

# Black Halo



S.L. Naeole



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# Black Halo

By: S. L. Naeole



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S.L. Naeole

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Visit the official website for Falling From Grace at [www.graceseries.com](http://www.graceseries.com)

Falling From Grace (Book One in the Grace Series)

Bird Song (Book Two in the Grace Series)





*For my missies.*



*"For the heart whose woes are legion  
'Tis a peaceful, soothing region-  
For the spirit that walks in shadow  
'Tis- oh, 'tis an Eldorado!  
But the traveller, travelling through it,  
May not- dare not openly viewit!  
Never its mysteries are exposed  
To the weak human eye unclosed;  
So wills its King, who hath forbid  
The uplifting of the fringed lid;  
And thus the sad Soul that here passes  
Beholds it but through darkened glasses.  
By a route obscure and lonely,  
Haunted by ill angels only,  
Where an Eidolon, named NIGHT,  
On a black throne reigns upright,*

*I have wandered home but newly  
From this ultimate dim Thule."*

Dreamland - Edgar Allan Poe



## PREFACE

The fire in my chest raged, the need for air fighting against my need to keep running, to not stop until the darkness was behind me. The sounds around me were mocking, jeering at the pains that shot through my arms and legs. Their sinister laughter, which echoed behind me hinted at the promise of something dark and evil that I had knowingly invited, and now ran from.

The trees, under the cover of their starless canopy began to move and sway with glee at the activity that swirled around them. I cried out as my foot wedged itself in the small hollow of a curious root, and I tumbled to the ground, the sound of snapping bone and tearing flesh silencing the sounds around me.

Quiet had never sounded so deadly.





## JUST DEAL

The beginning of the final chapter of senior year usually starts off with incredible excitement--there are only three months left before graduation, then college and the rest of your life. But the sentiment around my house couldn't have been any gloomier.

Getting up for that first day back felt like the hardest thing I'd ever had to do--probably because I hadn't even gone to sleep yet. I looked at the clock on my dresser and pulled the covers back over my face, not wanting to admit that it was six in the morning. I hadn't been sleeping well--or at all-- these past few days, each night spent tossing and turning until I finally gave up and stared holes into my ceiling until it was time to quit pretending.

A loud knock on my door was followed by a rough shaking of the bed as my best friend--and now my housemate--Graham Hasselbeck jumped in beside me.

"Holy cow, your feet are cold!" I shouted, quickly squirming away from him until I ran out of

bed space and fell with a resounding "oomph" onto the carpeted floor. "Why are you in here so early? And with glaciers for toes?"

"Because I heard your alarm go off. And it's cold downstairs; I think the heater's busted. Hey, did you know it snowed last night?"

I crawled to the window and stood on my knees to peer over the sill. Indeed, the street and the houses across it were covered in a nice blanket of pure, white snow. "That's weird--it hasn't snowed after spring since we were ten."

"I know. I remember that. You slipped on the sidewalk and sprained your ankle while walking to the bus. I had to carry you back inside and then I slipped coming back out. We spent the next two days watching old movies and eating stale popcorn downstairs."

"And the RHPS tradition was born," I laughed before turning around. "Hey, get out of my bed!"

"I told you, it's cold downstairs!" he cried as he pulled my comforter up to his chin defiantly. "I'm

staying here until you make breakfast, so if you want me out, you're gonna to have to get cracking."

"Oh, I'll crack something alright," I replied and launched myself onto the bed. I laughed as he tried to cover his head with the blanket. "That never worked as kids and it certainly won't work now!"

We wrestled on the bed, each vying for control, before tumbling off and landing sharply onto the floor in peals of laughter.

"I'm glad the two of you seem to be enjoying yourselves."

I peeked from between the mess of my hair, while Graham pulled back the comforter from his face to see my dad standing in the doorway, a suitcase in one hand, a white box in the other.

"Uh...hi, Dad," I managed to get out while Graham stuttered an incoherent reply.

"Mr. Shelley-Grace-morning-yes-hi."

Dad laughed and shook his head. "It's okay, Graham. I'm not dumb enough to think that you and Grace were up to no-good."

"Why are you home so early, Dad?" I asked.  
"And where's Janice?"

Dad walked over to me and handed me the box before pointing to the suitcase. "She's in the car--she's having contractions and the doctor says that it's too early, so we're here to drop off this bag and pick up the hospital one before heading off there."

I handed the white box to Graham who opened it and hooted at the contents. "Donuts! Thanks, Mr. S!"

"Well, I'm coming, too," I announced.

Dad shook his head vigorously. "No. *You're* going to school. We don't know what's going on yet so there's no need for you to miss out on any classes. If anything does come up, I'll call, alright?"

I nodded reluctantly and stood up to give him a hug. "You tell Janice that I'm thinking about her, okay?"

"Of course," he replied, returning my hug. "Have you been eating okay? You seem...thinner."

