

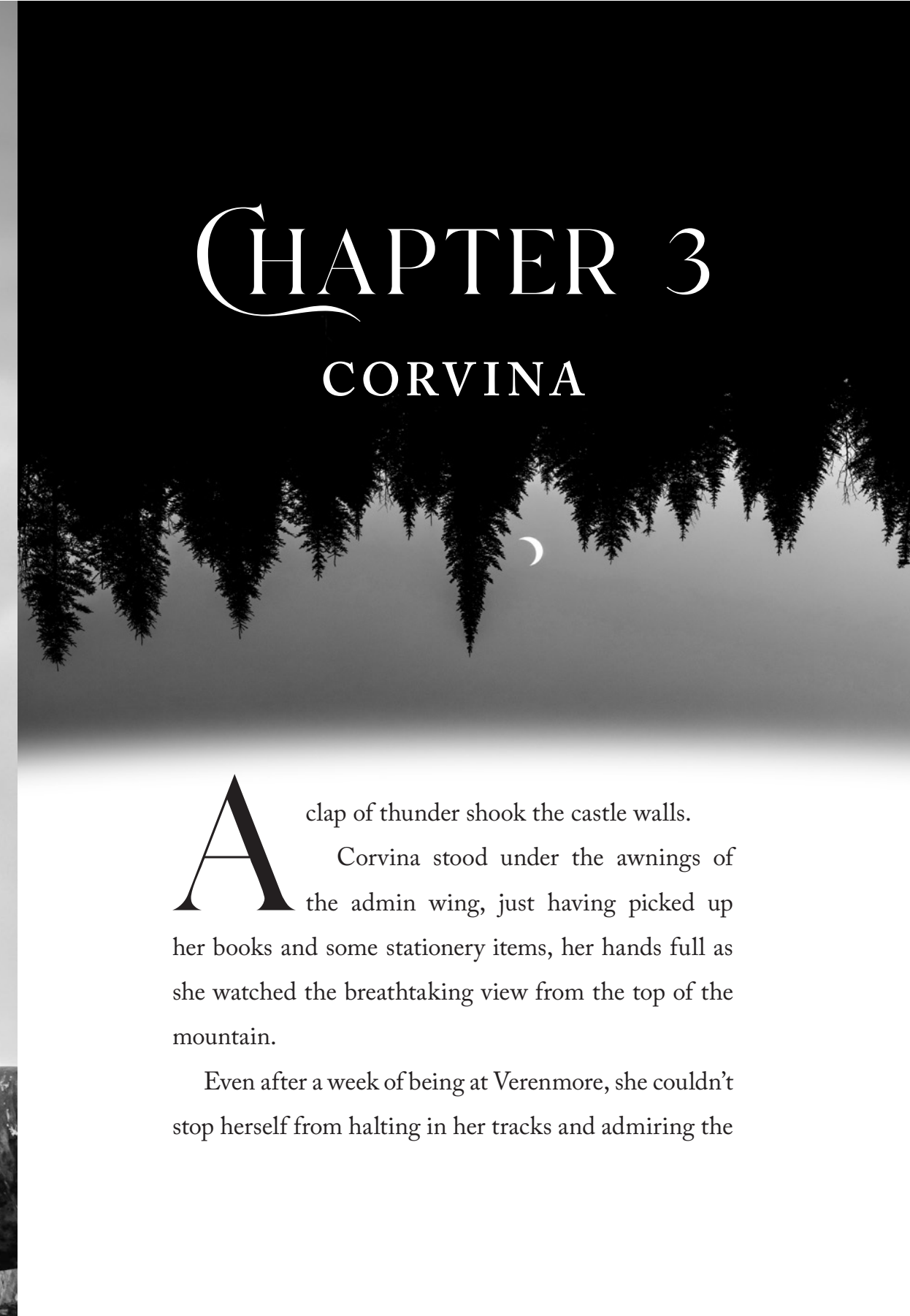
*There is always some madness
in love. But there is also always
some reason in madness.*

—Friedrich Nietzsche,
“Thus Spoke Zarathustra”



CHAPTER 3

CORVINA



A clap of thunder shook the castle walls.

