

REGEN

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Chapter One



Something tickled my face. I swatted at it. Or at least I tried. Had my arm even moved? There, again. *Whatever you are, go away. I just want to...* What did I want? To sleep.

Sleep sounded good. Was it night?

One eyelid complied when I told them both to open.

Dark, but not absolutely black. Early morning or late evening? Hard to tell in the rain. I flexed my fingers. They moved, stiffly. But the rest of me remained immobile. I shoved down the terror trying to flood up my chest. Why couldn't I move? What was going on? *Trish, what have you gotten yourself into this time?*

I gurgled out a sound, but it was hardly audible, even to me. No one was going to hear that unless they were right beside me. I blinked the one working eyelid. Water dribbled in and I groaned. A few blinks helped and I rolled my eye

around, trying to get my bearings, to see anything I could recognize. Outside, that much was obvious. Mist, trees, and a dark sky. That was it. I crushed the panic again, my heart thundering in my ears. I couldn't get in a good breath. Was it the panic attack, or were my lungs not working either?

How did I get here? And where is here? A voice. A man. A gun. I tried to yell again, with as much success as the first time.

After a moment my other eyelid started to cooperate. I blinked a few times, adjusting to both eyes working.

Definitely a forest of some kind. But maintained. Cut grass, trimmed bushes. Maybe a park?

What was going on? Last night I had... I couldn't remember. I couldn't even remember what day it was. I swallowed, a knot catching in my throat and making me gag.

My hand clenched into a fist involuntarily. Good, that was good, focus on the positive. A moment ago I couldn't move my fingers. Wait. It had been evening, just getting dark. I was out here with... someone. And then...

Something tickled my face again. This time I could see what it was. A small bush, leaning over me. I shoved it away. Feeling returned to my arms and toes at the same time. I patted at my chest and sides to see if anything was wrong.

The rain had me too wet to tell if there was any bleeding. Everything hurt, but in a general kind of way.

I squinted up at the tree branches, shielding my face with a trembling hand and looking for some type of landmark.

The thick, nighttime gloom covered everything, making it difficult to see anything but trees. Lots of trees. I took a deep breath, trying to stop the quivering in my fingers by relaxing for a second. It didn't work. We'd gone out in the

woods, and then... My body tried to bolt upright, but it didn't work. The guy had shot me!

A deeper investigation, with a little better idea where to look, and I found the hole in my dress. What if he was still out here? A whimper escaped, but I managed to keep it quiet. I had to get moving. I had to get out of here.

I planted my hands in the grass and pushed myself up into a semi-sitting position. Something popped and groaned behind me, and suddenly I was propped up by a huge tree root, dirt still crumbling and falling away from the wood.

A shriek ripped out of my throat, this one much stronger than the feeble yell I'd managed to get out earlier. I tipped over, unable to catch myself. The root did it for me, setting me back up. I slapped at it. The tree didn't seem to care. It didn't move again. Trees weren't supposed to move.

I covered my face with my hands. "It's okay, Mom said weird stuff would start happening to me. It's okay, it's okay." I rocked forward, barely registering that the rest of my body was starting to function.

Shoot, too much noise. I looked over my shoulder, but the darkness blanketed everything.

Fumbling around I discovered that I had no pockets, which meant no cell phone. That was bad. Really bad. Now what? I rubbed the back of my neck, willing my body to start working, trying to come up with a plan. I couldn't think.

Should I try to get someone's attention? Stupid. I always rolled my eyes at people in the movies, internally telling them not to get themselves noticed, now I was thinking about doing it. Who would even be looking for me? Maybe Wade, but that was doubtful. My boyfriend knew I could take care of myself. Usually. I shoved my trembling hands into my armpits, which were bare.

I needed to get out of here. Needed to find somewhere

better to figure out what to do. Somewhere the guy didn't know where to find me. A shiver tingled through me. I really wasn't dressed for this in... heels and a sequined dress?

What was wrong with me? I hated dresses.

Mushy leaves kicked over me hid half my body. I brushed them off with one hand. What was all over my dress? Mud? I took a better look. Blood.

Nearly hyperventilating, I patted at my body, looking for anything other than the bullet hole. Nothing.

Legs, start working!

