

**People with dark souls have nothing but dark dreams. People with
really dark souls do nothing but dream.**

Hear the Wind Sing

Haruki Murakami

Chapter One

☾

Dreamer

The darkness wrapped around me like a living creature. I stretched my hands and it pushed back against me, swathed in a smearing sky, light pressed upon and receding from night's cloak of coal black.

It swallowed and submerged me.

A soft glow started in my fingers, spreading up my arms and reaching my face. Gentle white light filled me and radiated from my skin in every direction. Beads of it drifted away and into the expanse of dark. Pinpricks of light as distant stars emerged and bobbed on the tangible, inky surface. Then light darkened, a churning sea of shifting azure.

I thought perhaps I was a star, or a sun going supernova. I thought I would fall away. I thought that many things I thought never mattered at all.

I sank into the silent dark. With a sigh, I drowned. The lights sloughed off and hovered above me in my shape before drifting away like dust specks.

Was this real?

My eyes opened to blink away the starscape. My bedroom with its pale blue walls and seeping, early morning light took its place.

I breathed in the dawn. A dream. Only a dream.

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I became vaguely aware of my Mom's voice.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Would you like tea on your way out?" Mom repeated with a smile in her voice.

She poured aromatic jasmine tea into a second cup. My favorite.

"No thanks."

“What’s wrong, Bella?” She asked. When I didn’t answer right away, she pushed a little.

“Are you feeling okay?”

I shrugged but didn’t look back up at her. Believe it or not, there were some drawbacks to having a good relationship with your mother: like how she knew when you were lying. “I’m just thinking.”

“Ah,” Mom said as she set the hot pot down. “Funny how our brains and our stomachs are so harmonized, isn’t it?”

She smiled at me with her signature motherly warmth. Her hair rested over her shoulder in thick rungs, dark like mine but with threads of silver woven into it. Only a little gray, despite her age. She and the rest of her full-blooded Native American family had all aged well.

In a small, secret way, I hoped I inherited that from her, even though she said I got every ounce of my looks from my father. Whatever that meant.

“I should head out,” I said after glancing at the digital face of my old flip phone. Eight more months until an upgrade.

“Okay, call me if you don’t feel well,” Mom said after me.

“Sure,” I replied, more out of routine than a real desire to answer her. I picked up my backpack, slung my arms through the straps, and marched out the front door, closing it behind me with a soft thud.

What did the dream even mean, anyway? That intense darkness, blocking out everything else. But I understood it, I wasn’t afraid. It seemed like we shared the dream together. How? Questions raced in my head and made it hurt as they slammed against my skull.

Plump lavender clouds with fluorescent orange tops hung delicately in the periwinkle sky. A mockingbird sat in the trees and chirped a myriad of select birdsongs from its repertoire in the distance. Waiting for me at the curb was my neighbor and very-best friend, Henrietta.

The short, Hispanic girl with dark hair and freckles flashed me a wide grin as I approached, French-braided pigtails hanging on the sides of her head and over her shoulders as she leapt up and fell in stride with me. “Bella!” she said, “My mom said you could stay over this weekend.”

“Is your dad gonna play board games with us again? ‘Nobody beats jeffe at Risk’!” I teased in a voice meant to imitate the older man, her father Jeff.

Henrietta rolled her eyes. “I hope not.”

Our high school was barely a block away from our neighborhood, so Henrietta and I usually walked save for the occasional days one of us would over-sleep, in which case we ran. It was easy to fall into our natural rhythm as we chatted and gossiped while I handed her my history homework to copy, but still something lingered in the back of my mind.

We stepped through an open gate in the chain link fence around the school’s running track. Students, in running shorts and zip-up hoodies, ran along the pavement with headphones threaded through their clothes out of sight of the coach, or huddled in the benches to wait for practice to end. Henrietta and I climbed up the creaky metal seats to a seat in the top back corner.

A group of runners rounded the nearest curve. One of them spotted us and lifted her hand to wave. We returned the gesture with fervent smiles.

“Go, Lucy!” Henrietta shouted.

A ripple of disturbed silence rolled across the clusters of kids in the bleachers. A few of them scooted away from us. Not that we weren’t used to it. The three of us were our own clique,

the kids with weird families: Henrietta clashed with her mother, Lucy was adopted, and I had a dead dad.

