

Chapter 1

The sharp squeal of brakes cut through the subway station, a discordant melody of metal against metal that reverberated through Clara Valenwood's already aching head. The fluorescent lights buzzed faintly ~~overhead~~, casting a cold, sterile glow on the surging crowd as it surged forward. Clara ~~adjusted the strap of her tote bag~~, narrowly ~~sidestepping~~ sidestepped a puddle of spilled coffee on the cracked platform.

The air was a stale blend of burnt pretzels, damp metal, and too many bodies crammed into too small a space. New York City's relentless rhythm pulsed around her, each second demanding urgency. She adjusted ~~tugged~~ the strap of her tote bag ~~higher~~, the fabric of her scrubs pulling against her shoulder.

~~Just another day!~~ chose this.

~~The thought echoed through her mind, a flimsy tether to normalcy. Clara had to remind herself of this several times a day. No one had forced her to move from her small town in Ohio to New York City. The overwhelm she felt was surely just the growing pains of adapting to a new life, and someday it would fade.~~

The doors hissed open, and the crowd pushed forward. Clara followed the momentum, her fingers wrapping around a cold metal pole as she stepped into ~~onto~~ the train. The doors sealed with a ~~final~~, claustrophobic thud.

~~Her phone buzzed in her hand.~~ The glow of her phone ~~the~~ screen became a small barrier between her and the press of people around her. News, weather, missed calls. All routine. She scrolled absently, her thumb moving faster than her thoughts, until a notification caught her eye ~~a notification appeared at the top of the screen~~.

Dad:

Hope you got the package! You'll know what to do.

Her brow creased. *The package?*

She sifted through her memory—the stack of unopened mail on her kitchen counter, left to the wayside in the scramble of twelve-hour shifts. Bills, ads, ~~and~~ flyers. Nothing stood out. A flicker of unease stirred, but she brushed it aside and typed out a quick response.

She quickly typed back:

Clara:

On my way to work. I'll check later.

Commented [MS1]: Revisit depending on later happenings - at this point is her life normal or not?

Commented [MS2]: Putting this here because the original lines implied that Clara was not already feeling like her life was normal - which would be fine except that everything that came after seemed to take her by surprise. Unless she means the dreams are what she needs to be tethered to normalcy from?

This also gives a little more background/personality - but obviously I'm just guessing so it may be completely wrong for what you had in mind.

Her father's reply came almost immediately.

Dad:

Take care, sweetheart. Remember, you're a Valenwood.

A small, weary smile tugged at her lips. Her father's sayings were always laced with that same air of mystery—reminders of a family history she never fully understood.

The train jolted ~~forward~~around a corner, and Clara tightened her grip on the pole. Her reflection flashed briefly in the dark subway window. ~~Dark-Dusky~~ brown eyes, framed by long lashes, stared back at her, rimmed with the telltale shadows of sleepless nights. Her hair, a cascade of dark brown waves, was hastily pulled into a loose ponytail, though a few rebellious strands had escaped, framing her petite face. At just five foot one, she often felt dwarfed by the city's towering presence.

Commented [MS3]: Just to avoid another "dark" from the sentences before and after

As the train swayed, she lost her balance slightly, her shoulder bumping into the man beside her.

"Sorry," she mumbled, pulling back quickly.

He grunted, barely glancing up from his phone. "Watch it," he muttered, ~~shifting away~~.

Clara exhaled through her nose, a sigh she kept to herself. Just another drop in the bucket of New York indifference.

The train rattled on, and outside the window, graffiti-tagged walls blurred past in ~~fleeting~~-flashes of color. Around her, the other passengers remained locked in their own worlds—a businessman adjusting his tie, a teenager scrolling through ~~music~~-playlists, a mother balancing a toddler on her hip.

Just another nurse. Just another commuter. Another thread in the city's endless tapestry. ~~Her mind wandered back to her father's text: what was in the package, and what was she supposed to do with it?~~

The train began to slow, the brakes screeching their familiar protest. ~~As the doors opened, a rush of cool autumn air swept in, tinged with the scent of fallen leaves.~~ Clara stepped out, merging with the flow of people ascending the stairs. The world above them pulsed with life—horns blaring, lights flashing, and the steady hum of a city that never slept.

The package could wait.

Patients couldn't.

