

avery williams

the
alchemy
of
forever

an
INCARNATION
novel

I pick up a stack of photos of Kailey and her friends. Kailey's eyes stare out at me, shining with life.

I regard my new body in the mirror. This is the first time in centuries I've been a sixteen-year-old girl.

There's no tangible difference between the face in the mirror and the face in the photos, nothing I could point out to prove that everything has changed. And yet I don't think I look like that smiling girl in the pictures.

"What do I do now?" I ask the stranger in the mirror. "Do I keep being you?"

Her first love made her immortal. . . .

Her second might get her killed.

After spending six hundred years on Earth, Seraphina Ames has seen it all. Eternal life provides her with the world's riches, but at a very high price: innocent lives. Centuries ago her boyfriend, Cyrus, discovered a method of alchemy that allows them to take the bodies of other humans by jumping from one vessel to the next, ending the human's life in the process. No longer able to bear the guilt of what she's done, Sera escapes from Cyrus and vows to never kill again.

Then sixteen-year-old Kailey Morgan gets into a horrific car accident right in front of her, and Sera accidentally takes over her body while trying to save her. For the first time, Sera finds herself enjoying the life of the person she's inhabiting—and falling for the human boy who lives next door. But Cyrus will stop at nothing until she's his again, and every moment she stays, she's putting herself and the people she's grown to care for in great danger. Will Sera have to give up the one thing that's eluded her for centuries: true love?

Born the day after Halloween in Los Angeles, *avery williams* has since lived in five different states due to her father's job as a radio disc jockey (though she sometimes claims her parents were in the circus). Now she makes her home in Oakland, California, with her husband and two dastardly kittens. She enjoys riding her bicycle around town and working on her hundred-year-old house. She is also a poet.



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He ne'er is crown'd

With immortality, who fears to follow

Where airy voices lead.

—John Keats

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prologue

london, 1349

I feel as though I've been waiting for the masquerade ball for my entire life. At fourteen, I am eligible for marriage and finally old enough to attend. The torchlight flickers on the sandstone facade of Lord Suffield's palace on the Thames, and the roses woven into my hair are heady and sweet. I remember to push my mask up over my face before I walk through the great arched doorway.

I catch sight of myself in a mirror.

I wear a high-waisted white gown—punctuated with golden threads on the seams—that flows over my body like water. The sleeves are fitted at the tops of my arms and flare out at my elbows like wings. The mask is golden and shaped like a butterfly, dotted with crystals and glass beads. It points back from my face toward the silver net that holds my hair in a thick bun at the crown of my head.

I am momentarily disoriented by my mask, not sure if the reflection I see is really me. I tentatively touch my hand to my cheek, and the mirror-girl follows.

Satisfied, I turn around and follow my parents and the sound of the music—lyres and lutes, tambourines and drums—until we arrive in the ballroom. I stand there for a moment, watching the masked dancers: women in silk and velvet gowns that brush the floor as they twirl in a circle, men forming a larger circle around them, the sinuous glow of the candelabras glinting off their headpieces. Although I have spent my entire life in London, I don't recognize anyone.

I feel a presence at my side and turn to look. A young man, all in black, with a red mask and white-blond hair, is standing next to me. He offers me a goblet of pomegranate wine, and I take a sip, feeling the burning sweetness in my throat. "You should dance," he tells me.

"But I don't recognize anyone," I answer, wondering if I know him.

"That's the point," he replies, his blue eyes vivid beneath the scarlet mask. "The disguises are meant to offer freedom, to let us do things we wouldn't normally do, to let us be someone entirely different for one night."

I study him for a moment. "Do we know each other?"

He tilts his head back and laughs. "I don't think so. I would remember you, I'm certain. But then again, maybe we do. We'll never know." He offers me his arm and leads me toward the dancers.

We are partners only briefly, soon separated as we move down the line in formation. But I glance up at him more than once, and each time he is looking at me, following me around the room with those vivid blue eyes. I am grateful that my face is covered, as I feel my usual blush heating up my cheeks. But when the song is over, he is gone.

I wander alone through the crowd, feeling hot and dizzy. The wine, the dancing, the press of people—it's all too much. I follow torches down a stone-walled hallway through a courtyard, then outside to the garden where a magician is entertaining a group of people. I watch, amazed, as he produces a dove from the empty air and then releases the bird above his head.

"He's a charlatan," says a voice behind me. I whirl around to see the man with the scarlet mask.

"It's amazing!" I exclaim. "He conjured a bird."

"He did no such thing. He merely tricked you. But"—he holds out his hand—"if you will join me, I will show you something truly amazing."