Corvina stood under the awnings of the admin wing, just having picked up her books and some stationery items, her hands full as she watched the breathtaking view from the top of the mountain.

Even after a week of being at Verenmore, she couldn't stop herself from halting in her tracks and admiring the

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view every chance she got. It was unlike anything she could have imagined before. Growing up, she didn't watch a lot of movies or access the internet to see sights such as the one before her. That was one of the reasons why not having a phone or internet at the university didn't really bother her. She'd never had them. There had been one telephone line for emergencies and to order supplies. All other business she'd done through the town library once a week after she was old enough to go by herself. Her mama had taught her self-sufficiency.

She hugged the books to her chest at the pang the thought of her mama sent through her, and then she shook it off. It wasn't the time to get nostalgic.

Wearing one of her black full-sleeved tops and brown maxi skirts, a black ribbon choker around her neck, Corvina felt like herself. Her dark brown lipstick complemented her skin and her black liner made her eyes stand out even more. She had her hair in her favorite fishtail braid, silver dangles hanging from her ears. A silver ring pierced her nose, and the multi-crystal bracelet she never took off except to recharge adorned her left wrist. Sure, people stared at her as she walked by. But at Verenmore, their gazes were more curious than antagonistic like the ones she had been used to her whole life.

Over the last week, she'd learned through observation, limited interactions, and her greatest sources of information—Jade and Troy—that most students at Verenmore had some kind of past, more often tragic than not. They all had their secrets, which was why they mostly respected that in others. Sure, there were some shitty students, but they were few and far between. On the whole, students minded their own business and kept to their friends.

And she loved that.

She loved the acceptance she felt there every day in the single nod the lady in the common dining area gave her, or the toothy grin Troy the Asshole gave her every time he saw her, or the affection with which

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he and his friends had taken to calling her “Purple,” or the random hugs Jade gave her out of nowhere every day.

Life had been looking up, and for the first time, Corvina was excited for the possibilities in her future. While she still wasn’t as open with them as she thought she would eventually be—or trust anyone enough to tell them everything—she was learning to accept their hand of friendship with grace. Even though a part of her wanted nothing more than to find someone who would take her secrets without her having to make constant choices.

It was exhausting being alone.

It made her think of the man playing the piano. She never told her roommate about her little adventure that first night to the tower room, as she was calling it in her head. There was no reason. She’d not seen the silver-eyed devil since that night, and though classes were to begin in an hour, and she knew she’d inevitably cross paths with him, there was no reason for Jade to worry about it, not after what had happened to her previous roommate.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” The girl in question came barreling toward her, her own books hugged to her chest, wearing a yellow top and jean shorts (as Corvina had discovered were Jade’s favorite), her green eyes wide.

“What?” Corvina asked, frowning at the apprehension on her face.

“I fucking forgot!”

“What?” Corvina asked again, confused. “What did you forget?”

“It’s the year of the Black Ball.”

Corvina felt her brows pinch together. “The what?”

“God, you don’t know—” Jade shook her head and began walking toward the academic wing, cutting through the gardens in between as Corvina picked up her pace. Corvina had not been to that particular wing during the week, even though she’d seen it from afar while going to the dining hall, or the main hall as they called it here.

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The academic wing was the largest part of the entire castle, right at the back of the grounds, nestled on the highest point of the mountain. Troy had told her during dinner one night—after planting himself on her table and telling her they were going to be great friends—that the back of the block was nothing but steep, lethal cliffs, which she'd be able to see from the windows. She was excited to venture into the new physical territory.

"I don't know the exact details." Jade's voice from her side broke through her musings as they made their way to the classrooms at a steady gait. "It happens every five years. It's a masquerade ball tradition that's been a part of the university history since its foundation."

"Okayyyy," Corvina drawled, willing her to go on. "And that's bad because?"

"Because every Black Ball, someone goes missing."

Corvina paused at her words, glancing sharply at her friend. "What the hell?" she whispered, gauging the seriousness of Jade's statement. She looked serious as fuck.

