

The Whizbang
Machine
Tunney's Curse

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To you, the reader:

Without you, there is no reason to write. Thank you for continuing to jump into my imagination. I dare you to be audacious like Elizabeth.

For those I have lost this year and to those who held my hand through it:

Thank you for the constant encouragement and lifelong love. Your strength is my inspiration. I'm still working on being an extraordinary girl in this extraordinary world.

CHAPTER ONE

Tumbling Down

A single wisp of smoke traced up my nose and clung to the back of my throat. My lips parted, breaking the Whizbang machine's electric kiss of death. My heart drummed out the rapid beat of fear, reminding me I had changed history. I had beaten Tunney's *vloek*. I could feel it. I was alive, trembling, and soaked in perspiration.

Still, somewhere in the back of my mind, I wished I hadn't listened to my father's pleas and had welcomed death with open arms. It would have been simpler in the long run. I held still and waited for a sign, for someone, a sound, a clue as to where I was, anything. None came.

"Hello?" I whispered. "Mom? Grandpa Jack? Hello?" My eyes peeled opened, blinking away the haze of a dusty fog, and then gently shut. "Where am I?"

The stench of hot char hit my face, bringing with it a raw dirtiness that sent my body recoiling. Wrenching my shoulders forward, I violently wiggled against the heaviness covering my chest. The tops of my fingers trailed across the thick roughness, weaving in and out of the gaps, trying to identify what was holding me down. My lungs seized, panicking. I was trapped.

"Grandpa Jack?" I screamed.

An explosion cracked in the air. Steel moaned above my head as if my words had awoken it. The weakened floors above me began to bow and pancake into one another. Wood popped and crackled as flames flickered and turned everything it touched into white ash. The last few days and hours hit me all at once. Debris showered down, striking with a deafening thud.

"Dear God," I said, trembling. "Jack!"

A slight scoff left my lips. I was wrong. The *vloek* wasn't done with me yet. The machine's rantings echoed in my head as the factory shook with all its might.

Family **secrets** are the **darkest** and **most deadly** of **curses**. **Deadly**. **History is** not right. **Correct it**. **Correct it, Elizabeth Royal**.

"I don't want to be a Royal!" I screamed. My throat quivered and burned. *Royal*, I thought to myself. *That's the real curse in all of this—being related to these people, being forced to carry on their bloodline*. "Do you hear me? I don't want to be a Royal!"

"Elizabeth?" Jack shouted. "I hear you! Where are you? Say something!"

“Grandpa.” My voice jumped. “Over here! I’m over here!”

Heavy footsteps crunched across the cement, galloping toward my head. I tried to break my hand free. Shrieking, I began to cry, hoping the noise would lead him to me. “I’m trapped! Help! Over here!”

As soon as the plea left my lips, they were absorbed by another series of loud explosions. The exterior walls were losing their hold. Bricks snapped in two raining down with red-hot embers that sizzled into the exposed skin on my feet. I swallowed the pain. Grandpa Jack slid a stop inches from my belly. Bending low, his hot breath hit my cheek.

“Lizzy,” he whispered. “Hold on. I’ll get you out of there.”

The ground violently rocked, sending Grandpa Jack reeling backward. His bones rattled, slapping together as they hit the stained concrete floor. My teeth instantly ground across one another. The force was so great I was afraid to give my jaw an inch of slack in fear I may have uprooted a tooth.

“Elizabeth,” Grandpa Jack shouted, “please, get up! You have to try to get up! You’re all I have. Please!”

The curse is winning echoed in my head. *Get up, Elizabeth. You have to stop this!*

“Lizzy,” Jack said, trembling. The fear in his voice was suddenly shaken, replaced with heated wrath, “You!”

A shadow moved on my right, ducking around an exposed electrical wire swinging

wildly from an upper floor. Each time it smacked a wall, sparks ignited, setting off yet another flame. From where I was pinned, all I could see were two feet scurrying towards the exit doors.

“Stop!” Jack commanded, struggling to his feet. “Vivian! I’ll...you’ll...I will not sleep until you pay for this...” He stopped short, trying to catch his breath while pulling himself off the ground. His threats dangled in the air. “I’m coming for you, Vivian! Don’t think about sleeping, because the minute you do, you’ll never wake up again. Do you hear me?”

“You stupid man,” she hissed. “There’s no escaping Tunney’s *vloek!* If you get out of this building alive, it will be I who finds you, not the other way around. The machine belongs to me. It’s always belonged to the Tunneys.”

“The machine belongs to its creator!” I screamed.

Her feet stopped moving, standing their ground, as an uninhibited and wicked laugh rose from the depths of her belly. The cackle was so intense it sent chills up my spine.

“It’s going to be a real shame when I have to take your life, Elizabeth, you being so young and all. I don’t usually like to get my hands dirty, but I think for you I’ll make an exception. And by the way, if you figure out a way out of here, you should call home. I wonder how your mommy is doing?”

“If you did anything to my mother,” I screamed.

Boom! A large support beam landed inches from the rubble I was trapped under.

“Jack!”

Breathing hard and fast, Jack pulled himself up on top of the stones and wires covering my body. The extra weight nearly cut me in two.

“Oh!” I cried.

“Hang with me, kid. This is the only way to knock the rubble off.” He kept one eye on my face, watching the pain come and go. Debris struck the live wire on the way down, sending it swinging out of control.

“Please hurry!” I gasped.

Feverishly moving through the ruins as quickly as his hands would allow, an angry howl ricocheted off the walls and filled what was left of the factory.