I am intrigued. I take his hand and let him lead me away from the crowd. When we reach the palace gates I hesitate.

"I should not leave. My parents will worry."

"It is just here, on the street," he promises, and I reluctantly follow him around a corner toward a garden of rosebushes just opposite from the Thames. I can smell their sweet blooms mingling with the torch smoke. We stop next to a stone bench, and he lets go of my hand.

"May I?" he asks.

I am not sure what he is going to do, but I nod my assent. He reaches for my hair, gently pulling out one of the roses and cradling it in his palm. It is still deep red, but wilted, the edges of the petals already drying out.

"People are always looking for magic, when the natural world holds true miracles," he says, pulling a small glass vial from his pocket. "This flower is dead. No offense meant, my lady." He smiles. "But the roses here in the garden are still very much alive."

He opens the vial and lets a few drops of liquid fall onto the base of the dead rose's stem, then holds it up to a thorny branch of the living rosebush. After a few seconds he takes his hand away, and I gasp.

The red rose I had once worn in my hair is in full bloom, the velvety surface of its petals no longer dried or wilted.

"Magic?" I whisper.

"Science," he replies.

I am astounded, and delighted. "I don't care what you call it," I say. "It's still magic to me."

"Will you take off your mask?" he asks, looking deep into my eyes. "I must know who you are."

"Only if you remove yours as well."

He nods, and I untie the ribbons that hold the butterfly mask to my face, and pull it aside. He does the same with his scarlet mask, the same color as my rose.

We look at each other and let out small gasps of surprise.

"Seraphina," he says breathlessly.

"Cyrus," I say wonderingly. Cyrus is the apothecary's son, and I've stolen more than a few glances at him when he and his father come to the house to visit. He is handsome with his white-blond hair, solid cheekbones, and vivid eyes. When I dream of my marriage, I often imagine Cyrus as my husband.

"You are even more beautiful than I remember," he says, and it is clear that he has thought of me, too. "And so I give you a promise. I will come to your home to speak with your father. And next time I will bring you something more than flowers."

There is no holding it back; I blush a deep crimson. I am overwhelmed, dazed, dazzled. The roses' heady scent fills my senses and I close my eyes. Is this my destiny?

We hardly notice when the two figures appear from the shadows and approach us: a man and a woman wearing filthy clothes, their faces half covered with cloths to conceal their mouths. The swords strapped around their waists, however, look well made and sharp.

"Sir!" spits the man, addressing Cyrus. "Pass me your purse."

I stiffen with fright, and Cyrus shields me with his body. "Be gone," he commands. "I have nothing for you."

The man draws his sword. "Your lady, then."

I am not carrying any money either. But I do have a jeweled crucifix that I always wear around my neck, and I hurriedly unfasten it to hand it to the man.

He grabs it roughly, nearly breaking the chain. "Is that it?" He grunts, turns his head, and spits on the ground.

"It is all I have," I tell him in a tremulous voice.

Before I can move he has me pinned under his arm. His teeth are rotten, and I can smell alcohol on his

breath.

"Get away from her!" Cyrus screams, springing to action. In one swift movement he grabs the woman's sword, kicks the man with his boot, and sinks the sword into his belly. His blood, sickeningly warm, splashes onto the front of my gown. We watch his body slump to the stone.

Cyrus locks his eyes with mine, and I see his expression change, his eyes grow round, terrified. And then, for the second time in an evening, my world changes forever.

To say that the woman's small dagger pierces my back sounds too delicate, as if she is preparing my earlobes for jewelry. It is an eruption of pain. I feel the knife go in, feel it scrape against bone, feel a hot gush of blood starts pouring down my back, pumping in unison with my alarmed heartbeat.

Cyrus knocks the woman over. She falls hard, her head cracking against the stone. She does not get up.

I sink to my knees, looking up at the moon shining brightly, as if nothing horrible has just happened.

I feel Cyrus's arms encircle me, feel his breath as he leans close, putting pressure on the wound, see my blood running over his white fingers, turning them completely scarlet.

In a haze, I see him rip open his tunic and pull out a small vial. The world grows dim as I close my eyes.

"I will save you, Sera. Don't leave me!" He pours a drop of liquid from the vial onto his finger and holds it to my lips.

As it touches my tongue, I cry out in pain. "What is this poison?" I gasp.

"It is an elixir," he explains hurriedly. "My father and I created it during the Black Death. He fell ill, and we used this to save him. The body you know—he was not born into it."

I feel a tug as something in my throat burns. "I am on fire!"

