# CURSED OBJECTS

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THERE'S A PART of Rachel beneath the skin that makes Adena nervous. She can see it sometimes in her eyes, the black fog twisting just under that hazel hue, ready to pop. It's common in people who are driven by mania. Instantaneous bouts of energy where the world is suddenly conquerable. Where anything is possible. Even for two teenage girls in the midst of a self-led rebellion.

It's one of the reasons Adena is so drawn to her.

And it's also the reason she fears her.

So Adena supposes, of all the pastimes the two could engage in on a Friday night, kneeling over a black jar in Rachel's basement is the mildest. But still, something about the look on Rachel's face disturbs her. Because if anything is possible in Rachel's mind, then the possibility of what she's saying being true excites her.

And this is nothing to be excited about.

"What do you mean *disappear*?"

"Disappear, dead, gone from all existence. Semantics. Who cares? It's all the same thing. Just gone."

Adena shakes her head. "But gone where?"

Rachel frowns. "I just said it doesn't matter."

Rachel opens the lid of the jar. At the bottom, there's a layer of wax and a single wick. Rachel reaches for the matches and lights the wick. The scent of burning fills the air.

"Where did you say you got this from?" Adena asks.

"I didn't. I made it."

Adena bites her lip. Why would Rachel want to make something like this? What gave her the idea?

"Okay, so here are the rules. Pick a name and write it down on a piece of paper. Toss it in, close the lid, and if the name burns up, then that person is gone."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then they got lucky." Rachel laughs and strikes a pose like she's cursing to the heavens. Her pale fingers decorated with black marker look like art pieces offered up to a god. "They've escaped the grasp of the underworld and get to live another day!"

Rachel's palms reconnect with the floor, chest sinking so that her shoulder blades protrude out of her black spaghetti-string top. She's hunched over the jar, over the fire, staring into it like her eyes are satisfying themselves on flame.

"I think we should put Chris's name in first," she says. There's a low growl to her voice like she's become another person. Assumed the position of the monster.

Adena's eyebrows furrow. "Chris? Why Chris? What's he ever done to you?"

Rachel cracks her neck and Adena startles.

"In second grade," Rachel starts, "I wore a skirt to school for the first time against my parents' wishes. I knew they'd yell at me when I got home but I did it anyway because I wanted to." Rachel's face sours. "And that butt-fuck, Chris Henry, made fun of my hairy legs in front of the entire class."

Adena's eyes go wide. Rachel looks so serious. But then Adena laughs, she can't help it, and then Rachel is laughing too, both of them cackling like their lungs are filled with pop rocks.

"I'm serious!" Rachel snorts. Her fingers wipe away tears—Adena has always wondered how the marker never transfers onto her face. "I was really upset! I gathered all this strength to show up in a cute skirt and Chris completely ruined it!"

"Well it's your fault for not knowing proper skirt etiquette."

Rachel sits on her calves and shoves Adena slightly. "What does that even mean?"

"Nothing. It means absolutely nothing."

They settle down and Rachel writes the name onto the corner of a notebook page which she tears off and sets aside. She rotates the notebook and slides it in front of Adena.

"Okay, your turn. Who do you pick?"

Adena worries the corner of her bottom lip between her teeth. "No one."

Rachel pouts, but her eyes say she already knows Adena is thinking of someone. That she's not as pure as she likes to seem.

"You're telling me there isn't one person in the entire world you'd like to have all-consuming power over?"

Adena's eyes flick to Rachel then back to the jar.

There is. But . . .

But it's all just fun and games, right? It's not real.

It can't be real.

"Ramon Moore."

Rachel's eyebrow cocks and her spine straightens with interest. Her tongue slips out to lick her top lip then disappears just as quickly.

But Adena saw it.

"Ramon Moore? Why Ramon Moore?"

Adena shrugs. "I mean, he was the main reason for it. It wouldn't have happened if it weren't for him."

"I'd argue it wouldn't have happened if it weren't for Bitch Three dragging you across the playground."

