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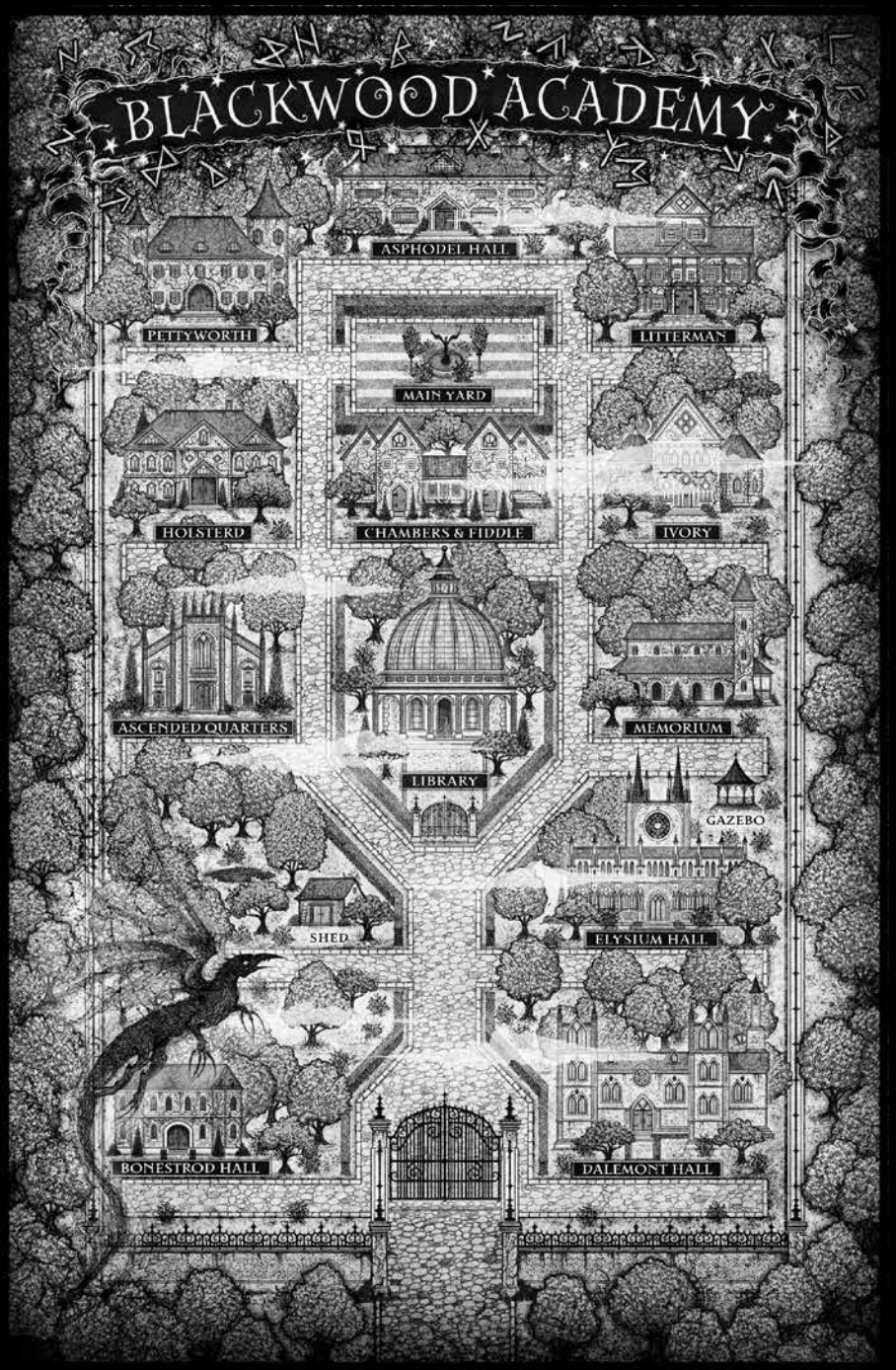
IMMORTAL CONSEQUENCES

I.V.MARIE

For Mami and Papi,
I would have never believed in myself
if you hadn't believed in me first.
Te quiero millones de millones.


