

C A T E T I E R N A N



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston

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Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017
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First Edition: September 2010

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RRD-C

Printed in the United States of America

Book design by Saho Fujii

The text was set in Goudy old style

CHAPTER 1



ast night my whole world came tumbling down. Now I'm running scared.

Have you ever been going along, living your life, living in your reality, and then suddenly something happens that rips your world right in two? You see something or hear something, and suddenly everything you *are*, everything you're *doing*, shatters into a thousand shards of sharp, bitter realization.

It happened to me last night.

I was in London. With friends, as usual. We were going out, as usual.

“No, no, turn here!” Boz leaned forward and jabbed the cabbie on the shoulder. “Here!”

The cabbie, his huge, broad shoulders barely encased in a sweatshirt and plaid vest, turned around and gave Boz a look that would have made a normal person sit back and be very quiet.

But Boz was by no means a normal person: He was prettier than most, louder than most, funner than most, and, God knew, dumber than most. We’d just come from a dance club where a knife fight had suddenly broken out. These two crazy girls had been pulling hair and screaming like fishwives, and then one of them had pulled out a knife. My gang had wanted to stay and watch—they loved stuff like that—but, you know, if you’ve seen one knife fight, you’ve seen them all. I’d dragged them all away, and we’d stumbled out into the night, luckily grabbing a cab before the cold made us sober up.

“Here! Right here in the middle of the block, my good man!” Boz said, earning himself a murderous look that made me feel grateful all over again for gun control in Merrie Olde England.

“My good man?” Cicely snickered next to me. The six of us were packed into the back of this big black cab. There could have been more, but we’d found that six wasted immortals were all the back of a London cab could hold, and that was only if no one puked.

“Yes, Jeeves,” Cicely went on brightly. “Stop here.”

The cabbie slammed his foot on the brakes, and we all shot forward. Boz and Katy hit their heads on the glass partition between us and the driver. Stratton, Innocencio, and I all catapulted off our seats, landing in an ungraceful, giggling heap on the dirty cab floor.

“Hey!” Boz said, rubbing his forehead.

Innocencio found me under the tangle of arms and legs. “You okay, Nas?”

I nodded, still laughing.

“Get t’ hell outta my cab!” our driver spat. He lurched out of the front seat, came around, and yanked our door open. My back was against the door, and I immediately fell out into the gutter, hitting my head on the stone curb.

“Ow! Ow!” The gutter was wet—it’d been raining, of course. The pain, the cold, and the wet barely penetrated my consciousness—knife fight aside, the evening of heavy festivities had wrapped me in a warm cocoon of hazy well-being.

“Out!” the cabbie said again, grabbing my shoulders and hauling me out of the way. He dumped me on the sidewalk and reached in for Incy.

Okay, hello, anger and a trickle of consciousness. I frowned, rubbing my shoulders, sitting up. We were a block away from the Dungeon, yet another horribly seedy underground bar where we hung out. And only this short block away, the street was dark and deserted, empty lots

alternating with burned-out crack houses, giving the street a missing-tooth appearance.

“All right, hands off!” Innocencio said, landing on the sidewalk next to me. His face was cold with fury, and he looked more awake than I’d thought.

“You lot!” the cabbie snarled. “I don’t want your kind in my cab! Rich kids, think you’re better than everyone else!” He leaned into the cab, grabbing Katy’s coat collar while Boz scrambled out on his own.

“Uh—gonna be sick,” Katy said, half in, half out of the cab. Boz jumped out of the way just as Katy’s system purged itself of an evening’s worth of Jameson whiskey—right on the cabbie’s shoes.

“Goddamn it!” the cabbie roared, shaking his feet in disgust.

Boz and I giggled—we couldn’t help it. Mean Mr. Taxi Driver.

The cabbie grabbed Katy’s arms, intending to haul her to the sidewalk, and suddenly Incy muttered something and snapped his hand open.

I had a split second to think, Huh, and then the cab driver staggered as if struck with an axe. Katy went slack in his hands and he crumpled, his spine curving almost in half. He pitched backward, landing heavily on the sidewalk, his face white, eyes wide open.

A wave of nausea and fatigue overcame me—maybe I’d had more to drink than I thought. “Incy, what’d you do?”

I asked, bemused, as I got to my feet. “Did you use *magick* on him?” I gave a little laugh—the idea was kind of ridiculous. I leaned against the lamppost, holding my face up to the chilly mist. A few deep breaths and I felt better.

Katy blinked blearily, and Boz chuckled.

Innocencio stood up, frowning at his new D & G boots, now flecked with rain.

Stratton and Cicely got out of the other side of the cab and joined us. They looked down at the cabbie, lying frozen on the wet pavement, and shook their heads.

“Very nice,” Stratton said to Incy. “Very impressive, Mr. Magician. You can let the poor sod up now.”

We were all looking at each other and at the cabbie. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen anyone use *magick* like this. Yeah, maybe to get a good table at a restaurant or to catch that last train in the Underground...