Ah, yes. Bitch Three; Chloe, Chanel, Christine. The three who thought it a good idea to drag Adena across the soccer field during fifth grade recess and force her to confess her feelings to Ramon Moore. Who taunted her all the painful while as everyone watched:

*"Adena wants to confess her love to you!"*

*"She like likes you, Ramon!"*

*"What are you gonna do about it? Do you like like her too?"*

*Ramon had frowned. He had the soccer ball cradled in his arm and tucked it into his stomach as he bent down to meet Adena's eye level.*

*"I'm sorry," he had said. "I like someone else."*

The wick crackles, its flame casting light over Rachel's face. She seems hesitant but then resigns.

"All right, girl. The power is in your hands so wield it as you wish."

She passes Adena a pen and Adena takes it between her fingers. It feels heavy. It feels heavy even as it spills ink along the drag of her penmanship.

But it's all a joke. It's all just a game.

She tears the piece off, Ramon's name caged within frayed edges, and together, they cast their decisions into the jar. Rachel shuts the lid and they both wait in anticipation. When the lid is removed, the names are gone, burned to ash, and the flame is extinguished.

A chill runs up Adena's spine. She looks to Rachel, to the top of Rachel's brunette head, and feels dread wash over her. Was this a bad choice? But then Rachel lifts to look at her, to meet her stare. And she's smiling.

And Adena is smiling back.

They burst into laughter. And they're on top of each other, trying to stop the other from laughing until their chests' rupture. Trying to keep quiet enough so that Rachel's mom doesn't come storming into the basement, demanding answers.

The back of Adena's head rests on Rachel's stomach. She can feel her still pulsating with giggles as they both look to the ceiling. The room smells like smoke, and the lights from the electronics blink green and blue hues. The real world is calming when you give it a chance to reach you.

It's silly, isn't it? How easily we let fantasies scare us. Because it's not real. It's never real.

And it's, oh, so fun to play games.

The following Monday at school, Ramon and Chris are absent. Adena tries to hide her look of shock as she stares at the two empty desks in Algebra 2, but she can feel the expression twisting her skin.

When she turns to Rachel standing beside her at the entrance of the class, she expects to see a mirrored expression. And she does. But only for a moment.

Rachel's shock morphs into something else. Into something hungry. She licks her lips and grins.

"What the hell?" Adena whispers.

She nudges Rachel's shoulder and Rachel snaps out of it, turning to her wide-eyed. She shrugs.

The teacher speaks up. Adena had almost forgotten where she was, and his voice startles her.

"Would you both care to join us or will you be gawking for the remainder of the period?"

Rachel and Adena clear their throats, apologize, and take their seats.

"Now, today we'll be covering parabolic formulas . . . "

Adena can't stop staring at the empty desks. They're like magnets, dragging her attention forward, pressurizing her skin.

Is it possible? Really possible?

Could they have caused this?

Without turning her eyes away, she leans toward Rachel and whispers, "Must be a coincidence, right?"

The answer is direct, sure of nothing else in the world: "I don't think so."

Adena rotates herself away from the empty desks to look at Rachel. Her friend leans back in her seat, knees propped against her desk as she stares into space, thinking. Adena watches her, watches the upturn of her lips as she chews on the end of a pencil, and wonders what could possibly be going on in that harrowing mind.

"I think we've uncovered something great," Rachel says.

Adena places her food tray on the table while Rachel opens her

lunchbox. She pulls out half a sandwich, stares inside, flips the box around, and they both confirm its emptiness. Rachel sighs and grabs the bag of chips off Adena's plate.

"Hey!"

"Listen. If this is for real," Rachel says. "Like, just imagine if this is for real." She takes a bite out of her sandwich, admiring the scenery behind Adena. The plain white wall.

Because it's her thoughts that are the most colorful right now.

Adena forks her salad and rubs it around the dressing at the bottom of her plate, collecting the flavor.

"I don't think it's for real," she responds and she can feel Rachel's eyes shift to her. "And even if it is, I don't think we should mess around with it anymore."

Rachel crosses her arms and harrumphs. "That's what you think."

"Besides, Ramon and Chris are good friends. Maybe they just played hooky or they're home si—"

Something slams into Adena's back. She's shoved forward and her lungs evacuate with a grunt, ribs crushed against the edge of the table. Her plastic fork breaks against her Styrofoam plate and she struggles to keep her face from slamming into her tray as well.

There's a cackle from behind. She hears Rachel mutter the word *bitches*.

"Oh, so sorry, Adena!"

Adena recognizes that voice. Chloe.