But the nature of our group wasn't exclusive. Lots of kids flitted into our social circle from time to time. When Tyler Bennet's dad went to jail, when Roslyn and Grace Curry's mother almost died in a car accident, and when Thomas Small's parents got a divorce they hung out with us. Eventually, though, all of them returned to their original group of friends. Henrietta, Lucy, and I were the only ones who stuck like glue.

Henrietta gasped.

Her elbow met my ribs and I winced. "What, Hen?"

She pointed, mouth agape. "Don't look!"

I rolled my eyes and opened my mouth to say something about getting mixed signals, and looked anyway. Then my mouth closed and my heart dropped.

Dillon. He knelt in the grass, a large camera up against his face and aimed over the track. Probably getting glamor shots for the yearbook.

Henrietta crossed her arms and leaned back, glaring alongside me. "I told you not to look."

I didn't respond. Before my birthday, over the summer, our brief attempt at a relationship went belly-up when I found out that he was cheating on me...

"Are you serious?" I blurted as my temper flared before I could catch it, watching a popular blonde flounce into view.

Michelle. Dillon's new arm candy. And, of course, the girl who'd been ruining my life for years.

"Don't even think about that stuck up skank," Hen said with a snarky grin.

It was too late for that. When Michelle and I were in elementary school, we were friends. Then, Henrietta moved to town and butted heads with Michelle right away. Michelle wore nice clothes, and Henrietta was a tomboy. I fell somewhere in the middle. At first, Henrietta assumed that Michelle and I were the same and tried to bully us. Once, she threw mud at us to upset Michelle but I returned fire and Henrietta backed down. She and I spent more time together.

Ever since, Michelle declared me her nemesis. In middle school, she spread nasty rumors about us, bumped me when I bent over the water fountain so it soaked my shirt, knocked Henrietta's books from her hands, and even stuffed my locker with dirty pictures of old men.

I stopped feeding into the torment when high school started, and she mostly left me alone... until the fiasco with Dillon. Even months later, I still wasn't over it.

So when I saw Michelle prance up to my ex-boyfriend, tap on his shoulder, and plant a kiss on his cheek, for just a moment I wanted something really, really bad to happen to them.

A flash of light streaked across my vision, like a lightning strike behind my eyes. It burst outward, sending a stream of water blasted directly for Dillon and Michelle. It struck her in the chest, soaking her shirt and the front of her pants and splashing against Dillon's expensive camera and drenched his face. They shrieked and fumbled through the grass away from a sprinkler that had shut on for no apparent reason. The one right in front of them, and no other.

Henrietta's loud laughter crashed against my eardrums and the murmur of gasping reactions that passed through the other gathered students. The coach watching the runners blew her whistle and she jogged over to where the two of them nursed their egos and outfits beside the bleachers, dripping.

Henrietta's hand caught my shoulder hard. "Did you see that!? How perfect!" She snorted as she threw her head back and covered her face to continue laughing.

But I didn't join her. As much as I wanted to enjoy the moment... I couldn't.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and squinted. My face hurt. What was that? I felt as though something inside me exploded.

"Hey, you okay?" Henrietta's laughter faded when she saw me.

I waved her away. "Yeah. I just have a headache."

As my focus drifted from the scene, the water from the sprinkler trickled away to almost nothing.



On my 16th birthday, it snowed. In southern Florida.

A week later, eyes glued to my phone, I tripped down the stairs. When I came to the bottom, I floated before I could crack my head against the wood floors. My phone wasn't as lucky.

After that, while driving with my mom, a dog ran in front of the car. I hit the brakes, but it didn't matter because the labrador teleported - I didn't blink, it poofed - to the other side of the road. Mom brushed it off. Said we got lucky. I didn't much like driving anymore.

Last night, I had a dream. While that might not seem strange to someone else, it is for me. I haven't had a vivid dream I could recall since my father died when I was two. Not like I remember that far back, but Mom says I never told her about dreams after that. I've slept like the dead, ever since.

I replayed the moments, over and over, leading up to the incident with Dillon and Michelle. After my initial headache dulled, it was inevitably replaced by the tension headache building between my eyes. Thankfully, I had a distraction.

Henrietta pulled up a makeup tutorial on her phone and I held it up for her while she dusted some white costume makeup along my cheeks and secured fake vampire fangs to my canines. She painted my nails black on one hand, while I used the other to color my lips cherry red. She tied her hair back as I found another tutorial on her phone, then used the rest of the costume makeup to change her face into a skull, complete with eyeliner around her eyes and traced along her lips like teeth.

