onto the table.

"Okay, okay. I'll leave you to it."

"Thanks for your help," I say to him. He nods with a slight exhale and pulls the stretcher back outside to put it back in the van.

I stare at the unopened body bag for a moment. It is serenely quiet, only the hum of the fluorescent lights surround me. I step forward and unzip the top of the bag. My eyes avert themselves as I pull the bag down, revealing her face. With a deep breath, I look down at her. I am staring at my dead little sister. My Lena. My breathing quickly becomes short. Her once olive skin is a pale blue, and her thin face has already begun to swell. I start to pull down the rest of the body bag. There is vascular marbling, making her bluish-purple veins more prominently visible under her skin. They look like the roots of trees. Even in death, she is still so beautiful.

I remove the rest of the body bag and begin getting her body ready. I wipe her down with the disinfectant. She's been autopsied, which means I have even more restorative work to do on her body. She's been all cut up and lightly stitched back together, and it is my job to put the pieces back together again in order to make her look "normal." I cut out the stitches that run from shoulder to shoulder, meeting at the sternum, running down to her pubic area. The incisions are in the shape of a Y, giving access to the internal organs. I snip away at the stitching, and peel open the skin of her chest cavity. Her internal organs, now viscera, are already in a biohazard bag inside her chest. I remove the bag and place it into the biohazard can I put near my station when setting up. I will have to treat the viscera by itself before I can put it back inside her body. I take the undiluted formaldehyde fluid and pour it into the bag, basing the amount on the size of the organs, making sure that they are saturated. I tie up the bag tightly. I'll have to let it sit for awhile, suck out the remaining fluid with an aspiration hose to kind of vacuum seal the bag, and then put it inside the abdomen.

I move on to the injections next. Because Lena's body is basically hollow and her circulatory system isn't intact, I can't just make the incisions for the tubes to insert the

embalming fluid. I have to inject it into different parts of her body to make sure it distributes. I walk over to the counter where I keep my fluids. I reach for the formaldehyde, but then my eyes trail over to the bottle next to it: the potion. *Don't do it, Gen, don't do it*, I think. I'm not even sure why I still have the bottle. I take it off the table and it glares at me. I think about Grace. I think about how I gave her a second chance. Lena wasn't supposed to die. It was only because I brought Grace back. Maybe I could...

Before I realize what I am doing, I am opening the cap to the potion. My hands shake vigorously. I am dipping the tip of the syringe into the potion, but before I can get any liquid into the cylinder of the syringe, the bottle falls from my hand, hitting the floor with a *thud* and spills all over the tiled floor of the morgue.

"Goddammit!" I screech. I drop to my knees next to the puddle of potion, covering my eyes with my hands. My face gets hot and it scrunches together and I cry. I wail and sob and sniffle, because my sister is dead and I just lost the only chance to have her back. I know the consequences now, however, perhaps it isn't worth it. As above, so below.

I cry so hard I shake. Fuck. I have to pull myself together. I have to finish preparing her body. I do not have time to sit here and cry.

I take a deep breath, and push myself off the floor. Ugh, now I have this whole mess to clean up too. I don't want to ask Jeremy or Desmond for help cleaning up, because if they find out, they will be so disappointed in me if they know what I tried to do.

I take a mop from the storage closet and quickly mop up the potion on the floor. Then I get back to business. I inject the diluted formaldehyde fluid down each leg, down each arm, and up into both sides of the head. Before I do the head, however, I need to stitch up her cranium,

because her brain has been removed. Typically, when the medical examiner does an autopsy, to remove the brain for further examination, they will make an incision that runs from ear to ear at the scalp line, and the skin will be pulled down so that the examiner can cut open the skull with an oscillating saw. Then, after they remove the brain, they put the skullcap back on the victim's head, and roll up the face back into place. I'm no stranger to embalming autopsied bodies, but every time it still just looks so strange to see the skin from the head pulled down.

I thread a curved suture needle and begin to stitch her scalp back together. After that, I resume injecting the fluids into her head, as well as treating the rest of her body with the fluids. Because her brain has been removed, the skull is now very light. I grab the cotton and pack it in to shape her head. I do the same with her neck.

