

LINDA KAO

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SAMPLER!

A CROOKED MARK

The only way to save a soul
is to make it burn.

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A CROOKED MARK

LINDA KAO

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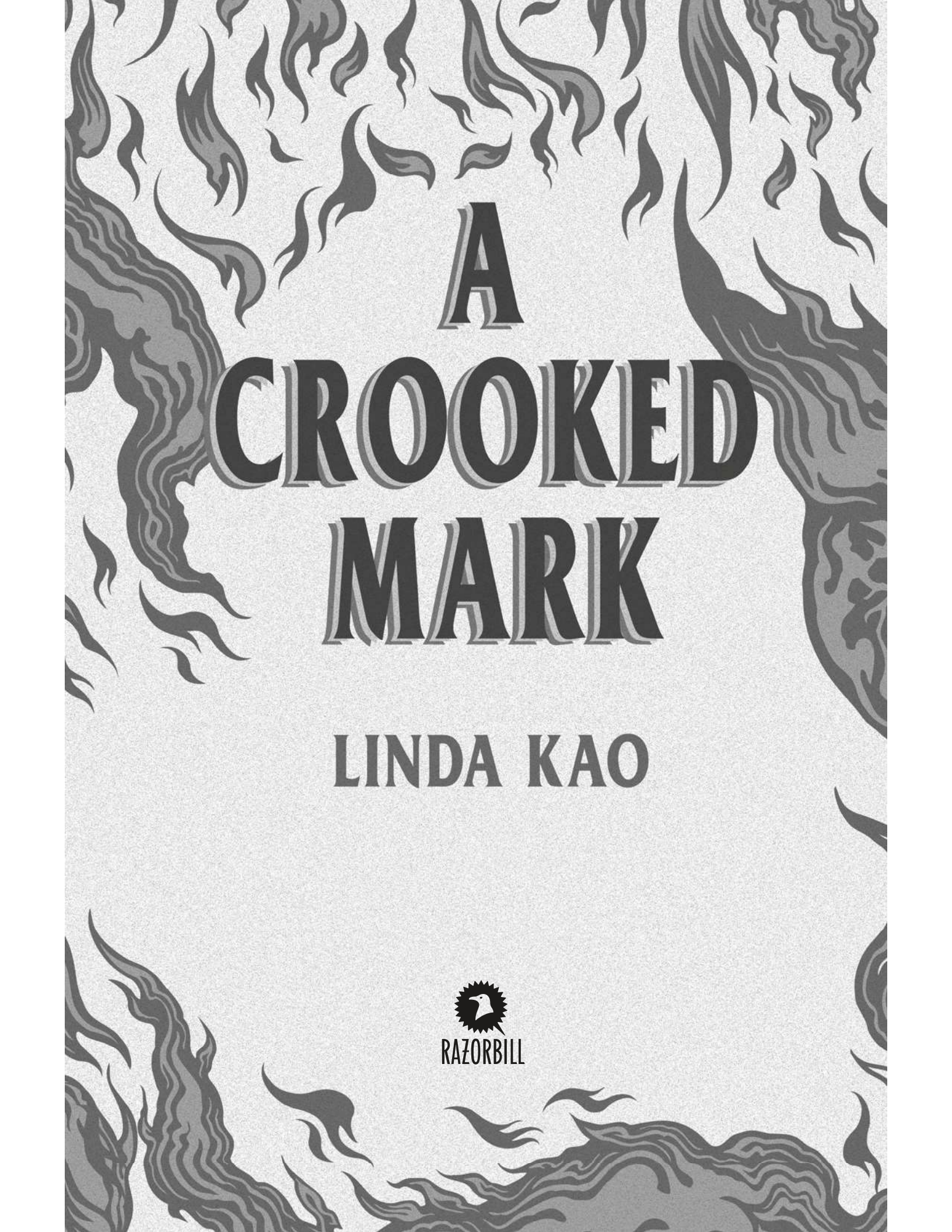
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For Emmie and Andrew
With all my love

**A
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MARK**

“The devil’s finest trick is to persuade you that
he does not exist.”

—Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*

CHAPTER

1

I don't know how it feels when the Devil scratches a soul. My father says He must have the lightest touch, because no one ever notices His crooked claw leave a stain on something that should belong only to them. They smile their old smiles, crack the same jokes, eat and play and work and laugh just as they used to, but the Mark festers inside, growing and feeding like a parasite. By the time anyone notices something is wrong, it's too late. Lucifer has already won.

Not tonight, though.

I brace myself in the passenger seat as the car bounces down the moonlit road. Dad killed the headlights a mile back, and if we hadn't driven this way hundreds of times before, we would have run straight into a tree by now. Yet nine months of careful work have given us plenty of hours to prepare. By the time we finished documenting sweet Mrs. Polly's chilling descent from lucky survivor of a restaurant explosion to heartless killer Marked by Lucifer, Dad had it all planned out.

The matches sit in the console between us.

