

New York Times Bestselling Author of *Divine Rivals*

Rebecca Ross

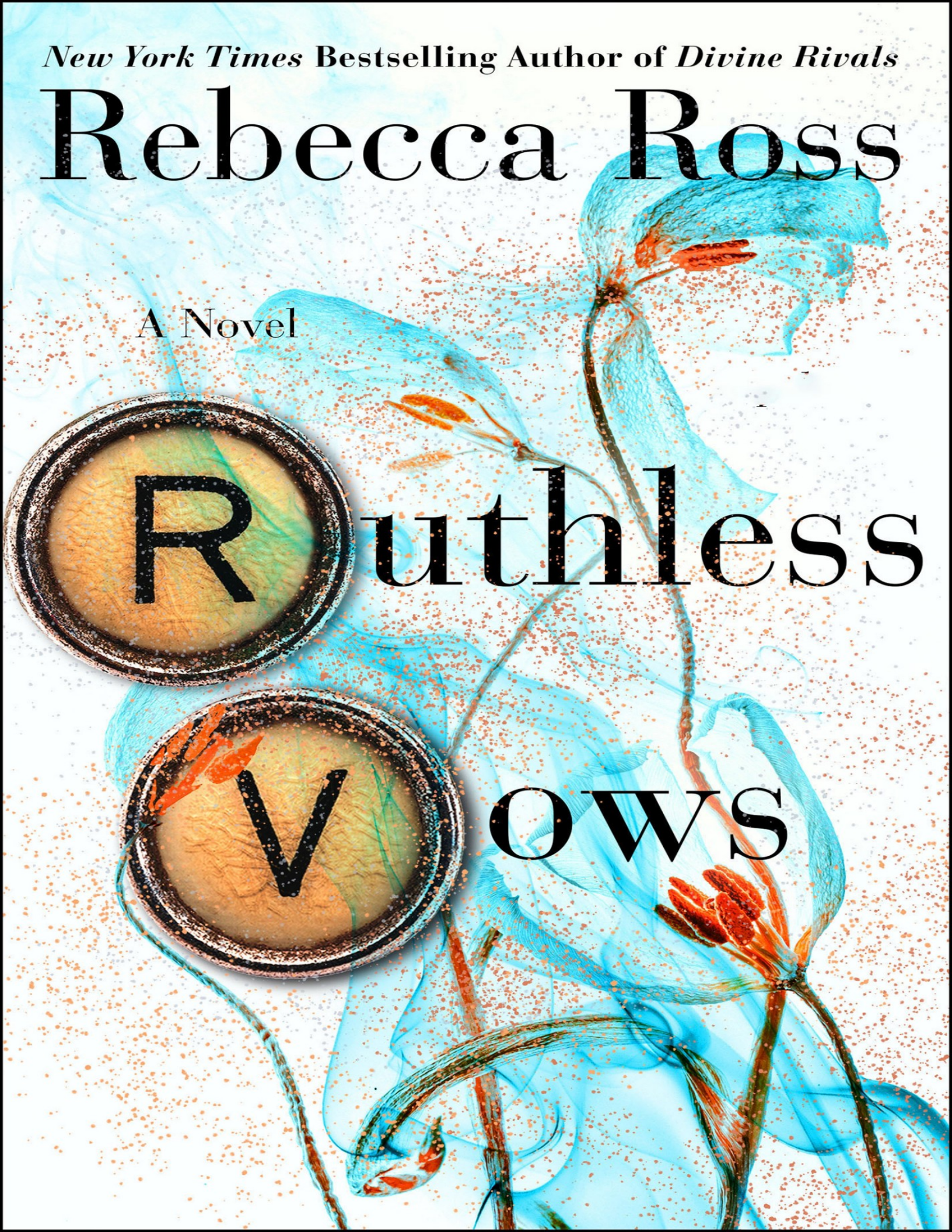
A Novel

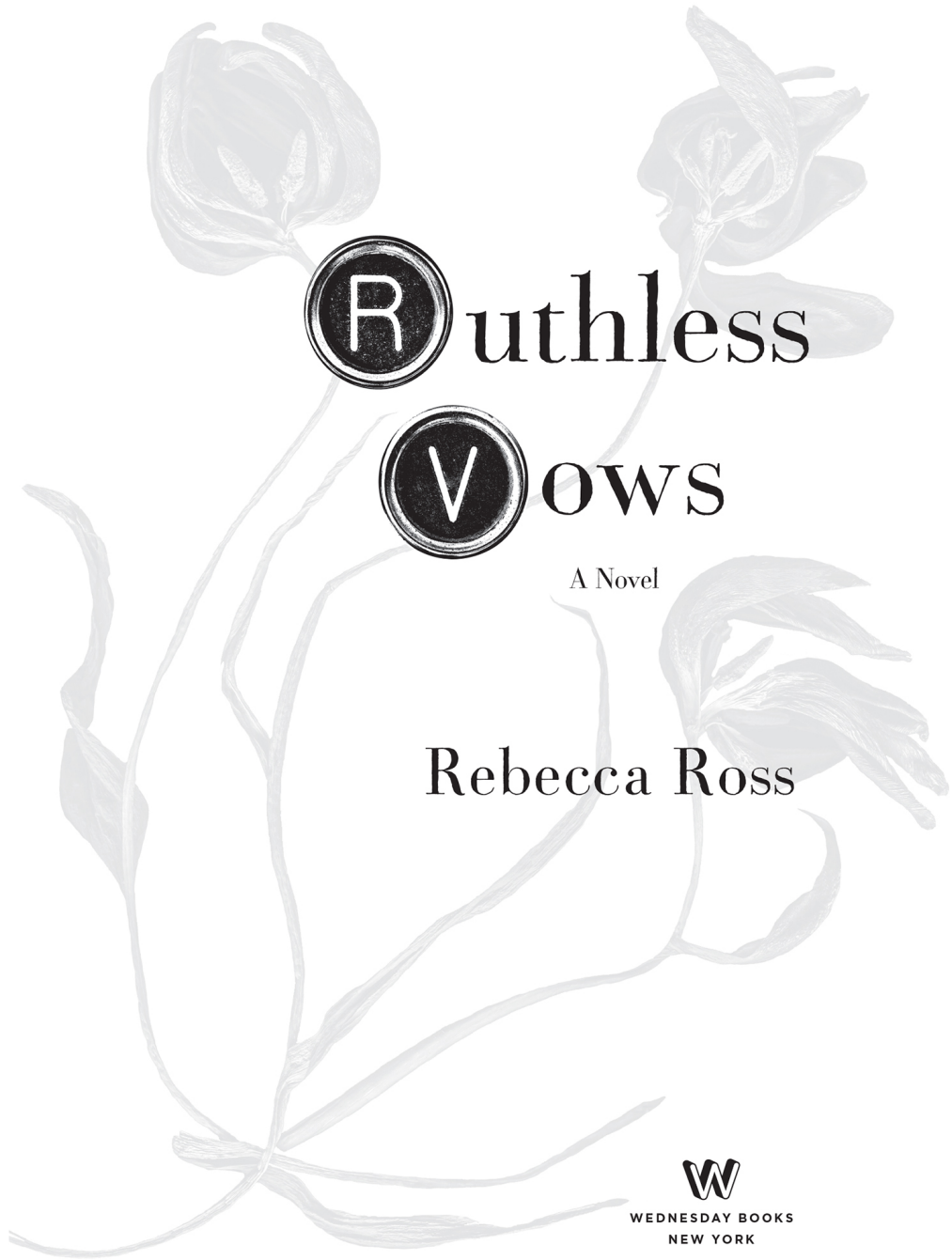
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A Novel

Rebecca Ross



WEDNESDAY BOOKS
NEW YORK

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*For anyone who sought a different realm through a wardrobe door,
Who wrote a letter and is still waiting for a reply,
Or who dreams of stories and bleeds words*

*Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?
—John Keats, “Ode to a Nightingale”*

{ Prologue }

ENVA

There was never any doubt in her mind, even after all these dust-streaked mortal years, that Dacre would one day come for her. Enva knew her music would only hold him in his grave for so long. It didn't matter how much she had sacrificed to sing it; the twisted spell she had sung over him would eventually fade in power.

She had strummed the lullaby for the entire turning of a year, from spring to summer, when gray storms turned the world green and soft. And then from summer to autumn, when the trees turned umber and gold, and rime cast a cloak over the dying grass. From autumn to winter, when mountains grew fangs of ice and the air was brittle, and then to spring once again.