I clasped a black cloak lined in red velvet around the base of my throat as Henrietta pulled on a leather jacket over her Ramones t-shirt and spiky jewelry.

“Ooh, look at you two!” Mom cooed as we came out of my bedroom and downstairs. “You look great, girls. Smile!” The flash from her phone blinded me for a moment.

“Mom!” I protested.

She pulled me and Henrietta in for a hug, her arms deceptively soft as they pressed us against her. “You two be good tonight,” she said into our hair. “Use the lights on your phones when you’re walking. And stay together! Be careful. I mean it. I want you both in this house by midnight. Clear?”

Mine and Hen’s phones buzzed.

Party starts @ 8! Don’t forget to wear a costume! followed by a series of squares. A text from Bethany to the group chat. The squares were bat and sparkly emojis, according to Henrietta’s phone.

“Yes, Mom,” Henrietta and I replied in unison.

Her eyes squinted in the corners with her smile as she let us go. “Good girls. Let me get a few more.”

We forced smiles and posed for my mom’s flashing phone camera. Then she took a selfie with us. “I mean it,” she said. “Be careful tonight. Don’t do anything you wouldn’t tell me about. Remember, Dad’s watching you.” She paused after her familiar parting phrase to me, with something that passed through it. A ghost, a threat, a promise. “If anything... strange happens... call me or come home, okay? Please.”

“Alright, Mom,” I replied.

“You two aren’t getting separated tonight, right?”

“Three,” Henrietta replied, then turned to me. “You did convince Lucy to come, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “She’s meeting us there.”

“Lucy’s joining?” Mom sounded a little surprised. Everyone who met Lucy knew how painfully shy she was. “That’s good, she’ll keep you out of trouble.” She winked.

It was the first night of Bethany Quill’s Halloween bash weekend. Bethany was a popular senior in school with busy parents that often went out of town and left her alone. Either out of genuine ignorance or intentional negligence, the parents of our small town seemed not to know that Quill parties were more than innocent get-togethers or sleepovers. Bethany’s parties always turned into all-out ragers with more sexual escapades than prom night and alcohol provided by her college boyfriend.

Hen slipped out the front door, ready to get going without getting caught sneaking around by her mother next door, but when I went to follow Mom latched onto my wrist. “Bell?”

I turned over my shoulder.

Her eyes shifted side to side before settling on me. A sheen covered the shadows hiding within them before she blinked them away and kissed my forehead.

Henrietta was the one who had convinced me to go to the party, claiming that it would be the deciding night of my high school career. I wasn't sure why Mom agreed, but I wasn't about to press her. I laughed and shrugged her off. "If I didn't know you better, I'd say you're trying to embarrass me."

"Just saying goodnight," she said as she released me from her grip and from the house. "My phone will be on if you need me."

With a quick wave, I pulled the door to. "Goodnight, Mom."

The door fell shut.

**“Let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is
fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which
paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance.”**

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

Chapter Two

☾

Fear

“It should be just up here,” Henrietta pointed her finger, looking back and forth between the street and the directions on her phone.

Fifteen minutes of walking off the main road of our small town, the Quill's two story, vinyl sided house stood out among the surrounding tall pine trees. The walk kept us warm against the brisk night air, and a clear sky gave way to full moon light. Dead needles carpeted the ground and the street around us. A bonfire from behind the house carried the scent of cardboard and ash on the wind.

We hardly needed her phone to guide us, though. The muffled beat of music led us to the right place, pumped through curtain-shrouded windows. It sounded like Monster Mash as we got closer. Light bled from every window of the house, and the lights outside spilled over the grass. A few kids older than me sat in the yard, one dressed like a Greaser, the others wearing cheap Batman outfits, smoking cigarettes and eyeing us as we approached.

I spied Lucy leaning against the garage door, and as soon as she saw us come up to the driveway, she darted for us and closed the gap. She wore her track uniform, and a big, red nose.

"Hey," Henrietta waved as we approached. "What are you supposed to be?"

"I'm the song, Run, Run, Rudolph," she chatted nervously. Henrietta and I doubled over, belting out laughter. "It's the best I could come up with using what I had. I hope it's not..."

She touched the edge of my cape and eyed it as she fiddled, but didn't finish what she was saying. She didn't need to. None of us wanted to look lame at this party.

"Come on, let's get inside!" Henrietta urged. "I want to drink! And to check out that fire..." A wicked grin came over her face, enticed by her wandering fantasies of the night's adventures.