Once the fluid infiltrates her body successfully, I wrap her ribcage in cotton. There are sharp edges of bone after the autopsy, because the examiner had to cut into the bones in order to remove the organs that reside in the ribs. By this time the viscera has been treated, and I use the aspiration hose. This shrinks down the bag, so that it will fit into the chest cavity and abdomen easier. I tie it up again, and carefully lay it down inside her. The cotton on the ribs also helps avoid the bag from getting caught on any sharp bone edges and tearing inside the body, meaning I would have a whole mess of organs to clean up.

Next I work on suturing the Y-incision back up. After that, I set Lena's features. I start with the basis of restoration on her face, but will save the rest of the cosmetic process for tomorrow. By this time, I am done preparing her body. I step back to assess my work. I still cannot believe I am looking at the dead body of my little sister. I can't stand to look at her any longer, so I remove my surgical gloves, dispose of them, and grab my bag to head upstairs

to talk to Desmond about the scheduling for the funeral. I also want to talk to him about having Lena's funeral follow some pagan/wiccan traditions, because she was afterall, a wiccan.

Our family has never been religious, but ever since we were little, Lena has always shown interest in things on the more spiritual or magical side. She'd get so excited for Halloween, and would almost always go as a witch or a fairy or some kind of cute spooky character. I loved Halloween too, but was always more into monsters. I think she got it from our mom. Our mother was into holistic medicine and healing, while my father was more on the science-y side, which I guess, in turn rubbed off on me. From the age of 15, two years after our mother died, Lena proclaimed herself to my father and I as a green witch, following the path of wicca, and has been practicing ever since. I think part of it was her finding a healthy way to grieve, but also a way for her to pay tribute to our mother and keep her spirit alive.

From my understanding, a green witch is someone who works primarily with the elements, herbs and plants, and other natural things from the Earth like crystals and stones. Green witches tend to be as environmentally friendly as they can, as a way to pay respect to Mother Nature, the land they live on, and the Universe.

Here at Winston's, while the most popular type of funeral service is a Christian or Catholic based service, we are open to doing all kinds of services. I'm sure Desmond won't mind my suggestions. Part of working in the death industry is taking the time to learn about death culture and funeral customs in different places of the world, as well as different religions. I mean, well of course, you don't have to, but it definitely makes your work a lot easier when you get a family requesting a very particular kind of service or ceremony.



I wake up 7 minutes before my alarm. Today is the day of Lena's service. My heart feels like it is beating out of my chest, and my hands shake as I put on my clothes. There is no part of my body that wants to do this. I don't think there is a part in anyone's body that would want to do this. Everything has to go smoothly.

I get to the funeral home a few minutes early, as per usual. I hang my coat on the rack, and pop my head into Desmond's office.

"Morning, Desmond," I say.

"Hi Genevieve." He gets up from his desk and walks over to me. "How are you doing?" he asks concerningly.

"Fine," I say. "Just nervous." I fold my hands together.

"I promise we will all make sure everything goes perfect and is up to your standards," he says.

"I have pretty high standards, you know."

"Oh yes, I am aware. But don't worry, Jeremy and I have been working hard to make sure everything is in place and is how it's supposed to be."

"Thank you, Desmond. I really appreciate you putting your extra efforts into this for me," I tell him. He nods with a smile. "You got my email about examples of traditions for pagan ceremonies, right?"

"Yes! I have a bit of knowledge myself, but I think all the traditions you are thinking of including are beautiful, and I'm sure Lena would be grateful that you took her outlook into account."

"Great. Thanks," I say.

“Have you done the cosmetics already, or are you going to be doing it this morning?”

“Not yet, I am going to do it right now. Then I figure I’ll ask Jeremy to help me get her into the casket and up into the viewing room.”

“Alright. I’ll let you get to it. Let me know if you need anything,” Desmond replies.