BLACKWOOD ACADEMY
ASPHODEL HALL
PETTYWORTH
LITTERMAN
MAIN YARD
HOLSTERD
CHAMBERS & FIDDLE
IVORY
ASCENDED QUARTERS
MEMORIUM
LIBRARY
GAZEBO
SHED
ELYSIUM HALL
BONESTROD HALL
DALEMONT HALL

PART I

WHEN SHE FELL

1
WREN

Wren Loughty hadn't bothered to lock her bedroom door.

She had come to accept that it was rather pointless to pretend that secured locks and protective wards would make a difference. There was simply no avoiding the inevitable. So when she awoke to a set of hands clamped over her mouth, the familiar scent of peppermint and sandalwood wafting up her nose, she wasn't all that surprised.

In fact, she'd been expecting it.

What disconcerted her was the strange dream of her mother she'd been having only moments earlier. She always found it odd that they still held the ability to sleep and dream. The dead weren't meant to dream. Though she supposed they weren't dead—not really. They existed in the place between. The place parallel to life and death, the one right on the cusp of birth and the dawn of the afterlife.

Whatever that meant.

She tried not to give the transitory nature of purgatory too much thought.

Pale light pooled in through the sheer drapes, illuminating the ivy-speckled ceiling in a crescent shape. Wren blinked, her vision adjusting to the darkness, and refocused her attention on her intruder.

Augustine Hughes's familiar slate-gray eyes hovered above her with smug amusement, the right side of his mouth curled into a smirk.

"I hope you'll forgive me for the rude awakening, Loughty." His gaze snaked over her face with careful precision. "Had to be sure

you wouldn't scream and blow my cover. You know . . . given your track record."

Wren groaned in irritation. It was true that she had acquired somewhat of a reputation for disturbing the other students in Pettyworth House. Multiple complaints had been sent to Housemaster Marigold regarding her loud night terrors, which often woke up the others and sent them running out of the dorm.

It was a flaw . . . one even she could admit needed fixing.

August leaned closer. "I trust I can let go without you making a scene?"

Wren narrowed her eyes in warning and attempted to snap back with a string of obscenities, though her words were muffled by his hand. Either way, the message was clear.

Don't push it.

August smiled and dropped his hand, his body still leaning precariously close. "No need for fighting words. I'm not here for a brawl, darling."

"Then maybe next time you can knock, instead of slapping your hand over my mouth like some deranged serial killer," Wren spat out, swatting him away. Her nightgown was thick enough that she didn't feel embarrassed under August's reproachful gaze as she stood up from the bed and made for the window.

She unlatched the hook and pushed it open, cool air wafting into the room. The silver glow of Blackwood washed over her in delicate streams, dancing through the thick nighttime mist. It would be easy to mistake the ethereal light for the glow of the moon, but Wren knew better.

There was no moon in the night sky. No earth. No universe.

No world that she once knew.

None of those things existed in Blackwood.

Not really.

August leaned against the wooden bedpost, arms crossed and face twisted into that perpetual smirk of his. He wore his usual uniform: black trousers with a white button-down, the sleeves rolled up over the muscles of his forearms and a black vest fitted over his torso. A tiny scar marred the skin beneath his right eye, a peculiar detail that had always intrigued Wren, though she hadn't brought herself to ask how he had gotten it.

They rarely spoke about their old lives. And she wasn't going to be the one to start.

Despite their animosity, Wren could acknowledge that she might have found August attractive if they had met when they were alive. He was conventionally handsome, she supposed, with his strong jaw and unruly dark curls. Not to mention annoyingly intimidating, weaseling his way out of most situations with his smoke-filled eyes and posh English lilt. Maybe they would have bumped into each other on vacation. She could see August sprawled confidently on some beach, muscles slick with sweat, remnants of sun lotion clinging to his naturally tanned skin as he basked underneath the warm rays of the sun.