Lucy nodded eagerly, her bare legs stark against the falling temperature.

The porch light doused us in yellow and attracted bugs that threw their hard bodies against the glass with loud clink sounds. I reached up to knock on the front door, white with a

square, fogged glass window, but Henrietta snatched my wrist out of the air. “Nope,” she warned.

I shot her a glare. “What? I’m knocking on the door.”

Henrietta shook her head and clicked her tongue. “You got invited, didn’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but-”

“This isn’t a tea party, Bella. This is an unsupervised, high school party,” Henrietta said. “Just walk in.”

“Fine,” I stepped back. “You open it, then.”

With a friendly smirk, Henrietta turned the handle and pushed open the door and stepped through. Lucy and I followed, heads craned low as she carved a path through the party.

The heat and bass of the music rocked against my body from inside the house. A dozen people crowded in the stairwell on the other side of the entryway, plastic red cups in hand. Smoke hung around the ceiling on the second floor carrying the stink of cheap marijuana with it.

Bethany propped herself against a folding table with more plastic cups arranged in triangle positions, players on either side aiming ping pong balls between their fingers. She waved to us when we arrived, but we didn’t stick around to chat thanks to the pounding speakers and flicked water droplets that scattered through the room.

We wove through dancing high schoolers, girls sporting risque costumes rubbing elbows with college guys and girls, and couples sitting in laps on chairs and kitchen countertops. Some of them tried to socialize over the music, others just kissed and touched each other. I tried not to look, but they were everywhere, even by the trash cans overflowing with folded up beer boxes and discarded cans.

“The keg must be out back,” Henrietta said, eyes flashing and cheeks flushed with warmth. “What do you think? Wanna get something to drink?”

The idea of drinking in a big crowd like this had bounced around in my head all day. I’d had a glass of wine with Mom, once, on the anniversary of dad’s death; the only time she drank. Otherwise, I had no experience with alcohol. Were sixteen year olds even supposed to? As I looked around, no one else seemed to care about the legal drinking age.

“If that means we’re headed for a bonfire and fresh air, I’m game,” I said.

Henrietta smirked over her shoulder as we headed forward, the three of us with our arms looped together like a chain. We didn’t make it very far.

We slammed to a halt as someone cut off Henrietta’s path, almost tripping as we backpedaled.

“I didn’t realize we were bringing trash to this party.” I recognized the voice before I saw who was blocking us. Her glossed lips sneered at us, one slender arm propped against her hip. Michelle Smith.

Henrietta balled her hands into fists. “Back off and shut up, slut.”

“Make me, lesbo,” Michelle spat back with icy, pointed words. She laughed, a tinkling and condescending sound. “Wow. We’ve got the whole junk yard here, with the rabid guard dog and everything.”

I took Henrietta’s wrist to keep her from throwing a punch and broke away from Michelle’s golden hazel stare framed in platinum blonde hair that reminded me for the hundredth time how obvious it was that Dillon would pick her.

Michelle started to say something, but a spark of bitter courage pulled me between her and Henrietta. “That’s enough,” I snapped. “Let’s just go.”

We lost Michelle in the sea of bodies that swarmed around us after sensing our tension, and I didn't care to search for her. Her bullying had been a nuisance growing up, but after everything...

Henrietta, Lucy, and I piled through the back door and past a bare bush on our right that separated a side yard from the backyard. A pillar of fire stacked in the back corner, fueled by empty beer cases and pine needles kindling, popping and crackling underneath, cast warm, yellow and orange flames glowing against the sky.

"That bitch!" Henrietta's shouting ricocheted off the fences. "I swear, if she tries anything, I'll kill her."

She huffed past me and snatched up a plastic red cup stacked beside the nearby keg, hands trembling as she filled her cup full of frothy liquid from the hose.

I leaned close to Lucy. "Are you going to drink?"

I suspected her answer, but the urgent way she shook her head was cute enough to justify my asking. "No way! If Dad and Father found out this was an alcohol party, I'd be grounded forever! Longer!"

I had to laugh. "But Ross brews wine in the garage with fruit from your garden."

"And Jim is a doctor, who sees people hurt from it all the time."

Henrietta slugged back her drink then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Well, if you're not going to drink, you wanna watch me drink? I want to join a beer pong team."

"Honestly, the more walls between me and Michelle the better," I said. Lucy sidled closer to me. "I think we'll stay here for a while and watch the fire."