The other girl started to walk toward the building as clouds clustered in the sky, casting a gloomy gray over everything.

"From what I know," she continued after Corvina joined her, "the first noted disappearance was about a hundred years ago. They said the guy went into the woods and got lost. The next disappearance happened on the same night five years later. It's been like a hundred years and almost twenty people have gone missing on the same night. It's just really spooky, okay?"

It was spooky and really weird.

"Wait." Corvina shook her head. "Haven't the police investigated?"

Jade gave a humorless laugh. "What can they investigate? There's no evidence of foul play from what I know. Girls, boys, faculty members, even townspeople all go missing. No bodies have ever been found. And because it's spread out over so many years, people just assume they're

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either runaways or lost. But trust me, I know from experience running away from here isn't easy, especially at night."

"Yo, freaky eyes," one of the girls from her tower, Roy, called out to Corvina. Yeah, not all people were nice.

"Fuck off, Roy," Jade yelled, giving her a middle finger as they rushed to their class. God, she loved this girl.

Her mind still on the conversation, Corvina asked the most obvious question. "Why didn't anyone stop the Black Ball?"

"Let's get to class first," Jade said as they entered the academic wing. Corvina stopped for a moment to take in the sheer beauty, the magnitude of the castle. It stumped her how something this extravagant, this ancient could still exist in the real world.

The entryway was grand, with sculptures on both sides of angels weeping and looking up at the enormously high ceiling supported by numerous pillars. A huge set of double wooden doors was straight ahead of them, and two sets of wide, low stone staircases leading to the higher levels on either side. Jade turned to the one on the left and Corvina followed behind, her eyes roving over the substantial pillars supporting the weight of this part of the castle. A big antique metal chandelier with over a hundred slots for lights hung from the center of the ceiling, looking so ancient Corvina imagined it could have been hung there by some medieval warlord.

They came to a landing with a corridor leading to the left and another set of stairs leading up. Jade entered the corridor and walked to the fourth door on the right. A bronze plate with curved edges hung on the door, with a label on top that simply spelled "English—Year 1."

They pushed the heavy door open and entered, the first in the class to arrive.

A board graced the front wall, and huge windows occupied the back and side walls. They were clearly in a corner room of the castle. The flooring had three levels—the lowest with a large desk for the

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teacher, and basic long desks and chairs on the second and third levels in neat rows.

Corvina was in love.

Heading to the back of the class, to a seat in the corner with windows both on her right and at her back, Corvina placed her books on the table as Jade jumped to sit on it, and looked out the window.

A deep, drop-dead-gorgeous cliff went vertically down from the castle wall and into a sea of green, the view absolutely breathtaking.

“Wow.” She felt the word escape her mouth as her eyes grazed over the entirety of the panorama at her feet.

“I know, right?” Jade said from her place on the desk. “I have a fear of heights but even I can’t stop staring at the view. That’s the one thing this place has got going for it.”

Corvina’s attention returned to their half-finished chat before the view had distracted her. “So, why didn’t they shut down the ball?”

Jade sighed. “They did, actually. For a decade, I think. People went missing anyway.”

“What the hell?” Corvina repeated as she put the books in her bag. Goose bumps erupted on her arms as she processed what Jade was telling her. If what she said was true and the pattern held, someone would go missing the night of the ball this year, too.

“This castle has so many secrets,” Jade whispered, looking out the window. “I love this place, but it scares the fuck out of me.”

Corvina could understand why. As beautiful as it was, there was something not right about the castle itself. She’d been sensing it more and more each night. It was like ants crawling over her skin—that feeling of wrongness, of something macabre. But she didn’t voice it. There was no point in scaring her already apprehensive roommate.

“When is the ball?” she asked instead.

“June fifteenth,” Jade told her.

There was still time.

Students started to file into the classroom, bringing their conversa-

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tion to a halt. Corvina took her seat and brought out her old notebook, picking up a pen, and opened to a new page.

The ghost of a melody drifted to her mind.