“I don’t think so, Strat,” said Innocencio, his face still tight. “I don’t think he’s a very nice man.”

Stratton and I met eyes. I tapped Innocencio on the shoulder. He and I had been partners in crime for almost a century, and we knew each other very, very well, but this cold rage was something I hadn’t seen too much of. “Right, leave him, then. He’ll be fine in a few minutes, yeah? Let’s go—I’m thirsty. And I guess Katy is now, too.”

Katy made a face. “Ugh.”

“Yeah, let’s go,” said Cicely. “They have a band tonight, and I want to dance.”

“By the time he comes to, we’ll be long gone.” I tugged on Incy’s sleeve.

“Hang on,” said Incy.

“Leave him,” I repeated. I felt a little bad about just leaving the cabbie in the chilly, sprinkling rain, but he’d be okay once the spell wore off.

Innocencio shrugged off my hand, surprising me. As I watched, he snapped both of his hands open at the cabbie, his lips moving. I didn’t hear what he said.

With a loud, horrible cracking sound, the cabbie bucked upward, once, his mouth opening in a scream he was unable to voice.

Again I felt a wave of nausea, saw a gray film pass over my eyes. I blinked several times, reaching out for Cicely’s arm. She chuckled as I staggered, obviously blaming drink. A few moments later my vision cleared, and I straightened up, staring at Incy, at the cabbie. “Now what? What’d you *do*?”

“Oh, Incy,” Stratton said, shaking his head. “Tsk, tsk. Bit unnecessary, surely? Well, let’s get going, then.” He set off down the sidewalk toward the Dungeon, closing his warm coat against the chill.

“Incy—what’d you do?” I repeated.

Incy shrugged. “Sod deserved it.”

Katy, still a little green around the gills, stared dully at the cab driver, then at Innocencio. She coughed and shook her head, then headed off with Stratton. I let go

of Cicely and she shrugged, taking Boz's arm. They followed the others, and soon their footsteps faded into the darkness.

"Incy," I said, taken aback that the others were just leaving. "Incy—did you—break his back, with magick? Where'd you learn how to do something like that? No—you didn't. Right?"

Incy looked at me then, a half-amused expression on his unearthly, darkly handsome face. His black curls were flecked with tiny diamonds of rain, glittering in the lamplight.

"Darling. You saw what he was like," he said.

I looked at him, then at the cabbie, still motionless, his face a rictus of pain and terror. "You broke his *back*?" I repeated, suddenly quite sober and horribly present. My brain skittered around the thought as if it were a hot spark to avoid. "You used magick to—good lord. Okay, well, go ahead and fix him, then," I said. "I want a drink, but I'll wait." I couldn't help the cabbie myself. I had no idea where Incy had learned a spell like that, and no idea how to counteract it, undo it, whatever. For the most part, I shied away from magick, the magick immortals are born with, that comes naturally to us. It was too much trouble, and it usually made me physically ill. The last time I'd dabbled in it, I'd at most made someone walk into a door or spill coffee on herself. And that had been ages ago. Nothing like this.

Innocencio ignored me and looked down at the cab driver. “Right, mate,” he said in a low voice. The cab driver’s eyes, now wild with shock and pain, focused on his with difficulty.

“That’s what happens when you’re rude to my friends, see? I hope you’ve learned your lesson.”

The cab driver couldn’t even grunt, and I realized he was under a nul-vox spell. An actual nul-vox spell—I’d only maybe seen that just once or twice before, in hundreds of years. Much less—

“Come on, undo it,” I said impatiently. I’d never seen Incy like this, do something like this. “You taught him a lesson. The others are waiting for us. Just undo it so we can go.”

Incy rolled his shoulders, shrugged, and took my hand in a hard, painful grip. “Can’t undo it, my love,” he said, and raised my hand to his lips to kiss. He pulled me with him toward the Dungeon, and I looked back at the cabbie over my shoulder.

“Can’t undo it? You broke his back for *good*?” I stared at Incy, my best friend for the past century. He grinned down at me, his beautiful angel’s face haloed by the street-lamp.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” he said gaily.

I gaped. “What next, putting Stratton through a wood chipper?” My voice was rising as the increasing mist wet my face. Incy laughed, kissed my hair, and marched me

forward. In those moments I'd seen something different in his eyes—more than just uncaring indifference, more than a casual need for revenge. Incy had enjoyed breaking that man's back, had enjoyed seeing someone writhing in pain and fear. It had been *exciting* for him.

My brain whirled. Should I call 999? Was it already too late for that cabbie? Was he going to die, already dying? I leaned away from Incy, turning back, but within seconds I felt the vibrations of the deep bass drums of some band, throbbing up through the ground, through my shoes. The Dungeon seemed like another world, another reality, beckoning me to it, lulling me with its noise, letting me leave the appalling shock of the paralyzed cabbie outside. I wanted so badly just to succumb to it.