The sun.

God, she missed the sun.

"Like what you see?" August tilted his head to the side. "I can paint you a portrait if you'd like."

Wren rolled her eyes. "What do you want?"

"I'm about to go for a midnight stroll," he explained casually, clasping his hands behind his back.

"And you thought I'd be interested in accompanying you because?"

"Because . . ." He slipped off the silver ring he wore around his index finger and flicked it up in the air like a coin. "It just so happens I have it on good authority that a new student is going to fall into Blackwood tonight."

Wren's entire body reflexively tensed. There was a large chance he was bluffing, seeing as August wasn't exactly the most reliable and trustworthy person at Blackwood, but it was still a shocking thought.

It was a well-known fact that the arrival of a new student was a rare event, occurring only every few decades. Blackwood ran like clockwork; there were rarely deviations from this schedule. The academy prided itself on order and balance, on maintaining tradition. But a new student had already arrived less than a year earlier, which meant that if August was telling the truth . . . something in the schedule had changed.

"Let's say I choose to believe you," Wren said. "Why the hell would I voluntarily go with you to watch?"

"Oh, Loughty." August chuckled. "You are the most infuriatingly competitive person I've ever had the displeasure of meeting. Don't act like you're not constantly worrying in that pretty head of yours."

"That's not true." It was. "Have you considered that maybe you're projecting your own insecurities onto me? That you're the one who's worried about another student being better at guiding than you?"

August's face fell. "Guiding?"

She stiffened her shoulders. "Yes. That's what we do, is it not?"

"No." His expression hardened as he took a step forward, the old wood creaking beneath the weight of his leather boots. "We reap souls. We're not holding their hands and skipping off into the sunset with them." He shook his head in disapproval. "Christ, Loughty. I thought you'd know better by now."

"That's not—" Wren sucked in a breath. She wasn't in the mood to get into one of their regular debates. And truthfully, she was curious. She couldn't help that inherently human part of her that craved to know more. That desired a deeper understanding of everything around her.

She wondered if that would fade—*when* that would fade.

"Look," she sighed. "All I'm saying is maybe we're both downplaying our own curiosity. That maybe we're both deeply invested in being good at what we do. In being the best. That maybe—"

"I get it," August interjected, waving his hand in the air. "We're both competitive arseholes. You've made your point." *Competitive arseholes*. That was one way to put it. Wren thought *sworn rivals* was a better way to describe their tumultuous relationship, though she didn't bother correcting him.

Ever since Wren had died and fallen into Blackwood, August had embedded himself into her existence like some nagging, blistering, swollen splinter that could not be plucked, despite how often Wren tried. She wasn't certain why he'd specifically chosen her to pester for the rest of eternity, though she tried not to concern herself with unravelling the labyrinthian mind of Augustine Hughes.

Wren pushed past him and ambled toward her wardrobe. She slipped on her usual black trench coat and glanced at August through the tarnished vanity mirror. He'd begun to absentmindedly browse the old leather-bound textbooks adorning her various shelves, index finger trailing over the dusty spines.

"How are you certain?"

He didn't look up at her. "Certain of what?"

"That another student has been selected," Wren clarified, discreetly slipping her favourite silver dagger into the pocket of her waistcoat. "It's a complete deviation from the schedule. It's been less than a year since that newbie entered—"

"Emilio," August said, finishing her thought. "Yes. I'm aware."

"That doesn't answer my question."

August paused and glanced over his shoulder. "Is it really that difficult for you to trust me? This will be a lot more fun if you stop asking so many questions."

Wren knew that the responsible thing would be to say no. It would be easy. She could send him off, get right back into bed, and pretend he'd never awoken her in the first place. But if there was truly a new student entering Blackwood tonight, then she was determined to know more.

"Fine," she sighed, gesturing toward the door. "Lead the way."

August smiled triumphantly. "That's more like it." He snapped his fingers and the door swung open. "After you."