"It's the silver cord that binds your soul to your body," he says urgently, "and this potion is unraveling it. You'll soon be free."

I begin to feel weightless, like I could drift toward the sky, like I could join the planets in their joyful arcs.

"Sera. Don't go." I hear Cyrus's voice, but it sounds so unimportant. I want to explain to him where I am going: to the stars. He could join me.

When he holds the filthy woman up to me, I rouse myself from my thoughts. He wants me to kiss her. What a ridiculous, revolting idea. Isn't she dead? Aren't I dead?

No, I realize slowly, coming back to Earth. She is alive; she merely lost consciousness when she fell. I don't know why, but I obey Cyrus. I kiss her until I taste something sweet. Then suddenly it feels as though the world has exploded. Thunder cracks, and it sounds as though an entire fleet of ships is firing its cannons. I shift, careening through space and time, and then all is still. Miraculously, the pain in my back is gone.

"Sera. Open your eyes," Cyrus commands.

I obey, with great effort. The view is all wrong. I can see my body, laying on the stones, so pale and cold, blood soaking my gown.

I am a ghost, I think wildly. It is the only explanation. Except that when I reach out, my hand makes contact with my own cheek. But it is not *my* hand that I reach out with—it is dirty, with ragged nails. Somehow *I* am now the filthy female thief.

I jump to my feet, suddenly strong. "I don't understand."

Cyrus stands in front of me. "Sera, you're alive. And if I am correct, you'll never have to die."

"But my body . . ."

Cyrus hesitates a moment, thinking. Then he scoops it up and drops it in the Thames. It lands with a loud splash. "It's the only one you'll ever leave behind. Your new body is different, no longer human or attached to your soul. When you are done with it, it will break into dust."

Cyrus's words wash over me, but I cannot comprehend what he is saying.

Just then I hear my mother's panicked voice cut through the silence of the street.

“Seraphina Ames! Sera, where are you?”

Cyrus turns panicked. He grabs my hand, pulling me away from the sound. “Seraphina, we must go.”

Not knowing what else to do, I run after him.

“Good-bye,” I whisper to my mother, but she doesn’t hear. She will never see her daughter again.

san francisco, present day

The late autumn day is oddly hot for San Francisco. The morning fog has lifted and the sun's rays reach my pale skin, but do not warm me. For the past year I've stayed bone white, no matter how much time I spend under the sun, and I'm freezing, all the time. It is always this way when death is near. I've put this body through hell and it's finally catching up with me.

I wince as I lean back on one of the steel chaise longues scattered around the pool on the roof of my apartment building, a brash glass tower, all angles and blue tints, jutting upward over the SOMA neighborhood. The sunlight glints off the surface of the pool; it's almost too bright for me, even behind my large sunglasses. I blink, watching a hummingbird make his way to the roof deck, zigzagging madly between the ruby-colored morning glory blossoms spilling out from galvanized planter boxes I had bought at the local flea market. I am always amazed when birds appear here, twenty stories up in the middle of the city. How do they know there were flowers? Was it instinct that drove him upward, or blind luck?

When I try to fly away, will I be as lucky and find what I am looking for?

Living like this—the persistent cold, the pain radiating through my joints at a constant interval, the shortness of breath accompanying my every movement—has made my choice for me. For once my body is as weary as my soul. I've dragged it all over the globe for six hundred years—it's time to let go of this life and figure out what comes next. I would be lying if I said I wasn't terrified, but a thrill of excitement runs up my spine every time I think about it. It's been so long since I've ventured into the unknown.

"I know that look. What are you thinking about?" Charlotte, my best friend, asks as she comes through the glass door to the deck. She carries a tray of iced tea, moisture already beading like wobbly diamonds on the outside of the glasses. When I take one, the little droplets fall to the ground and immediately turn to steam.

I push my sunglasses up into my dark hair and smile at Charlotte. "Nothing," I lie. "Just enjoying the sun."

I can tell no one of my plan to die, not even Charlotte. Cyrus would never let me leave. Not without a fight and one that I would surely lose. More than anything I want to be free of the man who controls me with his fists, his words, and his iron will—the man who made me what I am.

Charlotte narrows her hazel eyes at me, but says nothing. After two centuries of friendship, I can't guess anything by her, but I also know she won't pry. I cherish her understanding and acceptance; it is what I'll miss most when I leave. That and the sunshine, but I can't afford to think about what I'm leaving behind if my plan is going to work.