My stomach growled and I nearly retched at the level of hunger that punched me in the gut. I bent over, hugging my stomach. I knew hungry, but this was extreme, even for me. I rolled over and pulled out a fistful of grass, pausing for just a second before stuffing it into my mouth. My crazy level of hunger was telling me I'd been doing some intense healing in the not so distant past. As in, bring me back from death's door levels of healing. Another shiver went through me. This one had nothing to do with the cold.

Still not able to move well, I drug myself into some bushes. Whoever had shot me could come back. Or maybe they hadn't even left. I needed to get out of the open.

It took almost a minute, and a whole lot of lawn, but the calories from the grass finally kicked in enough for me to stagger to my feet.

I stumbled toward a smaller tree, pulled off some leaves and stuffed them into my mouth, nearly gagging as I tried to chew. They were dry and brittle, no doubt almost ready to fall, tasting like dirt. I forced as much of it down my throat as I could manage. It took a moment, but I felt a little better. Better enough to stumble away from where I'd woken up.

Squinting through the gloom didn't make any light

bulbs ding. Why would I have come out here with someone? I hated nature. It reminded me of my mom. And at this time of night? Dan and Nina were going to be so mad. Hey, Dan and Nina, I was starting to remember stuff. My foster parents were going to be ticked. If the guy wasn't out here waiting to make sure I didn't make it back.

I swiped at tears trying to run down my face. This was not the time. Picking a random direction, I hobbled forward in my heels, sliding around a little on the wet leaves. I tripped on a stick and went down, the mud I landed in sent the chill on my skin down into my bones. The shivers started coming faster. I struggled up and kept moving, smearing mud down my fancy dress when I tried to clean my hands. Not leaving a trail for the killer to follow in this muck would be impossible.

At least I had an idea why I was here. Not here as in this spot, but here as in this situation. Mom had said strange things would start happening when I turned sixteen, but she hadn't mentioned me going all werewolf and showing up out in the middle of some forest with no memory of the last few hours. Okay, nix the werewolf, I still had my clothes on. Plus, I already knew what I was.

The popping noise was back. I turned sharply to look behind me, nearly toppling over in my heels. The tree root that had come out of the ground to prop me up was gone. Totally gone. "It's okay," I whispered to myself. "Probably normal. It's okay, weird stuff is supposed to start happening," then shuffled away faster, looking over my shoulder.

After about ten steps something tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around, but no one was there. "Hello?" I squeaked out. No answer. The tap happened again. This time, I turned my head slowly, without moving my body. It was a branch. Like, just a normal tree branch. Or not

normal, whatever. Once it knew it had my attention, it pointed back in the direction I'd come from.

I looked.

“You want me to go that way?”

The branch just swayed in the wind, like any regular old branch sticking out abnormally far from its trunk. That was probably a yes. But the real question was, what were the tree's intentions? Did I really want to listen to it?

“Ah, no thanks,” I said, staying on my original route. “It isn't safe back there. I'm trying to get away from someone.” It tapped me on the shoulder again. I swatted it away. “What's with you? I don't want to go that way. Are you even real? Maybe I'm unconscious.”

The tree branch wilted at my harsh tone. I almost felt bad. Almost. I stalked away faster but only made it a few steps before something grabbed me around the waist. I yelped and struggled, but the grip just got stronger. My feet left the ground and I went limp, making and discarding increasingly crazy plans in a split second. And then I was turned around and set back on my feet, the branch unwinding from around my body.

I rubbed my arms to hide the freaked out shivering. “Fine, have it your way,” I muttered, and resumed my stalking, this time in the direction the tree had suggested. I nearly fell over three times because I was staring over my shoulder to make sure it didn't come at me again. The sky was getting darker, fast.

Apparently the tree was satisfied by my decision because it left me alone. Finally out of earshot. Or whatever. Could a tree hear? If a tree fell in the woods, could it hear itself? I didn't know, nothing like this had ever happened to me before.

Mom had mentioned that nature loved the fae, but she hadn't ever brought this up. It was supposed to mean big

gardens and stuff, not Narnia and living trees.

Suddenly a vine grabbed me, stopping a scream trying to rip from my mouth by covering it tightly. I struggled, but it just tightened until I couldn't move. The tears I'd been holding back flowed freely. *What do you want?* I thought toward it.

No, answer, of course.