“Thank you,” I say quietly. I take my bag and head downstairs to the morgue. I unlock the heavy door, and flip the lights on. I walk in, close the door behind me, and set my bag down on the counter. I retrieve the clothes that my dad had brought from home in PA. He’s not really one for fashion, so I drew him a little sketch of some things I knew were in Lena’s closet that I thought would be suitable for her to be wearing for the viewing. She has this beautiful velvet knee length dress that is a mix of an emerald green and a basil green. It has long sheer flowy green mesh sleeves, and little stars and sparkles embroidered in silver thread. She only wore it once or twice, to a party or something. It just stayed in the back of her closet, always waiting for the right occasion. She loved this dress, though, and while I wouldn’t say this is the “right” occasion, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind being buried in it.

Before I put the actual dress on, I dress her in some plastic undergarments, because autopsied bodies have the potential to leak or ooze fluid, since there are more incisions. It doesn’t always happen, but I’d rather be safe than sorry. It can’t hurt to have a little extra protection underneath.

For her makeup, I decide on a little twist of one of her classic looks. She loved to play with color in her makeup, mixing bright eyeshadow shades with black. I take two small pieces of tape and place them gently near her eyelids, this will be used to create a crisp and clean line for the eyeshadow wing. I dab on some hydrating cream onto her eyelids, and while that settles in, I

fill in her eyebrows with a light brown color. Next, I take a small angled eyeshadow brush, dust it in some of the glittery black in my palette, and carefully swipe it from the piece of tape to about the middle of her lid. I clean off my brush and dust it into a sparkly metallic green color, to match the dress. I take the green color and swipe it from the middle where I left off with the black to the inner corner of her eye. I take a blending brush and gently blend the colors together where they meet, creating a smokey black to green gradient. I take some mascara and do her lashes, and I am done with her eyes.

I move onto the rest of her face. For foundation, I use mortuary-grade makeup, it's a little thicker than regular foundation so I don't have to use as much, and keeps the skin hydrated too. It's important that the skin looks natural, and not like the makeup is caked on. Less is more, sometimes.

I blend out the foundation cream to even it out, apply a slight amount of blush, as Lena was never really one to be wearing rosy cheeks, but I still want to use some to give her that human-like warmth. I finish the face up with some highlighter, so her inner shine can be seen from outside. For the lips, I pick a pale red, just to bring out her natural lip color instead of doing anything crazy. This is her funeral, afterall, not a red carpet premiere. She was never the always glamorous type, though she did love to get dressed up for special occasions. But I wouldn't necessarily call this a special occasion.

I wrap up the cosmetic process with some finishing touches, setting spray, and a little extra powder in some places. I go upstairs to find Jeremy and let him know Lena is ready for the casket and that we should bring her into the viewing room.

“You ready?” he asks me.

“No,” I half laugh and half sigh.

We work together to get her body into the casket, rolling it down to where our industrial “casket” elevator is to get her casket upstairs to the viewing room. The casket my father and I chose is a shiny lilac color with a pastel interior. Lena also loved all shades of purple, and we just happened to have the perfect color of casket on hand.

Once the elevator brings us upstairs, we wheel her out into the viewing room. We get her casket onto the stand that is in the front, and then begin arranging the room. The chairs tend to move during each service, since people like to readjust them. So we just put them back into their place in rows. We fiddle with the chairs for a bit, until Jeremy finally speaks.

“Looks good,” he says.

“Yep,” I say somberly.

Viewings, or wakes, are typically held in two different sessions during the day, allowing the friends and family of the deceased to come at a time that works best for them. Today, Lena’s service will be from 2-4pm, and then another session will be held from 6-8pm later in the evening. Right now, it is about 11am, so we all have some downtime to prepare everything. Last night, my father and I wrote out an obituary for Lena together that will be featured on Winston’s website to accompany the details of the wake and cemetery service.

When the clock strikes 12:30pm, I take myself to the bathroom to freshen up and change into my nice clothes for the service. I touch up my makeup, put on some more deodorant, and fluff my hair a little bit. I exit the bathroom, and make my way into the viewing room so that I can have my own private moment with Lena before people start to arrive. I kneel down in front of the casket. I stare at her face.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper to her through tears. “I love you and I am so sorry.” A tear falls onto my pant leg and I am pulled into a memory.