"I didn't see you there! My bad!"

Rachel growls then barks. "The table is the size of your fat ass, Chloe, and you didn't see it?"

"I just overheard you talking about Ramon," Chloe continues, ignoring Rachel's comment.

As Adena composes herself, Chloe approaches her side. Two manicured hands press down on the table next to her and brown eyes set in a caramel frame follow. They squint into slits as Chloe twists around to assure herself in Adena's field of vision.

"You shouldn't worry about Ramon." She's so close Adena can smell the bubblegum on her hot breath. "He called me this morning and said he wasn't interested in socializing with normies today."

"What does that even mean?" Rachel says with disgust.

"He said he didn't feel like dodging any weirdo's advances. He'd rather just stay at home and play hooky."

"Do you actually believe you sound intelligent when you speak, Chloe?"

There are snickers from the other two behind; Chanel and Christine. Adena meets Chloe's stare, but she feels calm. Bitch Three's methods of intimidation have never bothered her.

All bark and no bite. Sometimes.

"You really should get Ramon out of your mind." Hot pink bubblegum. "You're a bother to him." Doesn't she get sick of chewing on that all the time? "Or do we have to teach you another lesson?"

There it is. The final move.

Adena thinks about smiling. About chuckling and patting Chloe on the head to belittle her. Tell her that's fine. She's a free woman and can do whatever she wants. Adena really couldn't care less if they dragged her through the parking lot concrete. She just wants to finish her lunch.

But she doesn't get the chance.

The chair across from her screeches against the linoleum floor. Something slams into the table, threatening destruction.

No, not something. Adena already knows.

"It's bad enough you're polluting the air, goblin. Worse that you're still here." Rachel's trying to keep her voice low. Adena can sense the struggle. She vibrates with it. If Vice Principal Merch passes by and hears Rachel's voice raised above the decibel of a blender, he'll call her into his office for a chat. It would be their third chat and it would mean suspension. "If you don't get your hands off the table, I'll remove them for you."

Chloe turns to Rachel with a wry grin. Her fingers tip-toe across the table toward her and brush the back of her hand.

"What are you gonna do, Rachel?" she mocks. "Mug me like you let your mother be mugged?"

There's a moment, a single moment where Rachel is silent. Where the air is solid and there's the possibility that Rachel decides today to be the bigger person.

Instead, she explodes.

"*No, but I'll rip your tongue out and shove it so far up your ass you'll taste how empty your skull is!*"

Adena stands, her body a piston shoving Chloe aside in the process of her ascent. Chloe snarls as she pinwheels her arms for balance. Good, let her direct her cruel energy at someone else. She doesn't realize Adena just saved her from what Rachel has no qualms of becoming.

"What gives, Adena?" Chloe yips. "You almost knocked me to the ground."

"I think that's enough, Chloe. Wouldn't you say?"

Chloe glares, fists clenched at her side. Chanel and Christine are silent, watching the scene like entertained observers.

"I've lost my appetite." Adena picks up her tray and turns from Chloe to Rachel. "Let's go."

Rachel's trembling. Her shoulders shake and Adena prays for eye contact. Prays that Rachel looks at her instead of focusing on the bullseye target she's marked on Chloe's forehead.

*C'mon. Don't let her get to you.*

Rachel screams. The length of her arm hits the table and clears it in one violent swoop. The lunchbox, half eaten sandwich, and chips clatter to the floor. The cafeteria goes silent. Heat rises to Adena's cheeks, but she forces herself to remain composed.

"I've lost my appetite too," Rachel grumbles.

"Young lady!"

*Fuck. Merch.*

Adena and Rachel spot the vice principal heading their way from across the cafeteria. Rachel grits her teeth, picks up her backpack, and storms out the doors into the hallway. Adena watches her go, but she doesn't follow. She remains in place.

Merch arrives at her side, huffing like the few feet he's covered are akin to a marathon. He takes out a handkerchief and dabs his sweaty forehead with a sigh.

"Hello, Chloe. Chanel. Christine," he says in greeting. Bitch Three chirps in feigned enthusiasm. And then he turns to her. "Miss Adena. I'd advise you to inform your friend that running away won't rid her of her problems. Next time you see Rachel, please tell her to report to my office."