“What is that?” I cried. Metal objects, too small to make out in the haze, began to tumble from what remained of the top floor. “Jack!” I screamed. “Duck!”

My arms were free. Swinging them over my face, Jack flattened himself on top of me. The first object struck the back of his neck. An audible gasp flew from his lips. The sound of his pain turned my stomach.

“I’m sorry,” I cried. “I didn’t mean for all of this to end this way. Grandpa, I’m so sorry.”

Hundreds of typewheels, like the one Jack found in Morocco with my initials locked in place, smacked the floor, each bouncing a half-dozen times before coming to rest. Had I not been trapped, we would have been caught in a wicked game of dodgeball.

"Let me go," I begged. "Please, stop Vivian before she gets away! We have to stop her."

Jack pushed up on his forearms. Trickle of blood dripped from his neck, staining the stones and brick covering me.

"Just hold on!" he yelled.

The live wire twisted back in our direction, grazing a cement pillar and connecting with an exposed copper pipe. The union set off a catastrophic chain reaction. A scorching red and orange fireball erupted, sending flickers of fire in every direction. If the falling debris didn't take us under, the fire would. Grandpa Jack juttled backward, wrapping his rough and bloodied hands around my calves. He pulled with all his might. Jagged edges tugged at my skin, tearing it with each push and pull. One final rough yank dislodged my lower half and sent my body snaking across the ground, smacking against wooden beams, fractured bricks, and metal balls before coming to a stop.

"Can you stand?" Grandpa Jack shouted, bending to pull me upright.

"I don't know? I don't think so—my legs," I cried. "I cannot feel my legs!"

Trying to claw my way up to standing, my body refused to respond. I wouldn't allow my brain to drum up a million what ifs and worry about why my legs were utterly worthless at the moment. Instead, I collapsed in a heap and decided it wasn't worth the effort to escape. I wanted this to end. I needed it to. Perhaps this was how the Whizbang machine wanted me to correct history—to die for it.

“Let me go,” I whimpered, “just let me go.”

A dose of adrenaline pumped through Grandpa Jack, further igniting his will for us to flee. In one swoop, he heaved me into his arms and ran for the door.

“The machine!” I cried.

“It’s too late,” he replied, panting. “We have to get out!”

“Not without the machine! Grandpa! Please! We have to find it.”

Boom!

An old printing machine crushed the ground where we were lying seconds before.

“Noooo!” I yelled, wheezing. “Stop, please. Where is the Whizbang machine?”

Forcefully leaning into the thick wooden door, Jack splintered the doorframe, busting it free with his right shoulder. The wood snapped, sending the massive lock smashing onto the top of his right foot. He gulped back the pain. Ramming the door once more, we were inches from finally being free from the factory’s grip, but not from Tunney’s upper hand.

CHAPTER TWO

Let It Burn

The door scraped open, barely staying on its busted hinges, as we bolted over the cracked threshold. Jack's brilliant blue eyes opened wide—darting across the open field.

“Vivian!” he yelled with rage.

The only thing that answered was a damp breeze smacking us in our faces. Wherever Vivian was, she was shrouding herself from what could have been our worst encounter yet. Sucking in the fresh air, my insides burned, setting off a violent coughing spell that upset Grandpa Jack's balance. Twisting in his grip, trying to stop the spasming in my chest, Jack stumbled. His foot hit a low spot causing his knees to buckle. Pain shot across his face before he was forced to let go. My back smacked against the wet grass with a reverberating thump. My stomach was in a million tiny knots. My legs were numb and covered in blood. My head was pounding. I was

done.

"Elizabeth," Jack blubbered, "are you okay?"

Prying one eye open, trying to push away the pain and focus, I nodded slightly. His face was inches

from mine, so close I could smell the smoke he inhaled coming off his breath.

"I think so," I mumbled. "You're bleeding, Grandpa."

"I'll be okay. I'm worried about you. I've got to get you out of the alley safely."

"Not without the machine," I hissed, struggling to roll over and pull myself up. Grandpa Jack grabbed my shoulders and forced my back to touch the ground. "I'm not going anywhere without the Whizbang machine!" I fought.

"You need to stay still," he warned.

"What if the machine is crushed? What then? There's no way to stop the *vloek* without the machine!" I cried out. Hot, salty tears hit my face and slipped down my cheeks.

"Maybe it's better this way." Grandpa Jack sighed, sinking his elbows into the grass and sinking down.

"What? No!" I demanded hotly. "How could this be better? The factory is coming down. The machine is missing. The Tunneys are after us! How could *this* possibly be better?"

"Nothing has gone right since we arrived in the Netherlands, Elizabeth. It's just one life-threatening situation after another." Jack's hands shot out from under him, gesturing wide. "Maybe

it's better if we end the curse by simply walking away."

"There it is—the Jack Yale that I know. When it's easier to run away, he's gone before anyone can ask questions," I stammered, finding the strength to sit up. His hand hit my shoulder again applying just enough pressure to force me backward. "Don't!" I said, knocking his hand off. "The last time I checked I was old enough to make my own decisions. If you have no intention of stopping all of this, then you should have left me in that factory to die. What's the point of everything we've done thus far if you're just going to give up?"

"Elizabeth," he scolded.

"Don't Elizabeth me," I shouted. "This isn't just about you and me anymore."

"That's the thing," Jack bellowed, "it's never been about just you and me. That is exactly my point. Now, please calm down. You may not realize it yet, but you're hurt, Elizabeth."