Moving around the deck, Charlotte offers drinks to our other friends. Jared pulls out a flask to spice up his drink, looking every bit the pirate he was when I first met him in 1660, a row of studs and hoops trailing up his forehead like a rocky coastline. Amelia declines, her white-blond hair gleaming in the sunlight and her deep tan a stark contrast to my milky skin.

When Charlotte approaches Sébastien, his long dread-locks pulled back in a low ponytail, a shy smile flickers across her face. He leans on the orange metal railing that encircles the deck. I notice his fingers grazing hers as he takes his tea, making her shake her head, slightly embarrassed, her copper curls falling forward over her face.

I have always loved her red hair, which is not so different from the hair she was born with. All of us have

had a similar experience: When Cyrus made us Incarnates, we went through periods of trying out different kinds of bodies. Old, young, male, female. But we all found the experience too disorienting, and eventually settled in forms that reminded us of our former selves. I've been a different incarnation of myself—brown eyes, long brown hair—for centuries.

The glass doors open once more, and Cyrus, our leader, joins us on the deck. He's wearing a well-tailored black shirt that sets off his platinum hair and tall, lean frame. Around his neck is the vial of elixir he used to make us Incarnates. I can't say he's not beautiful, though the magic I once felt when looking at him has long since dissipated.

He sits next to me, regarding me with his icy blue eyes and running his hands through my hair possessively. I shiver but don't pull away. "I want to discuss Sera's party," he tells us. Yes, the party in my honor. Although it would be more apt to call it an execution.

I sit up, my muscles straining from the effort, and am momentarily dizzy. When my vision clears, I see the hummingbird fluttering around a cluster of lilies, his wings a red blur.

"It's going to be at Emerald City," he announces, and Amelia's eyes brighten. Emerald City is the most exclusive nightclub in San Francisco. People more important and more beautiful than Cyrus have been turned away at the door.

Jared lets out a low whistle and pulls his chair closer to Cyrus, the metal screeching against the concrete deck. "Pulling out all the stops, eh?"

Amelia chuckles, arching her back toward the sun. "It's not that often that Saint Sera deigns to take a new body."

I detect an undercurrent of nastiness, but I don't let it get to me. She's right. I've been putting off this moment for as long as I could. We get about ten years in a body, even if the body we take is already sick, broken, run down by years of abuse. When we transfer our spirits, the body regenerates. But the energy expended in healing the body is also its doom, leading to organ failure five or ten years down the road. Unlike my friends, I try to stay in a body for as long as possible rather than switching into a new one as casually as one might try on a dress. Even Charlotte has no qualms about killing. *It's the only way for us to stay alive*, she says. *Why waste this gift?*

"My little darling," Cyrus murmurs affectionately, pulling me into his lap. I try not to cringe at his touch. "I'm going to miss this body when it's gone. Only one more week. But don't worry, we'll find you another just as beautiful." Amelia looks away, scowling.

He does love me, I've never doubted that. I'm his touchstone, his only link to his real past, to the body in which he was born. He's told me as much, crushing me in embraces that leave bruises the following day. *Seraphina, I would die without you.*

What will he do when I'm gone?

Jared and Sébastien will be fine, as long as they continue to follow orders. Amelia will be happier without me—she's always had a crush on Cyrus. I worry about Charlotte, though. Cyrus has never liked her.

I met Charlotte in New York in the early 1800s. I bought flowers from her at the market in Five Points, and, much to Cyrus's dismay, struck up a friendship with her. I took her shopping for dresses she could never afford on her own, and she regaled me with stories about her seven brothers. When she did not show up at her stand one morning, I sought her out at her home and found her and her younger brother Jack in the throes of scarlet fever.

I begged Cyrus to let me save her, and he finally said yes to shut me up. I don't think he really considered the consequences—that I would finally have an ally, someone who knew my true self. I turned her into a killer so I could have a friend, and I will regret that for eternity.

The hummingbird approaches the railing, then dips under it, taking off into the sky. I catch Amelia

watching it from her perch two seats down. She was an aerialist when Cyrus turned her and used to “fly” for living.

Cyrus turns his attention to the group. “Amelia, you’re in charge of the guest list. Under my close supervision, of course.” She beams. “I want plenty of options for Seraphina.”

Plenty of options for himself, he means. He would pick for me—he always did. He has a type: willow build, long dark hair, Mediterranean skin. She would be a failed model who had turned to drugs or an aspiring poet with a streak of madness who would never live to see age thirty. I stopped caring long ago what my body looks like; I only care that my new host either doesn’t want to be alive or doesn’t deserve to be.

I do have one request. “Amelia,” I say, “please don’t invite anyone too young.”

