

Chapter 1

I'm not a god, but I might as well be. People do what I say. They should; I created them.

See, watch.

That douchebag, in the button-down he thinks shows off his chest but is really a size too small, is about to make a move on the redheaded bombshell sitting alone at the end of the bar. He doesn't know that she's alone because she wants to be. Like me. But Douchebag can't resist the gentle curve of her neck as it meets the plunging neckline of her dress.

She's here on business, grabbing a drink to relax after a long day at a convention. No, a meeting with the CEO of a corporation she's trying to buy. Something far more important than Douchebag who trades a few stocks and calls himself a mogul.

See him flash his winning smile - the one that *a/ways* works - as he leans against the bar and misses the pained look she gives him.

No, start over.

He should have earrings. In both ears. Large, square diamonds. Gaudy things that catch the light from the ridiculously elaborate chandeliers. Far too fancy for this hotel bar, but who cares. I created it.

And she should have a book. Something large and intimidating. Something Douchebag assumes she can't read. In his mind, it's all for show, an act. A guard that he can break down with ease. One smile and it's gone.

Except she's going to slap him. In three...two....one.

The palm-on-face action echoes around the bar that silences for a second before the noise rises even higher as people pretend to mind their own business. But I make sure every eye secretly drifts to the woman as she storms from the bar.

Wait, no.

The guy should leave. He's the douchebag. The slap catches his earring and it rips part of his earlobe. Abandoning his drink, Douchebag stumbles out of the door, blood leaking through his fingers that are pressed to his ear. The woman smiles and opens the book.

I know this scene because I wrote it. I created it. Every person in this bar, even the bar itself, I created. The man in the suit with a bald head and glasses, thick and black like Buddy Holly's, sipping a dry martini as he grumbles at a laptop. The man sitting in the booth in the corner, his belly pressing against the table and his laugh booming over the gathered crowd trying to talk to him. Even the bartender with her shirt low cut enough to earn a few more tips. Actually, I'll give her even more. The tip jar near the register grows by a few bills. There's even a 50 in there, buried underneath the swarm of ones and fives.

Whenever I write a scene, I become a part of that scene. I control everything. I don't know how or why it happens, but it does. This boisterous barroom on a random Friday night, my pen wrote it. Everything down to the swirls on the baseboard trim and the glitter in the counter. I wrote it all.

Except for her.

The young woman with her hair cut shorter than mine and a slightly upturned nose. Her eyes are too far apart and her hair sticks up around the back. Freckles run in uneven lines under her eyes and her lips are full. She wears a blue dress with white fringe and a large, white band holds her bangs out of her face.

I didn't write her. How did she get here?

She laughs at something the lawyer said when he handed her a drink. She closes her eyes and opens her mouth when she laughs, putting everything into it. She places a hand on the lawyer's chest and shoots him a sultry look.

I don't like it. The man pushes her hand off his chest and storms away, bumping against another woman as he ventures to the other side of the room. Undaunted, the girl joins another

group and enters into the conversation with ease. Her eyes almost look like crystals as they sparkle in the barroom glow.

How is this happening? I created this! This is my place. She doesn't belong here. I don't understand how she even got here. She should leave. I write about her leaving, but she doesn't leave. She carries on with her conversation as if nothing happens.

What?

Fine. Full reset.

I blink and the scene changes. The fancy bar fades out, replaced by a different kind of bar. A less formal, more clinical one. The kind of bar people go to after a long flight. Men wear wrinkled suits and women wear blocky dresses that don't show off their figure. The bartender wears a button-down and curls his mustache on the ends. He wants to be a musician, but he's stuck here working for people who barely notice him. The chandeliers are gone, replaced by overhead lights so dull people think they might not be working.

Groups of people, different people than before, sit at tables around the room instead of standing and mingling. It is quiet. A little too quiet. I let some people talk louder and a gentle hum fills the room.

I keep the redhead at the bar. I like her. But I give her a laptop instead of a book. She needs to work, she's an important businesswoman.

I smile as I scan the crowd.

Then the blonde girl sits on the stool next to me. My mouth falls open and I stare at her. She's wearing a plain blue dress now, one without ruffles, and her hair is tied in a small ponytail. But her eyes are still a little too far apart and her nose is still turned up at the end. She doesn't look at me but tries to get the attention of the bartender. I make sure he looks the other way.

"Service in this place kind of sucks," she says.

I don't answer. She can't be talking to me. When I wrote this scene, I made sure no one in the bar even noticed me sitting in this dark corner. But then she turns and stares at me.

“What’s your name?” She leans her head on her hand, elbow propped on the bar.