The automatic doors of Brookhaven Manor Nursing Home slid open with a faint whoosh, trading the sharp bite of ~~the~~ fall air for the warmth inside. The familiar scent of antiseptic, lavender air

freshener, and freshly brewed coffee wrapped around Clara ~~Valenwood~~-like a well-worn ~~leak~~coat. The soft hum of early morning activity filled the halls—muted conversations, the rustle of charts, and the faint clink of medical equipment.

She adjusted the strap of her bag and took a steadying breath. *Another twelve-hour shift.* Just thinking about it made her shoulders ache.

At the nurse's station, Sophie, ~~the night shift nurse~~, greeted Clara with a weary smile. The dark circles under Sophie's eyes mirrored Clara's own ~~exhaustion~~. ~~The night nurse had probably been counting down the seconds until Clara came to relieve her; Clara certainly did the same when her shift came to an end. Clara glanced at the clock on the wall—5:57 AM. Just on time.~~

"Morning, Clara," Sophie said, pushing a few loose strands of red hair from her forehead. She handed Clara a clipboard. "I've got the night report for you. Everything's pretty routine, except for Mrs. ~~Alira~~-Alcott."

Clara's brow furrowed as she took the clipboard. "What happened with her?"

Sophie sighed, her eyes softening. "She was restless again. Kept murmuring about 'keys' and 'the veil.' She seemed more... agitated than usual. You might want to check on her first."

Clara's fingers tightened around the clipboard. The cryptic phrases tugged at her memory, mingling with the ~~dreamy~~ remnants of her restless nights. She forced a small smile. "Thanks, Sophie. Get some sleep, okay?"

Sophie laughed lightly, though it sounded hollow. "You too. One of these days."

With a nod, Clara turned down the hallway. The polished linoleum gleamed under the soft lights, and muted paintings of ~~autumn~~-landscapes lined the walls. Each door she passed held the quiet weight of lives reduced to routines and memories.

She stopped in front of Room 112B. The air around the door felt heavier, almost expectant. For reasons she couldn't quite explain, a shiver of intrigue always ran down her spine when she paused here.

She knocked gently before pushing the door open. Morning light filtered through the half-drawn blinds, ~~easting-painting~~ long ~~slants-stripes of sun~~ across the cozy room. Plants clustered along the windowsill, their leaves stretching toward the pale sunlight. Faded photographs in mismatched frames cluttered the nightstand, each one a frozen memory.

In the center of it all, ~~Mrs.~~-Alira Alcott sat propped up by pillows. Her silver hair was braided neatly, though a few wisps had escaped.

Clara's smile ~~d-softened~~. "Good morning, Mrs. Alcott."

Mrs. Alcott's gaze lifted, and her lips curled into a sly smile. "Ah, my favorite nurse has come to visit. Or should I say, *Guardian of the Valenwood legacy*?"

Clara chuckled, though her smile wavered slightly. "You've been reading too many fantasy novels again."

"Perhaps," Mrs. Alcott said, her voice a papery whisper tinged with mischief. She reached out a trembling hand, and Clara took it gently. The skin felt thin and cool, the veins like delicate lines tracing forgotten stories.

Mrs. Alcott's eyes glinted with something deeper. "Names are never just names, dear. You're special, you know. A Valenwood."

Clara's stomach twisted. Her father's text from earlier echoed in her mind: *Remember, you're a Valenwood*. She shook it off, keeping her voice light. "You and my dad would get along great ~~with the family sayings.~~"

But Mrs. Alcott didn't laugh. Her fingers tightened around Clara's hand, a surprising strength in her grip. "The veil is thinner than you think."

Clara stilled. She knew dementia could make people say strange things—but it didn't make moments like this any easier.

~~She forced a smile~~ This time, Clara forced her smile. "You should try to rest, Mrs. Alcott. I'll be here to check on you later."

Mrs. Alcott's gaze softened, her eyes drifting to the window, where the sunlight seemed less bright than ~~before~~ just moments ago. She let go of Clara's hand. "There isn't much time, child. You'll understand soon enough."

Clara stayed quiet. *It must be hard*, she thought, *living with a mind that wandered in and out like that*. The thought left her ~~strangely sad~~ morose.

"Let's get you comfortable," Clara said, ~~her~~ voice barely above a whisper. She adjusted the blankets with slow, careful hands. Mrs. Alcott's eyes fluttered closed, her breathing soft and uneven.

