

# MERCY

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## CHAPTER 1

There's something very wrong with me.

I can't remember who I am or how old I am, or even how I got here. All I know is that when I wake up, I could be any age and anyone, all over again. It is always this way.

If I get too comfortable, I will wake one morning and everything around me will have shifted overnight. All I knew? I know no longer. And all I had? Vanished in an instant. There's nothing I can keep with me that will stay. It's made me adaptable.

I must always re-establish ties.

I must tread carefully or give myself away.

I must survive.

I must keep moving, but I don't know why.

I am my own worst enemy; that much I've figured out.

You know almost as much about me as I do.

I look sixteen. Sometimes I even feel it.

Me? The real me? I'm tall. Though I only have a sense of that.

I'm pale, like milk, but I never get sunburn. Don't ask me how I know this, seeing as I don't seem to occupy any physical space at the present time, but I just know.

My hair is brown. Not a nice brown or an ugly one, just brown. It's weird, but it has no highlights. It's all the same colour, every single strand straight, even and perfectly the same. It hangs down just past my shoulders and frames my face nicely, which is oval and okay, I suppose. I have a long, straight nose, lips that are neither too thin nor too wide, and perfect eyesight. I can see for miles, through sunshine or moonlight, rain or fog. Oh, and my eyes? They're brown, too. And I never feel the cold, ever.

When I look in the mirror, I see this face — *mine*, I have learnt to recognise it, a palimpsest of a face, a ghost's face — within another's, a stranger's. Our

reflections co-existing. I am her and she is me, and we, together, inhabit the same body.

How is this possible? I do not know. We are two people with nothing in common, nothing that ties us together, except that I am currently the reason *she* — whoever she is — can talk and move and laugh, go through the very motions of her life. I am like a grave robber, a body-snatcher, an evil spirit. And she? My zombie alter ego who must do as she is told.

If I think hard about myself, really hard, I get the one word: *Mercy*. It's what I've taken to calling myself for want of something better. It might even actually *be* my name, but your guess is as good as mine.

My only real solace? Sleep. In the absence of an explanation for anything, for everything, I live for it and what it can bring.

Though I seem continually reborn, in this fogbound life I still have a kind of compass, a touchstone. He reminds me to call him *Luc* and appears to me only in my dreams.

His features are more familiar to me than my own. For I have traced them in my head and with my heart, such as it is. And perhaps once — though memory can be a treacherous thing — even with my

hands when they were real, made of flesh and bone and blood and not of the insubstantial air.

He has hair of true gold cropped close, with sleek, winged brows of a darker gold, pale eyes, golden skin. He is tall, broad-shouldered, snake-hipped, flawless as only dreams can be. Like a sun god when he walks. Save for his mouth, which can be both cruel and amused. He tells me not to give up, that I must keep searching, find him. That one day it will all make sense. And all this? Will have seemed merely a heartbeat. *An inconvenience.*

‘I am only a little ahead,’ he laughs as we sway together on a narrow precipice, high above a desert valley floor, the whole sleeping world spread out before us. ‘A little ahead.’

His hand is steady beneath my elbow. If he were not here, I would surely fall, and even in dreams, die. Though my true name always eludes me — like him, it is always just a little ahead — my fear of heights does not. Why this is, again, I do not know.

As always, Luc warns of others looking for me: his erstwhile brothers, eight in number. That if They find me, They will destroy me. And that save for him, They are the most powerful enemies one may have in this world.

‘If They catch you,’ he cautions, ‘They will surely kill you. And that, my love, is no dream.’

He whispers these awful-beautiful things with his familiar half-smile, before light seems to bleed from him for an instant. Then he is gone.

I wake with his warnings in my ears.

I wake now, sitting upright in the back of a bus packed with screaming, gossiping girls in matching school uniforms.

As I look down at the grey and dark red weave of the skirt I am inexplicably wearing, I wonder what disaster I am headed for as I try to figure out who the hell I am supposed to be today.