"I'm fine!"

"You are far from fine, Lizzy! And, to make matters worse, you're giving them what they want. The Tunneys want us fighting, falling apart! It's easier if we're individual targets. Can't you see that?"

"I don't have to see anything. You heard Vivian. 'You better call home and check on your mommy.'" My shoulders shook hard. Lowering my voice, I uttered, "What if they have gotten to her? I came here with you and left her completely exposed. I felt it when we arrived at the airport in New York. I should have listened to my gut then,

but I didn't. I just trusted that everything was going to be okay! And guess what, Jack, it's not, it's not okay!" Looking him dead in the eyes, I swallowed the regret and anger sitting in my throat and said, "If she dies, it's your fault, Jack Yale."

His head dropped, hanging so low his chin rested on his chest. Droplets of dark red blood slowly dripped from his shiny silver hair and trailed down his cheek. We were both a wreck. My mind was racing, and my mouth spewed the hot venom I held inside. The truth of the matter was, he left me before, and he was doing it again.

"I shouldn't have trusted you. I've already lost my father. If I lose my mother too, what then?"

"That's enough." Jack coughed, trying to clear his blackened lungs. "That's just about enough, young lady."

I made a promise to myself at that moment, no matter if Jack bailed on me or not, I would finish this once and for all.

"The Tunneys are trying to—" Jack stopped.

"Kill us," I finished. "That isn't exactly a new trend, Jack. So what's your point?"

"Elizabeth, look at us! Look at the situation. Let that old factory fall to the ground. What does it change? It won't destroy this horrid curse. I don't think the machine even has the ability to do that. Besides, Vivian was carrying something when she escaped. It's safe to assume..." He didn't finish his sentence. I knew what he was implying, that Vivian was carrying the Whizbang

machine out of the factory just like George had done before her.

I opened my mouth to respond but stopped. It didn't matter if we disagreed, or if we were ripped apart by this curse like everything else in my life had been. Jack would do whatever Jack was going to do. No amount of arguing would stop him. Pulling my shattered phone from his pocket, he held the button down and turned it on. Once it emitted its familiar glow, he entered my four-digit pin. 4-5-0-3. The second the phone was unlocked, the text messages from my mom began to roll in.

"Later," he mumbled, flicking the screen closed.

The fractured glass made it difficult to see whom he was dialing, but I could only assume it was the police station. Quickly pushing the phone against his ear, he waited for someone to answer.

"Jack," I insisted.

Pushing his hand up into my face, telling me to hold, his voice shook as a man's voice pierced our silence. "Detective Henry!" he shouted. "We need your help!" Jack paused. "What? No. We're still in Leiden. I don't know what you are talking about. We didn't go home!"

I couldn't make out what Detective Henry was saying, but it was clear he was confused.

"I don't know," Jack said hurriedly. "Please listen. We need help! We're in front of the Whizbang factory. It's on fire. Please, bring an ambulance—it's Elizabeth!"

Henry demanded answers. His muffled voice rose and fell frantically, but all Jack could

do was shake his head and then he disconnected the call. Gently laying his hand on my forehead, he brushed the rest of my matted hair from my face. "Hang with me, kid," he breathed. "Help will be on its way shortly."

"I'm fine," I lied once more.

Neither of us said a word after that. There really wasn't anything worth saying. We could only lay there, listening to the sounds of the building imploding, and waiting for the echoing of emergency sirens to call out in the distance. What felt like an eternity passed before the sound we were so desperately waiting for came.

"Do you hear that?" I asked, wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me.

"I do," Jack mumbled. "We're going to be safe now."

"Grandpa." I gulped, grabbing his hand. "My legs really hurt."

"I know they do. Try to breathe, Lizzy."

"You have to promise me," I pushed. "You have to promise me you'll stay with me. That you won't leave me. I need you." The words spilled out of my mouth, dropping so low that even I could barely hear them.

"I promise I will never leave you again. I promised you that in New York. I've promised you that here. Just because I said we should end this curse doesn't mean *we* end. I betrayed you once, kid; I have no intention of doing it again. I cannot make you believe me, it's just something you'll have to trust."

"We have to end this together," I whispered. "I'm scared."

"I am too."

Sirens wailed, drawing closer with each call. Heavy boots moved through the dense paths leading to the massive opening—the very same opening that Grandpa Jack and I made our way through just two days prior. Limbs snapped underfoot while faint voices faded in and out with the breeze. Trucks rumbled down the one-lane stone path on the backside of the factory. Once they made the turn off from the main road, crews would be pulling into a perfect hailstorm of destruction. If anyone were hurt, or worse, I knew where the blame would lie, squarely on me. I did the only thing I knew I could, and I silently prayed to my father, *Watch over us. Keep them safe—keep us all safe. Dad, please.* Chills rose across my skin. I shook them away and continued to listen as the cavalry converged from every direction.

"Grandpa?"

"Hmm," he replied.

"I'm sorry." I found myself unable to look at him as my words filled the small space between us. I focused on the sky, and repeated myself, "I'm sorry."

"We're going to be okay, Elizabeth. Help is coming. Can't you hear it?"

As if answering Jack's question on cue, a man called out from the clearing, "Hello! Hello? *Waar ben je?*"

Jack tapped my arm excitedly. A push of energy sizzled through his veins. "See! They are here! Help!" he screeched.

The officer twisted following Jack's voice. He stood quickly, his arms shooting up over his head, waving them around erratically like a child, "Over here! Please, come! H-e-l-p!"