She smirks at me, but it doesn’t feel cruel. Just matter of fact. “Don’t worry, you can go straight to confession afterward.”

“Jared,” Cyrus continues, “you’re in charge of security. I don’t want the club staff on this—we need a crew who will be discreet.”

“Of course, Cy.” Jared nods, pushing his black hair off his tattooed neck.

The mention of security sends a jolt of nervous adrenaline through my veins. Jared won’t mess around. He knows this is more than a dance party. Someone is going to die.

I’m trying to control my breathing, which is coming in quick, shallow gasps. I glance down, willing myself to stop fidgeting with the heavy ring on my left hand. Its antique garnet catches the sunlight like a glass of red wine—or blood.

I asked Cyrus to buy it for me a couple of weeks ago, on a fog-swathed day in Hayes Valley. “It’s Victorian antique,” the saleswoman had remarked. I silently thanked the other customer who drew her attention just then, keeping her from saying more. Because it was more than just a Victorian bauble. It was a poison ring, with a hidden compartment under the bloodred stone. Not much room, just enough for the tiniest pinch of powder or a single pill. It would be enough.

Sébastien, who has been silent until now, shoots me a concerned glance. “You okay? You seem tired.” Next to me, I feel Cyrus stiffen.

“She’s fine,” he says coldly. “Aren’t you?” I can feel the rage burning under his skin. He hates it when anyone else thinks they know how I feel, as though he’s the only one allowed that ability.

I smile weakly. “I’m just . . . excited.”

Cyrus sighs heavily and stands up, the sun shining around his platinum hair like a halo. “I think I’m done for the day. We’ll continue this later. Sébastien, I’ll need you to work on the DJ lineup.”

Sébastien flashes one of his rare smiles, white teeth brilliant against his brown skin. Music is one of the one things he cares about. Music and Charlotte. When I’m gone, I hope he will comfort her—and protect her. Because if Cyrus suspects she had any involvement in my escape . . . well, he’s killed for much less.

"I think I want coffee. Or maybe pistachio. Or . . . I don't know, green tea."

Charlotte ties her curls in a loose bun on the top of her head. "You can get all of them. An added bonus switching bodies tomorrow—no need to eat healthy."

"True," I say. "In that case, I guess I should get hot fudge, too."

The night before my party is moonlit and clear, warm enough to wear only a light jacket. I link my arm through Charlotte's and skip as much as my aching muscles allow, pulling her toward Michael's, my favorite ice-cream parlor in all of San Francisco—perhaps in all the world.

Although ice cream wasn't around when I was little, my mother and I used to flavor our cream with fruit and herbs from the garden. We'd make it when my father was away, staying up late and eating it right in the kitchen in our nightclothes. A century later, after I'd complained of missing my mother, Cyrus had fed me my first bite of real ice cream and smirked triumphantly at my delight in it. "See? Why ever long for something from the past when the future brings things that are so much better?" he'd asked.

"I still can't believe Cyrus let you out of his sight the night before your switch," Charlotte says as we turn the corner and walk toward Michael's. I strain my eyes to see the daily specials written in neon on the window—hazelnut, raspberry swirl, and mint gelato.

"Yes, well, he has to learn to live without me sometime," I say lightly. *Starting tomorrow*, I add silently.

He didn't want me to go out tonight—"There's still so much planning for the party, Sera," he'd said—but he relented after much begging on my part. He's never quite been able to resist when I stick out my lower lip like Juvenile, I know, but it does the trick and I needed one last girl's night with my best friend.

We walk through the doors of Michael's, and a cold, sweet smell instantly envelops me. Michael's looks like it was scooped up in a tornado in the Midwest and plopped down in the middle of San Francisco. Painted wooden cutouts of chickens, cows, and corn line the wall, and a row of rusty tin milk pails hang from the ceiling. We are the only people in the shop other than the girl behind the counter, who has hair the same color as the Blue Moon sorbet, and two little piercings that sticking out of her bottom lip like fangs. She takes a break from whispering into her cell phone to serve us our cones, then instantly goes back to gossiping.

Charlotte and I sit in our usual spot, two stools facing the front window, so we can watch people walk by.

"Gerald, 1913," she says without preamble, pointing to a man in his midforties with a wobbly chin and a healthy outcropping of ear hair. This is the game we always play. Although as far as we know we are the only Incarnates in the world, we always wonder if others have found a different route to immortal life, perhaps by a philosopher's stone that allows them to stay in their original bodies. We watch people on the streets and on TV, deciding who they could be from our past.

I frown. "No, Gerald had nose hair, not ear hair."