My mouth turns sour as my stomach gives another heave, and I clamp my teeth together, waiting for it to pass. Nine

months of getting to know someone has a way of bleeding into an accidental friendship, making an already impossible job even harder. In the dim light, the determined line of Dad's jaw holds only cold certainty, but doubt shrieks at me like a knife on glass.

It's not easy to judge a soul.

I have to give Lucifer credit. There might not be any serpent in the tree or horned man with a pitchfork, but He's still banging on our door. He's just gotten a lot more creative. Clever bastard found a brand-new way to wreak havoc in the human world.

Accidents.

The semitruck bearing down on your car. The train you think you can beat across the tracks. The safety harness that snaps halfway up the mountain. One moment you're in this world, and then—

Bam!

Hello, afterlife.

There's a split second, however, when you aren't quite in either. You're right in the middle of the jump, eyes squeezed shut and both feet in the air, so you never see Lucifer extend a slender finger. It's a delicate scrape, the smallest Mark on your soul, and then He sends you back. You're alive, and everyone calls it a miracle, but God had nothing to do with it.

It's something much, much worse.

Of course, not everyone who survives an accident is Marked. Some people really do get lucky, but you can never tell the dif-

ference just by looking at them. The Marked appear as normal as you or me, and that jump from this world to the next makes anyone fair game. A life filled with kindness and charity offers no protection. No shield. If Lucifer feels like leaving His couch at the moment you ski into a tree, all bets are off, and no one knows whether luck or the Devil saved you in that second you nearly died.

I'm still not certain which saved Mrs. Polly. But Dad is.

The house comes into view—a modest cottage on the isolated road, the familiar porch swing motionless in the shadows. Blackness bleeds from sleeping windows, and the single light beside her door offers the only glow in the surrounding darkness. Dad turns off the engine, and silence falls like the thud of a gavel.

“Ready, Matthew?” he asks.

Not at all.

“Maybe we should give it more time.” I brace against the frown growing on Dad's face. “Just to be sure. She volunteered at the animal shelter yesterday—”

“And the sign over the door fell and crushed Jessa Barney's skull twenty minutes after she yelled at Mrs. Polly for driving too fast in the parking lot,” Dad finished. “If we had acted sooner, Jessa would still be alive.”

“The chains holding that sign were old. One had already broken, remember?” My voice rises, and I fight to steady it. “Jessa's family plans to sue the shelter for not fixing it sooner.”

“And it just happened to break the moment she stood under

it?” Dad shakes his head. “Matthew, we’ve been over this. You saw the changes.”

The deaths and injuries that surrounded Mrs. Polly these last months had filled the pages of my notebook and made Dad’s fingers tap faster each night. The accidents started small: Little George Winton fractured his arm after he left his skateboard lying out for Mrs. Polly to trip over, and Vicky Becerra slipped and fell off the stage as she went to collect her first-place ribbon for the blueberry pie that beat Mrs. Polly’s in the annual fair. But then the brakes of Edward Fisher’s car failed the day he insulted Mrs. Polly’s new hairstyle, and Marian Wong choked to death on her steak as she laughed at Mrs. Polly for toppling a stack of dishes. A few more bodies dropped, and when a flowerpot finally fell off a balcony and killed Eileen Patterson minutes after she shorted Mrs. Polly at the cash register, Dad knew.

“Too much coincidence,” he said, and I agreed. Verdict rendered.

But now . . .

I think of the afternoons spent in her kitchen, trying new recipes and sharing apple pie, and force my mouth open once more. “What if we missed something? A few more days, just to be sure—”

Dad interrupts. “I liked Elisabeth Polly too. But waiting will only make this harder.” He picks up the matches. “Time to go.”

My fingers dig into the seat, every part of me begging to turn the car around and drive home. But that’s not the job. The lessons that began almost a decade ago ring through my head,

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and the rule by which Dad lives—by which he taught me to live as well—incinerates any last objections.

When Lucifer Marks a soul and returns it to this world, all we can do is light the fire and make it burn.

We open the doors and climb out.

CHAPTER

2

I lean against the car, every breath a jagged inhale, but Dad doesn't seem to notice. He opens the trunk and takes out the bag he prepared for tonight.

"Play the clip if anyone comes," he instructs, referring to the coyote howl I recorded on my phone last week. Packs of them prowl the area, and the noise won't strike anyone as unusual. He steps away in silence, and time slows to a trickle.

I could call someone. The police. The fire department. They would come, sirens blaring, and I could get Dad away in time to save Mrs. Polly. The disturbance might raise alarms, making our work harder, but the alternative creeping closer with each passing second feels worse.

Surely another week of watching can't hurt. My fingers are clumsy, the humming in my head deafening, but I dial: 9-1—

And then it's too late.

An orange glow blooms behind the cottage windows, and my chest squeezes so tightly I can't breathe. The charred air hits me, churning my stomach and clogging my throat. Wood snaps in the rising heat, and growing flames lick the

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night as smoke seeps through cracks in the walls.

The screams begin.