Clara lingered for a moment, watching the rise and fall of her chest. The words still ~~echoed~~ repeated in her head.

The veil is thinner than you think.

She let out a quiet breath and straightened, brushing a loose strand of hair behind her ear. As she turned to leave, she glanced back at Mrs. Alcott, unsure why those words lingered the way they did.

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The door clicked softly shut behind her. But the conversation followed her, quiet and persistent, all the way down the hall.

The bell above the door chimed ~~softly~~ as Clara stepped into Penny's Brew. The warmth of the café wrapped around her, a welcome contrast to the chilly night air. Inside, golden string lights crisscrossed the ceiling, casting a gentle glow over the mismatched wooden tables and fogged-up windows. The smell of baked bread, cocoa, and ~~something sweet~~ vanilla lingered in the air. Outside, a strong wind blew trash down the sidewalk and a group of yelling teenagers congregated on a stoop, but Penny's Brew was like a different world: clean, cozy, and quiet.

Malrik spotted her first. "Finally," he said, waving her over. "I thought I'd have to come find you and drag you here myself."

She smiled despite her exhaustion and made her way to their usual booth. Malrik was already sprawled across the bench seat, his long legs stretched out under the table. His dark hair was tousled ~~like he'd run a hand through it on the way over~~, and his black-rimmed glasses sat slightly crooked on his nose. The corner of his mouth tugged into a lopsided grin, his gray eyes crinkling ~~with amusement~~.

"You're lucky I came," Clara said, dropping her tote bag with a soft thud. "My legs gave me at least three different ~~warnings-excuses~~ on the way here."

"That's why I didn't wait for your next day off. I knew you'd find a reason to bail."

Clara slid into the seat across from him. A warm ceramic mug was already waiting for her, steam curling gently from the top.

"Hot chocolate," he said, nudging it toward her. "And yes, I got the one with the marshmallows. Because I care."

"You're too good to me," she said, wrapping her chilled fingers around the mug. There was the faintest prickle of pain as the heat seeped into them.

They chatted a bit—about work, the usual city chaos, and whatever else came to mind—until Malrik leaned down and pulled a small white box from under the table.

"Happy post-birthday," he said, placing it in front of her.

Clara blinked. "You didn't have to—"

"I did," he said simply. "You're twenty-one. I'm not letting that go unmarked."

Inside the box was a tiny chocolate cupcake with a single candle. He lit it with a match, the small flame flickering between them.

Commented [MS4]: I would possibly expand their conversation a bit before jumping to move on - give a better sense of Clara's personality besides liking hot chocolate, being a nurse, and not particularly liking NYC. If Malrik will be a key player, good to also know how they know each other, how long, etc.

Commented [MS5]: How long ago was her birthday? This casts the package in a new light - would she think it was a birthday gift?

Commented [MS6]: A line here about Clara being unusual for not wanting to party it up for her 21st? Gentle teasing.

"Make a wish," he said.

Clara stared at the candle for a second. Her thoughts scrambled to settle on something—rest, maybe a vacation, maybe something... bigger. Something more. She wasn't sure what that meant yet, and surprised herself by even thinking of it. Usually, she only wished for an extra hour of sleep; even better if it was actual sleep, rather than the tossing and turning that made up most of her nights.

She blew the candle out.

Malrik gave a satisfied nod. "There. Now it's official."

She laughed softly. "Thanks, Mal. Really."

"Anytime," he said, and for a while, the two of them just sat there, talking between bites of cupcake and sips of hot chocolate, their little corner of the café lit with soft light and familiar comfort.

Clara unlocked the door to her small studio apartment, the comforting scent of cinnamon and old paper welcoming her home. The place was modest and compact, nestled in one of New York City's more affordable neighborhoods. A far cry from the glitz of Manhattan, the area had a gritty charm that suited her just fine—bustling streets, car horns, corner bodegas, and the steady hum of life beneath her fire escape. that never seemed to sleep.

She dropped her tote bag onto the entryway bench, the soft thud echoing through the quiet space. The sun had long set, and the glow of city lights filtered through the blinds, casting dim, slanted shadows across the walls. She'd only lived here for a few months, having moved in right after graduation to start her first nursing first job at Brookhaven Manor. The space was a mix of cozy clutter and lived-in charm, filled with remnants of her life carefully packed and transported from her hometown in Ohio. ;

The apartment was a mix of cozy clutter and lived-in charm. a small stack of paperbacks leaned precariously on the coffee table. a knitted throw—her mother's handiwork—was draped over the couch, and a half-empty mug of cold tea sat beside her laptop on the kitchen counter. The remnants of a busy life, moments paused and waiting for her to catch up return.