Adena's eyes scan over his face. Deep-set wrinkles canyoned by sagging skin and fat. White teeth. The lack of a chin that makes his frustrations all the more comical.

Silently, she nods.

"Good," Merch confirms. "If she doesn't appear in my office by end of day tomorrow, you will be held accountable as well. Do I make myself clear?"

Another nod.

Merch straightens his wool blazer. Readjusts himself and steadies his breathing. "Ladies," he declares then saunters off.

Bitch Three cackles. This time, Chanel speaks up.

"Why are you hanging with a loser like Rachel anyway?"

"She's nothing but trouble," Christine adds.

"And she'll take you down with her."

Adena stares at Chloe. She thinks about explaining what it means to truly care about someone regardless of their misgivings. To offer kindness in the darkest of times, even when pieces of yourself are being shredded for it.

She thinks about explaining what love is.

But it would be wasted on her.

So she simply shrugs and walks away.

When she enters the hallway, she finds the corridors empty. She walks down them, searching classrooms and bathrooms. She spends the rest of the day trying to find Rachel. Trying to text her and call her but to no avail.

It's as if she's disappeared from existence.

The next day Ramon and Chris are still absent, and now, so are Rachel and Bitch Three. Adena doesn't find them at lunch and realizes that Merch isn't around either to warn her that the clock is ticking. Adena calls Rachel's cell over and over again, but there is no answer. The school is buzzing with tension; talks of missing person reports arise now that parents are unable to account for their children's whereabouts. The principal is demanding answers for their second in command's absence and teachers silence students' speculations and ghost stories about those who just *disappeared* as they scurry down the halls.

During her last class, Adena sits at her desk, staring at a blank notebook. Her fists are clenched on either side of the page and she tenses every muscle in her body wondering if she could shrink away if she tries hard enough.

She doesn't. She's still here.

There are five minutes of class remaining. Five minutes of school.

Adena picks up her pen. It feels unbearable in her hand. She brings the ballpoint to the top right-hand corner of the page and scribbles something down. When she's done, she tears the corner off from the notebook and slides the piece into her pocket.

The bell rings.

Adena stands from her desk, shrugs on her backpack, and leaves the school. In the wake of her departure, she realizes she's leaving behind an institution that will surely witness terror in the coming days.

One way or another.

Adena stands in front of Rachel's home. It's a thin thing, tilting to one side almost like it's weighed down by disappointment. The windows are dirty and the paint chipped. To most, it looks unlivable, but Adena knows better. It has its own charm. One that not many would understand.

Adena's always loved this house. Ever since she was a kid and Rachel invited her over after weeks of building trust. They'd play in the front yard because the backyard was all concrete and rust. People would pass by, stare at the two children on the lawn, then turn to the house and realize just how little is needed to live.

How resilient human survival is.

This house. Adena's always imagined this house is what Rachel looks like on the inside, that she'd be the one to fix it.

Hopefully today is that day.

Adena knocks on the front door. There is no answer.

She knocks again, this time calling out, "Hello?"

Rachel's mother must be at work. But the door is unlocked which means someone's home.

Adena pushes the door open slowly. It creaks on its hinges and she enters the foyer.

"Rachel?" she calls. But it comes out as a whisper, afraid for her presence to be known. Afraid of Rachel seeing her first.

Adena walks through the living room, through the kitchen, past the pantry and to the basement door. She reaches her hand into her pocket, worries the texture of the notebook paper between her thumb and index finger, and twists the knob.

She sneezes. The scent of burning wicks and ash tickles her nostrils. It smells like a crematorium. Like what you'd imagine school supplies would smell like if you set an office store on fire.

She descends the stairs carefully, trying not to make a sound, her heart pounding in her chest like a convict begging for freedom, but she already knows Rachel can hear her. She knew of her presence the moment she stepped through the front door.

"I've spent enough time in this house to know what every room sounds like from the basement," Rachel had bragged to her once. "It's like I'm the brain of the house and I can hear all the parts and their happenings . . . Not that there's much happening anymore anyway."

Adena reaches the final step. She sees the jar before she sees Rachel. It's five feet away from her, lit with scraps of paper littered about it like discarded confetti. Rachel sits beyond it, far enough that the light doesn't reach her. Far enough that she's in the dark.

