

Masquerade

“Higher! Push me higher!”

Elissa’s shrill eight-year-old voice cut through the damp morning air. She shrieked as she flew back and forth on a wooden swing.

Behind her, her older sister grinned. “If you say so.”

Elissa’s eyes lit up as her sister pushed her again. Her ponytail slapped her in the face as she swung and she giggled.

After a minute, Elissa brought her legs closer to her body to slow herself and turned.

“Deidre, are you going away tomorrow?”

Deidre’s smile didn’t waver as she tussled her sister’s hair. “Don’t worry, Elissa. It’s only college. I’ll come back to visit.”

Elissa pouted out her bottom lip and reached into her pocket. “I made this for you so you remember me.”

Deidre looked down at the small heart attached to a necklace. “Then I’ll wear it every day when I’m away so I always remember my little sister.”

The phone rang that night.

Elissa leaped off the couch and lunged for the side table. She fumbled with the landline and said, “Hello?”

The voice on the other side laughed. “It’s me, Deidre.”

Elissa broke out into a smile. “Are you at college?”

“Almost.” There was a pause. Then Deidre said, “It’s dark, and I’m stopping at this gas station near a town called Mora. Where are Mom and Dad?”

“They went out. They left me with the babysitter, but she’s making dinner,” Elissa said.

“Sounds good.” Deidre paused again. “My phone’s about to die, sis. Looks like there’s some party nearby. I’ll charge it there and call you in the morning. ‘Night.’”

Before Elissa could respond, the phone clicked off.

Two days later, a knock sounded at the door at the break of dawn.

Elissa’s parents answered it as Elissa peered out from behind the couch.

“Your daughter has gone missing,” a police officer said in a gruff voice. “We’re doing everything we can to locate her.”

Elissa stepped forward and hesitated. “Mom, Dad, Deidre said she was stopping—”

Her dad turned. “Go back to sleep, Elissa. Let the adults handle this.”

Then he turned back to the police officer as her mother wept.

Ten years later...

The dimmed glow of my headlights illuminate the road in front of me as it merges into the darkened forest.

Branches crunch underneath my tires. The wind howls outside my car and trees jerk from side to side. The darkened clouds above me rumble.

For a second, I consider stopping the car now and turning back.

“I can’t.” My words are quiet. “I have to find my sister.”

I hugged my parents this morning and told them I was going off to college. Now I’m driving through the same highway Deidre would have, heading for the same town she last called me from.

Beeping lights near my speedometer catch my eye. I curse.

“Siri, find me the nearest gas station,” I say under my breath.

My phone’s screen lights up. It takes a second to calibrate and makes a new path to the nearest exit.

I swerve off the highway and drive deeper into the woods. Branches scratch and claw at my windows and I squint.

Finally a pinprick of light enters my view. It grows closer as I keep driving and I turn right into the gas station. I shiver as I fill my tank and climb back into my car.

Deidre had said there was a town nearby. The same place she had disappeared at, but a town nonetheless.

A sinking feeling grows in my gut as I start the car again and pull back onto the road. In a minute, I see a small sign hanging off a low tree branch.

“Welcome to the town of Mora.”

My eyes widen at the sight in front of me.

In the distance is a mansion with glittering lights. Balconies jut out from every side. Elegant columns hold up an archway that leads to mahogany doors.

People dressed in glamorous gowns and pristine suits flood into the building. Figures laughing as if they didn't have a care in the world are moving inside the mansion.

I stop my car on the street and step out.

The sinking feeling in my stomach grows as I walk toward the party.

The sounds of talking and laughter increase. Wine glasses clink inside the building and the distinct smell of food wafts to my nose.

"Excuse me," I say, pushing past a group of ladies in flowing gowns.

I take a few careful steps toward the door and peer inside. The interior of the mansion takes my breath away.

At that moment, I forget everything. Honey-sweet music fills the air. Women in glittering floor-length gowns dance with men in dark suits. Masks of all shapes and sizes adorn the faces of everyone in the hall. Plates and knives clink at the buffet table at the right side of the ballroom. Curving golden banisters wrap around marble stairs leading up into the mansion.

"Excuse me, madame," a woman in a black-and-white maid's costume says. "Welcome to Epechein Mansion. Would you like an ensemble to fit the masquerade ball tonight?"

I am about to respond when I see a woman with free brown hair and eyes the color of chocolate dancing in front of me.

For a second, I think my eyes are playing tricks on me.

Deidre's emerald-green dress wraps around her and sways from side to side as she moves. She smiles. The pink heart necklace on her chest bounces up and down.

"Deidre!" I say without thinking.

She freezes. Deidre turns and her mouth curves in a perfect O.

For a moment, I can't bring myself to say anything. Relief fills me at seeing my sister, then fear at what she was doing here, then a thousand other emotions I can't name.

"Elissa?" Disbelief fills her voice. "What are you doing here? You look so grown-up..."

"Grown up?" I shake my head. "Deidre, it's been ten years. What are you doing here?"

She furrows her brow. "Ten years? Impossible. I just got here hours ago."

The party around me fades to a blur. I can't think anymore, can't even breathe.

I force words through my lips. "Deidre, you left in 2009. This is 2019. I'm eighteen. I left for college today, except I came to find you. And you're *here*."

"Eighteen, Elissa—" Deidre cuts off and looks around at the party. She finally looks back at me. "It's really been ten years?"

I nod. "We have to get out of here—we have to escape whatever trap this is."

"And go where?" Deidre asks. "It's a dangerous pitch-black forest out there. This place is safe, at least for a little while. Stay the night, and we'll leave in the morning."

I shake my head. "I brought my car. We can sleep there. Please, Deidre, we have to—"

She puts a warm finger to my lips and glances around. "Look at this party, Elissa. If this is some kind of trap, do you think they'll let us go?"

I force myself to look. The masked partygoers dance and weave around us like a sea of elegance.

But for how long?

I nod.

"Come." She slips her hand in mine. "We'll take turns keeping watch and resting. There's a room upstairs."

I keep my gaze on her necklace as she tugs me toward the stairs. I barely register where we're going as we ascend and take a few turns through hallways. The golden marble, tapestries, and paintings blur by.

Deidre opens a door and leads me inside, shutting it behind her. This room, too, is elegant, with walls of golden marble and a ruby-red carpeted floor. A canopy bed sits in the corner and a window next to it overlooks the bustling street below.

“Rest, Elissa.” Deidre pulls me toward the bed. “I’ll wake you later.”

I try to protest, but soft blankets are too much to resist. Before I can stay awake, sleep descends in a wave of darkness.

I wake to a foggy dawn.

Light filters past the gray clouds through the window next to me. The scent of dust and staleness floats to my nose and I sneeze.

The ripped gray blankets underneath me tear at my movement. I push them aside. “What the—”

It takes me a few seconds to notice a large fence in the middle of the street outside. It blocks off the door to the mansion and the paint is peeling.

A sign on the fence catches my eye.

“Off-limits. Epechein Mansion, abandoned since 1899.”

I slowly turn my head, unwilling to look. The moment I see the rest of the room, tears fill my eyes.

The door is falling off its hinges and the walls are broken. The tattered carpet shows wooden floorboards underneath. In the corner of the room sits a faded and ripped armchair.

In the armchair is a skeleton with a pink heart necklace around its neck.