A second later a shadow moved by. A person. A big person. My body went instantly limp, supported only by the vine. I stroked the vine a little, my fingers hardly able to move, and it loosened. The thing had probably just saved my life. I was afraid to blink, afraid to lose sight of whoever it was, moving past me back toward where I'd woken up.

No one with good intentions would be out here on a night like tonight.

Slowly, like it was afraid I'd crumple to the ground, the vine loosened around me, letting me go. I patted it lightly in thanks, not wanting to say anything out loud that the shadow could hear.

I took a deep breath, almost afraid to blink. Had that thing been a person? Which was better, yes, or no?

The heels had to go. If I needed to run, I wouldn't be able to. I pulled them off and gripped them tightly in one hand.

The farther I could get from this place the better, before that guy found out my body was gone. How long had it been since he'd shot me? At least an hour or so, judging from the darkness.

A small hill loomed up in front of me, barely lit by a sliver of the moon that passed in and out of the clouds. I paused.

Trying to climb up that slick bank would probably turn into another disaster. I shouldn't have listened to that stupid

branch and gone this direction. The woods out here didn't seem as well cared for. I turned left and followed the line of the embankment.

Stupid rain. It was getting worse. I wiped the excess water off my face for the fiftieth time. At least the rain would hide the tear tracks.

A rumbling sound pulled me from my thoughts. What was that? My heart clenched in my chest and I cowered into the closest tree. A rivulet of water flowed down the hill ahead. The only way I could tell the difference between it and the rain was the fact that it was a yucky brown. Gross water splashed on the already soaked hem of my dress.

The rumbling started again, this time even stronger, shaking the ground beneath my feet a little. No human could be causing that. It had better not be something crazy, like a dragon or whatever. I definitely wasn't equipped to handle that.

Just as the thought left my mind, a small wave of muckiness crested the hill and rained down into my face. I spewed water out of my mouth and gagged, the gross mix trickling into my lungs. I had a second to get the coughing fit under control before the rumbling started again, this time almost deafening in intensity. Oh crap. A huge wall of water surged over the hill, washing me from my feet. I slammed into a tree and bit back a scream as I felt a rib crack.

The water washed me off the tree and sent me head over heels down the embankment, shrieking like a banshee. I tumbled down the hill, my body crying in agony before going into a free fall off the last hill and plunging into a large mass of water.

Waking up after something like that is not pleasant.

Don't get me wrong, it's better than not waking up at all. I just wish that whatever part of me decides it needs to

wake up before I'm finished healing would keep its opinion to itself.

At least my dress is getting clean. The thought floated through the fog in my brain. I shook my head, trying to get my bearings. Tough, considering I was underwater somewhere.

I clenched my fists and closed my eyes for a second.

Maybe this was a nightmare. Maybe it would all go away. I cracked open an eyelid.

Nope.

Don't breathe. It's okay. You're fine. Sure I was fine.

Sure. I was just under water, that's all. I shoved the thought away and tried to blow out some bubbles. Nothing happened. No air in my lungs. I thrashed around for a second, looking for the surface, freaked out by the lack of breathing. The water was too clouded. I couldn't tell which way was up.

Blinking seemed to help with the fogginess and I came around enough to dodge some debris flowing downstream a little faster than I was. Who needed Disney World? Just jump in a creek and dodge some logs here. Add in some injuries just for fun. I gave an experimental kick toward where I hoped the surface was but gasped in pain.

Apparently a broken leg wasn't finished healing.

I closed my eyes to wait, the current tugging on my clothes, sending my long hair tangling around my face. If the water wasn't flowing so quickly, this would almost be calming. Which would be really nice, because no matter how many times I kept telling myself not to freak out, I was almost past the point of trying not to.

But no. Right now I just needed to get out of here. ASAP. I hadn't been very quiet while getting flung into the river, the shadow guy might have heard me. Ten seconds and the pain had faded to a manageable level. That would

have to do, I needed out of here. Like, now. The bones could finish on my way up. I butterfly kicked my way to the surface. It took forever with no oxygen in my lungs to help buoy me upward. I popped up and pulled in a gulp of air. Big mistake. I hacked for a moment, spewing out all kinds of fluid, sunk under the surface, popped back up, and then took in that breath. Ahh, better. I spit the last of the foul tasting water out of my mouth. Note to self, next time try to get water out of lungs before filling them with air.