Lena and I were getting ready for our mother’s funeral. We were in the bathroom at home together, an hour before the service. She couldn’t stop crying, big, salty tears streamed down her face.

“Gen, I can’t do this. I can’t,” she said through sniffles. I stopped fixing myself in the mirror and turned to look at her. She was sitting on the closed toilet seat, her face buried in her hands.

“You are stronger than anybody I know, Lena,” I told her. She removed her hands from her face to look up at me. The light coat of mascara she applied minutes before now streaked down her face.

“I don’t feel strong. I feel weak. And I don’t understand how you can appear to be so composed at a time like this,” she said. I let out a small breath.

“I don’t know either, honestly. But trust me, I’m freaking out on the inside,” I said. I move to sit on the edge of the tub, closer to her. “Remember that time when we were little and mom took us to the aquarium? And you kept asking her to show us the mermaids? And being the annoying big sister I am, I kept telling you that mermaids aren’t real, and you began to cry? Do you remember what she said to us?” Lena met her eyes with mine and smiled. She wiped some of the tears on her cheeks.

“Yeah— she said, ‘Mermaids might not be real as we think of them, but I know the both of you carry the essence of mermaids inside you, everyday.’ And then she said, ‘your minds

swim at a depth that most would drown in. Mermaids are representative of women who are at ease in the waters of life, the waters of emotion.”

“Exactly. So right now we’ve got to be mermaids. We’ve got to figure out how to be at ease in the rough waters of life,” I said.

“But how do we figure that out?” she asked.

“I’m not quite sure, but we’ve got each other. We’re in this together.” I reached out my hand and Lena took it tenderly.

“Together,” she said with a smile.

I wipe my own tears from my face and stand up from the altar in front of her casket. I have to be a mermaid. For Lena. I have to be a mermaid. I linger in the viewing room for a few more minutes, admiring all the things that surround the altar. Bleeding heart flowers drape down towards the ends of the casket. I don’t even know how Desmond got the bleeding hearts at this time of year, they’re Lena’s favorite flower. My father must’ve told him.



My father arrives around 1:30pm. He comes into the funeral home wearing his best suit, one I haven’t seen him wear in ages.

“Dad,” I say when I see him. We embrace each other tightly. “How are you holding up?” I ask him as we pull away.

“Doing my best,” he says, clearing his throat.

“Same,” I say. We slowly walk into the viewing room together. “You ready to see her?” I ask with a slight grimace.

“I-I-I guess so,” he manages to stammer out. We step up to the casket together. He kneels down at the altar, and I take a step back to allow him to have his own private moment. He bows his head as if he is praying, looks back up at Lena for a moment, and then turns to look at me. “She looks beautiful, Genevieve. You did a wonderful job. I wouldn’t even know that she’d... wow, um... she... she looks like she’s sleeping, so natural.” His voice trembles.

“Dad, it’s okay. Let it out. I understand how you feel. I am feeling it too,” I tell him. I reach to put a hand on his shoulder. He gets up from the altar and pulls me into a hug again. We hug each other tight, feeling the vulnerability and delicateness of life. Once we pull away, we walk back to the front of the funeral home, waiting to greet other guests as they come in.

The first person to arrive was quite a surprise to me. Grace is the first to arrive.

“Oh, Genevieve,” She says as she sees me. “I’m so sorry.” She walks over to me and gives me a hug.

“Thank you, Grace. I really appreciate you being here for me,” I tell her. She pulls me aside for a moment.

“Is this because of me?” she whispers. “You know, what Desmond first said, about something powerful being at force here and how there will be consequences?”

“I don’t know the specifics, but it has something to do with the balance of the Universe. And it’s not because of you. This is all my fault, not your’s.”

“This isn’t your fault! You can’t blame yourself for what she did to herself. You also had no way of knowing what was going on or what was going to happen. Please don’t blame yourself, Gen,” Grace urges.

“Thank you,” I say. “Thank you for being here for me.”