“Incy—but—you have to—”

Incy just shot me an amused look, and a minute later we were going down a steep flight of stairs slick with rain. I was split by indecision as Incy raised his fist and pounded on the red-painted door. I suddenly felt as though we'd gone down the steps to hell and were waiting for admittance. A small slit in the door opened, and Guvnor, the bouncer, nodded at us. The door opened and an enormous swell of music throbbed out at us and drew us in, into the darkness lit by burning cigarette tips, the hundreds of voices competing with the screaming band, the smell of liquor coiling sweetly into every breath I took.

The cabbie, outside—this felt like my last chance. My

last chance to take action, to act like a person who gave a crap, like a normal person.

“Nasty!” I was enveloped in a huge, slightly unbalanced hug. “I love your hair!” my friend Mal shouted as loud as she could into my ear. “Come dance!” She put her arm around my shoulders and pulled me into the dark, low-ceilinged room.

I hesitated only a second.

And just like that, I let myself leave the outside world behind, let myself disappear into the noise and the smoke. I was horrified, and if you knew the usual high jinks I myself was often up to, those words would have more weight for you. I split away from Incy, not sure what to think. He’d just done what I thought was probably the very worst thing I’d ever seen him do. Worse than that incident with that mayor’s horse, back in the forties. Worse than that poor girl who’d actually wanted to marry him, in the 1970s. That had been such a disaster. I’d managed to explain away those situations to myself, made them make sense. This one I was having a harder time with.

With a last, beautiful grin at me, Incy headed off to prowl the crowd that was already sending out tendrils of interest, from both males and females. Incy was irresistible, a seductive magnet, and most people, human and immortal alike, were helpless under the charm that hid a side that was, suddenly, so much darker than I’d realized.

Twenty minutes later, I was making out heavily on a

sticky couch with Mal's friend Jase, who was cheerful and drunk and adorable. I wanted to sink into him, be someone else, be the person Jase was seeing on the outside. He wasn't immortal, didn't know I was, but he was a welcome distraction that I threw myself into with nervous urgency. People talked and smoked and drank all around us while I ran my hands under his shirt and he wound his legs around me. His fingers pushed into my short black hair, and with a sudden shock I felt an unexpected warm breeze on my neck.

I was already reeling back, grabbing for my scarf, quickly rewinding it around me when I heard Incy say, "Nas? What's that on the back of your neck?"

I looked over my shoulder at Incy standing by the end of the couch, a drink in one hand, a long cigarette glowing in the other. His eyes were black holes, glittering at me in the darkness.

My heart was beating hard. *Don't overreact, Nasty.* "Nothing." I shrugged and collapsed on Jase, and he reached up for me again.

"Nas?" Incy's voice was quiet but determined. "You know, I don't remember ever seeing the back of your neck, come to think of it."

I forced a small laugh and looked up even as Jase tried to kiss me again. "Don't be daft, of course you have. Now clear off. Busy here."

"Is it a tattoo?"

I tugged my scarf tighter around my neck. “Yes. It says, *If you can read this sign, you’re too bloody close.* Now clear off!”

Incy laughed, to my relief, and moved away. The last I saw of him, a beautiful, slinky girl in satin was coiling around him like a snake.

And I just didn’t let myself think about the cab driver again. When the thought, the vision, intruded, I squeezed my eyes shut and had another drink. But the next morning it all came back to me: the cabbie’s face, the agony written there. He would never walk, never drive again, because Innocencio had snapped his spine and left him on a rainy London street, worse than dead.

And I had done nothing, *nothing*. I had *walked away*.

The good thing about being immortal is that you can’t literally drink yourself to death, as frat boys can. The bad thing about being immortal is that you can’t literally drink yourself to death, so you wake up the next morning, or maybe the day after that, and you feel everything you would be spared feeling if only you’d been lucky enough to die.

It was sort of light outside when I finally pried my eyes open for more than a few seconds. I blearily scanned the room and saw a window. The light coming in was pale and pink-tinged, which meant dusk or dawn. One or the other. Or perhaps the neighborhood was on fire. Always a possibility.

I knew it would be bad, trying to sit up, so I took it slowly, moving one small part of me at a time. Last was my head, which I raised cautiously a few inches off the mattress. The washed-out yellow roses of the bare mattress slowly clarified and resolved. Mattress, no sheet. Window with light. Dark painted brick walls, like a factory or something.

I turned my head slowly to see another sleeping body, a guy with spiky green hair, a thick silver chain around his neck, a writhing dragon tattoo covering most of his back. Um, Jeff? Jason? Jack? Something with a *J*, I was almost certain.

I achieved a semi-upright state several minutes later, then immediately hurled my guts up as my body attempted to rid itself of the toxins I'd ingested the night before.

I didn't make it to the toilet. Sorry, Jeff.