It was enough to hold her former lover beneath the loam for centuries by mortal reckoning, and she had reassured the human king at the time. As for the other three divines ... Alva, Mir, and Luz ... Enva had never been worried about their waking.

But all good things eventually came to an end. And all songs had a final verse.

Dacre would wake, and she would be waiting for him.

Enva curled her long fingers into a fist at her side, feeling the ache in her swollen knuckles. She had known her spell would end, but what she *hadn't* anticipated was the cost of swallowing so much power.

Momentarily lost to the past, Enva stood in a shadow on Broad Street, watching people hurry along their way, oblivious to her presence. But she was

often overlooked, as was her preference. She could melt into a crowd of mortals like she had been born among them, with flesh doomed to bleed and decay, with a spirit that was like a candle flame, flickering and incandescent. Burning brilliant in the darkness.

She waited a few more moments for the sun to set. Only then did she step forward into the dusk and cross the street, her eyes on a particular café. She was almost certain she had been here before, long, long ago. Before this city had risen from a crosshatching of cobblestones. Before the buildings had been made of tall, steel skeletons.

She could *almost* remember this place if she let her memories fall back in time. If she dared to relive the era when she had dwelled with Dacre below. When she could have drowned in such lonely shadows, waking in his bed, longing for the sky.

He had put her in a gilded cage, but she had slipped away from his grasping hands.

Enva reached the café's threshold. It was closed for the night, but locks had never stopped her before, and she stepped into the building and studied her surroundings. Yes, she had been here once, but this place had been vastly different then. She had the strange feeling that while everything around her had changed and evolved like the seasons, she had not. She was the same as she had been centuries ago, drawn from very old wind and cold constellations.

But she was not here to fall prey to what had been.

Enva narrowed her sight and stepped forward, searching for the door.

PART ONE

The Magic Still Gathers

A Grave Encounter

Spring had at last found the city of Oath, but even the flood of sunshine couldn't melt the frost in Iris Winnow's bones. She knew someone was following her as she walked through the bustle of Broad Street, over tram tracks and scuffed cobblestones. She resisted the temptation to glance behind, instead forcing her hands into the pockets of her trench coat as she stepped over a row of weeds blooming from the pavement cracks.

The coat was only three days old and still smelled like the store Iris had bought it from—a hint of rose perfume and complimentary black tea and polished leather brogues—and the days were becoming too warm to truly need it on her walks to and from work. But she found that she liked to have the coat belted at her waist, as if it were armor.

She shivered as she wove through a crowd gathered at a bakery door, hoping the person on her trail would lose sight of her in the tumult of people purchasing their morning buns. She wondered if it was Forest following her. The image instantly made her feel better, and then profoundly worse. He had done such a thing before, back in Avalon Bluff. In fact, he had been watching her for *days*, waiting for the right moment to appear, and it still made her feel ill to remember.

Iris couldn't resist a moment longer. She cast a glance over her shoulder, the wind pulling a few tendrils of hair across her face.

There was no sight of her older brother, but then again he was no longer the swift-laughing, affectionate person he had been before he enlisted for Enva's

cause. No, the war had left its marks on him, had taught him how to maneuver in the trenches and fire a gun and sneak across dead man's zone into enemy territory. The war had deeply wounded him. And if Forest was following her this morning, then it meant he still doubted her.

He continued to believe she would run, leaving him and Oath behind without a word of farewell.

I want you to trust me, Forest.

Iris swallowed and hurried on her way. She passed the building she had once worked in, where the *Oath Gazette* sat alight on the fifth floor, the place where she had first met Roman and thought him an arrogant upper-class snob. The place where her words had first found their place in the newspaper, where she had discovered the thrill of reporting.

Iris walked past those heavy glass doors, tracing the ring on her fourth finger. She turned onto a quieter side street, listening for the sound of footfalls behind her. There was too much din from the tram bells and the hawkers on street corners, though, and she dared to take a shortcut through an alley.

It was a strange, haphazard path that most vehicles couldn't navigate without knocking a side mirror loose. A cobbled street where magic could still be felt when passing over certain thresholds or glancing at the shine of windows or stepping through a shadow that never faded, no matter how brilliant the sun burned overhead.

