
THE REAPER'S DAUGHTER

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For my husband, Ron ...

For believing in this concept when I first told you about it, for the nights you go to bed alone while I write, for all your hard work. I love you for every light bulb of inspiration. And more.

*Before us great Death stands
Our fate held close within [her] quiet hands*

—RAINER MARIA RILKE

PROLOGUE

Present

THE ROLLING GREEN of her eyes was dimming fast, losing color and life to the quick click of time that beat out her days and nights, a perpetual circle that was now fading to a close. Light brown hair that had been recently styled into looping curls was limp against the black pillowcase—a metaphor for her wilted spirit, I mused, thinking offhandedly how proud my English professor would be at my thoughtful use of language.

I sighed. I didn't want to be here.

When her eyes met mine, I knew she saw me for who I really was—*what* I really was. She reached out an eager hand to take mine. I didn't want anything to do with it. But it wasn't because her fingers were slick with blood, deep crimson dripping down her arm and fingernails from where she'd so precisely placed a razor blade to her vein and dug deep, thinking she'd be free of her pain. It was because her face reflected back to me all the times I'd felt I'd been given a shitty deal. Current situation: case in point.

"Hi," she whispered, her once pink lips fading with every pump of her life, which was idly dripping away from her to the plush white carpet below. I could smell the newness of it, the fresh aroma of a recently laid floor. *That's going to be a bitch to get clean.*

I looked around her bedroom, at the dance trophies and pictures of smiling friends, and wondered why.

Why me?

"Blake ..." Hearing my mother's warning tone, I looked over at her where she stood in the shadows, overseeing my tutelage.

"Why can't we just call an ambulance? It's not too late. They could save her," I whispered fiercely, staring at the girl's hand stretched out to me as if I were her savior and not her end. "We should save—"

"It's not for us to decide, you know that. We are only here to bring souls over, not save their mortal lives. Take her, she wants to go."

"And will she still feel the same when she's looking down at her body?" I asked, not even bothering to check my mother's expression when she didn't answer. Suicide wasn't a peaceful death. It was pain—that much I knew.

I choked back the tears that wanted to rise in my eyes for this girl, for me ... I turned to her once more and leaned down, brushing a strand of her hair from her graying face. "What's your name?"

Barely blinking, her pale eyes darted to me. "Carly," she said, choking around her words.

"Just hold my hand and I'll help you cross," I said softly, forcing myself to meet her gaze so that someone would witness her ending as they had her beginning.

She smiled slowly, and I saw that in life she had been pretty. When she'd believed. When she'd had hope.

"The light?" Her eyes widened, glittering green for a brief moment in their otherwise colorless depths at the prospect of going somewhere beautiful after this life had been so cold.

I nodded, although I didn't really know where she would go. I was only in training, but I hoped it was someplace good, where her tormented soul could rest.

She had small, feminine hands, I thought, as she laced her slippery fingers around my longer warm ones. She didn't last long, her pulse giving one last flutter before sputtering out.

The room was suffused with the silence left behind in the absence of such a simple thing. The thundering lack of a person's heartbeat had never seemed quite so loud. As life departed Carly's mortal coil, her soul lifted from the body, but unlike some souls I'd seen that were light and buoyant, at peace with the next step in their existence, hers was outlined in darkness, and it rippled, suspended in space like a special effect in a bad horror film. Her gaze turned from her body to me, sorrow coming to settle on the slope of her bowed shoulders and in the recesses of her eyes. Regret was a fickle creature. It always came too late.

"I hope you find what you wanted," I whispered to her soul, waiting to feel the energy that usually infused my body during a crossover. As she blinked out, all air was ripped from my lungs and I was left clutching the bedpost for purchase, grappling for oxygen and drowning on the echo of Carly's anguish. The room spun around me, and my rasping heaves hurt my chest as I struggled to survive the sharp, bitter sting of loss that clung to the drapes and walls and assaulted my nose with its acrid scent.

I inhaled deep breaths when air returned, staring at the pool of red on the floor, thankful the bedspread had been black. She looked like a zombie, gray and without light, her once green eyes staring into a void that held nothing for her now. Without thinking about it, I reached forward and closed her lids with the lightest touch of my fingertips. The hands of Death.

"Blake," my mother warned again, a chastising edge to the velvety lilt of her voice. I turned to look at her and sighed, feeling the darkness in the girl's room overwhelm me, irritation surging inside me at my mother's emotionless manner.