Wren ignored the self-satisfied look on his face as she stepped past him.

Orange light illuminated the doorway, firelight dancing from the dozens of iron sconces adorning the corridor. Deep-crimson wallpaper lined the narrow hallway, the edges peeling and worn with age, curling up in frayed ribbons. Tiny filaments of greenery had snaked their way around the crown molding like a spiderweb, stretching up toward the ceiling.

Wren traced the wall with her fingertip as they walked. "So . . . did you prepare for Calligan's exam tomorrow morning?"

August raised his brows and peered at her curiously. "Loughty, darling, are you attempting to make small talk with me?"

"I'm not—" Wren staggered to a stop, an unwelcome flush creeping onto her neck. "You are the one who forced me out of bed!"

August leaned against the wall. "Nobody forced you."

"Well, it's not like you gave me a lot of options."

"Christ . . ." He rubbed his face in exasperation. "Look. You can still turn around. We're only a few feet away from your room. Last thing I need is you making me seem like the bad guy for inviting you somewhere."

A door creaked open to the left of them.

"Can you quiet down?" Maya Romero stood at the doorway, her black pixie cut sticking up in disheveled spikes. "I know the concept of rest may be foreign to the two of you, but most of us are trying to sleep."

"Sorry, Maya." Wren offered her an apologetic grin. "We're just going for a walk."

"Past curfew?"

August stepped forward. "Is that a problem?"

Maya instinctively flinched. "No. But . . . a group of Ascended were seen out by the Main Yard. Sent at least a dozen students to reformatory." She craned her neck forward and glanced around the corridor nervously. "I really don't think the two of you should be

pushing your luck right before the Decennial."

Wren cursed under her breath. *Of course*. She'd been so worried about a new student arriving she'd nearly forgotten that the opening ceremony would happen tomorrow evening. If they were caught . . . it could ruin her chances at the nomination.

Every ten years, the students of Blackwood Academy were considered for the Decennial Festival. Out of the hundreds of students at the academy, only one would secure the nomination, carefully chosen with respect to their skills and talents by the school's Headmaster and its six Housemasters. The nominee would then participate in four trials meant to test their magical abilities. Truthfully, the trials were more of a formality. A tradition as old as the Decennial itself. Not a single nominee in the entire history of Blackwood had ever failed the trials.

Though there was always the risk of being the first.

Once all four trials were complete, the nominee would be awarded a choice: formally graduate as a student and become an official Ascended, or venture into the unknown and cross over to the Other Side, putting their soul to rest.

Permanently.

The only problem was, nobody knew what the Other Side looked like. It was a gamble. A complete and total risk.

The answer for Wren had always been abundantly clear. Granted free rein over their magic and released from their eternal reaping duties, Ascended students were housed in a special building on campus and tasked with the responsibility of helping Housemasters run their classes. And that was precisely what Wren intended to do if she was chosen for the Decennial.

She just needed to find a way to remove August from the equation.

"We won't get caught," Wren promised. "You have my word."

Maya nodded, dismissing them with a groggy wave, and shut the door. August scoffed and walked ahead while Wren did her best to match his pace.

"She should learn to mind her business," he muttered under his breath.

"She's actually pretty nice," Wren countered. "You've heard of the word nice before, haven't you?"

"Don't think so. Could you use it in a sentence?"

"Ha ha. Very funny." Wren rolled her eyes. "You know, you ought to learn how to be a bit nicer. Some people are starting to believe you're a walking corpse. Nothing but a broken soul with no feelings and emotions."

August smirked at her, though Wren swore she saw a flicker of something resembling regret flash in his gray eyes. "No, my sweet Loughty. If I'd lost all feelings and emotions, then that would make me a Demien. And though unlimited power does sound thrilling, I'm afraid my humanity is still very much intact."

For now.

Wren could imagine August as a member of the Demien Order. She'd imagined it countless times before.