My name? My name is whatever I want it to be. Mark. Maximus. William. Gregory the Third. Whatever it is, it’s something she shouldn’t be asking about. I didn’t want her to ask this. Panic starts to swell in my chest and a light over the bar shatters making a few people gasp. I make sure they forget it instantly as I take a deep breath and summon the bartender to give me time to think.

“What can I get for you?” he asks.

“Finally!” She turns to him. “I’ll take a vodka soda.”

We’re both too young to even be in a bar, but he doesn’t check ids. Because I don’t want him to. Besides, the alcohol here doesn’t really work. The bartender does something behind the counter, out of sight because I don’t want to explain the movements, and then a full glass appears before her.

“So *do* you have a name?” she asks as she takes a sip. “Some people here don’t and I think that’s really funny.”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out at first. I swallow. “Jonah,” I say.

Wait, I change my mind. I want to give her a fake name. I rewind. People around the room jump back to the position they were in a second ago.

“My name is Adam.”

“Which is it, Jonah or Adam?”

“It’s...what?” I ask.

“You said Jonah and then you said your name was Adam. Which is it?”

“Jonah,” I whisper. “Who *are* you?”

“I’m Zara.” She dangles her hand before me like a princess ready to have a ring kissed. It looks soft and warm, but I don’t take it.

“Why are you here?” I say, writing bigger as I speak louder. “This is my place. WHY ARE YOU HERE?”

My heart starts to race and people stop talking as my mind focuses on the strange girl in front of me. Zara. The miracle girl. The girl who can invade my stories and my worlds. The girl with a face so bright I think about dimming the lights. It isn't possible. It can't be. I won't allow it.

Her face pales slightly as she stares over my shoulder. "What's that?"

I don't really need to turn around, but I do. A swirling storm cloud pushes its way through the bar. It moves, crawling like a zombie, drenching tables and people in rain that they don't notice. Lightning flickers inside the mass of gray. It expands, filling the space as it invades. I take a drink from a glass that appeared in front of me. Grape soda. My favorite.

"It's the Dread," I say.

"The what?"

I don't answer her.

The Dread is my nightmare. I didn't create it, but it shows up in every single scene I write. If it catches me, I'm stuck. The Dread is the only thing that appears in these worlds that I didn't create.

Until Zara.

The Dread is my clue to leave.

Chapter 2

I don't write anymore. For at least a day or two. Despite the itch that gnaws at the back of my mind nearly constantly; the desire to get away into a world that I've created and control. A world where things make *sense*.

Because they don't make sense out here. People do bad things and I think bad things and I can't understand why it won't all work the way it does in my stories. Maybe if they let me run this world, I'd improve it.

Whoever *they* even is.

I don't write because I can't bear to see Zara again, at least not until I understand where the hell she came from. Don't get me wrong, I *long* to see her again. At times, I do see her again. In my dreams, implanted on my consciousness, just out of my peripheral vision at lunch. I want to see her again the same way I want to breathe: I don't have to think about it, the need is there. If I don't see her, my chest will tighten and shrivel until I die.

I don't write anymore, but I read. Almost every hour, I re-read the scene I wrote that she showed up in. The bar with the business people loosening up after a tough day. I read the part where we talk. Over and over. I've memorized it and I still hate the way I sound on the pages. Abrasive. Rude. Short.

On the sheet of paper - no lines because I don't like them - my harsh, jagged black script is interspersed with lines of blue ink that are a little more slanted and a little less rich, as if I didn't press too hard on the paper when I wrote them. And I did write them, right? Even if I don't remember doing it.

When I write a scene, I'm completely alone in my room, I make sure of it. Disappearing somewhere else is dangerous, so I'm alone. No one else wrote it. And, as far as I know, no one else can jump into a story like I can.

Zara isn't real. She can't be. She has to be someone I wrote, even if I don't remember it. Nothing else makes sense.

The blue ink does look a little like my handwriting. Disguised maybe, but the lines under the "y's" are closed loops and the Z has a dash through the diagonal line. That mimics my handwriting and I've never seen anyone else do that.

If only I knew what I was trying to tell myself through Zara.

Shaking my head, I place the papers into the bottom drawer of my desk and lock them in. In the past few days, they've become my greatest treasure. Zara isn't real, I know that, but when I'm reading that scene again I can pretend and sometimes that's good enough.

Tonight I'll write again. Something easy, something fun. Not a world with a lot of people, because then I might accidentally write her.

I have to know if she's real.

She can't be real.