"Don't you care?" I asked.

She stepped forward from the shadows, her shroud of black hair sweeping around the marble pallor of her face.

"Of course," she said. But I had a hard time believing her when her features remained composed in an expression of sculpted apathy. "But it is what it is, Blake."

"This was the worst."

"I've seen much worse," she said, her voice lacking the deep resonance of human compassion. It was flat, a monotone observer in a world colored by grief and heartbreak.

"Gee, thanks, way to make me feel better about this whole gig."

"That wasn't really my intent. This is who you are. You will have to deal with tragedies that far surpass this. Tragedies far more encompassing. This was one girl. Be grateful it wasn't thousands."

I could barely look at her, nauseated by the way she acted as if one girl hadn't been everything to someone. I opened my mouth to retort with something equally nasty, my body tensed to storm past her for the last time, but I was caught in mid-motion by a soft knock at the door.

My head swiveled.

"Carly?" A soft voice came from the other side, concern coating the lightness of her tone.

Oh god, I absolutely could not stick around to watch Carly's parents find their daughter dead from suicide on her comforter.

Turning quickly, I pulled a fleecy black blanket, folded so carefully before, up over the girl's chest, trying to make the scene look less gruesome before I headed to the window.

"I'm outta here," I told my mother. To her credit, she didn't try to stop me with more inane platitudes.

"You could just flicker out," she said dryly. The doorknob was turning, and I shook my head. I'd tried her way of traveling through realms to no avail. If I was going to make an exit, it was going to have to be the human way.

I hurled myself through the open window onto the tree outside without thought of my physical safety, only glancing back once to see that my mom had already disappeared.

Sliding down the tree, I hit the ground with a grunt, my sneaker-clad feet stinging from the impact. I didn't pause, pumping my legs to power myself down the sleeping streets as fast as I could to get as much distance as possible from the death scene. But I didn't run fast enough, because her mother's shrieks of agony followed me from two blocks away. *They don't ever think about who they leave behind.*

I blocked my ears and kept running, the late winter air biting at my cheeks with the hope of spring hanging heavy in the wind, even on such a desperate night.

When I got to my own house, I paused at the stoop, sucking in a few breaths and trying to make the images in my head go away. Smoothing back my long, dark hair, so like my mother's, I checked my hands for hints of blood. But just like any normalcy that had previously existed in my life, the blood I'd seen stain my fingers had vanished. Licking my lips, I put my key in the door and pushed it open, stepping into the foyer.

My dad looked up from the living room, where his nose was buried in a book. "Hey, B," he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing tired eyes. "What are you doing here? I thought you were staying at

the dorm tonight." He arched his brows and glanced at the cable box clock that glowed a green 11:15 p.m.

"Yeah, I was going to, but Shelby wanted me to stop by her parents'—you know, it's weekly game night—so I figured that since I was so close, I'd just crash here tonight. I'd better get a little reading in though, so 'night, Dad."

He didn't stop me or question me, which I was thankful for. I bounded up the steps to my room. Movies always made it look so easy, but living a double life was going to be the death of me. Pun intended.

After closing my bedroom door behind me, I sat down on my bed, tossed off my shoes, and quickly headed for the bathroom to shower. My skin felt dirty with the cloak of death, and I wanted to wash it away. Even though I knew it was impossible.

I was struck by my reflection as I closed the door behind me and turned to the medicine cabinet. It was like looking at a younger version of my mother. Only my eyes were a pale crystal blue. Hers were black. I was thankful for the difference.

But what we had in common even more than looks was a legacy. A long one. You might have heard of her before; she's really quite famous, although most stories have gotten it wrong and made her out to be a dude. She goes by the name Grim, but her full name is Grim Reaper. Do you know what that makes my mother? Yep, that's right. She's Death.

So what does that make me? The Reaper's daughter.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

Six Months Earlier

“THE SPECTERS ARE BLACK! The Specters are white! The Specters will haunt you and fight, fight, fight!”

My breath fogged in the air as I shouted the cheer, and my fingerless gloves muffled my claps in the early autumn afternoon. I marched and clapped my way into formation and prepped myself for the lift. I felt my base, Brandon, wrap his strong hands around my calves and ankles, and then the wind encompassed me, stinging my cheeks on my way up through the air. My feet instinctively planted onto his shoulders and my muscles worked to keep myself balanced. The adrenaline kicked in, giving me that rush, the one that made it seem as if my blood sparkled within me and my heart danced in symphony to the head thrashing of eighties hair bands. The only reason I was on the squad was to be a flyer. It was like I had a death wish, sailing through the air like that, propelling my body in a way most sane people wouldn't dare. Plus, I got to satisfy both my physical need to be hurled through space and my dad's need for me to do it in a structured environment while furthering my college career.