But Iris paused when she saw words painted in bold red paint on a white brick wall.

Gods belong in their graves.

It wasn't the first time she had come across that statement. Last week, she had seen it painted on the side of a cathedral and on the library doors. The words were always in red, bright as blood, and often followed by a single name: *Enva*.

No one had seen the goddess in weeks. She no longer sang people to war, inspiring them to enlist and fight. Sometimes Iris wondered if Enva was even in the city, although others claimed they spotted the goddess from time to time. As for who was painting this sinister phrase all throughout town ... Iris could only wonder, but it seemed to be a group of people in Oath who wanted no living divines in Cambria. Including Dacre.

With a shiver, Iris continued on her way. She was almost to the *Inkridden Tribune* when she allowed herself a final glance behind.

There was indeed someone farther up the street. But they spun and slipped into a shadowy doorway, and Iris couldn't discern their build, let alone their face.

She sighed, rubbing the gooseflesh on her arms. She had reached her destination, and if it *was* Forest on her heels, then she would speak to him later, when she returned to their flat. It was a talk that had been brewing for an entire week now, the two of them both too hesitant to broach it.

Iris slipped past the wooden door, her boots clicking over the black-and-white-tiled floor of the lobby. She took the staircase down, feeling the temperature shift as the lightbulbs emitted a faint ring above her. Yet another reason to wear her trench coat year-round.

The *Inkridden Tribune* was rooted in the basement of an ancient building, where it often felt like eternal autumn, with oaken desks piled high with paper, a ceiling veined with copper pipes, exposed brick walls with drafty fissures, and the light of brass desk lamps limning the dance of cigarette smoke and the glint of typewriter keys. It was a dark yet cozy place, and Iris stepped into it with a soft exhale.

Attie was already sitting at the table they shared, staring absently at her typewriter. Her slender brown hands cradled a chipped cup of tea, and her brow was heavy, lost in deep thought.

Iris shed her trench coat, draping it over the back of her chair. She still wore the laced-up ankle boots that had been provided for the front lines, which were much easier to walk in than the heels she had once worn at the *Gazette*. The boots didn't match the plaid skirt and white blouse she wore, but Helena Hammond didn't seem to mind her mismatched outfit, so long as Iris wrote good pieces for the paper.

"Morning," Attie greeted her.

"Morning," Iris echoed as she took her seat. "Weather's nice today."

"Which means it'll be storming by the time we leave," Attie countered wryly, taking a sip of tea. But then her voice gentled as she whispered, "Any news?"

Iris knew what Attie was referring to. She was asking about Roman. If Iris had somehow scrounged up any news on his whereabouts and status.

"No," Iris replied, her throat narrow. She had sent out multiple telegrams since she had returned to Oath. Shots in the dark to railroad stations that were still operational despite how close they were to the war front.

*MISSING PERSON ALERT STOP ROMAN C KITT STOP BLACK HAIR BLUE EYES WAR
CORRESPONDENT STOP LAST SEEN IN AVALON BLUFF STOP CONTACT I WINNOW VIA
OATH TELEGRAM OFFICE STOP*

Iris had received no answers yet, but then again, what had she expected? Countless soldiers and civilians were unaccounted for these days, and she distracted herself with readying her typewriter, which truly wasn't *hers* but a spare one that the *Tribune* was lending her. It was an old instrument; the space bar was worn down from countless thumbs and it possessed a few keys that liked to stick, creating plenty of errors. Iris was still trying to get used to it, longing for the magical one her nan had once given her. The typewriter that had connected her to Roman. The Third Alouette.

Iris fed a fresh sheet of paper into the roller, but she thought of her typewriter, wondering where it was. The last time she had seen it had been in her room at Marisol's bed and breakfast. And while the B and B had miraculously survived the bombing, there was no telling what Dacre and his forces had done to the town once they had overtaken it. Perhaps the Third Alouette was still there in her old room, untouched and coated in ash. Perhaps one of Dacre's soldiers had stolen it, using it for nefarious correspondence, or maybe had smashed it to glimmering pieces on the street.

"You all right, kid?" Helena Hammond's voice suddenly broke the moment, and Iris glanced up to see her boss standing beside the table. "You're looking a bit pale."