Chapter 3

Mist creeps over the side of the hill, mixing in the dark rocks and twirling through the twigs. Actually, I want it to be sunrise so that the reds and oranges can reflect in the mist, making it seem like I'm standing within the clouds. I make it cold and let the mist leave small droplets on my face and hands. The wind bites, but I make sure I don't feel it. At least not in any serious way. Only enough to refresh me and wake me up.

I take a deep breath and the air tastes like rain, a gentle sweetness that infects every morning. I can barely make out the other mountain tops surrounding mine though the fog. One of them stretches above my head, so large it looks close enough to touch. But I'd prefer to be on the tallest mountain, so I make it disappear. In its place I see the last bit of night sky fleeing from the sun. An ocean of stars. Too many to count.

I haven't decided when I am yet, but I want there to be a village. There. Nestled in the valley of the two largest mountains. Smoke curls from a chimney and a soft golden light floods from a few windows. Every house looks the same, but I don't mind. And I'm the only one here to impress.

I watch a bird swoop along the tops of the trees that grow on the hillside. It brushes against the branches causing a few birds to jump from the trees and join the first bird in a formation as they dart across the sky.

In the village, a man pushes into the street carrying a bucket. He waves to a woman who opens her window and shoots him a smile. They had a fling once when they were far younger. Nothing but children frolicking in the mountains. Now they're both married with children of their own. Rumor has it the woman's son is going to offer marriage to the man's daughter. The families will be united after all.

No one in the village has ventured to this mountaintop. In fact, they have legends and myths surrounding it. This peak is holy ground. Sacred. They think the gods live up here and if anyone ventures close to the tip of the mountain, they will be killed.

Well, they aren't entirely wrong.

I climb out on a flat rock that dangles dangerously over the hill. For a second, my palms start to sweat and my heart rate quickens. In response, the wind picks up and a bird below caws, the sound echoing across the valley. I stand on the edge of the rock with my arms outstretched, letting the wind whip my cloak. If I left right now, I could fly.

Up here, I am limitless.

Infinite.

Divine.

My stomach clenches as I think I see Zara stumbling up the mountain, a bob of blonde hair pushing through the underbrush. But it isn't her, only a patch of white flowers caught in the breeze. I make them disappear while my heart races.

This mountain is impossible to climb, I made sure it was. Zara could not be here unless I place her here. So why do I want to place her here? I catch myself thinking about the way her eyes twinkled as if they held glitter and the way her fingernails were chipped and painted pure white. I think of ways I can describe her that will put her on this mountaintop with me, watching the sunset.

And for a second, I start to do it. I start to write her, but I stop myself. Since writing my own worlds, I've improved but I can't do justice to her. The way her energy bounces from her skin and her movements are graceful even in their sloppiness. I could never write her spirit that drips from every move she makes.

That's when I see her. On the opposite mountain, far away but unmistakable. She's in a light blue shirt and the sun is rising directly over her head. She walks through a patch of flowers, picking the largest yellow one and tucking it behind her ear.

I stand and almost topple off the rock. It's because I thought about her, that's the only reason she is there. Closing my eyes, I take a few deep breaths. I write that the mountain is

empty, with no Zara and no flowers. In fact, it's a patch of rocks so loose no one would dare stand on them.

When I open my eyes, Zara is gone. The sun bursting with color over the bare, lumpy hillside looks more post-apocalyptic than I wanted, but at least it keeps Zara away. Until I hear a rustle behind me and my blood turns cold. Goosebumps spread over my arms and my fingers start to shake.

I know who it is. It isn't the wind, but I stilled the air just in case. Still, something rustled. The clear sound of bushes against fabric. I think about leaving the story, about jumping back to my room. But I can't let her run me out of my world.

Plus what if she is real and she's there when I leave the story? I cannot handle that right now.

When I turn, I see Zara scanning through the bushes. A few of the pricklier twigs garb at her legs, but she doesn't mind. For one second I think about giving them thorns. Or making them poisonous. Something to scare her away. But I imagined her face in pain and I don't think I can take that. I don't want her here, but I never want to see her hurt. Not ever. Definitely not in my world.

"Oh, hey Jonah," she says as if she only now realizes I'm here. As if I didn't vaporize her mountain a few seconds ago. Her eyes glance at me, prodding and peeling, but then they are back to the bushes instantly. "I wish this place had berries or something. I'm kinda hungry and nothing beats wild berries."

The flower from the other mountain is still pinned behind her ear, but the petals are a little bent and browned along the ends. It isn't perfect, but she doesn't seem to mind. I try to stop myself, but I write berries on the bush. Little ones that burst with flavor when you eat them, kind of like a Gusher.