

Excerpt from *Halloway* – scene is subject to change

When we went inside, Tess ushered us to a sitting room, where we found mama and our remaining sisters. Mariel and mama sat at settees, engrossed in novels, while Claudia sat at the piano, plucking away at keys. My virtuoso of a sister emitted a hum so far off pitch I felt she would never find her way back.

“You should not sing,” Jeannette suggested. Before Claudia could fire an insult, Jeanette ran to tell mama of her adventures.

I joined Claudia. She regarded me with displeasure, tutting when I nudged her to move further down the bench. I said, “You may need practice.”

“Hmph. If you hate my music so deeply, you should play instead.” She gestured to the piano then crossed her arms over her chest.

I played the notes I remembered from my childhood, which heightened Claudia’s frustration. She smacked my fingers lightly, so she could resume.

“Do you like living here so far?” I inquired nonchalantly. Claudia’s notes stopped.

“Who could not love our new home? Everything I desire is at my fingertips.” She leaned over to press a high note. “This is a dream come true. I never thought I would feel so happy.”

“Are you sure? I would understand if you cried last night...”

Claudia answered me with a glare. “Why do you always ask such strange questions, Eliza? I am madly in love with Halloway and would hate to return to that disgusting hole we used to call home. If I were to cry, it would be from joy.”

I said, “You are particularly emphatic today.”

Claudia hmphed once more before returning to her poor attempt of music making. I rolled my eyes, sensed the end of our conversation, and wandered toward Mariel.

“I imagine she was less than cordial,” Mariel remarked, using her blue eyes to gesture toward Claudia.

With a shrug I asked, “Did you cry last night, Mariel?”

Mariel half smiled. “I did not cry, though I appreciate your concern. I feel a surprising sense of loss, but I am indefinitely grateful for this second chance. This father may not compare to ours, but he is lovely and worthy of our affections.” She raised an eyebrow, curious. “Why? Did you cry?”

“No, but I thought I heard weeping in the night.” I peeked out the window, which overlooked the huge garden. Reginald dozed in the grass, resting on his back with a look of pure contentment on his face.

Mariel glanced toward our family members to ensure they were not eavesdropping, then asked in whisper, “Are you hearing it again?”

“Not at all, Mariel. I promise.”

She grabbed my wrist. “You are an honest woman, Eliza. You would not hide from me.” I could not meet her face. “I would not, Mariel.”

She unhand me. “You must have an open window. Something ajar, so when the wind pushes through, it howls. Anyone would mistake such sounds for a person’s distress.”

“Logical, Mariel.”

When I remembered to examine the windows before I slipped into bed, I found them extraordinarily tight, as though they have not been opened for years.