I want to cover my ears, but I force myself to listen, straining to hear the smallest hint of what lurked under her skin. The voice might come from Mrs. Polly, but the woman I knew is already gone. All that burns tonight is the human husk Lucifer's Mark left after rotting another person from the inside out.

I listen so hard my ears throb, and all I hear is her.

Bile creeps up my throat, and every shriek sends an ice bath over my bones. Behind those singed stucco walls, Dad's smoldering cigarette must have ignited the couch, and those burning cushions torched the rug and curtains. The photographs of her grown son Mrs. Polly once showed me are now cinders, and her cozy kitchen table is nothing more than kindling. Trapped in her bedroom, the door wedged shut by the stopper Dad jammed beneath it, Mrs. Polly doesn't stand a chance. Her windows won't save her.

The glue I used to seal them shut had three days to dry.

A shadow moves, and Dad runs toward me. "All clear?" he pants.

It takes two tries before my jaw unclenches. "Clear."

We drive away with our headlights off, and I catch the sound of a distant siren cutting through the fire's roar. The neighbor must have called, though he won't come speeding over the ridge to check on Mrs. Polly anytime soon. A faulty spark plug has made certain of that. By the time the fire truck

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completes the eight-minute drive over the winding highway,
Dad and I will be long gone.

I rest my forehead against the window and listen for Mrs.
Polly, but the screams have stopped.

They always do.

CHAPTER

3

Streetlights flicker over the motel parking lot as I slip out the door for my morning run, leaving Dad snoring in bed. Pockets of darkness litter the road, and headlights from passing cars throw shadows across the pavement. Every step I take carries me a little further from the thoughts I can't shake, of smoke and fire and screams, though a quiet week has passed since the burning. We said goodbye to our neighbors and moved out of our apartment a few days ago, and not a police car was in sight as we crossed the town limits and kept going.

Nobody will ever miss us.

News outlets covered the tragedy briefly, always ending with a warning that smokers fully extinguish their cigarettes, and even Mrs. Polly's son who lived a few states away sadly acknowledged his mother could be forgetful. He was right, since I often helped her hunt for her misplaced glasses, but Mrs. Polly was actually quite good about her cigarettes.

"Don't want to leave these burning!" she told me a few months ago, cheerfully stubbing one out in the ashtray she kept on her counter.

It was how we got the idea in the first place.

The memory brings a whiff of smoke, so I push my legs faster until I'm flying over the sidewalk, lungs burning and brain bouncing with no room for thoughts or questions. I run until the sky lightens and my legs ache, and my mind finally clears.

When I return to the motel, I find Dad sitting at the desk, staring at his laptop and sipping coffee from a paper cup. Despite the fact we both pulled clothes from suitcases this morning, his outfit is crisp and pressed, while my T-shirt and shorts were a wrinkled mess even before my run. Mrs. Polly once joked I'm a younger, messier version of him, though he's blue-eyed and fair while I inherited half my genes from my Chinese mother. My eyes are brown, and I stand an inch taller than his skinny five-ten frame, which is crowned by a head of meticulously groomed gray hair. I've got a dark brown mop that refuses to stay in place.

"Not your looks," Mrs. Polly said, when I pointed all this out. "There's just something about the two of you. The professor and his apprentice, keeping secrets from the rest of us."

I laughed along as she placed a bowl of chicken and dumplings in front of me. She didn't mean it in a bad way, but I didn't know how to feel about it.

I still don't.

Dad's slight smile rises in greeting as he looks up at me. "How was the run, Matthew?"

"Fine." I fill a cup with water and gulp it down. "Feels good to get outside."

He nods. "The room's pretty cramped, but we won't be here much longer."

His words send a jolt through me, since any move out of this hotel will take us to our next project.

"No rush." I shrug as casually as I can. "It's not that bad."

He adjusts his wire-rimmed glasses, examining my face though he tries not to be obvious. "You sleep okay?"

"Yes," I lie. Mrs. Polly's screams haunted those dark hours, but sharing my nightmares will only invite more questions. Besides, from the way he eyes the elephant I started carving from a bar of soap around three this morning, he already knows. "What are you working on?"

"The final report for Elisabeth Polly." He picks up a black device lying beside the laptop, and I recognize the transmitter I fastened under Mrs. Polly's bed the month before we made our decision. The electronic bug hadn't yielded much—just that she suffered from insomnia—but restless sleep can be a sign of Lucifer. Though I suppose if that's all it takes, Dad would find me Marked as well.

Not him, though. He sleeps as well as always.

He slips the bug into his suitcase. "Almost done."

I stretch out on the mattress and reach for my knife. Dad gave me the blade years ago when I needed something to keep my hands busy during long stretches of surveillance, and my whittling soon graduated from sharpening sticks to shaping animals, complete with tusks and tails. My half-carved elephant leans against the framed photo that always sits at Dad's bedside—him, Mom, and me as a baby in her

arms—and I finish its trunk as he offers me the laptop.

“Want to see?” he asks.