Signaling to the others still behind the trees, the officer pointed and called out, "*Komst! Komst! Over hier!*" and then darted in our direction. His voice was harsh and louder than I expected, "*Lieve kind, u bent ernstig gewond. Gaat het goed met je?*"

"What?" I cried, matching the tone of his voice, "I don't know what you're saying!"

"Hurt? Are you hurt?" the officer barked.

"My legs..."

Another massive explosion inside the factory cut off my words. Fire danced above the open roofline coloring the sky with waves of red and a fog of heat. Instinct took over and the officer hit the ground, shielding my body. Another push of terror built inside of me. Everything was caving—the factory, my chances to save my mother, even me.

"*Lieve God, haast nu!* Hurry! *Oproep Detective Henry!*"

Henry, I thought to myself. Maybe he could stop this insanity from killing us all.

"*Ze is bloeden,*" he shouted. "The *fabriek!*"

The officer tore at his thick blue shirt, snapping the buttons in two. Gently moving my legs, he smiled, "Don't move. Okay? Medic!" As quick as humanly possible, he bunched the rough material

under my leg and began wrapping it, cinching it so tightly that I wrenched forward under the immense fire building in my limbs.

"Okay, okay," he said, hushing me. "Stop thrashing!"

"It's too tight!" I screamed, trying to pull my legs into my chest. It didn't work; they were still numb. My fingers dug in, slipping over the top of the stiff knot. Pulling harder, the fabric buckled giving only an inch of slack. I was a second from unraveling the makeshift tourniquet when the officer's hands clamped down and pulled the material tighter, turning my skin an odd shade of blue.

"No!" he barked. "You're bleeding, Miss. It must stay."

My head swam. I gave up trying to fight and sunk back into the damp grass. Individual reeds poked through my shirt and into my skin, dotting my back with little pricks of pressure. I shifted, trying to find an ounce of stillness, but there was none to be had. I was powerless.

"Medic," he yelled. "Sir, okay?"

"Where's Detective Henry?" Jack shouted.

"Coming, he is coming. Your head, sir, you're bleeding too. Can you tell me how bad your pain is?" he asked, applying pressure to the same spot Grandpa Jack hit against the curb after escaping the library tunnel.

Grandpa Jack snapped, brushing the officer's hand off his face. "It's fine—I'm fine. Look after her."

In a matter of seconds, the open field was saturated with police officers, fire crews, and two

large ambulances unloading and rumbling our way. Flames flickered in every direction. Firefighters spread across the lawn pulling weighted white hoses with them. I closed my eyes trying to decide what was more intense, the noise or the heat pouring over the field.

What if we hadn't escaped echoed in the corners of my head.

"Elizabeth! Jack!" a voice barked. "Where are they? Has anyone seen the Yales?"

"Henry!" Jack roared. "Over here! Hurry, Elizabeth needs help, please!"

The ground trembled as the outer bricks began to tumble. One by one they smacked the ground. Crews screamed into their radios. Steel moaned, sounding like an angry lion. Water whooshed. It was all too much.

"Make it stop," I cried, pushing my hands over my ears to block out the sound. "Please!"

Detective Henry stared at me for a brief moment. I honestly couldn't tell which emotion he was favoring—disbelief, concern, or perhaps, pity—whatever it was he quickly shook it away and snapped into action.

"Henry!" Grandpa Jack said. "Elizabeth was unconscious for close to five minutes. Her heart stopped."

He continued to reveal the details of what happened inside the factory. I didn't hear another word after he said my heart had stopped. I suppose it makes sense as to why my father was urging me to make a choice to stay with him or save my mother. But if my heart stopped, then...

I tried to clue back into their conversation,

but I was unable to focus. The Whizbang machine's words kept repeating in my head at a maddening pace: **Death is upon us. Death is upon us.** A slight grumble slipped through my teeth. Death wasn't upon me any longer. It had me in its grips, and somehow I had escaped it.

"I died?" I whispered, still needing confirmation. "Did I hear you right? Grandpa Jack?"

He continued to ramble. Growing agitated, Detective Henry held up his hand, interrupting Jack's fleeting words. "Listen, I need concrete information and I need it now. What happened? How did you get back here? We'll deal with what happened inside the building once I know how you got here in the first place."

"I still don't understand," Jack answered. "What do you mean, back here—back here, as in the factory?"

"No, the Netherlands," Henry said, rushing his words. Frustrated, he hit his fist against his other palm. "I received an email from you. Do you not remember, Mr. Yale? Honestly, we don't have time for your twisted humor right now. How did you get back here?"

Grandpa Jack's eyes narrowed, contorting his face. His lips puckered as he was about to answer Henry's absurd questioning. He didn't have a chance. Henry pushed harder.

"Come on, Jack, answer my question! You said you and Elizabeth had decided to give up this pursuit, that you were packing up and taking the red-eye back to New York. You thanked me for

my help and told me not worry. You would be in contact soon. Then, out of nowhere, you called and said the factory was on fire. Pardon my confusion, sir, but you owe me an answer!”

A medic wearing a bright yellow vest knelt down over my legs. I studied his face as his hands flew from my body to his vest, pulling out a large roll of white fabric tape and a bundle of cotton wrap. He smiled as he caught my eyes.

“You’ll be okay,” he said reassuringly. “Stay still, I’m going to unwrap the shirt now. I need to stop the bleeding.” He turned to the medic next to him and pointed to my head. “*U bent gesneden*,” he said.