"Yes, just ... thinking," Iris replied with a faint smile. "Sorry."

"No apologies needed. I didn't mean to interrupt your contemplations, but I have a letter for you." A smile broke Helena's stern countenance as she withdrew a crinkled envelope from her trouser pocket. "Someone I think you'll be happy to hear from."

Iris yanked the letter from Helena's hand, unable to hide her eagerness. It had to be news about Roman, and her stomach twisted with hope and terror as she ripped open the envelope. Iris was first taken aback by how long the message was—too lengthy to be a telegram—and she exhaled, her breath tremulous as she read:

Dearest Iris,

I cannot even begin to describe how relieved I was (and still am!) to learn that you had returned safely to Oath! I'm sure Attie has already told you of what happened in Avalon Bluff that terrible day, but we waited for you and Roman at the

lorry as long as we could. Even then, it felt like my heart had broken when we drove away without the two of you, and all I could do was pray that you were safe and that we would all find a way to reunite.

Helena wrote to me and shared that Roman is still unaccounted for. I am so sorry, my dear friend. I wish there was something I could do to ease the worry you must feel. Know that you are always welcome here at my sister's house in River Down. We are only a day trip away from you in Oath, and there is a room here for both you and Attie should you wish to visit.

Until then, my heart is with you. I miss you!

Your friend,
Marisol

Iris blinked away her tears, slipping the letter back into the envelope. It had only been two weeks since Iris had last seen Marisol. Two weeks since they had all been together at the B and B. Two weeks since she had married Roman C. Kitt in the garden.

A fortnight wasn't much time at all; Iris still had faint bruises and scabs on her knees and arms, from when she had crawled through the rubble and clouds of gas. She could still hear the thunder of the bombs exploding, sense the shudder of the earth beneath her feet. She could still feel Roman's breath in her hair as he held her, as if nothing would ever come between them.

Two weeks felt like a gasp of time—it could have been yesterday for how raw Iris's inner wounds were—and yet here in Oath, surrounded by people who were living life as normal, as if war didn't rage kilometers to the west ... it made those days at Avalon Bluff feel like a fever dream. Or like they had happened *years* ago, and Iris's memory had retraced those moments so many times they had turned sepia with age and wear.

"Marisol is good, I take it?" Helena asked.

Iris nodded, tucking the envelope beneath a book on the table. "Yes. She invited me and Attie to visit her and her sister."

"We should go soon," Attie said.

Of course, Iris thought. Attie had already been in River Down. She had driven Marisol (as well as a mewling cat named Lilac) there to fulfill her promise to Keegan. And Keegan, a captain in Enva's forces, was another person whom Iris was worried about. She didn't know if Marisol's wife had survived the battle at Avalon Bluff.

Iris was just about to respond when a hush crept over the office. One of the lamps flickered as if imparting a warning, and the steady clack of typewriter

keys faded until it seemed like the heart of the *Tribune* had ceased beating, suspended in silence. Helena frowned and turned to the door, and Iris followed her gaze, fixating on the man who stood beneath the brick lintel.

He was tall and thin, dressed in a three-piece navy suit with a red handkerchief tucked in the breast pocket. It was difficult to guess his age, but his pale face was creased with wrinkles. A mustache hovered above his pursed lips, and his beady eyes gleamed like obsidian in the low light. Beneath his bowler hat, his graying hair was slicked back with pomade.

Iris didn't recognize him at first. She wondered if he had been the one to trail her that morning, until she saw he had two security guards standing behind him in the hallway, their burly arms locked behind their backs.

"Chancellor Verlice," Helena said in a careful tone. "What brings you to the *Inkridden Tribune*?"

"A private matter," the chancellor replied. "May I have a word with you?"

"Yes. Right this way." Helena wove through the tables to her office.

Iris watched as Chancellor Verlice followed, his eyes sweeping over the editors and columnists he passed. It almost seemed like he was looking *through* them, or perhaps looking *for* someone, and her heart faltered when he glanced over and met her stare from across the room.

His inscrutable eyes held hers for a long moment before they shifted to look at Attie. By then, he had finally reached Helena's office, and he had no choice but to drop his gaze, stepping over the threshold. Helena shut the door behind him; the two security guards remained as sentries in the hallway, barring anyone from coming or going.