Just as I got my balance atop Brandon's shoulders, I noticed the crows. The cheer pounding out into the air caught in my throat and died on my lips. Those bloated black birds were littered all over the field like a bad omen—just sitting there, not doing anything but staring. Or maybe they were watching. I didn't know why I focused on the birds in that moment, but they had always creeped me out. Maybe because they tended to hang out in my backyard like they were waiting to pick someone off.

Turning my focus back to the stands, I flung my arms up in the air in time with the whoosh of the other girls' hands clapping together, feeling the beat of the cheer rhythm sound inside me once more. I wasn't looking at anything in particular; I was concentrating on balance. And that's when I saw him, my eyes sticking on him as if by gravitational force.

He had caramel brown skin and his silky black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. But it was his intense dark eyes that made me pause, because there was no way I could look away. He was sitting amidst the crowded stands, but he was the only person I saw. And I was pretty sure I was the only person he saw, because his gaze was locked on me from where he was leisurely sprawled on the bleachers. A secret whirled in the depths of his eyes, and even from my airborne, muscle-locked position across the field, I could see it. And it was a secret about me. How I knew, I wasn't sure, but that boy knew me. I was supposed to be jumping, flipping through the air into my base's arms, but I blinked instead, and with the connection disturbed, I felt my leg slip. I tried to recover, my arms wind-milling around me, the gasps of the audience sounding in my ears as a backdrop to my certain demise. Then there was just air around me, and the rushing of the world coming to take me back.

My eyes clenched shut, but arms swooped around me, partially cushioning my head and body from the hard ground. Despite the save, my foot slammed down, a searing pain ripped through my ankle, and I heard a sickening pop. The acidic swirl of bile hit my throat and filled my mouth as I attempted not to wretch, but I managed to swallow it back down, glancing up at Brandon and nodding a jerky thanks. I curled over my ankle, trying not to cry in front of the whole university. I didn't want to give anyone fodder for harassment, especially since Hailey, the team captain, deeply resented my presence on the team. I guess the fact that I was dating her ex-boyfriend didn't help. *Must. Not. Cry ...* I sucked in a deep breath and exhaled as the team crowded around me.

"Oh god, Blake, are you okay?"

I looked up to see my best friend Shelby's pale green eyes, outlined heavily with eyeliner, staring at me. Her Kool-Aid bright orange hair was tucked under a beret-style hat, and her pretty face scrunched in

concern. I smiled wanly, realizing she must have hurtled down the stands the moment she'd seen me go down. Despite her natural athletic prowess, she'd refrained from joining any school sports. Her excuse had always been that she refused to play into the monarchy that was high school. But now we were in college, and she still wouldn't join in the school spirit, acerbic and defiant despite the change of scenery. Basically, she just liked being that cool, alternative chick. It was an image she pretended not to care about.

Sipping from the chilly, fresh air, I managed a nod. "But I think it might be broken or something." I heard how weak my voice sounded, and I cringed.

"Are you sure? It doesn't look that bad to me," Hailey's sugary sweet voice said from above me. I blinked, looking up at her, unsurprised that she would try to downplay my pain.

"Give her some room!" Coach Jill parted the cheerleaders with a stern look and a sharp tone, her petite frame belying the steel rod in her back. Her heart-shaped face and aquamarine eyes made their way to my level. "Blake, what do you feel?"

"Umm, it feels like pain," I managed to say.

Grinning as if I'd told a joke, she looked down at my ankle, which was already turning black and blue. "It looks like a sprain, Blake. Who can take you to the hospital?"

"I'll take her." Hailey's smile was even sweeter than her voice.

"Um, no, you won't." Shelby elbowed her ungracefully out of the way. "I've got it, Coach."

Coach Jill nodded, ignoring Hailey. Coach Jill was the other reason I had joined the team. She was laid back but tough, and she had begged me to join, having seen my acrobatic abilities and fearless nature when I'd competed as a cheerleader in high school. Looping one of my arms around her neck, she gestured for Shelby to get my other side. "Here, I'll help you get her to the car."

