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**A GOTHIC PARANORMAL ROMANCE**



Grove  
**Hollow**  
SENESCENCE

Quantifying love through the dimension of time proves challenging, as love surpasses earthly limitations and resists standard measurements. Love's ability to exist across past memories, present moments, and future aspirations emphasizes its immeasurable value. Instead, the most effective meter of love lies in transformative experiences unfolding over the course of *time*.

# I

## REUNION

I can *feel* him.

The bedroom of the Actias Hotel, bathed in dim light, is quiet as we sit on the carpeted platform leading up to the Art Deco mirror. Silent tears stream down my face. The unknown passage of time is marked only by our erratic breathing and the rapid rise and fall of Will's chest against mine.

My heartbeat races a million miles a minute as I'm caught in a whirlwind of disbelief. His unyielding embrace is a steadfast anchor, providing refuge as I seek comfort within the tight circle of his arms. His neck becomes my sanctuary, the warmth of his skin a tender contrast to my wet cheek. My fingers card through the strands of his raven locks, twisting and twirling through their velvety waves.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the lingering scent of citrus-scented hair oil, as though he had applied it only a moment ago. My fingers move down from the back of his head, finding their way to the collar of his shirt. The fabric bends to the firm clasp of my knuckles, providing a tangible confirmation that grounds me in this reality. The invisible barrier preventing me from touching Will is gone.

A comforting hush flows from his lips, like a gentle lullaby to soothe a weary child. It calms the restlessness of my pounding heart. I draw back as his grip loosens. Our tear-stained eyes lock in a reunion—two old souls who have waited centuries to cross paths again. In the shared intimacy of the moment, my breathing grows shallow. Just

moments ago, he seemed lost to me forever, and now he is here right in front of me. The realization hits me like a wave.

His fingers float across my face, tracing the paths of tears on my flushed cheeks. The smooth touch of his fingertips carries a subtle weight. A soft laugh escapes me that resembles more of a staggered sigh of relief.

“You’re really here,” I whisper.

“I really am.” A tear streams down his face as his hand caresses my cheek. “And I can touch you.”

“But how?” I settle the side of my face in his palm and close my eyes. “How... is any of this real?”

Will had left. He’d left me through the mirror. I’d seen the whole thing unfold. With each passing hour, the gaping hole in my chest had expanded, intensifying the ache within. But here he is, sitting before me. None of this... none of this makes any sense. The knots are starting to form in my stomach. I’m beginning to wonder if I’m hallucinating from exhaustion.

No.

I can feel him.

His hand is on my cheek. It’s warm, weighted, and *real*. My mind is in a blurry haze as it struggles to process everything logically.

“They let me return.”

My eyes flutter open. I peer past Will. The hotel mirror’s reflection only displays the two of us perched on the floor of the platform before it. Why did they want him and the necklace? And where were they taking him?

“They let you come back? I-I don’t understand. How come?”

His hands move down my shoulders and come to a halt at my elbows. He exhales, averting his gaze to look at the beetle locket beside us. “I’m unsure.”

Will picks up the locket and studies it with hesitation as if one touch could transport him back to wherever he was and end all of this—perhaps that thought isn't as impossible as it seems. The uncertainty alone tightens my chest as I question why they allowed him to return.

“What happened, Will?” I ask, my words barely audible.

Without looking away from the scarab, he says, “When I stepped through the mirror, I was greeted by the most beautiful music coming from a sky filled with new colors. The two figures led me toward a bright light that promised me freedom from all sadness and anger. When I heard my mother’s voice calling my name, I knew everything would be all right.” He pauses to wipe the corner of his eye. “Before I stepped into the light, the man, Osiris, I believe him to be, presented me with the locket. I didn’t understand at first, but I soon realized I had a choice.” Will tucks the locket into his pocket.

I take a shuddering breath. “What kind of choice were you given?”

“To accompany them to the other side or to return here.”

A lump forms in my throat as a burning pain stings my nose. I grasp the heaviness of what this moment could have been if he had chosen the other path. I’d be forced to wake up and face each day without Will—I’d be confronted by constant reminders that would stir memories of moments shared with him, understanding I’d never have the opportunity to create new ones. I’d have to learn how to live with a heartache too powerful to suppress.

Tears pool under my eyes. I want him here with me—more than anything. Losing Will is a pain I never wish to experience again. But at the same time, I can’t shake the guilt as I wrestle with my own greedy wants and desires versus what might have been best for him. If he chose the other path—be it right or wrong—could I muster the strength to

accept his leaving? Could I genuinely find contentment in his eternal happiness and selflessly move forward with my life?

Without him.

The ball in my stomach rises and chokes my throat as tears begin to spill. I leap toward him, encircling my arms around his neck.

“Will, I thought I had lost you forever,” I cry into his shoulder.