"Oh, right," Charlotte says with a snort, then takes a bite of her mocha-chip ice cream.

As it's a Friday night, we watch a steady stream of beanie-wearing teenagers and singles rushing to date but no one else looks familiar. These bodies are all new.

After a few minutes I voice the question that's been haunting me ever since I made my decision to die. "Do you believe in true reincarnation?"

Charlotte turns her hazel eyes toward me. "What do you mean?"

"What do you think happens to people's souls when they die? Do they just evaporate, or are they reborn into new bodies with no memories of their past lives? And what about our souls? We've been around so long

would ours even know how to move on?"

Charlotte takes a bite of her cone and crunches thoughtfully. "Well, you know what Cyrus says."—

I do know what Cyrus says. He told me his theory in 1666 while we sat together on a boat on the Thames during the Great Fire of London. As we watched the world burn around us, I confessed that I sometimes considered dying, so I could join my parents in heaven. The flash of anger that came over him was sudden and intense. The flames flickered red in his eyes, and for the first time in my life, I truly feared him.

"The soul is nothing but a concentration of energy, held together by will, or, in our case, years of practice," he said fiercely. "Our Incarnate souls are different from human ones. Ours are stronger."

"But—" I began.

He grabbed my arm so tightly that his fingernails drew blood. "There is nothing after this life for humans, but your soul is strong, too strong. If you are killed, Seraphina, your soul will want to leave, yet after years of being intact, it will not know how. You will become a hungry ghost, unable to affect the physical world." The idea that I could stay on Earth in purely spiritual form terrified me, and I huddled against Cyrus for protection while the city where I'd grown up disintegrated before my eyes.

But now, as I truly face my own mortality, I have to wonder: How can he possibly know what comes next? Did he say those things just to scare me into staying with him, so he wouldn't have to wander the world alone?

"I don't care what Cyrus says," I reply, watching as a young couple kisses briefly under a streetlamp outside. "I want to know what you think."

Reflected in the window, I see the corners of Char's mouth turn down. It is rare that we flout Cyrus, even in his absence, and it troubles her to do it now. Still, she answers. "I suppose anything's possible." She lowers her eyes and whispers, "Sometimes I hope Jack is still out there somewhere."

I touch her arm. "I look for my mom, too."

We finish our cones in silence, listening to the electric hum of the freezers and the girl behind the counter laughing happily into her phone, unaware that she's in the presence of two seasoned killers. Then Charlotte gestures suddenly at something scurrying outside. "Seamus from Ireland, 1878!"

I furrow my brow. "What, that squirrel?"

"Yes! He was always hoarding food. And his front teeth were abnormally long," she says mischievously.

"You are terrible," I chide with a laugh.

"You love me," she says. Her expression turns serious. "Sera, I know you're nervous about tomorrow. But it'll be okay, I promise."

A lump forms in my throat, and I don't look at her for fear that I will accidentally give something away.

"You've done this a million times," she continues. "Cyrus will make sure your new body is perfect."

"But don't you think it's wrong?" I press. "Who are we to decide who lives or dies?"

"It's what we are, Sera. It's a choice we all made. I wish everyone could be like us." What she doesn't say is, "I wish Jack could have been like us." It had been hard enough to get Cyrus to make Charlotte an Incarnate. He would never have accepted her brother as well.

"Mmm" is all I say, not wanting to argue with Charlotte on our last night together. It took me six hundred years to come to terms with death. It is not my place to rush Charlotte. "Let's go home. I'm in the mood to watch *While You Were Sleeping*."

"Ugh, again?" Charlotte groans.

"Yes! It's my favorite." I push myself onto my shaky legs and wave good-bye to the blue-haired girl. She's so absorbed in her phone call that she doesn't even notice we're leaving until the cowbell over the door rattles loudly.

"Come back soon!" she shouts as she does every time a customer leaves.

The wind has picked up outside, bringing with it the vaguest hint of fall, a smell I've always associated with

possibility.

~~“Okay, fine,” Charlotte relents, crunching through a pile of fallen leaves on the sidewalk. “We can watch *While You Were Sleeping*. But then can we watch *Casablanca*?”~~

“Ugh, again?” I mimic. She elbows me and we both laugh. I hook my arm through hers again and pull her close. “You never know, Char. Maybe Jack is with us right now.”

Charlotte raises a red eyebrow and smiles wistfully. “Maybe.”