Henrietta nodded and refilled her drink. "I'll find you later, then."

“Dad told me to be home at nine, first, but Father said eleven so I’ll be home at ten to be safe,” Lucy said. She shifted nervously, like she expected her parents or worse to swoop down just from her looking at the beer.

“It won’t take me that long to school these guys,” Henrietta smiled again, turning to head back inside.

I grabbed her shoulder and locked eyes with her. “Don’t get in any fights.”

She shrugged me off with a laugh. “Yes, mom.”

Lucy and I found a patch of grass a few feet from a guy with shaggy hair and a Bob Marley shirt strummed an acoustic guitar. The music from inside muffled him, but we chose our spot more for its proximity to the fire than anything else. More people formed a half circle closer to the bonfire, all at varying degrees of inebriation, huddled together in the grass.

“Ross and Jim were really okay with you coming here?” I tried imagining her clean and somewhat strict parents’ faces when she asked them.

Lucy shrugged. “We’re still new enough to town that they don’t know what a Quill party is, I guess. I’m sure they’re worried, though. It’s hard to adopt a kid. When I hurt my ankle in Cross Country last year, they said they spent two years laboring to have me, so I had to take care of my body. But I’m glad Henrietta’s having fun.”

“Me, too.”

“She deserves it,” Lucy continued in her small voice. “After all those fights with her mom. I can’t imagine...”

I leaned back in the grass and looked up at the winking, faded stars. “Mom tells me that, without Dad, I’m all she has to keep her going.”

Lucy laid back and I rested my head beside hers. “You miss him?”

I shrugged. “I don’t remember him. I was two when he died, and he got sick before I was born. Mom doesn’t like to talk about him, so I don’t bring it up. I think it makes her sad. Still, though...”

My words drifted away from me toward the stars overhead. The lights seemed so small from here, I had to remind myself that I was the small one, perfectly placed in the sky, in the infinite universe. If there was no end to it, then could my dad’s soul still be out there somewhere?

We trailed off and spent some time listening to the echoes of the Bob Marley enthusiast playing away, and picking up bits of idle chatter from other groups. Despite the amount of people and the acrid stink of cigarettes, it was easier to be outside than inside.

Henrietta’s familiar laugh crashed against us as she filled her cup from the keg again. The makeup on her cheeks had smeared, making her look more ghostly than skeletal. She separated from a group of college-aged guys and plopped beside us. “Hey guys! What are we talking about?” She punctuated with a hiccup.

“Family,” Lucy responded.

Hen wrinkled her nose and scrunched up her face. “That’s depressing.” Not wrong. “You guys need to lighten up! Have some drinks, already!” A smile exploded across her face, overcome with a dastardly idea. “Let’s. Do. Shots! Billy and Marshall showed up with Jameson and Smirnoff!”

Lucy’s already pale face blanched.

“Careful, Hen,” I cautioned. “Beer before liquor, never sicker.”

“Did you finish your game?” Lucy asked.

Hen shook her head. “No, but we got next. So I chugged a tall one in a race against Matt, and Asher helped me do a keg stand.”

That explained a lot. Barely an hour in and already nursing her third drink.

The music changed to Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” and a cheer of approval shook the house.

Henrietta laughed mischievously, clutching her drink and hopping to her feet. “Come on! You gotta dance!”

I started to protest, but Henrietta’s drunken ambition refused any objection I might have made.

Henrietta spilled a little beer on the grass, but quickly recovered. Lucy spun around and propped up on her tiptoes in a classic MJ pose. The guitar guy played along with the beat, everyone getting to their feet, joining us by the fire, and using all the Prince of Pop moves in random order. Our shadows reached and twisted with the jumping fire behind us.

When the song changed again, Hen convinced me to watch her play beer pong. She let me throw the ball, and to everyone’s surprise, I sunk it. The other players shoved red cups in my face, trying to get me to drink as per the rules, but I wriggled out of their grasp by slipping into the bathroom.

After I finished, I held a girl’s hair when she puked in the toilet.

I found Lucy talking to the guitar player outside, apparently named Chad, and he showed us pictures of his dog on his phone. I caught a frisbee as it careened through the dark at my face, and tossed it back to a few guys who had accidentally thrown it too far. Eventually, it got lost over the fence and they settled for passing a hacky sack back and forth.

At 9:30, we said goodbye to Lucy to get her home before turning into a pumpkin.