His arms tighten around my back. In this moment, it becomes real; Will has been granted a second chance at life, with the warmth of flesh and the reassuring mass of existence. My heart is full of gratitude, realizing that we both share in this second chance. An opportunity for something more. He lets out a faint, melodic laugh, which resonates like a gentle hum. He nestles his head onto mine.

“You feel more incredible than I could ever imagine,” he says so quietly. I wonder if he meant for me to hear it.

I pull away, but his hold remains—an uncompromising tether meant to keep me close. I offer no resistance. A blush graces his cheeks. His whole body radiates with newfound color. His teeth gently tug at the bottom of his lip, coaxing forth a shy grin.

My cheeks respond with a subtle pull as I realize his vulnerable confession was never meant for my ears. In the soft glow of the hotel’s light, our faces hover, sharing breaths within an inch of each other. The air between us crackles with unspoken energy.

My gaze lowers to my hand, surrendering to an undeniable urge to trace the edge of his face. Could this be a dream? Is it truly his soft skin I feel beneath my fingertips? I follow the graceful line of his neck, gently gliding over his firm collarbone concealed beneath the elevated collar of his shirt. My palm lays flat on his chest, and a smile graces my lips. I feel the powerful thudding beneath it, each heartbeat declaring the vibrant pulse of life. No, this is not a dream. This is the beautiful sensation of touching Will.

As our eyes reunite, fireworks burst inside my chest, their sparkling radiance extending to the very ends of my body. The unexpected sensation catches me by surprise, and I gulp down air. My hand shakes as it rests on his chest. I clench and unclench my fingers to steady them.

“Will, having you here is everything I’ve ever wished for—losing you was like living through a never-ending nightmare.” I glance at the mirror. “Knowing how happy you would have been crossing over... are you sure returning here is what you want?”

I look back at him and notice a slight tremble on his lips as he draws in a long breath. The gleaming whites of his eyes narrow under his serious brow. I wonder what might be crossing his mind in his intense concentration.

“Jade Whitney,” he whispers, “I would have chosen to come back to you a million times.”

I gasp. My ability to speak abandons me. My mouth falls open as I absorb the meaning of his words.

Will chose *me*.

Waiting for my response, the blush returns to his face. His eyes deepen, stoking the vibrant, blazing fire within me. No words seem sufficient enough to express how thankful I am for Will’s profound sacrifice. Instead, I slide my hand behind his neck, pulling him closer. He tilts his head, letting his dark hair cascade over his closed eyes.

Time slows, and I savor the initial touch of his gentle lips gliding over mine. His kiss feels like a new song—an undiscovered treasure fated to be a favorite tune I want on repeat forever. The only audible notes echo in harmony with the swift beats of our hearts, opening the door to a surge of unexplored emotions. Each lyric narrates a compelling story—our story.

As time speeds forward, my fingers twist through his hair, clutching the nape of his neck. I make a concerted effort to absorb every magical, rippling feeling, with the desire to permanently etch the memory of my first kiss with Will in my mind. His arms tighten around my back, drawing me nearer until the delicate tips of his eyelashes brush against my cheeks. A dreamy sigh escapes me, met by his gentle laughter. Delight flitters through my belly. It's as though the universe conspires to intertwine us, and no earthly force could sever the unbreakable bond pulling us closer together.

The fluttering in my stomach subsides, giving way to a soothing feeling of familiarity. His hands find their way to the side of my face, and he deepens our kiss. His sweet lips meld with mine, like two crafted puzzle pieces, effortlessly fitting together. We surrender to unhurried exploration, and our kisses unfold slowly and purposefully, revealing the contours of each other. Every movement unveils a new discovery as we delve deeper. I long to know every part of him, and now we have time on our side.

As our kissing slows, he gently pulls away. My heart soars high above the clouds, and my body descends from the peak of a rollercoaster. With my strength waning, I lean forward, weakened by the intensity of unfamiliar yet exquisite feelings coursing through me. Will swoops in to catch me. I dissolve into his arms like liquid sunshine. I cling to him for support while his hands glide beneath my knees, carrying me over to the bed. I turn to my side to face him. His head finds its place on his pillow. Gently, his fingers trace along my arm, leaving ghostly goosebumps in their wake. I can't believe this is real. I smile, as I no longer have to rely on my imagination to understand the feel of his touch.

“How are you feeling?” I ask him.

He chuckles. “I should be asking you that question.”



“I’m much better now that you’re here.” I fight hard to ignore the exhaustion in my recovering body.

His lips curve upward, pleased with my response.

“I feel hungry, cold, and very tired,” he answers. “I forgot how delicate the human body is.”

“Let me find you something to eat.”

I sit up on the bed, intending to grab some leftover cheese from the charcuterie tray. He reaches out and takes hold of my arm, pulling me back beside him. With a warm grin, he shakes his head at my surprised face.

“But aren’t you hungry?”

“I’ll take care of it.” He places a light kiss on my forehead before rising from the bed. “You need to rest. I’ve put you through too much already.”