“Of course, Gen! You were there for me in my times of struggle, so it would only make sense for me to be there for you too.”

“Even though the circumstances are quite strange, I’m still glad we met and became close,” I tell her. She takes my hand and squeezes it. I squeeze her hand back and smile towards her.

The next hour or so is filled with the same thing. The same, “Hello’s” and “How are you’s?” and the abundance of “I’m so sorry for your loss” and “My condolences” or “Let me know if you need anything.” All I say back is “thank you,” because what else can I say? And what do I *need*? I need my sister to not be dead, thank you very much.

So many people I knew long ago showed up for Lena. It is really heartwarming to see what a huge impact she really had on the world and the people around her. I end up chatting with people I never thought I’d come into contact with again, people I thought were lost to me forever.

I am talking to Lena’s college best friend, Essa, when I notice something out of the side of my peripheral vision— a flash of red hair. Essa is talking my ear off about something silly she and Lena did in college.

“Sorry, um, will you excuse me?” I say to her. She nods with slight concern but doesn’t seem to get too worried. I, on the other hand, am quite worried. I can’t recall Lena having any red-headed friends, nor do we have any ginger relatives, which means there is only one person this could be.

I spot the back of the red-head, and walk through the crowd of people to her. I put my hand on her shoulder and she turns to face me.

“Helena?” I say. “What are *you* doing here?” I demand. Her emerald green eyes stare deep into mine.

Desmond must’ve noticed the slight raise in my voice, as he is standing close by. He quickly shuffles over to where the two of us are standing. Jeremy and Grace were talking, but soon they are surrounding us too.

“Genevieve, I am so sorry for your loss. It is always tragic to lose another witch,” Helena says to me.

“Oh, quit the crap— all I want to know is why. Why did you do this? What could’ve possibly happened between you and Desmond to make you want to get back at him like this?” I cross my arms with a huff. “And your spell backfired— big time. If your intention was to get revenge on him,” I motion to Desmond, “then why in the fuck do I have to endure this hurt? Why did *I* have to lose my sister?”

“I truly am sorry for the way this all turned out, it for sure was not what I intended when I devised my spell for revenge,” she explains.

“So, like, what exactly happened between you guys?” Grace says, interjecting herself into the conversation.

“Please, we’re all dying to know,” Jeremy chimes in.

“Huh. You’re stronger than I thought, Chambers,” Helena says in Desmond’s direction. “I’m surprised the guilt didn’t make you crack.” Her voice is laced with condescending notes. “Would you like to tell them, or shall I?” she says.

Desmond signs and crosses his arms, looking down at the ground.

“Go on,” he says to Helena, defeated.

“Well, I’m guessing that you all are no stranger to the fact that I am a witch,” she begins.

“Do any of you know what a familiar is?” she asks us.

Jeremy, Grace, and I all look at each other, and shake our heads out of cluelessness.

Helena continues to speak.

“A witch’s familiar is a supernatural entity or spirit that typically manifests in the form of an animal. The familiar is to help the witch with their spells, guide them, and offer them protection. Their bond runs very deep. Familiars are not just simply household pets, they are our confidants, they see and hear everything. They truly understand their witch. You see, I had a familiar— a little crow. I called him Phantom, because he was my little phantom of the night. Phantom was like my other half, I didn’t know what I would do without him. Until one day...” she trails off to shoot a glare at Desmond. Uh oh. That can’t be a good sign.

“See, your friend, Desmond, over here, thought it would be fun to take up archery. He wasn’t very good at it, however. One day he was out practicing, and I was sitting in the house we shared, doing some reading on incantations with Phantom. Phantom sat on my shoulder, god—he loved doing that, when suddenly, I heard glass shatter, and the next thing I know my little Phantom is pinned to the wall with an arrow through him. Pain and grief overcame me so quickly, I felt like I lost a part of myself. How was I to forgive someone who took something that meant so much to me?”

“It was an accident! I didn’t mean to! You said it yourself, I wasn’t any good at it,” Desmond wails, putting himself in the conversation. Huh. I guess Desmond is feeling the same way Jeremy and I were feeling around the time of Grace’s resurrection. Helena shifts her weight and switches her gaze to the floor. She continues the story.