The pongers mercifully forgot that I was owed a drink, so I stood behind Hen and cheered for her, or danced to the music with a few familiar faces from school. The sea of bodies seemed less hostile when they all moved in sway together.

Dancing left me hot and sweaty, so I stepped through the backdoor to find refuge in the cool October air. The bare bush beside the door rustled, a couple looking for some privacy. Then the bush had hands that wrapped around my waist and snatched my arm, then pulled me.

My cape snagged on the twigs and snapped them, sending shards flying and poking my sides and face. “Hey!” I shouted in surprise and fear, but either no one heard or no one cared. My back hit the wall and my teeth clicked.

“Shhh,” cooed a familiar voice.

The shadows cleared and I saw him, basking in moonlight.

“Dillon? I squirmed against his arm that blocked me from running. On our other side, the side yard ended and was blocked with trash cans that stank like they were half-full. “What are you doing here?”

“Everybody’s here, baby,” he said with that sarcastic smirk I had come to like on him. Before.

“Yeah, including your girlfriend,” I snapped. “Remember her?”

Dillon rolled his eyes, his honey-brown hair fanned toward the lashes. “Of course I remember. But she’s too busy to hang out with me right now.” He set his mouth in a hard line, and his eyes wandered over me and the wall.

Even with the stink of the trash cans, I smelled the alcohol on his breath.

Tears sprang up in my eyes, and I squeezed them shut. I clenched my fists. “Then what is this?” I shouted. “You want some kind of pity-party because you’re fighting?!”

“No,” his voice was sweet again and I opened my eyes to see his genuine smile washing over me as easily as the moon. “No, no, no, how could you think that, baby? I only wanted to apologize.”

I made no attempt to mask my incredulousness when I asked, “Really?”

“I mean, we haven’t talked in a while.”

“That’s because we broke up!”

A pause. I blinked away the tears and looked at my feet. Why did it have to hurt so bad?

“Baby…” Dillon tried again, leaning a little closer.

“Do not call me that,” I spat.

“Don’t be this way,” he touched my cheek and I swatted him away. He was undeterred.

“I just want one kiss.”

“No, stop it.”

“For old time’s sake? Come on, one kiss.” He leaned closer still, his face mere inches from mine.

I glanced at his lips, overcome with a wave of nausea. I didn’t want this. Not from him, not anymore. I held up my hands, but he covered them with his own and held them in place with a brash gentleness.

“I still care about you,” he whispered.

There was a note of truth, there, some sincerity. For an instant, I almost believed him. But only in the instant before his lips met mine.

I jerked my hands free and rage burst in my chest. I took the energy and momentum from it, and shoved hard against Dillon’s torso. We separated. He stumbled a bit, taken aback by my sudden reaction. The taste of cheap beer from his lips clung to mine. It was hard to see him

through the cloud of emotion that filled my vision, no matter how hard I glared, the same sensation as when I'd seen him and Michelle on the track, as when I didn't want to run over a dog or fall down the stairs.

This time, I was able to put words to it. Control. Power.

Fear.

Steam-like wisps gathered in the corners of my sight, and all of it surged out of me. I saw clearly when Dillon's eyes widened and his expression sobered at the look on my face. We flinched as something moved to my right, and what we saw left both of us shell shocked.

The trash cans hovered, both at least a foot off the ground and bobbing gently as if in water.

What was happening? A trick of the light? A drink I didn't remember having?

It dawned on me, then, that the fear that powered me moments ago... was mine.

I drew a shaking breath, the world quiet and numb around me aside from Dillon mumbling some obscenity under his breath. I closed my fists, still in front of me where I'd shoved Dillon away from me. When my fingers touched my palm, the cans both jerked upwards in a spastic motion. Dillon flinched.

I started, pulling my fists down and curling over myself. The trash cans arced and crashed down in front of me, cacophonous. Dillon cried out and groaned. I crouched there, looking directly into the cloud of dead brush and dirt that I'd kicked up.

Whatever had filled me before was replaced with unshakable terror and guilt. My hand flexed and reached towards the miserable pile of metal, plastic, and man, but when Dillon saw me coming he flung the can on top of him off. His arm had turned purple and he cried out again with pain.

“Get away!” He shouted. My heart froze. “Get away from me, you crazy bitch! I think you broke my arm!”

I pulled my arm back, tucking it in under my coat. He was right. I’d done this. Whatever this was, it was my fault like all the other times. But this... this time I’d hurt someone.