Feeling hollow and shaky and wishing immortality wasn't so incredibly literal, I saw I was still wearing all my clothes, which meant either the *J*-man or I, or both, had been too wasted to further our . . . acquaintance last night. Just as well. Reflexively I felt for my scarf and found it still knotted tight around my throat. I relaxed a bit, then remembered Incy standing over me, asking me about the mark on the back of my neck. I couldn't believe that had happened on the same night as the cabbie. I swallowed, grimacing, and decided to think about that later.

My leather jacket and one of my beautiful green lizard-skin ankle boots were inexplicably missing, so I took the boot I could find and crept out, not that an earthquake

would have woken Jay up then. I was pretty sure he was still alive—his chest seemed to be going up and down. I vaguely remembered having two drinks to each one of his.

I stepped over a couple more sleeping bodies on my way out. This was a big, bare warehouselike building, probably on the outskirts of town. My shoulder and butt felt bruised, and all of my muscles were sore as I limped down the industrial brick steps. Outside it was really cold, the wind whipping bits of trash up the deserted street.

At least it wasn't raining, I thought, and then it all flowed back into my brain, against my will: the night before, everything we'd done, the rain, the knife fight, falling on the sidewalk, Incy breaking that cabbie's spine, me almost losing my scarf in that club, in front of everyone. My stomach roiled again and I stopped for a moment, sucking in a cold breath as I ran through the details, dismay creeping over me anew. Where had Innocencio learned that magick? As far as I knew, he hadn't made a point of knowing any, and in the last century of our hanging out, I'd never seen him do much, certainly not anything that big, that dark. No friends in our immediate circle had honed their skills with magick. I leaned against the graffitied cinder-block wall of the warehouse while I pushed my bare foot into my one boot.

The cold air filled my nose and made it start running, and suddenly the morning was horribly bright, horribly clear. Incy had done something awful last night with powerful

magick, out of the blue. And I had done something just as awful, though not with magick. I'd watched Incy break that guy's spine, and then I had just...walked away. I'd walked away and *gone dancing in a club*. What was wrong with me? How could I have done that? Had someone found the cabbie during the night? Someone had, surely. Even though that neighborhood was mostly deserted. Even though it had been very late. And raining. Still, someone must have happened on him, taken him to the hospital. Right?

And on top of that, Incy had actually seen the mark on the back of my neck. And might well remember it. How ironic. I'd been obsessive about keeping my neck covered at all times for the last 449 years, and all at once, one night, that effort had been shot. Would Incy know the significance of what he'd seen? How could he? No one did. No one who was still alive. So why did I feel so afraid?

And all of these horrible, fevered thoughts bring us back to the beginning:

Last night my whole world came tumbling down. Now I'm running scared.

CHAPTER 2



fter some of the events I've witnessed, the Incy/cabbie/magick/neck night should seem like a party. I've raced away in the night, clinging to a horse's mane, with nothing but the clothes on my back, while a city behind me burned to the ground. I've seen bodies covered with the oozing sores of the bubonic plague, piled high in city streets like logs because there weren't enough people alive to bury them. I was in Paris on July 14, 1789. You never forget the sight of a human head on a pike.

But we weren't at war now. We were living an ordinary life, or as ordinary a life as an immortal can have. I mean,

there's always a bit of a surreal quality. If you live long enough, through enough wars and invasions and attacks by northern raiders, you end up defending yourself, sometimes to an extreme point. If someone's coming at you with a sword, and you have a dagger tucked in the back of your skirt, well...

But that was different. It didn't matter that your attacker probably wouldn't kill you—how often does someone actually cut your head clean off?—it still *felt* like a life-or-death situation, and you reacted as if it were. But last night had been... just a regular night. No war, no berserkers, no life or death. Just a pissed-off cabbie.

Where had Incy gotten that spell? Yes, we're immortal, we have magick running through our veins, but one has to learn on purpose how to use it. Over the years, I'd known some people who were all about studying magick, learning spells, learning whatever they needed to learn to wield it. But I'd figured out a long time ago that I didn't want to. I'd seen the death and destruction that magick could cause, I'd seen what people were willing to do to pursue it, and I didn't want to have anything to do with it. I wanted to pretend it didn't exist. And I'd found some like-minded *aefrelyffen* (an old word for immortals), and we hung out.

Okay, maybe I'd use magick to get a cab when it's raining and there's none to be found. To make the person in front of me not want that last *pain au chocolat*. That kind of thing. But to snap someone's spine, for fun?

I'd seen Incy use people, break girls' and boys' hearts, steal, be callous—and it was just part of his charm. He was reckless and selfish and a user—but not to me. To me he was sweet and generous and funny and fun, willing to go anywhere, do anything. He was the one who would call me to go to Morocco at a moment's notice. The one I'd call to get me out of a jam. If some guy wouldn't take no for an answer, Incy was there, smiling his wolfish smile. If some woman made a snide remark, Incy's wit would skewer her in front of everyone. He helped me pick out what to wear, brought me fabulous stuff from wherever he went, never criticized me, never made me feel bad.