We walk back to the house. I lean on Charlotte for balance, and I wish this night, and our friendship, could last forever. But I settle for living in this moment. Because even though it took me six hundred years, I finally know better. Time can't be cheated, not really. Everything—even me, and one day even Charlotte—must come to end.

three

The next morning, the day of my party, I wake to an empty house. I didn't sleep well. No matter how much fuss, I can't get comfortable. The bed's cool gray sheets match too closely to the sickly pallor of my skin, and my bones jut out through my skin at odd angles now.

I throw on my white terry-cloth robe and pad through the condo. Its design is modern, all neutral shades, and I fit in too well. In the kitchen I find a pot of hot coffee. Next to it is my mug, laid out by a bud valet holding a single velvety purple morning glory blossom. It is the most colorful thing in the entire place. A note is tucked under the lip of a shiny silver teaspoon. With stiff fingers, I unfold it and see Charlotte's fine script:

*Good morning, S, I'm out with Amelia. Boys
are at the club. Let's get ready together later?*

—Char

I pour myself a cup of coffee and take a sip, grateful for the warmth it brings on its path through my body. In the bathroom Cyrus and I share, I stand in front of the mirror and let my robe fall away from my body, regarding myself without emotion. I am too thin, ribs prominent on my sides and collarbones creating deep hollows on my chest. I look sick. Weak. Still, my chapped lips curve into a smile. Dying is the bravest, most human thing I will have done in six centuries.

After a hot shower, I dress in my favorite pair of faded green pants and a fuzzy hoodie and make my way to Cyrus's library. It's locked—none of us have ever dared enter here without his permission—but I know where he hides the key.

The library is the one room in our home that is not sleek and modern. Floor to ceiling bookshelves line all the walls, holding a jumble of handmade bindings, sewn Coptic spines, and ancient leather-bound volumes. An Oriental carpet in red and turquoise stretches across the floor, a souvenir from the year we spent in Iran. The room smells like old paper, with a faint trace of Cyrus's soap, notes of vetiver and cedar.

This is his collection, a record of his hundreds of years of knowledge. As much as Cyrus appreciates human progress and technology, nothing can replace these weathered volumes. They have an almost talismanic power over him, which is why no one else is allowed in this room. We've taken the library with us every time we've moved to a new city. I cringe, remembering the trouble it caused on the voyage from Barbados to New Amsterdam. At least one person has died for these books.

I run my fingers over the spines till I find what I'm looking for, and pull a slim book from the shelf. It has a lock closed over its front edge, like a diary. But I don't need to read it to know what's inside: the formula for making the elixir. Cyrus, the son of an alchemist, had learned how to make the elixir that unbinds the silver cord that anchors the soul to the body. He wears a vial of it around his neck at all times. It only takes a few drops to turn a mortal being into one of us: an Incarnate, a soul untethered from a specific body, who can live forever by stealing others' lives. We only need the elixir once—then we can switch at will.

Cyrus may have the formula memorized by now, but there's a chance he doesn't—after all, he hasn't changed anyone into an Incarnate in almost a hundred years. That chance is enough for me.

I sit at his desk and pull out a creamy sheet of stationery.

Dear Cyrus,

I loved you once, with all my heart, and I stayed alive, in one form or another, for centuries because I could not bear to be apart from you. But the years have changed us, and not for the better. Every death we've caused has killed our love, bit by bit. I cannot kill another human in order to live. When my current body is lost, I will be too.

Until the next life, Seraphina

Back in my room I fold the note and put it in the pocket of the dress I'll wear tonight. Everything is in place. Doors open and doors close; I just have to walk through.

By nightfall the fog is so thick that I can't see more than twenty feet in front of me. The streetlights glow amber in the haze, reminding me of minerals in a fire. Cyrus once charmed me with colored fire instead of a bouquet of flowers, the pale powders in his palm giving little clue to the hue they brought to the flame. It seemed like magic, those little flames glowing red, glowing violet, the color of cat's-eyes lapping at the dark. But it was only science—borax, copper chloride, potassium sulfate. I know that now.

It's just before ten PM when Charlotte and I arrive at Emerald City; the others have been at the club all day preparing. A large crowd of people is gathered outside the doors, bouncers holding them at bay while they check the guest list. Jared gives me an appreciative glance and parts the crowd for us to go inside.

I shiver in my oyster-colored silk shift dress, a modern version of the one my real body died in so many years ago. I've always valued symmetry, and this feels like a fitting tribute to my original incarnation. A small car key is pinned to the underside of my bra strap, laying flat against my heart. I wear no jewelry except for my poison ring, the hidden compartment of which contains my parting gift for Cyrus.

The second I step inside I'm overwhelmed by the thumping bass and loud voices. I walk slowly up the stairs, my heart pumping weakly. Charlotte places a steadying hand on my lower back.