Applying pressure to my scalp, I gasped and started to wiggle. “Stop!” I cried, pulling at the medic’s fingers.

“You’ve got a nasty cut,” he replied, pressing harder. “Please, let me help you.”

“I don’t want help. I want to get out of here!”

Grandpa Jack and Detective Henry’s conversation grew louder with each passing second. Grandpa Jack was incensed. His feet moved from side to side, knocking into one another like a pendulum. His hands raged, flinging out from his waist and punching the air between them. Twisting his watch into place, Henry nodded, “The email came in maybe forty-eight hours ago. It was signed Jack Yale. The email address had your name as well. It clearly came from you.”

“Well, that is rather impossible, now isn’t it?” Jack asserted. “We were stuck in that factory forty-eight hours ago, no thanks to the Tunneys.

The email wasn't from me. Henry, listen to me, please! I did CPR on Elizabeth until she regained a heartbeat. She was gone—completely gone!” Shuddering, he wiped the sweat from his brow with his shirtsleeve.

“No one is answering my question,” I shouted. “Did I really die?”

Jack fell silent. His eyes spoke the truth. I had died. He tried to answer but his swelling emotions caught in his throat. Gulping back his feelings, Jack turned and said, “There is nothing else to tell you, Detective. Are you going to help us or not?”

“Of course I am, but I have to know all the information to do so. What has happened over the last forty-eight hours? How did you two get here?” Henry questioned.

Grandpa Jack sighed, letting defeat push his shoulders forward as he rapidly began to relive our nightmare. “After the fire alarm was pulled in the University, we got breakfast. After that, we went to a bank. Elizabeth put two and two together and realized a key we found back in New York went to a bank box. That bank box just happened to be inside the secret vault in the former W/B Trust Bank. What we uncovered in that box led us here.”

“Secret vault,” Henry whispered to himself, knitting his brows.

An oversized stretcher came to a rolling stop next to me. The cold silver bars were inches from my fingertips. Everything was suddenly moving so fast my head felt dizzy again. Trying to steady myself, I focused on the medic preparing the

stretcher. Pulling a thin, yellowing sheet from under his arm, he shook it hard, letting it flap in the damp breeze. He stuffed his hands in the corner, making a wide V with his arms as he stretched it over the top of the thick black padding. Tucking the corners, his lips moved into an obligated smile when he noticed I was watching him. The smile quickly fell away, and the muscles in his cheek began to twitch. He seemed nervous.

I was about to ask him his name, gather all the information I could about this man, when a loud, sickening crack filled the air. My stomach seized, forcefully spilling thick bile from my mouth.

“Elizabeth!” Jack screeched. “Do you have to do that here?”

My eyes rolled back into my head as I tried to focus. Pain radiated from my legs. I could feel them again, even if I didn’t want to. The shifting of my bones proved too much for me to withstand. It was unlike anything I had ever felt. My stomach lurched again. Clawing my fingers into the damp earth, I refused to stifle my building screams.

“Henry!” Jack cried. “That’s enough! Make them stop. You have to stop. Look what you are doing to her!”

“Sir, her ankle, we had to put it back in place. We’re ready now, Detective.”

Without permission, two medics lifted me off the ground and placed me on top of the yellowing sheet then covered me with a rough blanket. Henry nodded, lifting a finger to tell the

medics to wait. Grabbing at his phone, he stepped away. Whoever was on the other end was being given explicit commands regarding both Jack and me.

“You three,” Henry snapped as he hung up the phone. “Come!”

Heavy boots pounded against the ground. “Yes, sir,” they answered in unison.

“Officer Bram,” Henry shouted. “Erik Bram!”

A young man, standing at least 6'4", trotted to Detective Henry's side.

“Sir?” Bram answered.

“You,” Henry said pointing to the group of patrol officers waiting for orders. “You will follow the ambulance. Your sole job is to block the bus from any other vehicles. I mean completely block it, even if it means taking up the entire street. No one comes near it, do you understand?”

The group nodded fiercely.

“And do not get separated. If any of you notice someone is following the caravan, call me immediately. I will give you further instructions. However, ultimately, you have my permission to use whatever force necessary to protect this girl's life.” Detective Henry stopped, directed his eyes to the stretcher, and pointed. “Is everyone clear?”

“Yes, sir,” they answered in unison.

“Officer Bram, a word,” Henry said, pulling him to the side, but not entirely out of earshot.

“This girl's life is in danger. You're in charge. Look me in the eye, Officer. I need you to hear me. *Het is de vloek.*”

"*Vloek!*" Bram stammered loud enough for the entire field to hear. "Tunney's *vloek*?"

Henry firmly hushed him, pushing his hand on top of his shoulder and nodded. "Yes, Tunney's curse. Bram, if anything happens to this child..."

"No sir," Bram replied. "She's safe with me. The *vloek*, sir, are you certain?" Bram's face turned bright red. His voice carried, as he was unable to hide his disbelief. "At the hotel, you said we had a missing persons case. You never mentioned this was connected to—" Bram stopped and shuddered. "The curse. How?"

"Listen," Henry pushed, "it doesn't matter how. Right now, we have to protect these two. Are you sure you are up to the task?"

"Yes," he replied, quivering.

"Then come," Henry commanded, pulling Officer Bram back into the tight circle. Bending low, hovering just inches from my face, he said, "Elizabeth, you need to be seen by a physician. Officer Bram is going to escort you to The Hague."