* * *

Later, when I was reclining on the couch at home with my dad, my mildly fractured ankle in a brace, I remembered the boy. He'd been good looking, definitely, but it wasn't his good looks that had made

me fall like that. It was something in his eyes, no ... something I sensed. I had felt an instant kinship with him, like we were cut of the same cloth, similar souls.

I was trying to muddle through my thoughts when my dad entered the room carrying a glass of ginger ale and saltines.

"Here, B, I brought you the remedy for everything." He grinned and set the tray down on the coffee table in front of me.

"Dad, I'm not sick." But I smiled, eyeing the fizzy bubbling soda. My dad was totally a Mr. Mom, and I loved him for it, especially since I didn't remember my mother.

He wrinkled up his face in a grin and sat next to me on the couch, patting my good leg. "I know this sounds strange, but I hate that you're a cheerleader, seems too risky."

I laughed. "And to think, Dad, when I told you I was going to try out back in high school, you were so excited I was actually participating in an extracurricular activity."

"Well, it would have been fine if you hadn't insisted on being one of those fly girls."

"Flyer, Dad ..."

He chuckled and patted my arm. "Same thing." I shrugged and sipped my ginger ale through the straw my dad had so nicely included.

"I know you're probably upset you won't be 'flying' for the rest of the season, but I'm not," my dad said.

"Well, I guess I'll have to put my life at risk in some other way," I grinned, enjoying his worry ... My smile eased into a straight line as I realized I was making my father nervous on purpose and enjoying it. What was wrong with me today? I stuffed a saltine in my mouth anxiously at the thought.

Thankfully, he merely brushed off my response with a chuckle and a kiss to my forehead. "My daughter, the comedian."

I swallowed the salty cracker down and tilted my head at him. "You were laughing," I pointed out. My dad just rolled his eyes and headed toward the kitchen.

"I'm making dinner, lasagna?"

"Sounds good, I'm waiting for Geoff."

Geoff and I had gone to high school together, although he had been a year ahead of me and was now a sophomore at Spec U, while

I was a freshman. We'd always been friends, but last year something had changed, and when he'd asked me out, I'd surprised myself by saying yes. We'd been together ever since.

The doorbell rang, startling me from my thoughts.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, yeah," he said, heading toward the door and opening it.

"Hey, Geoff." My father grinned at my boyfriend as he swung the door open, jerking his head to where I lounged on the sofa with a saltine crammed in my mouth and crumbs littering my sweatshirt. "Lover girl awaits."

Thankfully, Geoff wasn't fazed by crazy dads, which was one of the things I loved about him. He strolled into the room with a rock band swagger, his dirty blond hair spiked out from his head. His tall broad frame wore jeans and a Nirvana T-shirt better than any real rock star I'd ever seen.

Instead of sweeping me with his typical nonchalant grin, deep lines gathered at the corners of his mouth, his normally sunny blue gaze storm-cast. "Are you okay, Blake?" he asked. He too was averse to my risky behaviors. While my friends wanted to party, I wanted speed and wind on my face. I wanted to dance with life and death and see who emerged the victor. Shelby called me an adrenaline junkie, and maybe I was. But every time I was tossed through the breezes, every time I flew down the side of a mountain on a snowboard, I felt as if I was searching for a piece of myself I had yet to find. I'm not saying I had to "find myself." But I wanted to know the secret that the boy in the stands was keeping. Because I was sure it was about me.

I shook my head and grinned at my hot boyfriend. "I'd be better if the warden in the kitchen would give me some stronger drugs. He keeps insisting all I need is Advil. I swear it's just evil," I said, shooing all of the Shelby-like thoughts of secrets and cosmic connections from my painkiller-fogged brain. Who was I kidding? That boy knew as many secrets as I did, which was none.

Throwing his head back, Geoff laughed. I loved when he did that. He was handsomest when he laughed. He just had one of those laughs that was contagious. I felt my cheeks heat as I stared at his mouth, barely able to stop myself from grabbing him and pressing my lips to his, which were smooth with the telltale signs of a recent

ChapStick application. The presence of my loud, clattering father in the next room was reason enough for restraint. But I could dare a kiss.

"Kiss me," I whispered. Despite what I'd told him, the drugs from the hospital still hadn't worn off and I was feeling a little loopy. My inhibitions didn't seem quite so present, and I had to keep myself from giggling at random thoughts that popped in my head.