"Sera, you really shouldn't wait this long to take a new body," she whispers in a worried tone. "You're pushing it."

"You know me," I say with a forced laugh. "Always living on the edge."

Cyrus is waiting for us just inside the door. His eyes flicker with purpose under the low tracking lighting. "Seraphina, you look so beautiful," he murmurs, pulling me close. I am enveloped in his herbal scent, his strong arms. A memory of the masquerade ball rises in my mind, but I push it down. Nostalgia is my enemy tonight; I can't look backward.

"This is amazing," Charlotte says, smoothing down her green sequined dress. "I've never been inside Emerald City before."

The interior of the club is all shades of green—velvet couches the color of damp pine needles, intricate stained-glass chandeliers in chartreuse, wallpaper in turquoise. Waitresses cross the crowd with trays of absinthe and Midori in small crystal glasses.

Not long ago I would have loved a party like this—dancing till dawn, slipping through the crowd with purpose, making eye contact with Cyrus as we decided, together, who my victim would be. There is something undeniably thrilling about this part. The promise that, no matter what, I can change my body. That I can walk out a new person, presenting a brand-new face to the world. If only my memories were as easy to shed.

"You fit right in with that dress," I tell Charlotte. "But in the first Oz book, the Emerald City isn't really green. The Wizard makes everyone wear green-tinted glasses, so that's what they see."

Cyrus frowns, as though I've insulted his choice of venue. I put my hand on his arm. "I think I'll get myself a glass of champagne."

He brightens. "Yes, go get a drink, and don't forget to . . . look around." He finishes this statement with a smile and a knowing look. My stomach turns, but I make myself return his smile.

Charlotte and I cross the dance floor, which pulses with bodies dancing to electronic beats. The DJ is playing a remix of the old Neil Young song "Heart of Gold." It makes me unaccountably sad.

I crossed the ocean for a heart of gold. And I'm getting old.

Charlotte looks behind her to make sure I've followed. "Let's dance after this?" She has to shout to be heard. I grab her hand and give it a squeeze. Yes.

She asks the bartender for two Midori sours with wedges of watermelon, and we toast. "To new beginnings and old friends," she says.

"Cheers." I smile, and we clink glasses. "Friends forever."

The cold melon-flavored sweetness of the Midori trickles down my throat, and I am reminded of the summer we lived in Alabama. Cyrus found us a broken-down farmhouse with a brilliant red barn out back and a massive watermelon patch. Charlotte and I spent hours in the cool shade of the barn, the smell of hay and horses all around us, eating watermelon after watermelon and making wishes on the sticky black seeds.

I wish to fall in love.

I wish to live forever.

I wish to be friends until the end of time.

I have only one wish for Charlotte now. I take her wrist, suddenly urgent. "Charlotte you need to tell Sébastien how you feel. Promise me this."

Charlotte's smile falters. "Sera, you know what Cyrus would say."

"Screw Cyrus." When I see the stricken look on her face, I soften my tone. "What is eternal life without love?"

Cyrus appears behind us at the bar and encircles my waist with his arm. I twist to the side so he won't notice the folded note in my pocket. "There's someone I want you to meet," he murmurs. He must have already made his choice. It didn't take long.

I take a deep breath and pluck the empty wineglass from his hand. "Let me refill that for you, then I'll be right there." He kisses the side of my neck, then nods toward a girl standing alone under a chandelier, light falling in lacy patterns on her gleaming chestnut hair. She looks almost exactly like me, a minor variation on the theme.

When he's gone, I pull Charlotte toward me in a tight hug. "Thanks for being my best friend, Char. I mean it." When I pull back, my eyes are filled with tears. I blink them back.

"My sensitive Seraphina." She pushes my hair back and holds her palm to my icy cheek for a moment. "I will see the new you soon enough."

I swallow hard as the bartender places a full glass of red wine in front of me. I pick it up and make my way through the crowd toward Cyrus and the girl. When I'm confident no one is looking, I flick open my poison ring and, in one practiced movement, dump its contents into the glass. Then I stride forward, catching Cyrus's eye. He looks pleased.

I feel a flash of sadness for him. Cyrus, my alchemist love, the one who made magic real, the one who lived for illusion, who says, *Yes, the fire only burns violet for you, Seraphina*. Cyrus, who grips me so tightly I feel like I'm choking, who made me a killer, who would rather kill me himself than lose me. He's told me so, many times. But after tonight, I'll be gone—and for the first time in hundreds of years, we'll both be alone.

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