And I'd done the same for him—once breaking a bottle over a woman's head after she went after Incy with a long metal nail file. I'd paid off doormen, lied to bobbies and gendarmes, and pretended to be his wife or his sister or his enraged lover, whatever the situation demanded. We would howl about it afterward, falling together, laughing until tears came out of our eyes. The fact that we'd never been lovers, never had that awkwardness between us, only made it more perfect.

He was my best friend—the best friend I'd ever had. We'd been tight for almost a century, so it was amazing that he'd managed to shock me last night. And amazing that our other friends hadn't been shocked. And amazing that I'd managed to reach a new low, even for me. The low of indif-

ference. The low of cowardice. And, to top it all off, Incy had seen my neck. Better and better.

When I got back to my London flat, I took a shower, sitting on the marble floor and letting the hot water rain down on my head for a long time, trying to wash the alcohol and the warehouse off my skin. I couldn't even name what I was feeling. Fear? Shame? It was as if I'd woken up into a different life from the one I'd woken up into yesterday, and I was a different person. And this life and I were both suddenly much darker and grosser and more dangerous than I'd realized.

I soaped up all over, practically feeling the alcohol oozing out of my pores. I washed my hair, automatically avoiding my... it's not a tattoo. Immortals get tattoos, of course, and they last a long time, maybe about ninety years or so. Other scars heal, fade, and disappear much more quickly and completely than on regular people. A couple of years later, you can't tell where you were injured or burned.

Except for me. The mark on the back of my neck was a burn, and I'd had it since I was ten years old. It had never faded, never changed, and the skin was slightly indented, patterned. It was round, almost five across. It had been caused by a red-hot amulet pressed against my skin 449 years ago. Sure, despite my paranoia, the occasional person had seen it, now and again, over the last four and a

half centuries. But as far as I knew, no one *now living* had ever seen it. Except for Incy, last night.

Finally I got out, all prune-y. I wrapped myself up in a thick robe I'd taken from some hotel, avoiding looking at myself in the mirror. Feeling like a ghost, a wraith, I wandered into the living room and saw the *London Times* on the floor in front of my door, where I'd kicked it. I carried it into the kitchenette, where all I found were an ancient packet of McVitie's and a bottle of vodka in the freezer. So I sat on my sofa and ate the stale crackers, skimming the *Times*. It was buried way in the back, before the obits but after, like, Girl Guide meeting announcements. It said, *Trevor Hollis, 48, an independent taxicab driver, was attacked last night by one of his fares and suffered a broken spine. He is in the ICU of St. James's Hospital, undergoing tests. Doctors have said he will likely be paralyzed from the shoulders down. He has been unable to name or describe his attacker. His wife and children have been at his side.*

Paralyzed below the shoulders. If I had called an ambulance, gotten him help sooner, would it have made a difference? How long had he lain on the sidewalk, rigid with pain, unable to scream?

Why hadn't I called 999? What was wrong with me? He could have died. Maybe he would have preferred to. He wouldn't be driving a cab any longer. He had a wife and children. What kind of a husband could he be now? What

kind of a father? My eyes got blurry, and the stale crackers turned to dust in my throat.

I had been part of that. I hadn't helped. I'd probably made it worse.

What had I become? What had Incy turned into?

The phone rang and I ignored it. My buzzer sounded three times, and I let the doorman handle it. I'd lost my mobile a couple of days ago and hadn't gotten around to replacing it, so I didn't have to worry about that. Finally, at about eight, I got up and went to my bedroom and pulled out my biggest suitcase, the one that could hold a dead pony. (Before you go there, I'll clarify that it never has.)

Quickly, with a sense of abrupt urgency, I grabbed armfuls of clothes and whatever and shoved them in, and when it was full, I zipped it up, found a jacket, and headed out. Gopala, the doorman, got me a cab.

"Mr. Bawz and Mr. Innosaunce were looking for you, Miss Nastalya," he told me. I'd always been amused at how he butchered all of our names. Of course, he was doing a damn sight better here than what I could do if you plunked me down in the middle of Bangalore and expected me to hold a job.

"I'll be back soon," I told Gopala as the cabdriver hefted my suitcase into the boot.

"Ah, are you off to see your parents, Miss Nastalya?"

As usual, I'd invented mythical parents for myself, to explain why a teenager would be living on her own with an unlimited income.

"Oh, no—they're still in..." I thought quickly—"Tasmania. I'm just going to Paris, do some shopping." Maybe I was having a nervous breakdown. I felt afraid, anxious, ashamed, and cautious, as if every cabdriver in London now carried my picture on his sun visor, with a big red WANTED stamped across my face. I felt as if Innocencio would spring out at me from behind a big planter, and didn't know what I'd do if he did. I remembered his expression as he looked down at me from the end of the couch. He'd looked...intrigued. Calculating? Even if he had no idea of the significance of my scar, I *hated* the fact that he knew about it. I felt like I'd never be able to bear to see him again, and he was my best friend. My best friend who'd crippled someone last night, whom I was now—afraid of? This was my life. This was the situation I had created for myself.