He turned his head toward the kitchen and then looked down at me. I could only imagine how I looked—tufts of my usually straight black hair stuck out of my sloppy mess of a ponytail, and my pale skin was whiter than usual. But his lazy grin said he didn't mind at all that I looked like death, or that my father was only a few feet away, separated by a thin wall and an open doorway.

"How can I refuse?" he whispered back, his lips already closing in on mine. When he finally found my mouth, I relished the taste of him on my tongue, the spicy trace of clove cigarettes lingering on his breath and clothes. I relished all of him, and I was so lost in the moment, I heard myself cry out in protest when he broke the kiss.

"As much as I love making out with you, Blake, your dad is about to come in here and check on us any minute."

Sighing, I sat back, but I was still feeling the heat clinging to my cheeks when my dad sauntered in casually only moments later.

"You hungry, Geoff? I made lasagna, Blake's favorite."

He looked up from staring deeply into my eyes with his blue ones and grinned. "I could eat," he announced. It wasn't news to anyone that the 6'2", nineteen-year-old boy in the room was hungry.

Later, when my dad went to bed, Geoff and I cuddled in close on the couch to watch a movie. With my foot elevated on pillows on the coffee table, I laid my head on his chest, his warm arm automatically curling around me. After a long day, the comfort of his embrace made it seem as if my eyelids were weighted, and I found myself beginning to doze off. I'd fought the effects of the painkillers, but I was no match for them or the security and love I felt within Geoff's arms.

I was half asleep when the image of the boy from earlier that day drifted across my thoughts, and I remembered how he'd been staring at me right before I fell. I shivered again, feeling a deep sense of familiarity overwhelm me. Why had he been staring at me? I was certain I'd never seen him before, but I couldn't quite push down a nagging desire to see him again.

CHAPTER TWO

"**COME ON!**" **SHELBY BEGGED**, pulling her orange hair into a bun on top of her head and gesturing to the magic shop, which bore a sign touting guaranteed dragon's blood essential oil and all the herbs and incense anyone could want. I sighed. She was always so into the New Age crap.

One hand on her hip, she wore a cropped sweater and a flouncy skirt. Looking at me over the top of her aviators, she was catalog chic despite her sugar-coated dye job and the overly dramatic make-up. She was an old-school throwback, and she insisted on dyeing her hair with Kool-Aid packets, changing the color so often I rarely remembered that her true color was light blond.

"What?" I asked. "Are you going to join the ranks of so many hopeful, impressionable girls who've come before you and buy into this stuff? We're in college now, that's so passé," I laughed, knowing full well that she'd be horrified at the suggestion that she would ever do anything to be trendy except dress stylishly. She couldn't get enough clothes.

But she didn't take my bait and instead grabbed one of my crutches and tried moving it to the door, causing me to stumble forward in order to hang on to it.

"Come on, gimpy, being interested in the occult has nothing to do with being trendy. We're young and thus must indulge in our innate curiosity of all things related to nature, spirituality, life, and death," she said philosophically. "Besides, I'm taking a class right now about witchcraft. It's more history and symbolism and stuff, but there's a contemporary Wiccan section in this store, and I want to check out what they've got for the paper I'm writing," she added,

batting her lashes over her glasses at me before sliding them back into place and revealing the light spattering of freckles on her tanned nose.

She was a sun-kissed girl all over, while I was forever ghostly pale with skin that was so blindingly fair that I never went anywhere without tons of sunscreen on. Even at the end of August, I was still as white as I would have been mid-winter, my dark black hair making the contrast all the more noticeable.

"Well, I suppose I can't argue with that logic," I relented and allowed her to grab my backpack as I hobbled after her into the shop. The moment we entered, my senses were assaulted by the smoky musk drifting up in a thin plume from a burning stick of incense.

"Blessed be," a woman said from behind the desk. I had been expecting someone hippy-ish, but the woman had short, spiked black hair, piercings all the way up her ears, and tattoo sleeves on both forearms. She looked more like a punk motorcycle mama than a New-Ager. She held a cigarette and blew out a waft of smoke, tapping the ashes into an ashtray with her pointer finger and smiling warmly. I pegged her to be in her mid-forties and noticed a coffee cup nearby stained with red lipstick.

"Hi," Shelby said brightly, her heavily shadowed green eyes darting to the jewelry on display. I could see she was already eyeing a large pair of thickly engraved silver hoops, each with a circlet attached bearing a dangling black stone.