"Wait," Jack interrupted, "what do you mean?"

Why isn't she going to the hospital?"

"It's too dangerous, Jack. She needs to be treated outside of the city. I don't want anything else to happen to either of you. You'll be protected from now on. In fact, Jack, you'll stay here with me."

"No," I exclaimed. "I need him. I need my grandfather. You're going with me!"

"Elizabeth, I promise you will be safe. I need

Jack here to gather all the information we can. The longer the Tunneys are on the run, the harder it will be to find them. I won't know where to start without one of you here. Do you understand?"

Still dead set on the fact that I wasn't leaving without Grandpa Jack, I folded my arms across my chest in protest. "I won't go," I said, shifting my weight to the side. Pushing up on my hands, I tried to make my way off the stretcher. Two sets of hands hit my body and roughly shoved me back.

"Elizabeth!" Henry barked.

One of the medics grabbed the belts under the gurney and strapped it across my legs, forcing me into stillness.

"Take her to The Hague," Henry ordered. "A doctor will meet you there. Make sure the ambulance does not make any unexpected stops." Pulling Officer Bram to his side once more, he continued, "Do not let the medics inside the building. Once you arrive, send them on their way. The doctor will contact you by phone. You'll receive instructions from there. Look at me, Bram. Do—not—leave—her—side."

He looked down at his dark boots and nodded slightly. "*Vloek*," he whispered.

"Elizabeth, I need you to trust me and stay with Officer Bram. He's the best officer I've got, kid. He'll make sure that nothing happens while we're apart. I promise you. Okay?"

"No!" Tears sprang to my eyes. I needed someone other than a stranger; I needed my

grandfather. "You promised me, Jack! You promised me!"

"Load her up!" Henry screeched.

The stretcher shot up, fully extending. Each rough push forward sent shockwaves of pain through me. I groaned in agony. The medic closest to my head touched my face taking pity on me, and rapidly began firing orders to the others in Dutch. Without warning, the stretcher peeled off the ground, suspended in the air, as it swayed from the team racing towards the ambulance.

"Grandpa Jack!" I cried one last time.

CHAPTER THREE

Uncertainty

Jack and Detective Henry watched as the ambulance cleared the rubble and the taillights disappeared out of sight. Jack stood frozen, unable to shake away the fear bearing down on him. Fear that he and Elizabeth would never see each other again. Fear that her injuries were far worse than what could be seen by the naked eye. Her bones would heal, that much he knew, but her heart...? Trying his best to push away a mountain of what ifs another thought struck him. What if he was right? What if no matter how hard he or Elizabeth, or even Detective Henry, fought, they would still be forced to surrender to Tunney's *vloek*, one way or another?

Jack tilted his head towards the clouds hoping to hold back the upsurge of emotion trying to spill out of him, but it didn't hide him from Henry's eyes burning into the side of his face.

"Jack?" Henry said, nudging him.

"The boiler room was on fire," Jack whispered.

"They are working to get it under control," Henry answered.

"No," Jack said, turning his eyes onto Henry's, "no, before, when we were trapped inside. Vivian tossed a match into the center of the room before she locked the door."

Henry stood quiet, waiting for Jack to say something more. The horrifying images of the last twenty-four hours replayed in his head: the fire, the building imploding, Elizabeth's pale face struggling to take in air, the second her light flickered off and her heart completely stopped, Tunney's *vloek*. Squirming under the pressure mounting in his chest, he bent at the waist, gasping.

"This is impossible!" he screamed. "How do you stop something you can't even see?" His chest heaved.

"Jack, are you okay? Do you need me to get someone to help you? Are you having trouble breathing?"

"Help," Jack snorted, trying to straighten his back and catch his breath. "The only help I need is to figure out how my granddaughter is going to survive something that up until a few weeks ago I had no idea was looming over my entire family." A stream of frustration poured from his mouth through gritted teeth. "Augh!"

Henry swallowed hard. "Jack, we do the only thing I know to do, and that's to start at the beginning."

"The beginning of what exactly?"

Crews scattered across the field. Two ferocious-looking stone gargoyles teetered over the edge on the far side of the factory's rooftop. Jack's fist tightened into small, white, bloodless balls as a crew of firefighters moved in. Whispering something to himself, he watched and waited for the inevitable to happen. Water blasted from hoses towards the flames, rocking the stone creatures back and then forth. Jack closed his eyes, refusing to watch as they left their posts. The first hit the ground, shattering into bits, propelling pieces of stone in every direction. A lineman lunged forward trying to dodge the flying rock. At that same moment, the second gargoyle tumbled, speeding towards the ground.

"Look out!" Detective Henry shrieked.

There wasn't time. The shrill that left the firefighter's mouth sent Jack to his knees. "It won't stop. It won't stop," he said, sobbing. "Elizabeth!"

Henry dropped next to Jack and wrapped his arm around his shoulder. "I think it's time to get you out of here," he said softly.

"These people are dying, Detective, and I need to protect Elizabeth. I don't know what to do anymore."

"She's in good hands," he murmured.

"How can you be certain?"

"I just know, Jack. I need you to trust me."

"Trust," Jack scuffled sarcastically. "Look around, Detective. Look what trust has gotten me so far. I trusted that I would bring my granddaughter here, and we would solve a mystery surrounding our family. It was supposed

to be simple. I didn't think about what could happen. I trusted that everything would be okay. But at what cost do my decisions come to everyone else? All of these people's families believed they would make it home tonight. Yet, some won't, but again, you ask me to continue on and put my faith in you. What is it you think you'll get out of this? Huh? You keep telling me to trust you and no one else, but why should I?" Jack's chest heaved. "Oh my God! Elizabeth!"