I scrambled into the backseat of the cab, giving Gopala a big tip. "Just off to Paris. Back soon!"

Gopala smiled and nodded, touching the bill of his doorman's cap.

"So, you want St. Pancras?" the cabbie asked, marking his log. "Catch the train through the Chunnel?"

"No," I said as I sank down into the backseat. "Take me to Heathrow."

The next morning I was in Boston, in America, renting a car at some dinky little company that would rent to someone under twenty-five.

“Here you are, Ms. Douglas,” said the clerk, handing over a set of keys. “And how do you say your first name?”

“Phillipa,” I answered. Like every immortal, I have a bunch of different passports and IDs and driver’s licenses. Someone always has a friend who knows someone who can get what we need. For years I’d used this one little man in Frankfurt. He’d been a genius, had forged a thousand different identity papers during World War II. My passports list different names, ages (in my case, a range between eighteen and twenty-one), places of origin. It had been so much easier before governments started tracking people. I mean, birth certificates? Social Security numbers? What a freaking headache. “Phil-ip-pah.”

“What a pretty name,” the clerk said, giving me a cheerleader smile.

“Uh-huh. Is the car out this way?”

As soon as I was out of Boston, I pulled over and unfolded my map of Massachusetts. The rental-car people could have plotted the course to West Lowing for me, but then they might remember doing it, if anyone asked them later. And right now I just wanted to disappear. I felt like—like the devil was after me. Like I was being swallowed up in a disaster or something and just had to get . . . far away.

I'd had seven hours to think about things on the flight from London to Boston. Seven hours isn't long enough to fully contemplate four hundred years of mounting darkness and stupidity, but it's plenty of time to remember enough bad things to make you feel like a slug beneath a rock. Worse than a slug. Like slime mold.

I found West Lowing. It was smack dab in the middle of Massachusetts, near Lowing Lake and right on Lowing River. I'm guessing someone named Lowing was a big shot a couple hundred years ago and felt a need to splash his name all over the place.

It would take only about two hours to drive there. In Ireland, two hours of driving could take you about three-quarters of the way across the country, horizontally. You could drive straight through Luxembourg in about five minutes. America is a big, big place. Big enough to get lost in? I hoped so.

So, the whole immortal thing. You must have questions. I don't have all the answers. I don't know how many of us there are. I've met hundreds over the years, and simple math says our numbers must be increasing all the time, right? New ones are born, old ones only very rarely check out. You've probably run into quite a few yourself, without realizing it. Basically, immortals are humans who just don't die when we're supposed to.

Most of us believe that there have simply always been

immortals, just as people who believe in vampires think there have always been vampires. (In fact, if you look into old vampire myths, you'll see some overlap with the "living forever" theme.) I don't know how we began, or where, or why, but I've met immortals of most races and ethnicities. It does take two immortals to make new little immortals, so when an immortal hooks up with a regular person, their offspring won't be immortal—but in a lot of cases, those are the people who live weirdly long lives, like over a hundred years. There was that woman in France—and there's a town in Georgia (the country, not the state), where an odd proportion of people live to be over a hundred years old. They attribute it to their healthy living and yogurt-heavy diet. Ha! It just means there was an immortal there who really got around.

We do age, but in a different pattern than humans. Most of the time, until you're about sixteen, it's a year = a year. After that, it's usually about a year = a hundred human years. I've seen immortals who have aged a lot faster or slower, but I have no idea why. The oldest person I've ever met was about eight hundred. He'd been awful, so full of himself, mean and evil. What's odd is meeting an immortal who's still only about forty or fifty—it hasn't really sunk in for them, the reality, and they feel like adults but still look like teenagers. It leaves them in a weird limbo, and they kind of don't know what to do with themselves.

For myself, I was born in 1551, a nice symmetrical

number. Almost 460 years later, I still get carded in bars. Before you think *Oh, awesome!* let me tell you what a pain in the ass that is. I'm an adult. I've been a grown-up forever. But I'm locked in an eternal twilight of adolescence, and I just can't move past how I look. But then, many teens seem to feel immortal, as though nothing can touch them. The concept of danger or death is completely foreign, without weight or reality. So maybe I *am* still a teenager. Okay, I know: Cry me a river.

We don't get cancer or diabetes or things like that. We do get colds and flu and the plague, but we recover. For your info, smallpox scars take about fifteen years to fade. We can get burned, have limbs cut off, have horrible wounds—but they heal, as I explained earlier. It takes time, but they all heal. Limbs grow back, a process both disgusting and fascinating. It takes several years. Despite our name, we can be killed. But it takes some doing, so don't knock yourself out trying.

What do we do with all of our time? Lots of the same stuff regular people do. We live on the same planet, we have the same resources available to us. Some of us are wastrel partiers. (Not naming any names—okay, me.) Some immortals use their time more wisely: to study, learn, hone artistic talents or crafts, travel. Some people neither party nor improve themselves. They live in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction, not liking anything, always finding something to complain

about, hating other immortals, hating humans. I've met people like that, and I've always wanted to put them on an ice floe and push them off into the ocean.