“I’ll admit, my spell did backfire, when I was devising my plan for the potion I was unaware that Desmond was no longer the primary mortician here. I thought it would be him administering the potion, not you, Genevieve. And for the loss of your sister, another witch, I am eternally sorry.”

I don’t say anything in return. I am just so hurt. I still cannot believe this is why this whole thing has happened.

“If it is any consolation, let me lead a seance for you to talk to her, Lena,” Helena offers.

“A seance?” I ask.

“Yes, we can safely conjure her spirit and you can finally say anything you want her to know,” she tells me.

“You’re sure that will work?” I ask, skeptical.

“I’ve seen her spells and magic work— she’s good,” Desmond says. Helena smiles at the comment.

“Yes, I am sure,” she says.

“Alright, sure, we can do that. But just so you know, my acceptance of your offer isn’t me forgiving you for what you’ve caused,” I tell her. She brings her hands to her face.

“Of course, I understand. And for what I’ve done, I am eternally sorry. This will undoubtedly haunt me forever,” Helena says with a sigh.

I don’t say anything in return, and there is a moment of awkward silence. Jeremy fiddles with the cuffs of his white button up. I excuse myself from the group to talk to some other people.

The first round of the service ends with goodbyes and kisses on cheeks from old friends and beloved family members. My father and I linger in the viewing room until only Jeremy, Desmond, and Grace remain. We all gather together at the entrance of the viewing room.

“Hi, are you one of Genevieve’s friends from here?” my dad says to Grace.

“Uhhh, yeah, you could say that!” Grace says.

“How did you two meet? Work related?” he asks. Grace and I give each other a funny look.

“It’s um, a long story,” I say with a slight chuckle. “But yes— at work.”

“Yeah, haha,” Grace says. “Gen’s a good friend though. She’s been there for me in ways nobody else could’ve or would’ve been.”

“Well I’m glad my Pookie has some good friends around her. I was worried about her moving to a new place without knowing anyone years ago,” he says.

“Grace is wonderful,” I tell him. “I am thankful to have her.”

“Good,” he says.

“Dad, there are some things I have to finish up here but I’ll meet you back home,” I say to him.

“Genevieve, go home with your dad and relax before round two tonight. Desmond and I will take care of everything,” Jeremy says.

“But—” I begin to protest but Jeremy cuts me off.

“Go home, Gen, it’s okay to let other people do the job sometimes,” he says.

“Fine. But just this once,” I say. My dad and I gather our things and head outside to our cars.



The second service is similar to the first, more family members and friends and other people Lena knew. She sure was quite the socialite, she had many friends I didn't even know. She was the queen of networking— she always knew the right people to talk to. She was so close to getting her writing published, too. I wonder if they will go ahead and release her work posthumously. I mean it is possible, they've done that sort of thing with many great writers and creators after they've passed.

After the service is finished, my dad goes back to my house this time and I actually stay behind. Not to do any of the work that is done after the service is finished of course, because Jeremy still won't let me. Instead, I stay behind to talk to Desmond about arranging the seance with Helena. It is only 8pm, and he tells me that she suggests we can do it tonight if I am feeling up to it. I decide on doing it tonight, because I just want her soul to be able to rest after all. I want to get out what I have to say to her as soon as possible, she deserves to know now. I need my own closure, too.

Desmond gets in contact with Helena, and we head over to her house. He wants to come with me, just to make sure I am safe with her. I guess he just doesn't fully trust her from the events in the past and to what led to now. It seems their relationship was very tumultuous. A funeral director and a witch does not exactly seem like the best match, if I'm being honest.

We arrive at Helena's house around 8:45pm. She already has everything set up by the time we get there.