Though the precise location of the Demien Order was a mystery, there were rumors that they existed somewhere just beyond the outskirts of Blackwood, hidden deep within the surrounding forest, obscured by the crooked branches and rotten leaves. Demiens worshipped a higher power, an unknown entity known only as the Soulless One, who granted them the ability to strip themselves of their humanity and access shadow magic.

Throughout history, a number of Blackwood students had chosen to venture outside the iron gates in search of the Demien Order, prepared to sacrifice the little humanity they had left for an eternal source of power. But becoming a Demien meant completely relinquishing that human part of themselves. The part that stuck around even after they ended up in Blackwood. The one that yearned for home. For connection.

It was said that the more shadow magic a Demien created, the more their soul would change, rotting and decaying until they were

left more shadow than human. No moral compass. No conscience to guide their decisions. Shadows would corrode their soul, consuming every inch of the person they used to be.

And once they'd been completely consumed . . . there was no going back.

"Oh, hush that brain of yours." August chuckled as he turned a corner. "I can practically hear the gears turning from here. I have no genuine intention of joining the Demien Order. I just like riling you up."

"Right. I'm happy to hear you don't plan on joining a brainwashed cult. Do you want an award or something? Maybe a parade?"

"No need." August grinned over his shoulder as they approached the arched wooden doors carved into the entrance of Pettyworth House. "Getting to see the look on your face when I'm chosen this Decennial is the only award I need."

"Well, that's awfully presumptuous of you." Wren masked her rage with an impassive smile. "Chances are you won't even get nominated. *Again*. How many years has it been, old man? A hundred at the very least?" She raised her brows and smiled in satisfaction. "I'd be worried if I were you."

"I still have plenty of time left," August muttered defensively. "Most students don't begin to experience the Forgetting for *hundreds* of years. You're not getting rid of me yet."

Wren shivered at the mention of the infamous transition, her sense of victory at her jab fading.

The Forgetting.

It was Blackwood's way of keeping itself in balance, a part of the natural order. Once a student had been in Blackwood for a couple of hundred years, they would slowly begin to lose the memories of their previous life, a sign their soul was ready to transition into its next phase. Once a student had completely forgotten who they were when they were alive, they were permanently removed from Blackwood and sent to the Ether, where they'd reap lost souls for

the rest of their existence. It's also why students were given weekly reaping assignments, a way to prepare for their eternal duty. As grim as it might have seemed, it was simply the cycle of the afterlife, or so the Housemasters insisted. There were roughly five hundred students attending Blackwood Academy at any given time, and the Forgetting was a way for the school to purge itself of a student and welcome in a new one.

But it was also the reason everyone was desperate for the nomination.

The Decennial was the only escape from their inevitable end.

"Have you . . ." Wren searched for the right words, breath hitching in her throat.

"No," August replied, somehow knowing what she was trying to ask. "My memories are still intact."

"That's a good thing . . . you know that, right?" Wren eyed him warily. "I know memories can be painful, but they can't be worse than living the rest of your existence reaping lost souls on an eternal loop."

A pained expression washed over August's features. For a tense moment, Wren thought he might actually chip away at the wall between them, allowing her a glimpse into his past.

But then he simply let out a throaty chuckle and said, "Well, we won't have to worry about that, will we? Considering I'm the top choice this Decennial."

"And what makes you so certain?"

"The fact that Housemaster Marigold told me herself."

Wren clenched her fists as an anticipated wave of fury bubbled in her chest. "Really?"

"Yep." August stepped closer. "Does that bother you?"

"Not at all," she replied, challenging him by edging even closer. "Considering it isn't true."

"You think I'm lying?" August asked, more amused than offended.

"I know you are."

"I'd never lie to you, darling. You're simply lacking imagination."

Wren groaned, losing her patience. "And what is that supposed to mean?"

"It means perhaps you're not considering *how* I got this information." His gray eyes glimmered with satisfaction. "You'd be surprised at what a little mental push can do."

Wren let out a breath of disbelief. "You didn't."

August smirked, triumphant. "Oh, but I *did*."

"You can't use psyche magic on a Housemaster," Wren gasped. "That's completely out of line!"