Do we get married, have kids? Sometimes. I've been married. It's a conundrum—if you marry a regular person, no matter how much you love him, he gets old and dies and you don't. So at some point, you either have to tell him about yourself, or you let him stew and wonder. Either one of you has a secret, or both of you do. And if you marry another immortal, well, you're going to be married a looong time. Worse, if you're married to a non-aefrelyffen and you have kids, seeing those kids age and die is even worse than seeing your spouse age and die. But more on all that later.

Four hours, three espressos, and a bag of Chips Ahoy! later, I hit West Lowing. I drove straight through the town in less than ten minutes. Not a major metropolis. I turned around and drove back into it, cruising the neighborhoods, following the winding roads around the town's outskirts. I didn't even know what I was looking for. A sign? Either a literal sign, like RIVER'S EDGE, TURN LEFT, or a metaphorical sign, like a burning bush or something, a bolt of lightning pointing me in the right direction.

Two minutes later I was out of the town again. I pulled over, leaned my head on the steering wheel, and slammed my palms against the dashboard.

“Nastasya, you are an idiot. You are a stupid effing idiot, and you deserve this.” Actually, I deserved so much worse, but then, I’m pretty easy on myself.

After several minutes of thought and consideration, I got out of the car and walked into the woods by the side of the road. No cars had passed me in a while. About twenty feet in, hidden from the road, I knelt on the ground, putting my hands flat. I said a bunch of words, words so old that they sounded like a string of unrelated syllables. Words that had already been ancient by the time I was born.

Words that reveal hidden things.

One of the few spells I knew. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d used it. Maybe to find my keys, back in the nineties?

I closed my eyes, and after a minute, images floated into focus. I saw a road, a turn, the shape of a maple tree, its leaves sprayed with autumn’s colors. I saw where I needed to go.

Taking a deep breath, I stood up. Where my hands had been, the leaves and twigs were powdered, dry, disintegrating. Bits of late clover were withered and dying, their cells sucked dry of life so I could work my baby spell. Two handprints of destruction marked where I’d gotten my power. Because that’s how immortals do it—to make magick, we rip the power away from something else. Most of us do it that way, at least.

I got back in the car and drove again down winding

roads that led through and around the small town. I started looking carefully, trying to feel where I was. I knew I had been down this road just ten minutes before, but this time I examined every tree, every unpaved turnoff.

There it was: an unmarked road, a maple tree aflame with color, its wide branches forked into a V, as if hit by lightning years ago. I turned. My tiny rental bumped over the unpaved drive—I bet it would be almost impassable in a heavy snowfall. I was starting to feel chilled, so I cranked the car's heater. I felt hyped up on caffeine and sugar and was suddenly overcome by the supreme ridiculousness of what I was doing.

I was insane. This was the stupidest thing I'd ever thought up. Part and parcel of my panic, my nervous breakdown, I supposed.

Abruptly, I stopped the rental and rested my head on my hands on the steering wheel. I'd come all this way to look for a woman named River. This was so incredibly asinine. What had I been thinking? I needed to turn around, return the car, and go home. Wherever I decided home was going to be, this time.

When had I met her, River? Like, 1920? 1930? All I remembered was her face, smooth and tan, and her hands, strong and slender. Her hair had been gray, very unusual for an immortal. Innocencio had wrecked his first car—and I do mean *first*. As in *just invented*.

Had it been...1929? That sounded right. Innocencio

had bought himself a truly beautiful Model A, sort of a dusty blue. It was one of the first Model A's that Ford shipped to France. Incy had it a couple weeks, and then he crashed it into a ditch on a road near Reims. Another car stopped to help us. It was night. I'd been thrown through the glass windshield and had landed in the ditch. My face was shredded—this was before safety glass, before seat belts. It was freezing.

Innocencio and Rebecca had been thrown out of the car. Rebecca had a bunch of broken bones. She was a regular human and probably ended up in the hospital. Imogen was dead—her neck had broken when she hit a tree. Innocencio and I were messed up but could walk away. We'd met Imogen and Rebecca only the day before, at a party. They were both pretty, rich, and ready for fun. Unfortunately, they'd met us.

A car had stopped. A woman and two men ran over to help us. The men carefully loaded Rebecca into the back-seat of their car, and they discovered that Imogen was dead. The woman checked Innocencio, who was already starting to shake it off, mourning the loss of his beautiful car. Leaving him, she came and knelt by me, where I was climbing out of the icy ditch water. In French, she told me that everything would be fine, that I should lie still, and she tried to check my pulse. I brushed my sodden hair out of my eyes, pulled my fox-fur collar closer around my neck, and asked her what time it was—we were on our

way to a New Year's Eve party. Imogen was dead, and it was too bad, a shame, really, but it hardly registered on me. Depraved indifference. Incy hadn't killed her on purpose, after all. Humans seemed so . . . fragile sometimes.