"Come in," she says to us before we even have the chance to knock. Psychics, man. Either that, or she heard our cars pull into the driveway. Maybe a mix of both. She welcomes us

into her home graciously, leading us into a small room. There is a small, round table draped with a white lace tablecloth in the middle of it. Off to the left, there is a long rectangular table with different witchcraft related things. There are many candles, goblets, crystals, and other little witchy trinkets. I deem this to be her altar. The walls are lined with shelves that contain jars of various herbs and books pertaining to witchcraft. The candles on her altar and the table are already lit, and there is incense burning, which smells like lavender. There is a black ribbon as well as a pen and pad on the table. I assume this is all a part of the ritual.

“Sit down,” she says in her sultry voice. Desmond and I follow her instructions and seat ourselves at the table and she sits down too. “We are going to do a protection spell first. This will help keep things from backfiring on us, as we don’t want to accidentally call upon an angry spirit.” There are spells to keep other spells from backfiring? Why couldn’t she have done this when making her potion? Damn. Desmond and I just nod in cooperation. She picks up the black ribbon.

“The lavender incense is to purify the space and cleanse any negativity, aiding us in protection. I am going to enchant this ribbon and it will serve as a talisman of protection for us tonight.” Desmond and I nod again.

“Sounds good,” I say. She begins to knot the ribbon and starts reciting the words to the presumed spell.

“By the Karmic Power of Three, this spell tied and knotted be, to cause no harm nor return to me, as I will it, so mote it be.” She finishes knotting the ribbon after the third knot. She then tucks it into the breastpocket of her black t-shirt. “The talisman must be held or worn by the one casting the spell in order for it to work,” she explains. Wow, that was easy. Next we begin to

move on to the actual seance part. She tells us that the pen and paper are for automatic writing. As we ask Lena's spirit questions, hopefully through Helena we will receive the messages from Lena, and Helena will be able to write them down. She describes it as if Lena is taking her hand as her own and writing for her.

"Are you both ready?" she asks.

"Yes," I say. Desmond responds in the same manner. Helena clears her throat so that her voice comes out clear.

"Don't we need to like, hold hands or something?" I ask.

"Not always, every witch or medium prefers their own methods. I find that you never know how long a seance may take, and sometimes holding hands can just get downright uncomfortable after awhile, so I prefer not to. To each their own, though," Helena answers.

"Makes sense," I say.

"What is your sister's full name?" she asks me.

"Lena Marie Collin," I answer. She nods, closes her eyes for a second, and begins to speak a bit louder into the still air.

"Miss Lena Marie Collin, we respectfully ask that you honor us with your presence tonight," she starts. There is silence for a moment, until I feel a breeze pass by my shoulders. I shudder lightly, and look around the room towards the windows to see if maybe it could've been a gust of wind, but they are closed, and there are no vents in the room that I can see.

"Did any of you feel that?" I ask.

"I did," Desmond responds.

“She’s here,” says Helena. “I can feel her. Her presence is warm and inviting. It seems she couldn’t wait for you to call for her. Would you like to ask her a question, or tell her anything?”

“Yes, um,” I focus myself on what I am to say. I clear my throat like Helena did before, and speak into the air. “Lena, it’s me, Gen. I am so sorry this happened. I love you so much,” I start. I notice Helena has begun to scribble on the note pad, her gaze is off in the distance and she is incredibly focused, like she is in trance. Hell, she probably is. I imagine Lena taking Helena’s hand as Helena writes. I switch my thoughts back to my words and continue to speak.

“I wish you talked to me, told me what’s been going on with you. Maybe I could’ve helped. But it’s too late for that now, I just hope you are at peace now, and I hope you’re drinking Shirley Temples with mom, the way we used to when we were little. I hope you’re pouring extra grenadine into your glass when she’s not looking. I love you,” I say.

Helena writes more stuff down in her trance-like state. I think of anything else I want to say. It is hard, because there is so much I want to ask, or tell her. In the moment, I decide that if she has anything else she wants to tell me, she will figure out a way to. She was a witch, after all. And she was always good at finding ways for anything difficult.

Helena pulls her focus back to myself at the table. She looks down at the writing on the pad, and relays the received messages to us.

“She says she loves you too, Genevieve. She wants you to know that it’s okay, and that it’s alright for you to mourn her, but she desperately asks you not to dwell in your loss and sadness. She wants you to continue to live your best life, even if she is not there. She wants what is best for you. She also wants you to start going out again and spending time with people more.