No hangs on the tip of my tongue. After all, I know how the story ends, and it’s not the way I wanted. Instead, I nod, and approval flits across Dad’s face. My stomach clenches as I begin to read, but I scroll through months of careful work that inched us closer to the project until she called us friends.

I suppose I called her that too.

As usual, Dad’s documentation is thorough. Her baseline behaviors. The slow but terrible changes.

The burning.

Each neat bullet point showcases the descent that began nine months ago when Mrs. Polly walked away from a devastating oven explosion with hardly a burn. Her encounter with Lucifer would have been so fleeting she wouldn’t remember it, and since nothing suggests He stays to see the wreckage of His work, Lucifer likely continued along His merry way, leaving Mrs. Polly with a Mark on her soul and a new set of abilities. She couldn’t influence the living, but as the Mark within her grew, the objects in the physical world became her toys.

And Mrs. Polly played.

A brake cable, a piece of steak, a flowerpot—all it took was a simple thought to transform the ordinary into a weapon, and no one ever suspected the smiling woman in the corner.

That’s where we come in.

The Second Sweep hunts those who survive the accidents that should have killed them. Our leaders find the stories, uncover the names, and search out the addresses. Then they send

people like Dad and me. We find an opening and settle into their town. We learn their habits, their quirks, their schedules. We gain their trust.

And if they change—if that Mark consumes everything that's good in them and lets evil fester in its place—we bring the flames to destroy them. The Marked can be incredibly resilient to injuries from knives or bullets, so unless you have a match ready, all you're doing is drawing their attention and making yourself an easy target. Those who escape the Sweep's notice live on with that stain on their souls until old age finally sends them to their graves years too late, leaving behind paths of death and destruction. The sooner we find and stop them, the less damage they can do.

Mrs. Polly left quite a path.

I take my time reading Dad's report. He included photographs as well, and something inside me flinches as Mrs. Polly's cheerful face fills the screen. Dad cropped the other half of the picture so I'm nowhere in sight. I posed with her the first week we "accidentally" met at the ice cream shop, and the smiling image perfectly blends Dad's real work as a professional photographer with our other job.

Her smile makes my heart pinch.

We didn't know for certain, not right away. The shift between an ordinary life and one tainted by the Mark is always blurred. Souls don't surrender easily, and things like coincidence and bad luck throw even more confusion into the mix. Within a year, however, we usually have enough evidence to render a judgment. If all we've seen can be attributed to

normal living, we declare the project's soul clean and move on, though we come back once a year to ensure they haven't changed.

They rarely do. It's those first twelve months that really matter.

Mrs. Polly lasted nine.

The accidents around her progressed from bruises to broken bones to bodies, and Dad's final hesitation vanished with that flowerpot smashing into Eileen Patterson. Everyone else was running to the body crumpled on the sidewalk, but Mrs. Polly just stood watching, her smile bright and her gaze dark as she finally lifted the sunglasses she always wore near the end. Dad saved the photograph he snapped in that moment for the report's last page, and the chill it sends over me feels as if Lucifer Himself reached out and tickled my soul.

Above her grin, Mrs. Polly's pupils bleed black, the weeping midnight tendrils swallowing her blue irises like spilled ink. Ever hear the saying "The eyes are windows to the soul"? It's true. When the soul dies, the window closes.

We made our decision on the way home.

My eyes twitch as I stare at the screen, waiting for the proof to overcome my last lingering doubts. Instead I see a trick of light, a shadow, a speck of dust on Dad's camera lens. There's even a medical condition called aniridia, where people are born without an iris or with it only partially developed, so it appears as if their eyes are black. I looked it up. It usually manifests in newborns, though couldn't eye problems develop

later, especially if someone's in, say, a kitchen explosion?

Doubt pulses at my temples, and a headache looms. "Looks good" is all I say, and hand back the laptop.

Dad nods, satisfied. He'll print it out and mail it to a PO Box registered to a Mr. James Trainer, who doesn't exist. Someone will pick it up and whisk it away to wherever the heads of the Sweep reside, their file cabinets filled with reports of the Marked. No email, no electronic trace. The only technology the Sweep uses is the emergency phone number Dad made me memorize, reserved strictly as a last resort for when sirens are screaming. We've never called it, and I hope this never changes. All that's left now is to burn our notebooks, wipe our hard drive, and move on to the next project.

"Your notes were very helpful," Dad says, scanning his report once more. "You did a good job."

He means it as praise, but his words only sharpen the ache snaking through me. Hope dies hard. Mrs. Polly lasted five months longer than Mr. Whittmeier, the first burning I did with Dad, and I had begun to think she might be like Ms. Rivera, who lasted the entire year. There had been a few worrisome incidents in the beginning of that project as well—dropped ice cream cones by children trespassing through her garden, a bike accident involving an especially harsh critic of her paintings—but these soon stopped, which is why it's so important not to jump to conclusions at the first sign of trouble. Our year ended with friendly conversations and regular surveillance that showed no sign of the Mark, and relief

poured through me when Dad pronounced the verdict. Ms. Rivera had been outside the day we drove away, painting on her porch, and I wished every project could end like that.