"Rachel?" Adena steps forward, then stops when Rachel's head lifts to meet her. The flickering glow shines off her eyes. Black eyes filled with pain and hellfire.

"I never told you this," Rachel starts so abruptly. The crackle of the wick, hungry and waiting, fills the silence between her words. "But after my mom got mugged . . . I researched endlessly to find the names of the guys who did it. Three of them." Rachel reveals her hand in the corona of light. Between her fingers are three pieces of paper. "I got lucky, really. It was only because they got caught in a later robbery that I was able to connect the dots." Rachel laughs a hateful laugh, her teeth shining like individual pearls through the dark. "The robbery got newspaper coverage. Three goons walk into a deli, three goons walk out in handcuffs. No injuries, no stolen property. No harm, no foul. Just good ol' journalism."

Adena takes another step forward. "Rachel . . . " She reaches out, thin

fingers casting spider-like silhouettes across the walls, trying to connect the distance between them.

"Do you know my mom can barely stand to look at me?" Rachel snaps. She leans in and the creases of her face are caught by shadows. "Looking at me reminds her of that night." She looks monstrous. "Like I'm the reason those guys came after her." Rachel screams, "*I was only ten!* What could I have possibly done?"

Rachel's hand turns into a fist, taking the papers along with it. And then her fingers open, one by one above the jar, until the fist is a palm ready to deliver a slap and the papers fall to their fiery deaths below.

The jar glows bright as it consumes the names.

"But it's not just them who have to pay," Rachel mutters. She's tearing pieces from her notebook, curled over her work like a predator protecting their hunt. "How about my mom's boss who made her work a double shift? Who made her stay late to bag groceries while he sat in the back office smoking a joint? How about the Wilkes who passed by the alley, who made fucking eye contact with a terrified girl who didn't know what to do to protect her mother and walked away? Or the cop, too lazy and too stupid to do any real investigating." She's scribbling names across the ripped pages, frantic like if she doesn't do so fast enough, her opportunity will vanish out of existence.

"Rachel . . . " Adena tries again. She doesn't want to ask, but she has to know. "Did you put Chloe, Chanel, and Christine's names in the jar?"

Rachel's head snaps up. Her upper lip curls over her teeth in a snarl.

"Oh, don't do that," she says. "Don't use their names like they're people. We've always called them Bitch Three and now you want to double back and humanize them?"

Adena takes another step forward. She's standing above Rachel now, reading the names on all those papers.

Arnold Holtz.

Stephanie Wilkes.

Charles Wilkes.

Detective Go Fuck Yourself.

"I tried to group them." Rachel giggles a crazed giggle like a scientist realizing the true extent of their creation. "I wrote a few test names on a piece of paper and burned them. People that won't be missed. But it's too early to know how it all works. I think it comes for them at night. I think it comes and it just takes them and then the next day they're just gone. Not a trace. Can you believe that?"

Rachel picks up the pieces. She holds them over the fire.

*Innocent people*, Adena thinks. *Innocent people who just so happened to be involved in a horrific night.*

"Are they really so innocent though?" Rachel says.

Adena's skin floods with goosebumps. Over the soft flesh of Rachel's bottom lip seeps a trickle of saliva. Her black eyes glitter, whites drowning in darkness until there's no presence of humanity left.

Rachel's voice declares in a hoarse echo, "I'm going to be a fucking god."

Adena screams and the sound catches Rachel off guard, her eyes returning to the mortal present and looking to Adena for an explanation. But Adena has already made her leap. She jumps over the jar and tackles Rachel to the ground, gripping her wrist and slamming it into the floor in hopes of forcing her to release the names. But Rachel is stronger. Standing five inches taller than Adena and fighting off demons for a living, Rachel overpowers her easily.

There's a grunt, a rip, and Rachel rolls Adena over to claim the higher ground.

Adena shrieks. Rachel foams at the mouth.

"I can't let you—" *do this*, Adena attempts, but she's silenced by a fist to the face. Her brain scrambles in her head, registering the sensation of knuckles cracking against her nose while commanding her lungs not to inhale her own blood. Rachel crawls off her and Adena cries, taking air in through her mouth with rasping breaths now that her nose has been decommissioned.

"Rachel," she weeps.

But Rachel doesn't reply. She doesn't need to. When Adena peers over her chest, she witnesses Rachel drop the names into the jar. She witnesses the hungry glow like a furnace gratified for the wood chips that keep it alive.