A pang of dread speared itself through my stomach and I took to my feet. I launched myself on trembling legs through the dying bush, pushing through the three or four solid bodies that had gathered to investigate the anguished shouting. Their voices blended in my head into one stream of gray. My heart thundered and my arms shook.

I stumbled along the ground until I found my feet in a wide, low stance facing the roaring pillar of flame. The heat pulsated over the ground, an endless wave. My tears evaporated as the pulse from the fire seemed to swell inside me and threatened to take over my consciousness.

My throat tightened and I shut my eyes. I folded in half with the weight of whatever power pressed down on me, and in a great whoosh of air, the fire collapsed on itself and extinguished in a burst of smoke that blew through me and against my cape.

The students in the yard were concerned, now, backing away or drawing nearer. Their voices were screams in my head, faces melted away to featureless glares.

I turned and ran again, pushing through the gathering crowd at the back door, but the feeling that I couldn’t get away from this stalked me. I staggered through the bodies until I found Henrietta and took her wrist.

Our eyes locked. “Bella?” She called my name, but even though we shared a room she sounded far away.

A rumble.

Quiet fell over the crowd. Stunned quiet.

Had we all felt that?

Another tremor, a tiny quake, out of place from the music. It had to be...

An earthquake?

An icy talon of fear squeezed my chest, radiated from me. I couldn't contain it, I couldn't calm down...

The lights shut out.

In seconds everyone started screaming, running, sprinting, colliding, panicking. Plunged into darkness, I lunged through the shadows and wove through bodies and furniture with as much ease as though I were seeing them in the light, guided by my mind's eye.

We darted into the writhing throng of people all clamoring for an escape. Another wave rattled the ground beneath our feet. Henrietta screamed, a sound I hadn't heard in years.

We bolted, bursting through the front door with a small contingent of other level-headed kids...

... Just in time to see the lights.

Blue ones, white ones, all coming up from either side of the street. Police lights.

**“Who looks outside, dreams;
who looks inside, awakes.”**

Carl Jung

Chapter Three



Energy

With a quick, almost practiced yank, I hoisted Henrietta into motion and we shot off behind the Quill house. Its bastion of protective shadow kept us out of the flashing lights until we reached the surrounding woods; an obvious hiding spot, but as the only one sober enough to make decisions, I saw no choice but for us to barrel toward the trees.

The woods screamed with wind and terrorized life as a tiny tremor shook under our feet. My blood turned as cold as the wind. Our breaths curled around our faces in puffs.

“Wait!” Henrietta finally found her voice, and pulled her arm out of my grasp. She tumbled to the ground, still too drunk to keep balance on her own.

I skidded to a stop and spun around. My chest rose and fell in spastic rhythm. “What are you doing?” I hissed, my throat raw.

“Me?” She made a gagging sound and propped up on her wrists. “What are *you* doing?! I don’t understand, I... We were having fun...”

I let out a long breath and ran my hand through my mop of sweaty hair. I stepped closer to her and knelt down, this time offering my hand instead of forcing her to take it.

“Yeah, well,” I said. Henrietta laced her fingers through mine and I helped her to her feet.

“Party’s over.”

Henrietta turned her head over her shoulder and gaped at the alternating lights and shadows. The blinking lights from the house reflected on small leaves, but they’d dwindled to a faded glow instead of a glare.

I flicked on my phone’s flashlight, shining it against the trees in the opposite direction. Birds screamed in response and flapped their wings in fright, and my dull light only glimmered off the wet surfaces of trees and slop.

“Good idea,” Henrietta said, pulling out her own phone. “Oh, wait, I should tweet this.”

I took her arm and tugged. “Twitter will be there when we get back to the house. Let’s keep moving.”

Henrietta nodded and turned on her light. “I don’t have a signal anyway.”

“Seriously?” I eyed her screen, then mine. No bars. “I didn’t realize Bethany lived this far out.”

Panic slithered into my brain but I forced cold, clear air into my lungs to slice through. Henrietta turned her light up and across my eyes to aim it over my shoulder, illuminating grass and sludge. “Is that the way to town?”

I blinked away the spots on my vision. “One way to find out.”

Henrietta looped her arm through mine. Our little lights bobbed along as we picked our way, slow and careful, through the trees and mud. I checked my phone for service as we went, and every time it tightened a knot of dread in my stomach. As the sounds and lights of the party faded into the night, I let go of Henrietta to cup my hand around my mouth.

“Hello?” I half-yelled.