She toed off her sneakers, wincing as the cool wooden floor met at her tired-aching feet. The hum of the radiator filled the silence, fighting the chill seeping in from the windows.

Her gaze landed on the small pile of mail on the kitchen counter, where the sharp corners of unopened envelopes peeked out. Bills, ads, and one small, brown package with familiar handwriting.

Her heart gave a small, unexpected jolt. Somehow, she'd forgotten about her father's strange text: ~~h~~Hope you got the package! You'll know what to do.

. She couldn't believe she hadn't remembered bringing the package in with the rest of the mail, or that she wouldn't have opened it right away. And yet, there it was.

~~Hope you got the package! You'll know what to do.~~

~~Her father's text echoed in her mind. She stepped closer, She brushed her~~ fingers ~~brushing~~ over the rough paper, the inked letters of her name unmistakably his: *Clara Valenwood*.

~~Her fingers traced the familiar handwriting before~~ She carefully ~~peeling-peeled~~ away the packing tape. Inside, nestled in soft tissue paper, something caught the kitchen light—a pendant on a delicate golden chain.

Clara lifted it for a closer look. The pendant was about an inch long, a teardrop-shaped crystal capped with intricate goldwork. Strange symbols spiraled across its surface, flowing into each other like a language ~~she couldn't read~~. The craftsmanship was exquisite, each line etched so finely it seemed almost to shimmer.

She frowned. The crystal felt... warm. Not hot ~~or uncomfortable~~, but a brief, unexpected warmth, as if the pendant was greeting her. Then, just as quickly, it cooled against her skin.

She turned it under the light, wondering if she was just imagining things. Maybe it was the exhaustion or the ~~odd~~ weight of the day ~~lingering-clouding in~~ her mind.

Beneath the tissue paper, she found a handwritten note ~~written in her father's steady hand~~:

"You're 21 now, Clara. This pendant has been in our family for generations. Keep it close—it's more important than you know. Love, Dad."

With a sigh, she let the note flutter back into the box. Her fingers closed around the pendant again. The crystal was cool now, ~~as though~~ whatever warmth she'd felt before ~~had~~ vanished ~~with her imagination along with the mystery of the package. It was just like Dad to send her a family heirloom and act like it was magic. She smiled at his unpredictable predictability.~~

She unclasped the chain and fastened it around her neck. The crystal settled just below her collarbone, the weight of it unfamiliar, ~~a silent question she couldn't answer~~. She touched it once more, half-expecting a reaction—but there was nothing. Of course there was nothing.

She shook her head and slipped the pendant beneath her shirt, trying not to dwell on it.

But as she turned off the kitchen light and headed for bed, a faint unease curled in her chest. The pendant rested quietly against her skin, ~~its presence a a silent question she couldn't answer~~ lingering reminder that some mysteries couldn't be brushed aside so easily. A reminder that, perhaps, some mysteries couldn't be brushed aside as easily as Clara thought.

The distant hum of the city faded to a low murmur as Clara lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. Her studio apartment was cloaked in shadows, the occasional flicker of headlights from the street below casting brief flashes of light across the walls. ~~Outside her window, the city never slept—horns blared, sirens wailed, and the steady rhythm of New York continued without pause. The city never stopped moving.~~

~~b~~But in here, everything felt still.

Clara shifted under the covers, the pendant's chain pressing against her neck. The weight of the day clung to her shoulders, but sleep hovered just out of reach. Her mind wandered back to her father's note, to Mrs. Alcott's cryptic words, and to the unsettling feeling that something was just beyond her understanding, waiting to be discovered.

She exhaled slowly, letting her eyelids drift shut.

The world around her shifted.

She found herself standing in a forest bathed in silver light. The air was crisp, carrying a faint scent of pine and rain. Ethereal trees stretched toward the sky, their branches shimmering with a soft luminescence, as though they were woven from threads of moonlight. Leaves of gold and emerald fluttered down around her, gliding weightlessly before vanishing into mist.

Clara took a step forward, the ground beneath her feet springy. The forest was silent, ~~yet but~~ not empty. The silence thrummed with possibility, with secrets held just ~~beyond her~~ out of reach.