"Oh, it's not as dramatic as it sounds. I simply gave her a nudge. Just enough of a spark to get the information out of her."

"You meddled with her mind."

August arched a brow. "And since when have you cared for the Blackwood rules? I don't recall you being so self-righteous when you used that cloaking enchantment to sneak out past curfew last week."

"That's different."

Wren didn't need to explain herself. The truth was, she often found herself tossing and turning during the night, plagued by dreams of the life she'd left behind. Wren had been in Blackwood for eighteen years. The same amount of time she'd been alive. But she still hadn't been able to completely silence that voice in her mind that ached for the comfort of home. If she let herself, she could still remember long summers walking along the shoreline, sea-foam tucked between her toes. The crisp autumn air rustling the yellow leaves above her family's home in midcoast Maine. Snow days spent bundled next to the fire listening to Etta James and making ginger cookies.

Her mother, hair as red as her own, sitting by the piano. The smile lines etched into her skin from years of laughter.

"How convenient," August mused, pulling her back to reality. "But maybe it's time you simply congratulated me on my upcoming nomination." He shoved his hands into his pockets and let out a

wistful sigh. "Augustine Hughes. A member of the Ascended. Has a nice ring to it."

"You may be a top contender," Wren said with a tinge of bitterness, "but so am I."

He shrugged. "I suppose you're right. But . . . I reap souls faster than you. Which, despite your annoying capacity to consistently get high marks, *actually* means something in the grand scheme of things."

"Well. I'm sure I'm not the first girl to tell you this, but faster isn't always better."

"That's not—" August broke off, stopping himself, and let out a low chuckle. "You know, Loughty, you might be the only person brazen enough to speak to me that way. Not to mention back in my old life—"

"Oh?" Wren lifted a brow in mock surprise. "Is the mysterious and elusive Augustine Hughes *actually* going to tell me something about his old life?"

He smirked.

"Not in this eternity, darling."

A muted anger ran through Wren. God, he knew how to push her buttons.

"Ah." August leaned against the doorframe. "There's that familiar look of disdain. Did I hit a nerve?"

"You wish."

She knew she was only satisfying his perverse desire to drive her absolutely crazy, but she couldn't find the restraint inside herself not to indulge in her anger. If anything, she was currently trying to decide between charging toward him and wringing his neck or using the pointed edge of her concealed dagger to jab his eye out. Neither of which was a sensible option, seeing that no matter how hard she tried, Augustine Hughes could not be killed.

"Come on, now," August teased. "There's no need to get violent. We're beyond all those silly games, aren't we?"

"Dunno. Maybe we should test it out."

"You could stab me," August commented with an impartial shrug. "That always puts you in a better mood."

"Though tormenting you does bring me great joy, you don't need to worry. I'm not risking my nomination just so I can snap your neck or push you off a building again." Wren smirked and crossed her arms. "Publicly, at least. I might consider privately maiming you every once in a while. You know, just to keep our spirits up."

"How generous of you," August chuckled.

Wren stepped forward in an attempt to walk past him, but he jerked his arm out, obstructing her path.

She sighed. "Do you mind?"

"You forgot to put shoes on. Wouldn't want you getting hurt."

They smiled in unison at the thought.

Pain.

Wren never thought she'd miss it. The sharp prick of a paper cut. The stabbing pressure of menstrual cramps. The throbbing, dull ache of a migraine. She craved it. They both did. It was why they tormented each other mercilessly, desperate to find ways to somehow, despite everything, still feel alive.

But much to their collective disappointment, they were unsuccessful every time.

Wren placed her hand against August's arm. Her fingertips grazed his skin, and he tensed under her touch . . . that she knew he could still feel. That rush of . . . something. Of being too close to one another. Of crossing a boundary that shouldn't be crossed, let alone acknowledged.

"I think I'll manage," she said with a wry smile, and he dropped his arm, motioning her forward with an indolent wave of his hand.

"But, as always, thank you for your concern, August."