But they don't.

Dad reaches over and picks up my elephant, smoothing his thumb over it as the silence stretches. Then: "Do you know what day it is?"

Eight days since we burned Mrs. Polly. "Saturday?"

"It's September twentieth. Your birthday."

Seventeen years old, and I couldn't care less right now. "I don't really feel like celebrating."

"I know. But I have something for you." He picks up a long white envelope and drops it into my lap. "Open it."

I turn it over, and the emblem of a torch stamped in the red wax seal sends a wave of dread through me.

The symbol of the Second Sweep.

My heart skips as I slice my knife through the seal. A single page sits inside. The paper crackles as I unfold it, revealing a printout of a news article.

FATAL CAR CRASH LEAVES SOLE SURVIVOR

Sixteen-year-old Rachel Winter walked away from a crash that left two dead, including her father, Timothy Winter. They were driving home Wednesday afternoon when, according to eyewitnesses, their car approached the quiet intersection of Haims and Drifter. They stopped at

the crosswalk and had just pulled forward when thirty-year-old Malcolm Harrison collided with them. Mr. Harrison, whose blood alcohol was later found to be over twice the legal limit, died immediately. Mr. Winter was taken to Mills Creek Community Hospital, where he passed away an hour later.

Rachel, who had been sitting beside her father, escaped with only bruises. "It's a miracle she survived," said Captain Veronica Walsh, the first officer to arrive . . .

"This one's different." The paper trembles in my hand. "The project's only sixteen."

"I know." Dad's lips stretch in a grim line. "But Lucifer wouldn't care. If she's Marked, someone needs to stop her."

"It says she was wearing her seat belt." I hold the article up like evidence. "The police think the other driver hit exactly the right spot so she didn't get hurt."

"And what are the odds of that?"

I don't say anything. I don't need to. The answer is printed right in front of me: *one in a million*.

My stomach curdles, and I rub an old scar on my leg, its raised line smooth and reassuring. The stupid part of me hopes this will be another Ms. Rivera, with a quiet year of watching and waiting that ends with the matches still in our bag. The rest of me is already gearing up for a repeat of Mrs.

Polly. Either way, someone has to do the work.

And maybe this time, I'll finally see the Mark as clearly as Dad does.

The red torch pulses. "So she's our next project?"

"Not quite." He pauses. "The Sweep would like to offer this to you."

My breath stills. "By myself?"

Dad nods. "The project is yours if you want it. From start"—his jaw twitches—"to finish."

If I hadn't already been sitting, the thought of that burning match in my own hand would have dropped me to the floor, where I'm pretty sure my stomach just landed. My first solo project.

A sixteen-year-old girl.

Looks like the Sweep decided to take the training wheels off. It's a compliment, I suppose—the chance to observe Rachel Winter on my own, without Dad steering me toward the final verdict. The decision would be mine, and if I judge her Marked, it would be up to me to strike the match.

This is everything I've worked toward.

My throat tightens, blood pounding through my head like a tidal wave, but I lift my chin and hold his gaze. "I'll take it."

Dad hesitates, worry deepening the wrinkles on his brow. "Are you absolutely certain? You need to understand, Matthew: This solo project is a test. There won't be a second chance. Accept it, and it's yours until the end—whatever that brings."

The concern etched on his face almost makes the *No* pushing against my teeth jump out, but I swallow it down.

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“I can do it,” I tell him, and those four words might haunt me more than Mrs. Polly’s screams.

Dad’s head dips, hiding his face. When he finally looks up, his expression is impossible to decipher.

“I’ll let them know.” He hands me a file containing everything the Sweep prepared on Rachel Winter’s accident: articles, maps, pictures.

This is the worst birthday present ever.

CHAPTER

4

Mills Creek lies an hour east of San Francisco, though the small suburb feels about twenty years behind the big city. I drive past the welcome sign and ease up on the gas pedal to match the lazy crawl of cars around me. Thick trees rise on either side, their branches heavy with leaves, and beneath them slope the streets: cracked sidewalks lined with houses, small shops, and a six-screen movie theater that—like the rest of this place—could use a fresh coat of paint.

In the rearview mirror, the afternoon sun bounces off the windshield of Dad's silver SUV, which he picked up at a used car lot yesterday. That's one perk of this solo project: our old sedan is now mine. He trails me down the main boulevard and onto a shady side street. A few more turns, and the road ends in front of a rickety two-story house.

The weathered wood lost its shine long ago, and dusty windows break the lines of dingy brown planks. With a bent weather vane poking out of the roof and weeds sprouting from an overgrown front lawn, the place looks more like a haunted house than the creatively named "vintage home" described in the rental ad. At least we won't be staying inside, though the

“comfortable and cozy” guesthouse we rented in back probably won’t be much better. I park at the curb, and Dad pulls in behind me.

“Mr. Garrett said the key would be under the mat,” I remind him as he climbs out. I grab my backpack and lead the way around the side of the house. A leaning gate blocks the path, and I try not to knock it over as I undo the latch and push it open.