I let out a sigh as I watch him leave. The room is silent while he is out in the kitchen, with nothing but the faint murmurs emanating from the TV and the ticking of his pocket watch. I retrieve the watch from the floor where I had dropped it earlier. I examine it closely. The alarm clock beside the bed reads 3:48 a.m., while the pocket watch displays the time as 3:00 a.m. I notice the watch’s second-hand shows it’s barely moved. It’s very strange. I shrug it off—it’s old and hasn’t been tended to in a hundred years.

“I can’t believe how incredible the taste of brie is!” Will shouts from the kitchen. I laugh in response.

As he enters, the bedroom transforms immediately, shifting from a dismal emptiness to a comforting fullness. He places a butcher block, laden with cheese, a sliced baguette, grapes, and two cups of water, on the bed. He finds his place beside me with his elbows propped on his long bent legs. Taking a bite of smoked gouda, he closes his eyes and sighs contentedly as if it were his first experience with cheese. In some

ways, perhaps it is. I reach for my glass of water, surprised at how dehydrated I feel from all my crying and the amount of wine I had consumed.

Will's gaze narrows on the pocket watch next to my leg. "How did you manage to get it working?"

"I didn't," I reply, passing it to him. "I heard it ticking as you were returning through the mirror. It's showing 3:00 a.m., so I think it's still broken."

His brows scrunch as he examines the watch. Like me, he dismisses it with a shrug and places it between us.

We inhale our food. Will refills our water glasses and places them on the bedside table. He lifts the covers, inviting me to cuddle up next to him. I lay close to his chest, resting my palm on his shirt. He covers my hand with his, offering a light squeeze. I run my thumb along the side of his palm, seeking nothing more than the reassurance that I can feel him.

"It's amazing," he begins, his voice tender. "The moments I used to only dream about with you are no longer in my imagination."

"I know what you mean," I say, recalling the aching hunger for his touch only hours before.

"Coming through the mirror marks a fresh start for me—for us," he says, inhaling deeply. "That is, if you desire that, too."

"That's all I want, Will," I affirm with my lips against his. He holds me tightly as if we're both making a silent pledge.

"We should find some sleep." He brushes his fingers on the side of my face, the tips of our noses still touching. While I know he's right, a lingering worry resides within me, the fear that if I fall asleep, I might wake up and discover this *was* all a dream.

"I'll set an alarm," I say, parting with another kiss, just in case.

I rise from the bed and sit beside him on the opposite edge. I set the alarm for our early morning journey back to Hudson Station. Fatigue

falls heavily on my eyes. I yawn, acknowledging we won't enjoy more than a few hours of sleep. However, a startling thought causes my heart to stop. I had neglected the fabricated reason behind my visit to New York City: to get a belated Christmas gift for Aunt Ruth. The situation is further complicated because I'll be bringing a twenty-one-year-old man back with me.

"Will?" I ask, the tone in my voice rising. He turns to me and places his hand on my back. "What are we going to do about Aunt Ruth's gift and telling everyone who you are? I imagine you'll have to stay with me as you'll freeze to death in Montgomery Manor."

"Hm." He rubs the top of his forehead.

While he continues to think, I move to my side of the bed. I claim my spot next to him, lowering my head on his shoulder. The slow pace of his breathing helps calm my nerves.

"We'll have to come up with something clever to tell her," I suggest, biting my nails. He grabs my hand and pulls it away from my mouth, his gentle grip not letting go.

"Don't worry," he says, sounding tired but without an ounce of concern. "I'll think of something."

Will inhales a breath through his nose and lets it out slowly. His face is washed in the gentle glow of the bedside lamp, highlighting his closed eyelids and long lashes. Stretching across his body, I switch off the lamp. His arms surround me, pulling me back against his chest. I plant a light kiss on his lips. A faint, contented smile appears on his mouth, illuminated by the slender beam of moonlight seeping through the window.

Sweeping his hair away from his face, I'm still in disbelief that he's here. That I can feel him. Just a few hours ago, I was lying here on the bed, feeling hollow, with my heart shattered as I was preparing myself to continue the rest of my life without him. Never would I have

imagined this moment. A twinge in my stomach accompanies a thought that pushes itself to the forefront of my mind. How did I become so fortunate to be given this new opportunity to explore all the depths of love with Will? Knowing the challenges of our situation, I had always wondered why fate brought us together. It seemed evident that our meeting was destined, yet circumstances prevented us from fully embracing every enchanting, physical aspect of our connection. So, why now? What's the significance of this timing?

I watch his smile relax as he drifts further into sleep. I release a heavy sigh. I cast aside my concerns, finding comfort in his presence as I rest my head on his chest.

“Goodnight, Will,” I whisper and close my eyes.

All I know is that whatever the reason for this second chance, I am prepared to dive headfirst into love's deep abyss and welcome this new chapter of my life with Will.