Treading water against the current should have made me tired, but it didn't. I was almost back to normal. Though not completely normal. A normal person would be dying of exhaustion right now. I squeezed my eyes shut in relief.

Another one of the blessings of being fae, along with the whole healing thing. Supposedly not all of us get the same gifts, but I didn't know for sure since I didn't have another of my kind to ask.

The rain had finally slowed to a drizzle, only a little late. It could have done that an hour ago. An hour? Had it been that long since I woke up? No idea. I squinted toward the bank of the river, the moon's reflection on the water giving me a little help in the light department. There had to be some civilization around here somewhere. I started kicking in the direction of the riverbank, the pain totally gone. Which bones had I broken this time? Hard to say.

I dodged random debris floating in the mess of a river, the stupid dress weighing me down. I'd lost my shoes somewhere in the fall.

Finally I made it to the bank, hauling myself onto the edge. Looking up was not encouraging. Steep. Really steep. I dropped my head in my hands. I would not cry. I was not a crier. Crying was not something I did. The sniffles were just from the water in my nose, that was it. I looked up the sheer mud wall again. The commercials about wild fires

and yada, yada were all over this year. Guess they were right if the river was supposed to be that high. Just my luck.

I took an experimental breath through my nose and didn't choke. At least that was getting better. *Come on, Trisha. You can do this. Just pretend you're training with Mom.* Sure. Like this was anything the same.

Trying to climb the mud bank was like trying to scale a cliff covered in ice. Difficult. It wasn't long before I had just as much mud on me as before I went through the rinse cycle on nature's washing machine. Further up, the base of the bank had eroded away, leaving an overhang up top. I turned left and crept along in the dark for a few feet before stopping. The lip only got worse in that direction. The right proved the same.

It was okay. I could do this. What good were my gifts if I couldn't climb some stupid little hill? Digging my hands into the freezing, sticky mire, I started up what had to be four feet of mud-covered dirt. The top layer was slick, but I could get a hold of the more solid layer under it. Maybe I wouldn't be doing this if I had to worry about six weeks in a cast, but since that wasn't a problem all I could think of was how tired I was of being out here in the rain. And the fact that there might be someone following me trying to kill me. But I didn't want to think about that part at the moment.

Smooth sailing until I reached the top. Here the lip was even more pronounced, hanging out over the bank. I was going to have to practically dangle to get over this. I latched on to a rock sticking out of the dirt tightly with my left hand, then reached over onto the ground with my right, flailing around as I tried to find something to grab onto. A pop and a groan sounded from above. I tried to jerk my hand back, but something rough was in the way. A tree root? Was it following me? Was that possible?

But I needed the help so I couldn't look a gift horse in the mouth, or whatever. I grabbed the new found handhold and heaved myself up over the embankment. Sure enough, a dirt-covered root stuck out of the ground, the dirt looking fresh.

"Thanks," I squeaked out, just in case the tree expected it. The root ignored me and burrowed back into the ground. I took off.

Once I was a comfortable distance away, I noticed that the slight drizzle had faded and the stars were starting to peek out from dark clouds. Of course, right when I needed the rain to help get some of this ick off. At least it was hiding the blood all over my dress. I really should be concerned about that. I rubbed my hands in the damp grass, trying to scrape some of the mud off. Not much luck, but it would have to do.

A short walk and I literally stumbled onto a road. Now we were getting somewhere. A glance in both directions didn't give any revelations about which way I should try. Where were those friendly branch tour guides when you needed them? "Hey, trees. Got any opinions on which direction I should go now?" I whispered, then waited a moment.

Everything stayed quiet. What made the last one help me? I held up a hand and concentrated, squeezing my eyes closed. After a moment, I opened an eye a slit. Nothing happened. "Thanks a lot, stupid trees."

Without any help to figure out where I should go, I slouched right and started walking.

Would this night ever end?

Walking along in the dark is great for thinking. Once you find somewhere to walk where you don't have to worry about tripping every five seconds. Without shoes, I stayed on the very edge of the road, close enough to jump in the

trees if I needed to hide, but off the bare ground full of sticks and rocks. The road rubbed at my feet, but they healed as I went. Thankfully it didn't hurt much.