The same melody he'd been playing that night, that haunting melody of anguish that had somehow wormed its way into her being. She closed her eyes, hearing it in her memory, the notes flowing like blood through her veins, his posture, his closed eyes, his pained stance etched in her mind. Whatever fascination Corvina felt for the silver-eyed man, she'd been trying to nip in the bud. But sometimes, the music, the man, the moment, came to her mind unbidden.

Shaking her head to dispel the image, she stared around at the full classroom. There were a total of forty students in her class, twenty-eight boys and twelve girls as she mentally counted. A few of them were chatting with each other, but most of them were pretty quiet like her.

Maybe it was the feeling of being in a new environment, meeting new people, or a combination of both that had everyone slightly wary. Considering they all came from some kind of damaged background, she didn't find that surprising in the least.

Sitting at the back with Jade, she looked down at her open notebook and the little doodles she'd drawn in her handwriting. She was excited to take notes. Having never been to a school before—as her mother had homeschooled her—the experience, while terrifying, was also thrilling.

From what she understood, Verenmore offered all students two years of an associate's degree in general studies, after which a student could choose to go to another university to get a bachelor's degree in their specified field or complete the degree at Verenmore itself, or simply go out into the world with the associate's degree. It was a pretty good way for the university to not only cultivate a sense of loyalty amongst the students to give back, but to empower the kids from bad backgrounds to live a better life.

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Suddenly, the little noise in the class fell to a hush, making Corvina glance up.

The air shifted.

The silver-eyed devil walked in with a diary in hand, striding with confidence, his broad shoulders back, his wide chest steady, his long legs eating up the distance, commanding the molecules around him to shift. He was in another black outfit—black pants and a black button-up shirt tucked in, two buttons at his collar undone, sleeves folded over his muscled forearms. There was no shadow on his jaw, the clean, sharp lines stark against the tan of his skin. In the daylight, Corvina could see that the streak of gray in his hair was not the only one. There was slight premature gray at his temples, and Jade had been right—he made it work for him really, really well.

His mercury eyes roved over the students, skimming over her before suddenly snapping back to her. She saw him take her in under the broad daylight filtering through the arched windows just as she'd been doing to him. She knew what he would see—black sweater, brown lips, fishtail braid, black ribbon choker, nose pierced, silver dangles, and her odd, violet eyes.

Her palms began to sweat as his eyes lingered on her, before moving on.

“I’m Vad Deverell,” he said, addressing the class, his deep, gravel voice dripping with authority. “You will refer to me as Mr. Deverell. Not professor. Not my first name. I’ll be teaching you Language and Literature this semester. It is one of the core subjects of this course, hence mandatory. We’ll be covering the fundamentals of literature, the different schools of critical thought, and study some classics with the perspective of why they are so. Following so far?”

Most of the students nodded.

“Good.” Mr. Deverell leaned against the table, putting his diary on the desk, hands on either side, hands she’d seen work a piano so masterfully. “For the classics, I’ll give you all a choice between a few. Which-

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ever you decide, we'll study. For my class, you'll need to write two papers for the entire semester—one creative and one critical. And I don't want answers from the book. Think free. Give me the context of why you choose a certain topic. And we'll go from there. Any questions?"

A girl at the front in red raised her hand.

He nodded for her to go on.

"Aren't you a student yourself, Mr. Deverell?"

His silver eyes glinted in the light from the window. "A doctoral student, yes. I'm completing my dissertation this year."

"What is your project on, if you don't mind me asking, sir?"

"Don't call me sir," he commanded, his hands gripping the table at his side, his eyes coming to Corvina. "It is the correlation and influence of music on literature through the ages."

Damn.

Damn.

He was unsettling. Very unsettling, in a way that made her want to squirm in her seat, especially when he looked at her like that and talked with such intelligence. Corvina could admit she'd never encountered that. And she wasn't the only one who felt it. She could see a few flustered girls around the class, and she knew they were feeling whatever was rolling off him.

Corvina broke their gaze again and looked down at her notebook, her chest heaving. She realized it was possibly the first time in her life she was feeling lust induced by an actual man and not a fictional character. This was what it felt like—writhing, hot, velvety. This was lust. And she wanted to roll in it.