Slowly, the *Inkridden Tribune* resumed its hum of activity. Editors returned to editing piles of paper with their red fountain pens, columnists resumed their typing, assistants rushed from the tea sideboard and the phone, carrying steaming cups and scrawled messages to various desks.

"What's that all about, do you think?" Attie whispered, angling her head to Helena's office door.

Iris stifled a shiver. She slipped her trench coat back on, belting it tight at her waist.

"I don't know," she whispered in return. "But it can't be anything good."

Ten minutes later, the office door swung open.

Iris kept her attention on her paper and the words she was inking across it, falling into the rhythm of her typewriter, but she could see the chancellor from

the corner of her eye. He took his time walking through the room, and she could feel his gaze again as if he were measuring her, measuring Attie.

Iris gritted her teeth, tilting her chin down so her hair would cascade around her face, coming between her and the chancellor's stare like a shield.

She was grateful when Verlice and his two guards disappeared up the stairwell, but the pungent cloud of his cologne lingered like fog. Iris was just about to rise and pour herself a cup of tea, to hopefully wash the bad taste from her mouth, when she saw Helena wave to her.

"Iris, Attie. I need to speak with both of you."

Attie stopped typing, rising without a word as if she had been waiting for it. But she chewed on her lip, and Iris knew her friend was just as anxious as she was. Whatever the chancellor had come here to say must have been about them. Iris followed Attie to Helena's office.

"Have a seat, you two," Helena said as she settled behind her desk.

Iris shut the door, moving to sit on a worn leather sofa directly to Attie's left. She resisted the urge to crack her knuckles, waiting for Helena to break the quiet.

"Do you have any idea why the chancellor paid us a visit?" Helena finally spoke, and her voice was strangely calm and cool. Like water beneath a sheet of ice.

Attie glanced sidelong at Iris. She had come to the same conclusion. Iris could see it in her eyes. The annoyance, the worry, the gleam of anger.

"He didn't like our articles," Iris said. "The ones you just published about Clover Hill and Avalon Bluff being evacuated, bombed, and gassed."

Helena reached for a cigarette and then sighed, tossing it onto a pile of paper. "No, he didn't. I knew he wouldn't, and I still published them."

"Well, he doesn't really have to *like* them, does he?" Attie said, raising a hand in frustration. "Because Iris and I both wrote the truth."

"He doesn't see it that way." Helena's auburn hair was limp on her brow. There were faint purple smudges beneath her eyes, as if she hadn't slept. Her freckles were vivid against her pale complexion, as was the scar on her face.

"What does he see it as, then?" Iris asked, rotating the wedding band on her finger.

"He sees it as fearmongering and propaganda. He thinks I'm trying to drive up my sales with such headlines."

“That’s rubbish!” Attie cried. “Iris and I were *eyewitnesses* to the attack on the bluff. We’re doing our jobs as reporters. If the chancellor has a problem with this, then he’s obviously a Dacre sympathizer.”

“I know,” Helena said gently. “Believe me, kid. I know it. You wrote the truth. You wrote what you experienced, bravely and honestly, just as I needed you to. And yes, the chancellor seems to have strings attached to Dacre, willing to dance at the god’s bidding. Which leads me to my next point: Verlice thinks I’m trying to stir up trouble by making people panic and angry. He blames us for the most recent *gods belong in their graves* vandalism, which was, in fact, painted on his driveway in big bold letters this morning.”

Iris flexed her hand. She remembered seeing that fearless slogan on her morning walk. “People are allowed to have their own opinions and beliefs on divinity, whether they worship them or not. We can’t control that.”

“The very words I said to Verlice,” Helena said. “Which he doesn’t agree with.”

“What does this mean for us, then? Do you want us to stop writing about the war? Should we act as if the gods don’t exist?”

“Course not,” Helena responded with a snort. But her defiance waned as she continued. “And I don’t want to ask this of you two, because you’ve been through more than any of us here can fathom. You’ve only just returned. But if Dacre is making a hard drive to the east like both of you saw at the bluff ... then we need to know, especially if our good chancellor is in bed with him. We need to know how much time we have before the god reaches Oath, and what we can do to prepare for it.”

