



*“Before me there were no created things,
Only eternal, and I eternal last.
All hope abandon, ye who enter in!”*

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Inferno*, Canto III

Pierce keeps having the most terrible nightmares.” My mom used to say this to all the doctors we saw right after the accident. “She talks in her sleep — sorry, sweetheart, but you do — about a boy following her. Sometimes she even wakes up crying. It doesn’t seem normal. I’ve never had dreams that vivid.”

That’s because the worst thing that’s ever happened to you, Mom, I’d wanted to tell her, is your divorce from Dad. You never died, got resuscitated, then had a boy follow you back from the realm of the dead.

Only I couldn’t say this to my mother. Nothing good ever seemed to happen to anyone who found out about my problems, which had more or less caused my parents’ divorce, even if Mom didn’t know it.

“Often while we’re sleeping, our mind is busy working out solutions to problems about which we’ve felt stressed while we were awake, though our dreams might seem completely unrelated to what’s really bothering us,” the doctors explained, one by one. “In Pierce’s case, of course she isn’t *actually* being followed by anyone in real life.” This showed how much the doctors knew. “That’s just how whatever is causing her anxiety manifests itself in her subconscious . . . the way some of us will dream that we’re late for a class, for instance. It’s perfectly healthy, and a sign that Pierce’s subconscious is functioning normally.”

You know what I’d like? To dream that I’m late for a class.

Instead, I’m always dreaming that someone is trying to kill me, or someone I care about. That’s because people *are* trying to kill me, as well as the people I care about, in real life . . . so often, as a matter of fact, that there are times I can’t tell when it’s really happening, and when I’m only dreaming about it.

Like now, for instance. For a dream, this one felt pretty realistic.

I was clinging to the wooden railing of an old-fashioned sailing ship. High winds whipped my dark hair, causing loose tendrils to stick wetly to my face and neck. They tugged at the long white skirt of the silk ball gown in which I’d somehow become dressed, tangling it around my legs, making it hard for me to keep my footing on the rain and salt spray-slickened surface of the deck.

The sky above me was black as night . . . except when lightning sliced through the thick dark clouds, revealing the frighteningly whitecapped ocean waves crashing against the ship’s hull below me, churned by a violent storm.