

JESSE HAYES



1 WEEK BEFORE SAVANNAH ARRIVES IN SILVER VALLEY

The pounding rain chills me to my core.

Aching. Biting. Tearing me to shreds.

But I stand utterly still in the downpour, eyes glazed as cars dash past on the street ahead of me. Their lights are dizzying, orange and glaring through the rain, splitting apart my head.

Silver Valley is quaint. Simple.

It's made for people who dream of a boring life.

Once, I may have wanted it. But that was back when my family was alive. Back when I lived in a world where the sun was always gentle and the trees always ripe with fruit.

Back when Umbra was my home.

I stand in the rain, shivering and ready to go back to the base. From here in the forest, the people in the village cannot see

me. But their lights rip through the trees, and I can see everything.

A long pull of air splits apart my lungs as I jog away. Back to the only thing I care for; Melanie.

She stumbles through the trees.

I can't see Mel, but I can hear her.

In a different life, I like to think I still become her friend. Imagining any version of my life without her feels empty. Wrong.

She's it for me.

Always will be.

And back then, I like to think I would have met her, nonetheless.

I used to have friends. We went out. Partied. Snuck across the ocean train every weekend and drank until we couldn't see anymore with the fancy upper class nobility.

It was a simple life.

A boring life.

A life I could have found her in. Just like I found her in this one.

The muscles in my body tighten as she huffs behind me.

A muscle ticks in my jaw. The damn girl wanted to come to Silver Valley herself, despite the sheets of rain. I turn to her slowly, drinking in her face. The rain has brought colour to her cheeks, dampened her hair, plastered her clothes.

We're near the edge of the forest now.

Her fight with it is nearly over.

"Does anyone live in this house?" she asks me, teeth chattering between words, as she points out the nearest building.

"No," I respond.

This place is my preferred spot to enter the village, plainly

because the house is unoccupied. The “for sale” sign has been up for nearly a year now.

No one ever comes near it.

“Not many houses are empty in the village. Could that mean anything?” Mel asks, rubbing her fingers together.

A black glove covers the bionic prosthetic on one of her arms, the other hand open to the cold, short nails blue from the chill.

I stare at her. At her hand.

A part of me wants to take it. Warm it. But I don’t.

“Jesse?” she asks, her gaze tearing at me.

Her whole body wracks from the cold as she stares at my face, the rain breaking her apart. Stars, I don’t know why she couldn’t just stay on the base.

My last lead met its dead end. Even the other scouts have turned up empty handed. There’s nothing else to find—no more brunette 17 year old girls left on this entire goddamn island.

The prophesised is probably on the mainland, living her happy little boring life.

If we want to expand our search, we have to go there.

But I don’t dare hint at that.

Because Melanie Beckett *would* go to the mainland.

“It means no one wants to live on a butt-cold island.”

She rolls her eyes; silver flashing as she turns towards the house.

“The prophesised will.”

I let out a long, long breath.

I watch her walk ahead, as if through a haze.

“I have a feeling I won’t like her much.”

“You don’t like anyone. Or anything.” Her words are muffled as she moves further and further from me.

It takes all of my strength to follow her. To keep going.

I hate this end of the island.

I hate the forest.

“I like you,” I say.

She snorts. “Clearly.”

A fat drop of rain smacks me in the middle of my face.

I grunt, wiping my eyes.

“I’m here doing this, aren’t I?” I say, my feet barely squelching in the mud.

She doesn’t answer. Her gaze stares straight ahead, locked on the house before us as she breaks through the trees.

I really don’t have to follow her; she’s loud, I’ll be able to hear her. And yet I push aside the tree lining the edge of the forest, still shadowing her.

The truth is, I would follow her anywhere.

Do anything for her.

Even trek every damned day in this wretched rain.

Even allow her to come with me, knowing she has the stealth of a child.

“Jesse,” she calls my name. Her voice is gentle, breathy, as she stills near the front of the house.

I watch her hair as it tumbles with long, rain-soaked tears down her back. It looks so soft, so gentle, when mussed with water.

“Hey!” she calls out. This time not to me.

I notice the change in tone immediately.

My heart surges, blood pumping in my ears.

Without a breath, I’m out of the tree line. A knife slips into my hand, angled in front of me, as I dart towards the house. My back hits the window facing the forest, the empty living room barren behind it.

I drift around the house until I get to Mel.

A long huff clambers out of my lungs at the sight of her, frustration welling up in my chest. She stands near the carport at the side of the house, hand shielding her face as she stares at a blonde mane of hair dashing down the road.

A car pounds towards the blonde girl, it's orange lights peeling across her narrow frame. The girl jumps, dancing to the footpath next to the road.

She doesn't even look back at us as she runs away.

"She was looking into the house, is that weird?" Mel asks.

I slam my knife back into the belt at my waist, heat pounding behind my head.

"No."

"I think I frightened her," Melanie muses, turning to me.

My heart lurches as our eyes meet.

My frustration melts.

She's safe. She's okay.

My Melanie, thorough and determined. Why can't she leave things alone?

"Mel. I'm taking you home. You're cold."

"So are you," she mutters absently. She moves her eyes from mine, as if doing so is an effort.

Something in my gut twists.

"That doesn't counteract what I said," I say.

She ignores me, drifting out from the protection of the trees, over to where a rose bush is alive with roses, rimming the front of the vacant house.

Footprints line the grass from where the blonde girl had been, and Melanie artfully places her feet over the marks, covering her own tracks.

Something like pride flushes in my chest and warms my

cheeks.

I lean back against the carport, a smile pressing at the muscles in my face as I watch my favourite person in the universe do her thing. Her pale fingers skim flowers, her large jacket making her motions staggered as she navigates her way through the thorns.

I don't expect her to find anything.

It's just endearing to watch.

I give her several minutes. Counting seconds in my head.

I'm about to open my mouth to remind her it's time to leave again when she suddenly lifts something off the ground, her lips twisting into a smirk.

My heart plummets at the sight of the thing in her grasp.

She doesn't have to move closer for me to know what it is.

Years ago, my sister had a similar necklace.

They carry stones. Silver Magic.

Umbran Magic.

I stiffen.

The cold feels like a lash against my drenched clothes as Melanie Beckett comes towards me, sloshing over the wet grass.

"Jesse," she hushes.

Surely, not.

No way in hell.

I shake my head.

"The blonde girl... She was Umbran," Mel says, lifting her silver eyes to me.

And I say what she is too excited to say, my stomach dropping.

"We have a proper lead."

The smile that crashes across Mel's face is infinite.

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