"I learned that night," Rachel says, staring into the fire, "that if you show you're weak, people will take advantage of you. If you let them, they'll do it without thinking twice."

Adena turns over. She crawls on her forearms to Rachel's backside. She keeps her body moving although her heart is begging her to stop. Pleading. Tears trail down her face. *I thought I could fix her*, she thinks. *I thought I could tilt her upright and paint her beautiful and safe*. Adena reaches into her pocket and pulls out the torn paper.

*I thought I could fix her . . .*

With a whimper, Adena reaches past Rachel and lets her fingers open up like a dying flower shriveling wide to let Death in. From her fingertips falls Rachel's name, falling and falling until it hits the lip of the jar. There it pauses, undecided. Adena holds her breath as the piece teeters.

Rachel makes her move. Adena reaches out to stop her but doesn't get there in time.

Rachel bends.

She blows.

The name falls into the depths of the ceramic and burns up. Adena's shout catches in her throat, a sob ramming through the organ's walls at the same time, multiple emotions blocking the exit.

*Why?* she wants to ask.

"It wouldn't be fair, would it," Rachel answers, "if I didn't wager my own death. After all, I'm the one who let it happen. I was the weak one."

*How silly . . .*

"Then again, I am the one who created this jar." Rachel tilts her head back and stares up at the ceiling, contemplating. "And can a cursed object really destroy another cursed object?" A pause. "I guess we'll see."

*I could never fix her. How could I fix something that's already demolished?*

Adena's eyes grow wide watching Rachel's hand lift into her field of vision, a piece of paper larger than a fist wedged between those decorated fingers.

A piece of paper with her name on it.

"I knew you'd try to take me down," Rachel says.

"I—"

When Adena tries to speak, blood falls into her mouth, onto her tongue. She's assaulted by the taste and snaps her jaws tight.

*"I had to,"* Rachel finishes the thought for her. "Yes, I know, I know. So I hope you understand why *I* have to."

Rachel releases her fingers. The piece falls. It burns. A sharp pang hits Adena's chest at the scent of her name turned to ashes. She falls too. Collapses in defeat. The air . . . She becomes drowsy. The air becomes a suppressant. A gas.

She can barely hear Rachel speak.

"You always protected me. Against Bitch Three and Merch." Whispers. "But the real question is why . . ."

Adena's eyes are winking. Slowly, slowly shutting.

"I was the weak one. But you kept me weak."

The air is turning grey. They're in a crematorium. There are bodies burning everywhere.

"I won't let you . . ."

Adena doesn't register unconsciousness but she falls just the same.

When Adena comes to, she is still on Rachel's basement floor. The room is dark. The jar is in the same place, only the light is snuffed from inside. The scent of smoke still lingers in the air, only it's not as pungent as before.

Adena sits up. She licks her lips and her tongue runs across crust. She

remembers the nosebleed. She touches her fingers to her bridge to check how much she's bled out. If maybe she's close to exsanguination. Her fingers last no longer than half a second upon the cartilage. The pain is too excruciating.

Broken. It's definitely broken.

She sets her hands back behind her, propping her upper body against her arms. She scans the room.

The basement looks empty. But it doesn't feel empty.

Something rustles in the corner. Adena turns to it, eyes wide, trying to collect what light she can to see in the dark. But it's no use. Her senses only pick up sound. The rustling grows louder, more confident. It doesn't care that someone else is here to observe its presence. It wants to be known.

Adena crawls backward, arms and legs working to drag her bottom across the carpet. As she moves, her hand hits something that creates a clatter like soft rain.

The matches.

The rustling stops, sensing her activity. Adena holds her breath. Stares through the darkness, trying to imagine what could be here with her.

And then the rustling moves. More like a shifting weight than the sound of a small rat searching for food, the rustle approaches her direction. Adena's heart races and she scrambles backward, hoping to escape its trajectory.

Her back hits something. The bottom of the staircase. Light shines down from the open door above. She leverages herself onto her arms to turn and run up the stairs, but before she can, the rustling lunges out of the darkness and pins her down.

No, not a rustling.

It's Rachel.