Thinking was something my subconscious was telling me not to do. I didn't listen. I ran every conversation with my mom I could remember through my mind, trying to come up with an explanation for me being way out here, for someone wanting to flat out kill me. Nada.

After an unknown period of time trudging through the dark, the rain and dripping trees not being able to make up their mind if they wanted to drench me or not, something glowed in the distance. A light. Small, yes, but at least it was a light. I picked up my pace.

What was a light doing way out here, anyway? Campers?

Traffic? I squinted, trying to see if there was anything else unusual ahead. Nope, just more trees. Nowhere near home with this many trees. "We're not in the D.C. suburbs anymore, Toto."

Water dripped off the branches above and onto my face. I scowled up. "Watch it, I'm wet enough." Apparently these trees weren't the thinking kind or they didn't like being told what to do because an even larger pattering of water splashed down my nose and dribbled into my left eye. I wiped my face on my arm, but it didn't help. I was soaked all the way through.

The light down the road burned brighter now that I was getting closer. I slowed to ask myself something that should have come up when I first saw the light. What was I getting myself into going there? Stopping in on people I didn't know, not wise, by all accounts. But I didn't have much of a choice. Even if I wanted to walk home, I didn't know how to get there. And what were the chances of these people wanting to kill me too, whoever they were. If the

shadow man hadn't had a flashlight out when he was looking for me, he probably wouldn't have something that bright now, so it was a good bet it wasn't him.

Dan and Nina were going to be sooooo mad. My fosters were better than most, but they were still going to freak. I could call Wade. Maybe he could get me home and I could sneak in without them noticing. That's one of a boyfriend's duties, after all. But something about that felt wrong. Too bad I hadn't gotten the courage up to ask Amy for her number at the party last night, she'd have picked me up. Probably.

Wait, party, on Thursday. *Halloween!* That's why I was in the dress.

Now, if I could remember where I was, maybe I'd remember how to get back. But it didn't seem like that was going to happen so I upped the pace. At least I had started to remember other stuff. It'd be nice to get out of these wet clothes. My skin had finally warmed up to an acceptable level, but the clothes were chaffing. Plus I needed to eat.

Bad. Preferably not something lawn based.

When I got closer to the glow, I could make out lights flashing near a dump that was set back from the road. Maybe an old gas station. Definitely not a house like I'd been expecting. Compared to the stations Nina always went to in the suburbs, this place was below dump on the junk scale. I squared my shoulders. Back to that not much of a choice thing. Better a dumpy gas station than getting offed in the woods. Again.

The open sign blinked, sending waves of red along the wet pavement. My first piece of good luck since I woke up out in the trees. I wouldn't have to break into the place.

The door swung open easily, hardly squeaking on its hinges. I popped my head in, not sure I wanted to take that next step. Sure, if it was some serial killer holed up inside

I'd probably heal. But I still didn't like the pain and it would be a disaster if anyone found out about the whole indestructible thing. I've seen *Heroes*, I knew what could happen.

"Hello?" I called out. When no one answered, my gaze began to wander. Food. All kinds of gas station food. Who knew that it could look like some major buffet? Chips, cookies, trail mix. Maybe they had one of those little hot dog racks. I couldn't smell it, but that didn't mean it wasn't there, considering that my senses were a little overwhelmed right now by the stench of mud. It didn't matter. I'd even take that jerky off the rack up near the front.

I took a step inside and let the door shut behind me. "Hello?" I asked again. If no one showed in a second, they'd return to find their place cleaned out. I needed to eat. And eat a lot.

Scuffling started somewhere in the back. A baseball cap popped up from behind the rack of pork rinds. "Hi. Didn't see you pull up." The hat and voice belonged to a guy probably in his forties. I was still in the District of Columbia, right? Because this guy looked like something from a movie set way down South with the scruffy face, baseball cap, and matching vest. "What can I do for ya?" he asked.

Now that was a good question. Maybe I should have figured out a story before I'd walked into this place. I thought about going with "Oh, somehow I showed up in the middle of the forest, had a conversation with a tree and finally found a road, now I need to use your phone," but that didn't seem like a real plausible story.

The fact that I was wearing a dress, covered in muck, and reeked kind of gave away that there was interesting backstory.