No grass grows behind the house, but a giant oak tree towers in the middle of the barren yard, its branches stretching in all directions. A tired wooden fence provides an ugly but effective barrier from any curious neighbors, and the ivy creeping over it might have been pretty except for its promise of rats and spiders. A small, peeling guesthouse sits in one corner, wedged against the steep slope sweeping up the rear of the yard.

“Beautiful,” Dad says. “And private. You’ll be safe here.”

Something in his voice stops me. “Aren’t you going to be here too?”

He shakes his head. “This is your project, remember? I’ll get you settled, but the Sweep asked that I do some work of my own.”

I wait for the relief his words should bring, since no one will be around to criticize me or second-guess my choices. Instead, it feels like Mr. Garrett’s backyard just tilted sideways. Dad has been beside me since Mom died fifteen years ago, and while I didn’t expect his help, I was counting on him sticking around and being—well, my dad. Instead, he’ll leave me to decide Rachel Winter’s fate on my own.

He gives my shoulder a squeeze. "I'll visit whenever I can. The Sweep understands that even though I won't interfere with your project, I need to be seen around here enough to maintain your cover. But you can do this, Matthew."

"I know." Maybe if I say it enough, we'll both believe it. "I'll be fine."

Mr. Garrett's "mat" is a piece of cardboard lying in the dirt in front of the guesthouse. At least the key works, though opening the door brings a stale, charred smell that reminds me of Mrs. Polly, and I nearly gag. Stepping inside, I find the culprit—a fireplace filled with ash—along with a lumpy mattress in one corner and a plastic table and chair in another. I open the lone window to let in fresh air before following the chipped tile floor past a bathroom in need of a shower curtain and into a small kitchen. The rusty stove makes me wonder when it was last used, and a mini fridge and stained sink complete the furnishings of my new home.

"Good enough," Dad says. "Let's get you settled."

Before I can unzip my bag, the backdoor of the big house slams, and a wiry man with wrinkled brown skin strides across the yard. His black hair is sprinkled with white, and the sour expression on his face would make a lemon feel inferior. Despite a slight limp, he carries himself with a rigid posture that screams of a past in the military.

"Allen Garrett?" Dad asks, and the man grunts. "Jonathan Watts. Thanks again for renting to us."

Mr. Garrett ignores his outstretched hand. "Found the key?"

Good. No pets, and no smoking. Rent's due the first of each month. Just leave it in my mailbox."

"This should cover the first few months." Dad slips his unshaken hand into his pocket and takes out an envelope. "I travel a bit for work, but Matthew here can take care of himself. You've got my number in case you need anything."

Mr. Garrett eyes me like I'm a skunk about to spray. "No parties either."

He's safe there. "Don't worry," I assure him. "No parties."

He grunts again. Taking the envelope, he gives me a final scowl and stomps back inside.

At least I won't have to worry about an overly involved landlord. Mr. Garrett seems perfectly content to ignore us the rest of the day, and we keep our distance as well. Dad takes me shopping to purchase groceries, a printer, and supplies for school, and our landlord never appears as we carry everything inside. Still, that doesn't help the loneliness poking me the next afternoon when Dad heaves his suitcase into his car.

"I'll only be three hours away," he says through the open car window, though his expression tells me the tornado hammering my stomach also twists in his. On the seat beside him lies his own letter from the Sweep, with the address of a man who survived when a tree crashed down and somehow spared him, leaving him standing amidst its fallen branches. Luck or something else? Dad will find out.

He goes on. "Remember, Matthew: This is your test. Once you pass, everything will change."

For a moment, he looks as if he might say more, but then just pats my arm and starts the engine. I step back, hoping he doesn't notice how my teeth grind so hard my jaw hurts. Even the air feels empty as his car vanishes around the corner. When I finally turn to trudge back to the shack—"guesthouse" seems far too grand for it—curtains ruffle in Mr. Garrett's window.

Nosy old man.

It doesn't matter. I'll take a few minutes to check my notes, and then I'll go for a drive.

I've got some watching of my own to do.

CHAPTER

5

The Winters' home sits on a quiet street with worn curbs and lopsided fences. No one is outside when I drive by, though a bicycle leans against the house. White shutters border windows that flank a small front porch, and age and sun have lightened the blue paint on its walls. Leaves trace the lines of the slanted roof, and neatly cut grass covers the lawn except for a single patch of dirt, which lies scuffed beneath the swing dangling from a stout tree.

I wonder if Rachel's dad hung that swing. Does she think of him when she sits in it, or has the Mark already made her stop caring?

I don't know. But I will soon.

The Sweep's file on Rachel contained little beyond news of the accident, and I couldn't find much about her on the internet. A couple high school track competitions list her name in their results, but her social media sites offer little. Either she's too busy to update them, or she doesn't share much. The most useful post is her picture, which shows a pretty girl with light brown hair and striking hazel eyes.