Henry let Jack's questions dangle in the air. With each minute that passed, the discomfort grew between them until Henry snapped, "You want to talk about trust, Jack, but you still haven't told me why you came here alone in the first place. When the alarm was pulled at the University, I told you to wait for me, and we would come together. Why did you come here? I could have helped you. I could have prevented all this from happening."

Jack's head snapped back; looking at Henry bitterly, he laughed. "You sure think a lot of yourself, don't you?"

"You know what I mean. I just want the truth," Henry demanded.

"So do I, and that is why we came here without you. All either of us thought we would find was nothing more than an old abandoned warehouse. I had no idea that..."

"That what?" Henry pressed. "What was it that you found when you arrived?"

Jack twisted his head from side to side and folded his arms across his chest. "You know, Detective, I'm not saying another word until you

tell me who is responsible for pulling that alarm at the University. You're so hung up on starting at the beginning, then fine, that's our beginning. You speak your truth, and I'll speak mine."

"We still don't have a suspect in custody, Jack."

A twinge of anger settled between Jack's brows, forcing them together. "You said the Royal exhibit is the hub for the University's security. If that is, in fact, the case, how could you not know who pulled the alarm? Hasn't anyone taken the time to actually review the video?"

"The room *is* equipped with cameras. We're still investigating. Mr. van Rijn is working on it too. Whoever pulled the alarm cut the video feed moments before they got down to the basement. We still don't know how they accessed the feed, let alone how they did so undetected. The computer's central system is on the upper floors, in plain sight, yet not a soul can account for anyone entering the secured room or coming out. To make matters worse, the logs don't show that anyone used a secured badge to gain access inside. Without that, we're stumped."

"That doesn't make sense," Jack whispered.

"No, it doesn't. None of the cameras show any of the people we are looking for or anyone that you and Elizabeth have claimed to have had encounters with either."

Jack leaned into Detective Henry, and cleared his throat. "There's more of them, aren't there? More Tunneys than we even know."

"That's the only theory I can rationally come up with," he nodded. "I don't think a simple

merchant would have the skills to pull off a hack like this, not with the level of security surrounding these particular feeds.”

“I wouldn’t put it past any of them, honestly,” Jack declared.

“We only have theories, but we think the Tunneys are working with someone inside the security team. The video is encrypted, every keystroke is logged, and up until now, no one has ever been able to penetrate the system. AVID tried to...”

“AVID?” Jack interrupted.

“AVID is like your American CIA,” Henry answered.

Jack nodded. “AVID tried to what?”

“They tried to hack into the system after the artifacts went missing eight years ago...”

Jack cleared his throat crudely at the mention of the stolen objects. Henry studied his face. “What?” he asked.

“I think I know who stole those items,” Jack murmured.

“Your son?” Henry asked matter-of-factly.

Jack nodded.

“That’s been my theory for some years now, Mr. Yale. I’ve just not been able to prove it.”

“Why didn’t you say so before?”

“What would it change?” Henry asked. “He’s gone, so now it’s a matter of finding out where Jesse stashed them. And honestly, I want to know why.”

“He was apparently trying to do what we are,” Jack answered. “He took evidence from the New York City Library too.”

Henry crossed his arms. "Why didn't he tell you what he was doing, or did he and you're keeping that information from me as well?"

Jack's shoulders slumped. "I wish I were keeping a secret from you, Detective. But my boy, Jesse, he never said a word. I've asked myself a million times—why, why would he keep something this important, this life-altering, from his own father? But you know, I still can't seem to come up with a good reason."

Henry watched Jack closely, looking for his eyes to shift to one direction or another, his fingers to twitch, anything that would clue him into the truth. Jack swallowed hard and continued.

"Up until a few weeks ago, I never thought he and I had a single secret between us. He told me everything, even things I didn't even want to know, but never this. I guess what I thought I knew about the man I called my son was a heap of lies too." Jack's voice cracked at the realization of his words. He paused, gathered himself and continued, "I can't help but to believe that the decisions he made cost him his life."

"What's important is making sure those decisions don't claim his daughter's life too. We need to figure out everything Jesse took from the Royal exhibit and more importantly, why he did so, before the Tunneys do. Other than knowing you and Elizabeth were at the University, the question stands as to why the Tunneys showed up at the University at all—what were they looking for? As far as the cameras go, the video we do have is sketchy. It's almost as if someone edited

it before we accessed it. It starts with the four of us talking in the exhibit hall, and then you and Elizabeth fleeing out the side door with the alarms blaring. Seconds later, the video goes blank. There is nothing before the alarm or after.”

“Blank? For how long?” Jack pushed.

“Six minutes,” Henry replied. “Six full minutes of absolute blackness.”

“Did they take anything?”

“Not here, Jack.”

“No one can hear us, Detective,” Jack said, pointing to the building. People were still scrambling in every direction as the building burned out of control.

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t trust anyone,” Henry replied. “I answered your question, now how did you two find your way to the factory?”

“We hopped a taxi at the bank. We gave the driver the address. About a mile out, he pushed us out of the car saying the grounds were cursed, and that was as far as he would take us. I nearly didn’t make it out of the car before he peeled off. We walked through the woods until we found this place. Elizabeth and I were just a few hundred feet from the door when a woman yelled at us to leave.”