"I don't really know," I said lamely, moving over so a

shelf of junk food hid me from the window and the door. “Can I use your phone to call my parents?” *Please say yes, please say yes.* What would happen if he told me no and sent me back out into the rain? Whoever had tried to kill me would get a second chance.

“Sure, come on over.” The guy, whose cracked nametag said Vince, moved past me and headed for the counter.

This was getting ridiculous enough I could almost believe I was having a nightmare. That would explain why I couldn’t remember ending up in the woods. Nina was always telling me I shouldn’t watch horror movies, that they’d give me bad dreams, but I never listened. That had to be it.

“Is the call long distance?” Vince’s voice brought me back.

Probably, right? But I had no way of knowing since I didn’t know where I was. And I didn’t know anything about long distance anyway. I literally never used the home phone. “Yeah?” It came out kind of weak, but oh well. Having my cell phone would be really nice right now. Where was it anyway?

Vince chewed on something for a second, staring me in the face. “Do you have a collect number?”

“Uh, no.”

“Who’s going to pay for the call then?”

“Ah...” no answer for that. “Can I use your cell?” He stared at me for a second. “Don’t have one.”

My mind raced through all kinds of terrible scenarios, my favorite involved me being stuck here until I died of starvation, Vince standing over my emaciated body and eating pork rinds in front of me because I didn’t have the cash to pay for them.

“I don’t know. I guess I could just stay here til morning, then walk. Do you have somewhere I can sleep?”

Vince's eyes bulged. "Oh no, we can't have that. It's fifteen miles to the next station and they ain't open on Sunday. You wouldn't be out of here til Monday."

Sunday? This guy was obviously on something. It was Thursday. Oh well, it worked. He jerked an old phone from the wall and shoved it in my direction, cord trailing behind.

"Thank you," I said, nearly ripping the phone out of his hand before he could change his mind. Would that shadow in the woods be willing to come out in public? Not that this was very public, but still. I didn't want to find out. Punching in the familiar number of Nina's cell, I looked out the door, straining to see anything in night. Nothing.

Hopefully Nina answered. I didn't want to take the chance of getting Dan by calling the home phone. Nina was definitely going to be the more understanding in this situation.

The phone barely had a chance to ring before someone picked up. "Hello?" The winded voice on the other end was hardly recognizable. Whoever it was needed to take a breath.

"Nina?" I asked. Surely I hadn't dialed the wrong number. Nina always sounded perfectly in control. Ol' Vince wouldn't be happy about two long distance calls if I had misdialed.

"Trisha? Trish? Is that you? Where are you, honey?"

Good question. I probably should have found out before I dialed. "Yeah, it's me. Give me a second." I turned to Vince. "Where are we exactly?"

Instead of bulging, this time Vince's eyes narrowed. I liked the bulging better. Much less strange looking. "Not far from the entrance to Prince William Forest Park."

"Prince William Forest Park, I guess," I said into the phone, keeping my eyes on Vince.

"In Virginia?" I had to hand it to Nina, though her voice

did rise a little, she was keeping herself nicely under control. Hopefully that continued, even after they made it out here to get me. Wait, Virginia? “Just a second, honey.” Her voice faded. No doubt she was conferring with Dan. I’d always hated it before when she’d called me honey, but for some reason it didn’t sound quite as bad right now.

“Dan says we can be to the park in thirty minutes. We were already out this way showing your picture around. What happened?”

Heat blossomed in my chest, the first warmth I’d really felt since I’d woke up in the woods. They cared. For real.

Sure, Nina had always said they did, but words were cheap. My mom had said she cared and look how that ended up.

“Just tell them where you are. You can get your lecture later. Joplin Road,” Vince whispered loudly. “You’re spending my money.”

“Who was that?” Nina asked. Apparently Vince hadn’t whispered quieter than her mom ears could hear.

“I can’t talk about it right now, Nina, as soon as you get here, I promise. I’m at...” I squinted at Vince’s name tag. “Vince’s Fill Up on Joplin Road.”

Another few seconds of conferring. “It showed up on my phone, we can find that.”

“Okay, see you soon.” Vince was making hang-up motions. Man this guy was serious about long distance.

“No, wait! Can’t you just stay on the line? Do you have a number we can call you at?”

I paused, the thought of hanging up and losing my weak link to home and reality making my stomach roll. But there was Vince, looking even more grumpy. “No, can’t. See you soon. Please hurry.”