The articles about the accident painted a horrific scene,

complete with pictures of the demolished cars and clusters of EMTs crouched around them. Workers had to cut through metal to reach the drunk driver, but Mr. Winter had been carted off in an ambulance within moments of its arrival. Mrs. Winter had come screeching up in her own car a few minutes later since someone recognized her daughter and called, leaving Rachel's thirteen-year-old sister with a neighbor to spare her the trauma of the crash site. One article had gone for the emotional jugular with a family photo of the Winters, and Rachel's wide smile looked exactly like her dad's. The joy in that picture had been impossible to miss.

I turn my car toward the intersection where Malcolm Harrison ran his drunk ass right through that joy. The corner is silent when I arrive, though black tire marks still scar the curb. I park, step outside, and replay the tragedy that brought me here.

Mr. Winter behind the wheel, Rachel in the passenger seat. Maybe they were talking about her day or what they would do when they got home. Maybe they were just listening to music. They stopped at the crosswalk. Waited.

Pulled forward.

Did they see it coming? Harrison hit Mr. Winter's side without ever slowing, so they never heard brakes squeal. The impact must have spun both cars around before they slid to rest, their mangled metal shells wrapped around two broken bodies.

And Rachel, who walked away unscathed.

In a town as small as Mills Creek, most people probably

knew Mr. Winter, and the funeral pictures the Sweep provided showed a well-attended ceremony. Casseroles likely appeared on his family's doorstep, and a neighbor might have stopped by with a lawn mower to take care of the grass. Even now, people probably watch over them more than usual.

I'll have to be careful.

Fortunately, the new-kid angle works. I start school tomorrow, which will hopefully make me look more normal than a random teenager living in Mr. Garrett's backyard. Classes actually began a few weeks ago, but the school still had openings. Dad showed them a copy of our rental agreement and explained I had been homeschooled since second grade, which is actually the truth, and that did it. A new ID card is already nestled in my wallet, declaring me a proud student of Mills Creek High School.

Rachel's school. We'll both be juniors, which means overlapping classes. Shared lunch periods.

A way to get close.

Something along the opposite curb catches my eye. It's too distinct and bright to be another remnant of the accident, and closer examination reveals an infinity symbol carefully drawn in dark blue paint. A cross stands on the middle of the curved lines, right at their point of intersection. The drawing can't be more than a few inches tall, but a chill of recognition shivers down my back.

The Leviathan Cross. An old alchemical symbol for sulfur, and a sign of Lucifer.

But it can't be intended for me. I look more closely, and

relief descends as I realize I'm wrong. It needs another horizontal line to form the symbol's double cross. No, this is something else, though its presence here feels too intentional to be coincidence. Maybe someone left it as a sign of grief, of the horror brought about by Malcolm Harrison's choices that day. Maybe it's just some kid messing around. I stare at it a minute longer, but the design offers no clues, either about its meaning or the person who put it there.

Hopefully, my next stop will bring more answers. I pull out my phone and snap a photo of the drawing before climbing back into my car. With a final glance at the curb, I check the road twice before rolling through the intersection.

Bet I'm not the only one who does that now.

The quiet streets that pass for Mills Creek's downtown are only ten minutes away, and I park in front of a little bakery sandwiched between a vacuum repair shop and a used piano store. Wavy letters spell **CHARON'S LAST STOP** on the clean window, and a black bench carved in the shape of a boat sits beside the entrance. I open the door, and the sweet smell of freshly baked cake wafts out.

The silver-haired man at the register is busy with another customer, which gives me a chance to examine the large display case. Mrs. Polly would have loved this place, and part of me crumples since it's my fault she'll never see it. Now isn't time for regret, however, especially when it will come at night, like always. I lean over to study a pomegranate cake labeled "Persephone's Revenge," and a girl's voice stops me.

"Can I help you?"

I look up, and any thought of dessert evaporates. An article mentioned the part-time job, but I hadn't been certain she would be here today, especially with the accident still fresh. Maybe she needed something to occupy her, a distraction from the grief that clings to her despite the smile she's attempting. Her hair has grown longer than in the photo and her face wears a new sadness, but those are definitely Rachel Winter's eyes watching me from behind the counter. I glance at the name tag pinned to her shirt: Rae.

Time to work.

"I hope so." I offer a sheepish grin and gesture toward the case. "I want everything."

She nods, her smile unchanged, though it looks as if it's taking every bit of effort to keep it there. "It's all really good. The 'Damned If You Don't' cake is our bestseller, but my favorite is 'Night in Tartarus.' Brownies are popular too."

The answer sounds mechanical, as if she's repeated it countless times, and she probably has. Shadows pool under her eyes, but she waits patiently as I examine the Night in Tartarus cake. Its layers of chocolate would have been my first choice anyway, but it doesn't matter now if it had been frosted with broccoli. That's her favorite, so it's mine too.

"Sold," I tell her. "It looks delicious."

"Good choice." She slides the cake from the case. "Would you like to eat it here?"