That was when the woman looked at me. She held my chin in her hands and really looked into my eyes. I looked back into hers, and we recognized each other as immortal. There isn't a distinguishing characteristic. It's not like we have a big *I* painted on the backs of our retinas. But we can recognize each other.

She sat back, looking at the scene: the ruined car, the dead girl, Innocencio and I already starting to pull ourselves together.

"It doesn't have to be like this," she said in French.

"What?" I asked.

She shook her head, her warm brown eyes sad. "You can have so much more, be so much more."

That was when I started to get belligerent, wiping blood out of my eyes and standing up.

"My name is River," she said, getting up also. "I have a place, in America. In Massachusetts, up north. A town called West Lowing. You should come there." She gestured at the ruined and smoking car, at the men gently carrying Imogen's body to their own car. She gave Incy a glance that seemed to sum him up in an instant as a wastrel, a good-time guy, the proverbial rock that seeds of wisdom would die upon.

“I’ve been to Massachusetts,” I said. “It was straitlaced. Snooty. And cold.”

She gave a brief, sad smile. “Not West Lowing,” she said. “You should come, when you get tired of this.” Again she looked at the car, at Incy. “What’s your name?” Her eyes were sharp, intelligent—they seemed to memorize the planes of my face, the curve of my ear. I drew my fur closer around me.

“Christiane.”

“Christiane.” She nodded. “When you get tired, when you want to be more, come to West Lowing. Massachusetts. My house is called River’s Edge. You’ll be able to find it.”

The woman named River got into the car with the two men, with Rebecca and Imogen’s body, and they drove off, leaving me and Incy and his ruined, beautiful blue car. Eventually someone came along and we hitched a ride, then took the train to Paris, and then down to Marseilles, where it was warmer. It was a beautiful spring in Marseilles, and I put River—and Imogen—completely out of my mind.

Until two days ago. Now, eighty years later, I was deciding to take her up on her offer. Eighty freaking years later, as if she would still be here, her invitation still good. As you might imagine, immortals move around a lot. To live in the same village for fifty years, your looks not changing—well, it would arouse suspicion. So we rarely stay in one place

too long. Why would I assume that River would still be here? It was just...she had seemed so timeless. A pointless cliché for an immortal, I know. But she had seemed—unusually rock solid. Like if she said she'd be there, that I could come anytime, well then, by God, she would be there, and I could come any freaking time.

The espresso and sugar made my hands shake, my insides churn. What to do, what to do?

There was a tap on the window of my car, and I jumped, barely able to stifle a scream.

My frantic eyes focused, and the man leaned down to look at me.

Almost-hysterical laughter tickled my throat, and I had to swallow it. A Viking god had tapped on my window, was looking at me with concern—or suspicion. His golden handsomeness was breathtaking, as if a mythical figure had come to life, had warm blood flowing through his veins.

In the next moment, I squinted at him—his face was familiar. Was he a male model? Had I seen him in an underwear ad, forty feet across, in Times Square? Was he an actor? On a daytime soap? I couldn't quite place him as I rolled down my window. Please, please be some sex-starved nutcase who wants to kidnap me and make me your love slave, I begged silently.

“Yes?” My voice sounded dry, cracked.

“This is a private road,” the god said, looking at me disapprovingly. He was, maybe, twenty-two? Younger? Did he

like teenage girls? I blinked at him, feeling again, at the edge of my consciousness, as if I'd seen him somewhere before.

“Ah... um, I was looking for River? River's Edge?”

His topaz-colored eyes flared in surprise. It occurred to me she might have cloaked her place from neighbors. If she was still there at all.

“Do you know anyone like that?” I pressed.

“You know River?” he asked slowly. “Where did you meet her?”

Who was he, her personal guard? “I met her a long time ago. She said I could come visit her,” I said firmly. “Do you know if her place, River's Edge, is around here?”

Too fast for me to react, one strong hand reached through the car window and touched my cheek. His hand was warm, hard and gentle at the same time, and I knew that my skin felt icy under his touch.

He was immortal, and he now recognized that I was, too.

I tilted my head to one side. “Do I know you? Have I met you somewhere?” If I'd met him, surely I would remember him with much more clarity, much more intensity. No one would forget that face, that voice. Still, I'd pretty much crisscrossed every continent too many times to count. Maybe he wasn't that old. Or—

He was one of them, the other kind of immortals. The kind I had nothing to do with, nothing in common with,

avoided like the plague, mocked with my friends. The kind I disdained almost as much as they disdained me.

The kind I was hoping would...save me. Protect me. The Tähti.

“No,” he said, drawing his hand away. I shivered, feeling colder than ever.

“It’s down this road here,” he said, sounding reluctant. “Down this road. It curves to the left. Take the first left fork. You’ll come to the house.”

“So River is still here, then?”

I couldn’t read anything in his expression. His face was closed.

“Yes.”