A faint whisper floated through the air.

"Clara..."

The voice was soft, melodic, threading through the stillness like a breeze. She turned, searching for the source, her heart pounding. The trees seemed to lean closer, their glowing branches forming a tunnel that stretched deeper into the forest. Light pooled at the end of the tunnel, warm and inviting.

"Come... find me..."

The whisper grew clearer, tugging at her chest. She felt a strange pull, as if the ~~very~~ air around her wanted her to move forward. Her feet obeyed, carrying her along the luminous path, her breath caught between curiosity and fear.

She reached the end of the tunnel, where the light grew blinding. The pendant around her neck began to burn, its warmth intensifying into a searing heat.

"Clara..."

The voice called once more, urgent now, tinged with a plea.

She stepped into the light—

Clara's eyes flew open, a gasp tearing from her throat.

The room was dark again, the familiar shadows of her apartment settling around her. Her chest heaved as she tried to steady her breath, her heart ~~hammering like~~ a frantic drum.

She sat up, her fingers fumbling for the bedside lamp. The soft glow of the bulb banished the darkness, but it couldn't chase away the remnants of the dream—the forest, the voice, the blinding light. Her skin prickled with residual cold, as though she'd truly walked through that otherworldly ~~place~~forest.

Her ~~gaze~~hands reached for the pendant resting on her collarbone, lifting it so she could see it clearly. ~~It was warm again, an oddly comforting thrum~~heat, that sent a ripple of unease through her. The crystal glowed faintly, a pale golden light swirling within its depths, before fading back to stillness. ~~The warmth faded, too, leaving her holding something inert—but not quite lifeless. A trickle of unease made its way through Clara's body.~~

~~She reached out with trembling fingers, touching the crystal. It was warm again, an oddly comforting thrum that sent a ripple of unease through her.~~

What is happening to me?

The whisper from the dream echoed in her mind: *Come... find me...*

A chill danced along her spine. She glanced out the window at the city beyond, its relentless lights ~~unwavering~~, indifferent to whatever strange thing was happening inside her small apartment.

Swallowing hard, she pressed the pendant to her chest, the metal cool beneath her palm. ~~For the first time, t~~The weight of the pendant felt heavier—like it carried something far greater than an old family tradition.

She shivered and lay back down, pulling the covers up to her chin. Sleep, when it finally came, was restless and tangled in unanswered questions.

~~The familiar scent of antiseptic and lavender greeted Clara as she stepped through the sliding doors of Brookhaven Manor.~~ The chill of the fall morning still clung to ~~her~~Clara's scrubs when she entered Brookhaven Manor, greeted by the sharp, astringent lavender scent that had become familiar. ~~—and t~~The weight of last night's ~~dream~~ sat heavy in her mind. The whisper—*"Come... find me..."*—~~resounded~~echoed in the corners of her thoughts, shadowing every movement. She hadn't taken the pendant off yet, though she wasn't sure why.

Commented [MS7]: I believe in the other version you sent it says that she has this as a recurring dream, which I thought would still be the case as above it references her not sleeping well. This makes it seem like an anomaly. Is there another reason for the sleeplessness that we will get into?

She shook her head, forcing herself to focus. Dreams didn't matter in the light of day; ~~h~~Her patients did. Clara had gone into nursing because she wanted her life to be more than the sum of its parts. She made a difference in her patients' lives, even if that difference was at the very end. She was glad to have something bigger than herself to care about each day, and funneled her energy into that instead of ruminating on her father's strange gift and the even-stranger dream that had followed.

"Morning, Clara!" Tony called as he wheeled a cart of linens past her.

"Morning, Tony," she replied, managing a small smile.

The hallway bustled with the usual sounds—murmured conversations, shuffling feet, the occasional cough. But something felt wrong. The air was thicker today, tinged with an ~~unnatural~~~~spoken~~ dread that prickled at the edge of her awareness.

Her gut clenched as she reached Room 112B, Mrs. Alcott's room. The door was slightly ajar, the light inside dim. Clara pushed it open gently and stepped inside.

Mrs. Alcott lay in bed, her frail frame barely making a dent in the blankets. Her breathing was shallow, each rise and fall of her chest a struggle. The lines on her face seemed etched deeper today, her skin pallid under the muted glow of the bedside lamp. The vibrant spark that always danced in her eyes was gone, replaced by a fading light that made Clara's heart twist ~~painfully~~.