"I'll take it with me. Thanks." Several tables line the front of the shop, but this first contact with a project should be brief. Casual. I just need to spark a connection I can build upon later.

"I'm new in town. This place is my best find so far. Is the high school around here?"

I already know the answer, but it's an easy start to a conversation.

"Mills Creek High?" she asks, and I nod. "It's only fifteen minutes away. I go there too. I'm Rae." She gestures to her name tag. "But you probably figured that out."

I did, but not the way she thinks. "I'm Matthew. Is it going to be awful? I've been homeschooled until now, so I'm kind of terrified."

Her smile turns genuine, flashing a glimpse of the humor she must have worn closer to the surface before grief smothered it. "MCHS isn't bad. The teachers are okay, as long as you don't have Mr. McNally for math." She catches the look on my face. "You've got McNally."

"Second period."

"Well, at least we can suffer through it together. I'm in there too." She cuts a thick slice of cake and slides it into a white box. "What else do you have?"

I rattle off my schedule, which isn't hard since I memorized it minutes after the smiling woman in the front office handed me the list. "First period is Spanish with Torres. Then McNally, English with O'Brien, and fourth period's biology with Doherty. After lunch is history with Timmult, and then study hall since they figured I'll need it to catch up." I wince. "They're probably right."

Rae blinks. "Wow. I don't think I knew my classes that well until the second week of school."

"I'm a little nervous." I give an embarrassed shrug, and the flutter in my stomach tells me I'm not completely acting right now. "I'm fairly certain I'll get lost and end up in the wrong classroom."

"You'll be fine." She seals the box with a sticker of a black boat identical to the bench outside and hands it to me. "I don't know Timmult since she's new, but Torres is nice. O'Brien's hard, but she's good. I'm in that one too. And you got lucky with Coach Doherty."

"Coach?"

"Cross country. You run?"

"A little." Five miles or more each morning, but I keep that to myself. The surprise can come in handy if things go wrong. "I'm not fast or anything."

"That's okay. No one gets cut. You should come out." Rae glances over my shoulder to where a line is forming, and her shoulders sag a fraction before she pulls them straight, her smile back in place. "Mr. Yamamoto can ring you up. See you tomorrow?"

"Sure. See you." I move to the register, and Rae greets the woman behind me. They chat while I pay, the woman clearly a regular as she asks about Rae's family. Rae's polite answers—we're fine, doing better, everything is all right—make me want to shake the woman, because clearly it's not all right and nothing is fine.

Rae just smiles and cuts another slice of cake.

She's tough. I'll give her that.

The bright sunlight stings my eyes as I step outside, cake

in hand and the clock ticking. If I'm lucky, I'll spend the next year in Mills Creek watching Rae Winter do nothing out of the ordinary. At least I'm off to a good start, since from our brief encounter, she certainly doesn't *seem* Marked.

Then again, neither did Mrs. Polly. Not in the beginning.

A gentle breeze cools the heat pounding through me, and I check my watch, noting the time and surroundings for the entry in my project notebook. A mother perches on Charon's bench, feeding a cookie to a toddler, and a man leans against a nearby tree, munching a brownie. His gaze meets mine, and a new thought nearly makes me drop my cake.

Dad called this project a test. How will the Sweep know I'm passing if they don't watch me?

They won't. Which means I'm not the only Sweeper in town.

Everyone around me is a stranger, but it's not like the Sweep hands out the company directory when you sign up. Existing members identify new recruits, and if the leadership approves, an old-fashioned apprenticeship begins. There's no secret school, no hidden camp, no annual company picnic. The Sweep is essentially a network of isolated dots, which makes sense since anyone who doesn't know about Lucifer's Mark will think we're just going around setting people on fire. Secrecy is critical. Dad and his mentor are the only members I've ever met, which means I wouldn't recognize another Sweeper if he or she were standing right in front of me.

Maybe one is.

Suddenly, the sidewalk holds too many eyes: the man

eating the brownie, an elderly couple out for a walk, a teenager sauntering past with headphones blaring into his ears. Even the line in Charon's is no longer filled with customers trying to satisfy a sweet tooth but people who observed my entire interaction with the project.

As casually as I can, I head toward my car. A quick glance back shows the door to Charon's opening again, and the woman who had been speaking with Rae appears, box in hand. She makes it only halfway through the exit before the door swings closed, smacking her from behind with enough force that she stumbles forward and drops her cake. My feet freeze midstep.

Maybe Rae didn't like her questions after all.

The next moments reveal nothing more. Someone retrieves the box and hands it to the woman, who lifts the lid to peer inside. She must make a joke, because the people around her laugh, and she carries her cake away as another customer leaves Charon's, the door closing smoothly behind him.

It could mean nothing.

Or, I can almost hear Dad saying, it could mean quite a lot.

The bustle of the sidewalk returns, and I climb into my car and drive away. No one stares after me, but it doesn't matter either way. Any Sweeper watching would call my morning a success. Not only did I connect with the project and see a possible hint of a Mark, but I even laid the foundation for our next meeting.

After all, we're going to be classmates.