Iris’s heart quickened. She had felt hollow since returning to Oath. She slept but she didn’t dream. She swallowed but she couldn’t taste. She wrote three sentences and deleted two, as if she didn’t know how to move forward.

“You need us to return to the front,” she stated, breathless.

Helena’s brow furrowed. “Yes, Iris. But not exactly as you did before, since Marisol is no longer in Avalon Bluff.”

“How, then?” Attie asked.

“I’m still working on those details, so I can’t quite tell you at the moment.” Helena raked a hand through her hair, leaving it more limp and mussed than before. “And I don’t want answers from you right now. In fact, I want you to take the rest of the day off. I want you to truly *think* about this and what it

means for you, and not just give me the answer you assume I *want* to hear. Do you understand?”

Iris nodded, her thoughts instantly drifting to Forest. Her brother wouldn't want her to leave, and dread welled in her throat when she imagined breaking that news to him.

She glanced at Attie, uncertain what her friend would do.

Because the truth was that Attie had five younger siblings and parents who loved her. She had been enrolled in prestigious classes at Oath University. She had many threads to keep her tethered here, whereas Iris only had one. But Attie was also a musician who kept her violin hidden in the basement, defying the chancellor's law to surrender all stringed instruments. She had gifted her stuffy old professor a subscription to the *Inkridden Tribune*, since he had once believed her writing wouldn't amount to anything.

Attie had never been one to let people like Chancellor Verlice or narrow-minded professors have the final say.

And, Iris was swiftly coming to learn, neither was she.

★ ★ ★

Dark clouds were billowing across the sky by the time Iris reached the riverside park. She had parted ways with Attie at a corner café, the two of them having eaten a late breakfast together before taking Helena's advice to heart. Attie wanted to walk the courtyard of the university again before heading home to her parents' town house, and Iris wanted to visit the park she and Forest had haunted when they were younger.

Iris stopped on a mossy rock, typewriter case in one hand weighing her down. She gazed into the shallow rapids.

Willow and birch trees grew crooked along the winding banks, and the air tasted damp and sweet. It was strange how this place felt far removed from the city, how the tram bells and sputter of vehicles and many voices seemed to fade away. For a moment, Iris could imagine she was kilometers from Oath, tucked into the idyllic countryside, and she knelt to gather a few river stones, the water a cold shock to her fingers.

Years ago, Forest had found a snail among the rocks and had given him to Iris. *Morgie*, she had called him, proudly taking him home as a pet.

She smiled, but the memory was sharp, cutting her lungs like glass.

If you see me too much, you're bound to tire of my sad snail stories, she had once typed to Roman.

Impossible, he had replied.

Iris let the stones fall from her hands, watching them splash into the water. Thunder grumbled overhead as wind rustled the tree boughs. The first raindrops plopped onto Iris's shoulders, rolling down her trench coat like tears.

She began the brisk walk home, the rain falling in earnest. Her hair was drenched by the time she made it to her apartment building, but her typewriter case was thankfully waterproof. She didn't normally tote the instrument home in the evening after work, but she had discovered that she didn't like to be without it. Just in case inspiration stuck at midnight.

Iris hurried up the outer stairwell to the second floor, boots clanging on the steel steps, but she came to an abrupt halt when she saw her flat door was ajar. When she had left that morning, Forest had still been home, sitting on the couch and polishing his old pair of shoes. He had seemed reluctant to leave their apartment, and Iris could only wonder if he was worried someone might recognize him, believing he had deserted his post. It was far more complicated than that, but most people in Oath didn't truly understand what was happening at the war front.

"Forest?" Iris called, stepping closer to the door. She nudged it open farther, listening to it creak on its hinges. "Forest, is that you?"

There was no reply, but Iris could see the lamplight, warm and hazy, within. Someone was inside her home, and a chill traced her spine.

"Forest?" she called again, but there was no reply. Only a curl of spicy smoke, and the sound of someone moving.

Iris passed over the threshold.

A tall, older man dressed in a calfskin jacket and dark suit stood in the living room, a few paces away. It was a man she had never seen before, but she knew who he was the moment their gazes crossed, and that chill spread further, making her blood feel like ice.

He took one last draw from his cigar as if he was preparing for a fight, the rolled tobacco smoldering as he lowered it from his mouth.

"Hello, Miss Winnow," the man said in a deep voice. "Where is my son?"