Rachel with black eyes and smiling lips coiling herself around her like a snake. Rachel glowing like a ghost, her skin luminescent and throat purring like a lullaby. She doesn't say a word. Her hand caresses Adena's cheek lovingly. So cold. Her skin is so cold. But her gaze is hot, filled with hunger. Her legs straddle Adena's waist as she leans in. There is no pulse to her contact. No affection. Only motion.

"You knew," Adena finds herself saying. "You knew this whole time, didn't you?"

Rachel doesn't speak, but she listens. Adena knows she's listening somewhere deep down in that possessed mind of hers. Veins grow on her face and her lips abandon their pinkish color for a grey hue.

And still, from the way Rachel is watching her as she descends chest to chest, Adena knows part of this is real.

Heat surges through Adena. A twisted anger feeding off a perverted release. How funny. How wrong. How not like she ever imagined. And this is on purpose, isn't it? A payback. A payback for her crimes.

"You know why I picked Ramon Moore, Rachel?" Adena snarls. "You want me to admit it?" She wants to scream. She wants to scream it so loud it breaks Rachel's eardrums. But she keeps her voice down. If this is her final confession, she needs to deliver it well. "After Bitch Three finished their public humiliation of me . . . "

Adena sees it. She sees it like it's right in front of her. She sees herself in the hallways of their elementary school searching for Rachel. Running down the corridors of chipped eggshell white walls and rotten orange juice tiles. She sees herself turning that final corner and sees Rachel with Ramon. Rachel hugging Ramon. Ramon kissing Rachel with the inexperience of a child still in size junior shoes.

She sees herself retreat. She feels her jealousy. It's steam. The kind so hot it burns layers deep.

"I didn't want Ramon."

She sees Ramon's eyes lowering to meet hers. She sees his lips move with words she couldn't care less for.

"I realized I wanted you. And that was even more humiliating."

Rachel smiles. It's weak, but it shows she understands. Even if this is a lost part of Rachel. An antithesis.

"I picked Ramon," Adena says. This is her confession. This is her confession for the sin that has cursed her. "I picked Ramon because he got from you what I wanted."

The admission is awful. It's selfish and predatory. It's resentment, a curse Adena has always hated from herself. But it's real. And still, Rachel leans in. Her hip bones dig into the small of Adena's stomach and Adena realizes this is her chance. Her chance to have what she's wanted for so long.

Rachel's lips approach, harsh grey things with intent. Adena puckers hers, waiting for the taste. But the flavor never comes. She gasps. She screams. She tries to sit up, but Rachel won't let her. No, not Rachel. A mirror. A reflection. It's no longer black eyes belonging to her friend that bore down on her. It's her own. She's screaming. The doppelganger is screaming. Her hands are around her neck, choking the life out of her. This is Adena's antithesis. Her shadow self.

Her cursed object.

And as this jealousy, this rage, this pent-up resentment slides down her throat like black tar, and as her esophagus and stomach fill with the saccharine sludge, she realizes she was cursed far before a jar could tell her otherwise.

The jar fills with dark oil. It zaps the energy from the room, consuming it like a treat. Rachel reaches under the couch and pulls out the lid from where it was kicked. She stares into the dark reflective surface and grins.

"There you are."

She caps the jar with the lid. It makes a satisfying click, rubber vacuuming ash and smoke into a black hole.

"I knew you'd never hurt me," she purrs.

There are thumps from upstairs. Footsteps. It's Rachel's mother returning home and approaching the basement door. Probably wondering what's going on. But she won't open it. Rachel knows this. She'll only get so far until her threshold of care reaches its limit. She'll place her hand on the doorknob. She'll think. She'll hesitate.

The footsteps retreat. Rachel scans the ceiling, marking the path her mother takes. A path that leads far away from her.

That's all right. Not a worry. After all, the strongest work in the dark. Under the radar of those they are affecting.

Rachel reaches for her notebook.

That's all right.

She opens to a fresh new page and grips the pen within her claw.

That's just fine.

She scratches at the scales on her arm. Runs the fork of her tongue across the fangs in her maw.

It's no matter.

She whips her tail against the carpet to mimic the heartbeat she no longer has.

She has much to do. She can't be distracted, anyhow.

She scans the page, then begins writing, monstrous eyes hungry for a list of sinners.

The list is endless.

Good.

Cursed objects are not limited by time. And neither is Rachel's hunger.