“Who was she?” Henry pushed, pulling his notebook from his back pocket.

“She said her name was Vivian Myers.”

“Myers?”

“That is the name she gave. After convincing her we were only there to look at the factory, nothing more, she invited us into the small stone cottage over there.” Jack pointed in the distance.

“Huh,” Henry muttered. “That’s Edward Royal’s childhood home.”

“She mentioned that, but then she began speaking about George in a way that almost sounded like she idolized him. The way she was speaking—jaded, tilted only towards the Tunneys—made us realize we had made a mistake coming alone. Elizabeth was growing uncomfortable so when Vivian asked us if we wanted a cup of tea, I thought maybe it would speed up our departure. We walked down a narrow hallway, and that is when we knew for a fact we had walked right into the arms of the Tunneys.”

“How? What did you see?”

“A room with nothing but pegwood dolls. She caught Elizabeth staring at the shrine. That’s really what it was—a shrine to the dolls. That’s when things changed. She ushered us out of the house and into the factory. She pretended to give us a tour but within minutes, she forced us into the boiler room, lit a match, and closed the door.”

“Did you tell her who you were?”

“I don’t think so. I can’t remember now. I think I told her our bloodline was connected to the factory. I remember telling her my full name because she called me Mr. Yale. But I never said which side. Now that I think about it, she only said she was a descendant of the family too, but it’s pretty safe to say that Vivian is a Tunney. Oh, I almost forgot! The hallway was lined with photos of the pegwood merchant that jumped from the bridge. There were pictures of him with the woman from Morocco, the same one we

believe shrouded herself to steal the machine from our hotel room. I believe they are married.”

Henry looked up, dropping his pen on the small pad. “That’s impossible.”

“What’s impossible?”

“That Vivian is a Tunney.”

Jack’s face flushed, signaling his frustration. “If Vivian isn’t a Tunney, why are all the pegwood dolls in her house? Why would she rave about George that way? Furthermore, why would she try to kill us if she were a Royal?”

“Come with me,” Henry said, rushing him along.

Together the pair headed for the small stone cottage closer to the woods. The sun had faded into the night sky leaving only a slight sliver of light as their guide. By the time they reached the porch of Vivian’s house, full, blinding darkness had set in.

“Stay behind me,” Henry ordered, “and don’t let your guard down.”

He pulled the heavy flashlight hanging from his belt off its loop and pushed the light across the porch, sweeping it back and forth quickly. Jack grabbed the back of his arm, halting him from taking the next step.

“Look,” he whispered, “the door is open. What if one of them is still inside?”

“Shh,” Henry hushed, moving slowly towards the open door. Sticking his foot out, he tapped the door hoping the old slab of wood would ease open on its hinges. The door moved, letting out the most awful creaking sound.

“Hello!” Henry shouted, moving forward, knowing he had to advance before someone else did. “Is anyone in here?”

Nothing.

Together they hurried inside. The centuries-old floor moaned under the weight of their bodies. Henry tapped Jack’s shoulder and snapped, “Find the light switch!”

Jack stumbled, brushing his hand across the wall. Coming up empty-handed, he tried the adjacent wall. After the fifth attempt, he flipped a switch. A lamp in the corner cast a warm, dim glow over the disheveled cottage. Books and papers were strung everywhere. Drawers were spread across the floor, turned upside down. Vivian and her cohorts were looking for something before they fled.

“Show me the room,” Henry said, moving forward.

“You need to see the hall too.”

Jack stepped in front of him, pushing through the piles of things on the floor, and turned down the hall. The walls were blank. Even the nails and wires the pictures hung on were gone.

“It was here; I swear. Family pictures, George as a child, the merchant, that lady, they were all here!” Jack shouted, slamming his hand against the wall. The yellowing drywall vibrated and jumped under the impact. Jack surged forward, busting through the last door on the right. He was greeted by another blank space. “No!” he shouted. “They cleared the house, Detective. I swear, ask Elizabeth, this room was covered with pegwood dolls, every single inch of

it. How could they have possibly cleared this house so fast?"

"Calm down Jack. We'll figure it out."

"Where are they, Henry? Where did the Tunneys go?"

"I don't know, but we'll find them."

Henry led Jack back into the living room and pointed to the ground.

"Her name isn't Myers, and she isn't a Tunney."

"What are you saying?"

"Look," he said pointing, dropping to his knees. He pushed an open letter into Jack's hand. "Look at it."

Jack read the top, "Dear Vivian Royal." His hand began to tremble. He bent low, grabbing letter after letter hoping what he was holding was a fluke, but no matter where he looked, the name Royal stared back at him. "Now what?"

"We don't trust anyone," Henry muttered.

The front door creaked, flying open, as an officer rushed in holding something wrapped in a large, gray wool blanket. His body was shaking uncontrollably.

"*Wat is dat?*" Henry barked.

The officer stammered, trying to speak. Noises and sounds flew from his lips, but nothing was coherent.

"Slow down," Henry said.

The officer's Adam's apple moved in his throat. As his eyes darted around the room, he stumbled, trying to catch himself before dropping the object he was carrying to the ground. It was too late. His knees buckled, sending the object

airborne. A wild golden spark shot out of the blanket and sizzled in the air. A harsh howl rushed across the man's lips. The blanket trembled as it hit the ground, releasing a thin line of white smoke.

“You found it? You found it!” Jack uttered.

Henry darted forward, reaching for the blanket.

“Don't!” Jack urged. “It's the Whizbang machine!”