Henrietta snatched my hand back and hissed, “I thought we were being sneaky!”

“Well, maybe we’re not the only ones who got away.”

“Good thinking,” she squeezed my hand. “You always know what to do.”

A dry chuckle slipped out of me. “I’m not even sure this is the right way, or how much further it is to town.”

“Maybe that way?” Henrietta pointed.

I adjusted her aim a bit to her left. “Let’s try *that* way.”

We started again as I tried calling out again. The song of the swamp was the only answer I got.

My flashlight beam flickered and dimmed. I groaned under my breath and opened the flip-phone to see a blinking red battery symbol.

“You didn’t charge up at the house?”

“Unless someone had a charger from 1993 lying around, I didn’t have a choice,” I huffed out a breath. “Besides, it was over half when we left. The flashlight must really be...”

Then, I saw a light. A flash in my periphery, between trees, but more than enough to stifle my racing heart. I closed my phone.

“Bella?”

I turned my head. “Hello? Is someone there?”

Nothing. With the birds already scared away, the only response was a low rumble of thunder on the horizon.

I deflated. “Come on, this way.”

Henrietta stumbled behind me to keep up as our arms unlinked. I caught my shoulder against tree trunks and branches smashed against my face, staring past the darkness to find any speck of light that brought me closer and closer.

The swamp sprawled under us. Was it closer or further from home?

Another burst of light faded in and out like a reverse blink. A flashlight between the trees! Someone heard me after all! My feet slipped on the mud at first, but I figured out how to run anyway.

“Bella? Wait up!” Henrietta’s voice wavered from the shadows behind me.

“Hey! Hey, I’m here!”

My cry echoed within an empty clearing I stumbled into. No search parties, no flashlights. But I was hardly alone.

The air was split apart, peeled back to reveal its bones; a mass of undulating light, strewn with flecks of glitter passing through it. Wisps of painted air curled out from it, wrapped around trees and disappeared into the wind, gold and green and white wove through the light and splayed like the reflection of a prism.

I picked a few careful steps along the dry dirt, moving only to fill my need to be close to it. Something strong, magnetic, hypnotizing, and somehow familiar pulled at me from within.

Fever spiked along my body, dense as stone. This was what surged inside of me when I was driving, when I saw Dillon and Michelle, and after he kissed me at the party.

I stilled. For a moment, I'd nearly forgotten about getting home. Above, the sky rumbled with another peal of thunder. A reminder and warning. But maybe there was hope. This light, this power could help me, show me the path to take me home.

I stretched my hand out and eased it through the space...

Until a fraction of it vanished, swept into my palm. The light penetrated straight into my veins like an electric shock. Yet, my muscles didn't lock up, my eyes didn't go blind, my system didn't overload. In fact, it filled in a part of me that I didn't know was hollow before. This power pulsed with my heartbeat, leaked into my nerves, my skin, turned the gears in my mind.

I lifted my eyes to the sky, each star clear enough to count between the branches and the gathering dome of clouds. The storm encroached faster, now.

I focused on the light inside me, and my strange power leaked out of my pores. Tiny beads of the same stuff danced along the slightest breeze and rose up around me in a circle. I watched after them in awe, the energy radiating from them that glowed with a bluish light with tiny tendrils of effervescent light-smoke pooling around themselves.

Light. Pure shards of captured light.

"Bella?" Henrietta's voice carried from what felt like another world. "Bella, is that you?"

The bodies of light in the clearing shuddered above me. The air folded like fabric and the light body closed on itself, then it all winked out and exploded in an inferno at the edges of the clearing.

The flames sucked the air from my lungs and buckled my knees. The loss of the light and power crushed me like a weight. I tumbled forward in a heap.

Sweat broke along my brow, the chill of the night replaced with the intense heat of the flame as it pulled closer to me. I lifted my hand to cover my face and watering eyes from the glare and dancing heat. Dry air raked my throat and nostrils, keeping me from screaming for help.

The air shimmered against the fire's wake and tore again in a bright flash.

A silhouette appeared amid the flames. A man, tall and thin. I reached for him, and he clamped a powerful hand around my arm. Tongues of flame glowed across his angular face as his eyes flashed and landed on me. "You!"

My breath caught in my throat. I pushed onto my feet and turned to run - but jerked to a stop when my arm twisted painfully. He pulled me against his chest and squeezed me tight around my shoulders. "Don't make another move!" He sneered, his features turning angry.

I cried out, but the sound vanished. Just like I did.