She quickly checked her vital signs. Her pulse was faint, her breathing dangerously slow. A cold wave of panic ~~rose~~~~stirred~~ in ~~Clara's~~~~her~~ chest.

~~Clara's~~~~Her~~ hand shot out, pressing the call light on the wall. ~~A small, soft glow indicated the signal had been sent for assistance.~~

"Mrs. Alcott?" Clara's voice was soft but edged with urgency. She gently touched the older woman's shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

Mrs. Alcott's eyelids fluttered, her dull gaze struggling to focus. But when she saw Clara, a flicker of recognition sparked ~~to life~~. Her ~~frail~~~~thin~~, papery hand reached out, trembling. Clara took it without hesitation, the ~~frailty~~~~thin~~ ~~of the~~ fingers a stark reminder of life's fragility.

"Clara," Mrs. Alcott whispered, her voice barely more than a breath. "You came."

"Of course I did," Clara said, squeezing her hand gently. "I'm here. I'm not going anywhere."

Mrs. Alcott's grip tightened with a strength Clara couldn't understand given her state~~with surprising strength~~, her eyes suddenly sharp and filled with urgency. "You must listen... protect the key."

Clara's heart pounded, dread coiling in her chest, the pendant feeling sharp on her collarbone. *Her vitals are dropping too fast.* She swallowed hard, the clinical side of her brain fighting to

take over. "I need to call the doctor," she said, her voice tight, and she started to turn toward the door.

But Mrs. Alcott's fingers clutched her hand with that same unexpected force, holding her in place.

"No!" Mrs. Alcott's voice was a raspy croak, but the desperation in it froze Clara in place. "There's no time... It's too late for me, dear." She took a shuddering breath. "The veil... must not fall."

The veil... must not fall. The phrase hung in Clara's mind like a storm cloud, heavy with an impending threat she couldn't name. What does she mean? And why did those three words feel like a shield against something terrifying?

Clara's breath caught, her mind racing. She knew Mrs. Alcott was DNR—Do Not Resuscitate. The paperwork was signed, clear, unchangeable. Even if her instincts screamed at her to do something, she couldn't. This was Mrs. Alcott's choice. But was this how Mrs. Alcott imagined her last moments? Clawing at Clara's hand, fighting with her final breaths to make her understand—and failing? Was this really what she wanted? The acceptance in her eyes, the peace within the struggle—it was what she wanted.

~~The veil... must not fall. The phrase hung in Clara's mind like a storm cloud, heavy with an impending threat she couldn't name. What does she mean? And why did those three words feel like a shield against something terrifying?~~

A cold chill raced down Clara's spine. If nothing else, she would make Mrs. Alcott feel heard as she went. That some part of Clara needed to know was secondary. At least, that is what Clara told herself. "I don't understand. What veil?"

Mrs. Alcott's gaze softened, her eyes glistening with something that looked like resignation. "You're a Valenwood. You'll know." With a trembling hand, she reached beneath her pillow and pulled out a small, ornate box, her fingers barely able to hold onto it.

"For you," she whispered, pressing the box into Clara's hand. "Keep it safe."

Clara held it carefully. She frowned. The box was warm—warmer than it should've been. Not just from touch. Warmer than her own skin.

~~She frowned.~~ The surface felt smooth and solid, faint patterns etched along the top. They shimmered for a moment, then faded.

First the pendant. Now this.

Something about it didn't feel like it was of the same earth as Clara's scrubs, or the plants on the windowsill, or the cars outsideordinary.

"Mrs. Alcott?" Clara's voice trembled. "Alira?"

But Mrs. Alcott's fingers went limp, her eyes drifting closed as her chest rose one last time, then fell still.

A piercing ache settled in Clara's chest. The silence that followed felt unbearable, like a chasm opening beneath her feet.

Clara swallowed hard, her throat tight. *She's gone. And I can't change that.* The weight of honoring Mrs. Alcott's wishes pressed on her heart, though it did little to ease the grief.

Another nurse entered quietly, drawn by the call light. She glanced at Mrs. Alcott and then at Clara, confusion furrowing her brow. Understanding settled in and softened her voice. Her voice softened, understanding the emotion etched on Clara's face. "I'm sorry. I know you're fond of her. I'll take care of it. You should step outside."