"Hi," I nodded, turning to a shelf with crystal balls and dream diaries, feigning interest.

"You girls looking for anything specific? Any spells I can help you with?" I could tell she was used to humoring girls our age.

I laughed and shook my head. "No thanks, my friend just wanted to come take a look." I looked up and smiled politely.

The woman smiled and stamped out her cigarette. "Well, I'm Rae. If you girls need anything just holler." She smiled at me again, looking into my eyes. "You know, you have startlingly blue eyes. They're very eerie," she said. Unsure how to take her matter-of-fact comment, I nodded.

"Thanks ..."

She must have sensed the question in my voice because she laughed, a deep throaty sound. "They're beautiful, hon. Almost otherworldly, which is cool in my book."

I nodded and suddenly decided I liked this motorcycle mama witch. "Thanks," I said again, more sincerely this time. I'd often been told that my blue eyes were one of my best features, but I'd also been told they were creepy.

"Lemme know if you need anything, I'll be right back." Rae rose from her chair behind the counter, her skinny, tattooed, wifebeater-and-leather-pants-clad form disappearing behind a curtain.

I watched her go and then sauntered over to take a look at the jewelry, examining a large turquoise pendant that caught my eye.

Shelby, who had quietly been perusing the merchandise, looked at me sharply with a glint in her eyes. "She does palm readings," she said quickly, a gushy ring bringing her voice to a high pitch as she gestured to a sign nearby.

Arching my brow at her, an ability I had perfected from long hours practicing in front of a mirror, I shook my head. "What?"

"Palm readings. It could be fun!"

"I don't know ... It's usually expensive and really a bunch of crap."

"Oh, come on, I'll pay for you—it can be your birthday present!"

"I don't want to be told I'm going to meet a tall, dark, handsome stranger for my birthday when I've already got my tall and rock-star-hot boyfriend," I argued. "Why don't you get it done; I'll watch."

"Because it's not as much fun if you don't do it too," she whined, clasping her hands together under her chin and pulling out the dramatics. "Also, maybe she'll tell you something about Geoff, like whether he's your true love!"

I sighed, more at myself than her, so easily tempted by thoughts of Geoff and the tiny little voice inside of me asking if perhaps there wasn't something to cosmic connections and palm reading. The boy from the bleachers popped in my mind for a split second, but I shook the thought away.

"Well, let's make sure it's not like fifty bucks first," I partially assented and was rewarded with Shelby's killer smile. Her father was an orthodontist and she had the whitest, straightest teeth of anyone I knew. She'd had braces for like six years and unlike any other friend I'd had, she strictly wore her retainer every night. For such a wannabe rebel, I always found it funny she was so conscientious about her oral hygiene.

Rae had come back into the room and overheard us. She smiled kind of strangely and glanced at the two of us, her gaze lingering on me. "You two girls interested in readings?"

"Well, how much is it?" I asked.

"Hmm, well, I thought I heard your friend say your birthday was coming up?"

I shrugged. "Well, in like a week."

"Doesn't matter, I'll do you for free, it'll be my pleasure."

"Really? What about me?" Shelby asked quickly, shooting me a grin.

"I'll throw you in for half price at fifteen bucks."

"Cool." Shelby winked at me as if to say *look at our good fortune*, but I wasn't convinced. Rae had been staring me down pretty hardcore and seemed to have a creepy interest in me. I didn't think I was just imagining it either. There was something off here.

We followed her through the hanging sparkly curtain into the low-lit back room. The flickering glow of candles cast shadows on the walls, and a table sat covered by a blanket with pictures of moons and stars embroidered into it.

"Sit, stand—do whatever suits you girls," she said in her rough, scratchy smoker's voice, flicking a tatted arm. We both decided to sit, not knowing what to expect.

She followed suit, but sat opposite us and pulled out a drawstring velvet bag, which she opened to reveal an array of crystals. "For good energy," she explained.

"Who's first?" Shelby asked, her anticipation palpable in the candle-scented room.

Rae spread her faded red-lipped mouth into a smile and nodded at her. "You."

Shelby grinned, took in a deep breath, and struck a melodramatic air. "Tell me my future."

I snickered, which bought me a glare from Shelby before she once again got on with her dramatics by adopting a pained look.

"Give me your palm, girl." Shelby handed it over almost reluctantly, although I could easily read the eager glow in her peridot eyes. "Hmmm." Rae traced lines with her index finger, as if exploring a determined route on a map.

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