"Introduce yourselves now," he ordered the class, crossing his arms over his chest, and Corvina looked up to find those mercurial eyes ensnaring hers.

"Jax London," the good-looking guy at the front who'd been hanging around with Troy started.

"Erica Blair."

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“Mathias King.”

Followed by the next, and the next, and the next.

And the entire time, the silver-eyed devil nodded at them while keeping his eyes on hers, as though he could flay her open and delve into the deepest recesses of her mind. He wanted her name. He wanted to hear her voice. She knew it in her bones. And for some reason, her stomach felt heavy at the thought of directly addressing him, at the thought of giving him her name. Names had power, as her mother told her.

“Jade Prescott,” her roommate spoke from beside her, and Corvina knew she was next.

She swallowed as he nodded at Jade, before giving the entire ferocity of his focus to her. Palms clammy, she rubbed them on her skirt and wet her lips.

“Corvina Clemm,” she said softly, grateful that her voice didn’t reflect her inner turmoil.

The boy from the front, Mathias, turned to look at her. “That’s a cool-ass name. Does it mean something?”

Corvina, who was still trapped by silver eyes, saw his jaw clench at the boy’s interruption. “Crow,” he spoke, addressing Mathias. “It means little crow.”

“Raven,” she corrected him automatically.

His eyes flared. “Raven and Clemm. Your parents liked Poe?”

“My mother did,” Corvina said, her eyes stinging at the memory of how much her mother had loved the poet. Her nose twitched involuntarily.

She saw his eyes linger on it for a second longer before he moved on to the next student, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

“All right, let’s get started.” He clapped his hands, and the rest of the class passed in a blur, mostly with her keeping her head down and focusing on taking notes. Before long, the bell rang.

“We’ll discuss this tomorrow,” he said, picking up his brown leather-

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bound diary, and left the room, taking that charge of electricity in the air with him. Corvina slumped slightly, a breath escaping her just as Jade turned to her.

“What the hell was that?” she hissed as the other students began to leave the room.

Corvina looked at her with a frown. “What?”

Jade’s eyes were troubled. “Whatever that was between you two. The air was pulsing, Cor. I’m not even kidding.”

Corvina shut her notebook, chuckling. “That was probably all the ovaries in the room melting for him.”

“No.” Jade stood with her. “That was the two of you. It felt . . . hot. And that’s not okay, not in this place. Just be careful, okay?”

Corvina huffed as they made their way to the door. “He’s our professor, Jade. I know that.”

“Damn . . .” They turned to see the tall, gorgeous Black girl who’d introduced herself as Erica, walking behind them. “That was some peak sexual tension. Bottle it, and you’d be the richest fucking girl this side of Tenebrae.”

“See.” Jade pointed to Erica. “It’s not just me.”

Corvina shook her head at them. “I don’t know what you guys are talking about.”

“Girl,” Erica said, passing them toward the corridor outside, “from where I was sitting, it was lit up so bright aliens could probably see it. Mr. Deverell looked like he’d eat you alive. No, it looked like he’d feast on you if given the chance.”

Corvina clutched the strap of her bag as they exited into the corridor and Erica went to greet someone else.

Jade began to walk toward the stairs just as the man in question ascended on the other side.

Her friend turned to look at Corvina seriously. “You don’t understand, Cor. He’s just so . . . unknown. Like we all have our secrets, but he takes it to the extreme. He’s the only one who goes into those woods

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all the damn time. No one knows where he comes from. He doesn't have any friends, only his colleagues. Then Alissa hooks up with him against the rules and jumps off a tower? It's just . . . weird."

Corvina couldn't deny that as she watched his black-clad form disappear up the staircase. It was weird.

"And you wanna know something even weirder?" Jade asked, taking the other staircase for their next class.

"What?" Corvina asked, realizing she asked that a lot around this girl.

Jade looked at her, her green eyes somber. "The last girl who went missing at the Black Ball five years ago? She was with him at the time. Makes you wonder, doesn't it?"