Clara hesitated, her professional instincts warring with the grief in her chest. She nodded, her lips pressed tightly together.

Everything felt distant, muffled, like she was underwater.

She whispered a shaky goodbye, clutching the box to her chest.

The night air was colder than usual, slicing through Clara's scrubs even beneath her coat. Her fingers curled tightly around the strap of her tote bag, the small box Mrs. Alcott had given her nestled deep inside. The city lights flickered and buzzed, casting long, jagged shadows onto the cracked sidewalks.

Something wasn't right.

She had just gotten off the train a few blocks back, her steps slower than usual. The weight of the day pressed heavily on her shoulders. She'd texted Malik earlier, something short and vague: *Rough day. Feel strange.* He'd replied, asking if she was okay, but she hadn't responded. The weight of the day was too much to explain right then. She'd planned to text him back once she got home.

The usual hum of the city seemed subdued, like the streets were holding their breath. The rhythmic thud of her sneakers against the pavement felt louder than it should. Clara pulled her coat tighter around her, the hem brushing just above her knees. The chill still managed to sneak under the fabric, prickling her skin.

She glanced up at the half-moon, its light barely cutting through the low-hanging clouds. The trees lining the sidewalk rustled, their skeletal branches swaying with an eerie rhythm.

She quickened her pace.

It's just the grief, she told herself. The exhaustion. The weirdness of the day.

But a ~~veinprickle~~ of unease ran down her spine, one that had nothing to do with fatigue. She heard faint noises behind her—shifts of air, the rustling of something brushing against a surface. She glanced back over her shoulder.

Nothing.

Just empty sidewalks, parked cars, and pools of shadow.

She swallowed, her throat dry. Her heart hammered in her chest, the box in her bag growing heavier with each step.

She turned down a quieter street, her breath visible in the cold air. The streetlights flickered, some completely dark. The shadows seemed thicker here, stretching out as if trying to grab her.

Just a little farther, she thought. Almost home.

Movement brushed the edge of her vision. She jerked her head around—nothing.

She stopped abruptly, her ears straining.

A ~~coolhill~~ draft brushed the back of her neck, feather-light and wrong. The sensation of being watched grew sharper, pressing on her like a weight she couldn't shake.

Her voice trembled. "Hello? Who's there?"

Silence. The kind that buzzed with tension.

Her eyes darted over the empty street, every parked car and doorway suddenly menacing. A dark figure shifted near an alley entrance, just out of the reach of the streetlight. Clara's chest tightened. The figure didn't move closer, but it didn't retreat either.

She took a step back, her fingers trembling as she clutched the strap of her bag.

Run. Every instinct screamed at her.

Just as she took a shaky step backward, a voice behind her broke the tension.

"Clara!"

She jumped, gasping as she spun around. Malik was there. He stepped out of the shadows, his tall frame a solid presence against the night, his dark hair ~~windswepttousled~~ and ~~his~~ eyes

glinting behind his glasses. His coat flared slightly as he walked forward, ~~the dark fabric~~ making him seem even taller.

Relief flooded through her. "Malrik," she breathed. She didn't know why Malrik was there, but she was glad he was.

He frowned, his gaze darting between her and the shadows. "Are you okay? What's going on?"

Before she could answer, Malrik's eyes snapped to the figure in the alley. His expression hardened. He took a step forward, his shoulders squared, his presence a shield.

"Hey!" he called, his voice sharp. "Who's there?"

The figure melted back into the shadows, the oppressive weight in the air lifting slightly. The ~~city~~alley seemed to breathe again, the alley empty and silent once more.

Malrik didn't move until the tension ebbed away. Then he turned back to Clara, his eyes narrowing. "Clara, what was that?" His voice was low, concerned. "And don't tell me it's nothing."

Her fingers tightened around the strap of her bag. She swallowed hard, her heart still racing.

"I don't know," she whispered, her voice trembling. "But something's happening, Malrik. And I don't know what to do."

He sighed and stepped closer, his hand resting lightly on her shoulder. The warmth of his touch was a stark contrast to the ~~cold~~ chill seeping into her bones. "You texted me you were feeling down. When you didn't reply, I figured I'd better check on you." His jaw tightened. "Good thing I did."

She nodded, the steady warmth of his hand grounding her. But the chill in her bones wouldn't fade.

Somewhere out there, in the dark, something was watching.