She knows you like your solitary time, but you need human connection too. She wants you to find a good balance between your work and personal life,” Helena tells us. Tears have started to stream down my face the moment Helena spoke the first sentence. She continues on, “She also knows that you have great things coming for you in the future. You should be on the lookout for new opportunities soon— something about an art show?” I sniffle and start to cry harder.

Desmond puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Is there anything else you’d like to say, Genevieve?” Helena asks. I try to think of anything else.

“No thank you,” I say quietly through a muffled voice. Helena nods in confirmation.

“Lena, thank you for your presence and time tonight, it has been greatly appreciated,” Helena says. She looks towards Desmond and I.

“Thank you, Lena bear,” I say, teary eyed.

“Thank you, Lena,” Desmond says.

“We bid you farewell, Lena, thank you again.” Helena shifts her focus to us again, signaling that she is talking to us and not Lena.

“To close, I will now recite Hecate’s Prayer for the Dead. Hecate is a goddess known for guiding souls into the underworld. She helps protect our loved ones as they embark on their new journey, and helps us in dealing with our own loss.” Helena shifts her weight in her chair and begins to recite the prayer:

*Hail Hecate, Mighty Eternal Queen,
Divine Mediator,
She who walks between the worlds,
Torch-bearer who shines Her light
Upon our path.
Hear me now,*

*Mistress of Death,
Welcome this departed soul.
I call upon You,
Great Light,
Embrace this soul as they pass through
The gates of death.
Guide my beloved safely
To the other side,
Offer them comfort,
As they cross the threshold
From this life to the next.
Be with us now in our time of grief.
May we know the peace of eternity.
Let the light of their memory burn bright,
Give us the faith to know that all
That dies shall be reborn.
Hail Hecate, Mighty Eternal Queen,
Divine Mediator,
She who walks between the worlds,
Torch-bearer who shines Her light
Upon our path.
Hear me now,
Mistress of Death,
Welcome this departed soul.*

Helena concludes the prayer, and then says, “Blessed be,” and she again looks towards Desmond and I.

“Blessed be,” we say in unison. With that, she blows out the candles on the table, and gets up to blow out the ones on the altar. We sit in the darkness and I wipe my face with the sleeves of my shirt.

“How are you feeling?” she asks me, guiding us out of the room and into the light of the living room.

“I feel... content. I mean, obviously I am still sad, but I believe in some way this was the closure I needed,” I tell her.

“Good,” Desmond says as we walk.

“I’m so glad,” Helena says. “At any point, if you’d like my assistance to speak with her again, you are more than welcome. However, I have a feeling she will be contacting you in other ways, too.”

“Thank you,” I say. Helena walks us to the door, and Desmond and I go our separate ways.



There is a thick, misty veil that hangs in the air. I’ve always found cemeteries to be some kind of beautiful, despite them being filled with so much death. The gray, moss covered stones are scattered around the cemetery. The headstones stick out of the ground like crooked teeth. My loved ones and people I don’t know surround me. My father, Grace, Desmond, and Jeremy stand directly next to me. We huddle around the six-foot hole in the ground where my sister’s casket is being lowered into it. The dirt is a rich brown, and some stray plant roots stick out on the sides. I stand with my fists clenched together behind my back. There is a priestess reciting some kind of wiccan prayer. I am finding it hard to truly listen, though. I just close my eyes as she speaks and take deep breaths. Tears slide down my cheeks.

Once the priestess is done speaking, a bouquet of flowers is passed around, and we each take one. Everyone takes turns tossing their flower into the grave site. After everyone has done so, they step back to leave me be. I am the last person to toss in my flower. I stare down at the

lavender casket. It glistens in the sun. I breathe in deeply again, and finally exhale when I drop the flower into the ground.

“Goodbye, Lena bear,” I whisper into the warm air. “I hope you are in a better place, I love you.” The priestess stands across from me. She nods her head and it is quiet for a moment.

Then, finally, she looks straight at me, and says, “Blessed be.”