I nodded with slight agitation and eased away from dad. "I'm fine, Dad."

"Well, I know you left the wedding feeling sick--how *are* you feeling, by the way? How's Robert?"

I shrugged my shoulders and looked away, unable to answer him.

"She's been stuck in bed mostly, Mr. S, and Robert's been busy at work, so she hasn't seen much of him lately," Graham said hastily. I mouthed the words "thank you" to him and then turned to nod my head in agreement.

"Well, I guess that's better than I expected--I admit that there were a few moments that I was afraid I'd come in and find you and Robert in here...alone. It's nice to see that I can trust you to behave yourself, Grace," Dad said, patting my shoulder with a slight bit of reservation.

"Okay, kiddo, I'm going to get that bag now. Go-to-school! And don't let Robert take you to school on that motorcycle of his in this snow!"

I nodded my head and watched him walk out

of my room. As soon as I heard his bedroom door open, I sank to the floor.

"I can't get out of it, can I?"

"Gedowduwot?" a muffled voice asked behind me.

I turned my head to see Graham shoveling the back end of a glazed donut into his mouth. "Never mind," I told him and reached for the box. "You ate them all?!" I shouted, looking at Graham's gluttonous face in shock. "Ugh!"

"Wot?" He quickly swallowed the hastily chewed donut and wiped his mouth on the corner of my comforter. "You know better than to stick food in my hands. Besides, I told you to make breakfast--you snooze, you lose, woman."

I snatched my comforter from his hands, glared at the sugar-stained corner with disgust, and fought back the urge to punch him in his donut-filled gut. "You know what? I changed my mind. I don't want you to talk to Lark anymore--there's nothing in this world that she could have done to deserve you for a boyfriend."

His mouth dropped open in surprise as he stared at me, his eyes disbelieving. "Are you serious?"

I held my face stern for as long as possible before I burst into laughter. "Oh God, duh! You know I meant what I said about you talking to her."

I had. There was a genuine connection between Lark and Graham, the two people least likely to fall in love, yet had done just that amid everything that was going on around them involving me and Lark's brother. I blinked my eyes rapidly as that last thought caused the burning of moisture to appear.

Graham nodded, his jaw closing slowly though he still looked at me with doubtful eyes. "Well, I thought I'd do it today. You know, since we'll probably see her at lunch and everything."

I smiled sadly and then turned my body around to face my window. I stood up and walked over to it, climbing over my bed in the process and pushed it up, opening it just wide enough to allow a hint of the cold morning air to flow through while allowing the stale air to escape.

"I'm going to the bathroom--do *not* get back on my bed," I warned him before heading out of my room, closing the door as I did so.

"Here, kiddo. I thought it was best to save an extra one," Dad said as he handed me a napkin wrapped donut. He was standing in the hallway, a mini duffel slung over his shoulder and a small travel bag in one hand.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, grabbing it. I bit into the soft pastry and closed my eyes for a moment, relishing the not-so-subtle sweetness of the glaze over the buttery ring of fried dough. "Are you leaving now?" I mumbled.

"Yeah. I don't want to keep Janice waiting any longer. She didn't honk the horn yet, so I know that I haven't taken too long, but the roads are a mess right now from all this snow and I don't want her to have to sit in the car longer than necessary," he answered. "You be good and I'll call you later this evening if nothing else happens, okay?"

He bent to press a quick kiss to the top of my head before heading downstairs. I followed him



and helped hold the door open as he bent down to grab the morning paper sitting on the welcome mat.

"Oh, and could you do something about all of these pots?" he said as he passed by the lily graveyard that had once been our front yard. "I don't know what's going on with all of them but they're an eyesore, Grace, and I'd like to think that you'd take better care of the house than this."

"Sorry Dad," I answered, avoiding looking at the mass of pots that littered the lawn, each one holding lilies in varying stages of decay. For the past week, the deliveries had been non-stop, and these represented only the past couple of days' worth of flowers, the rest having met their fate elsewhere.

I caught a glimpse of my new step-mother's figure in the front seat of dad's car. "Hi Janice," I called as I waved to her. She smiled and waved a lazy hand towards me, the other resting protectively over her abdomen. I saw her wince with pain and knew that while Dad hadn't taken too long to get what he needed, he was cutting it pretty close.

"Drive safe, Dad!" I shouted as he got into

the car after loading the bags into the back seat.

"Remember what I said about Robert and that motorcycle, Grace," he called back before pulling out.

I simply nodded and waved, the words unwilling to leave my mouth.

Once he was gone, I walked over to the kitchen to pour myself a glass of milk and sat down in the semi-darkness to finish the rest of my donut. The ticking of the clock on the wall was the only sound in the entire house, and I counted along with each one until I found myself losing track. I got up to wash the glass and finish getting ready for school.

The sun was just peeking through the windows, casting golden rays of light across the walls and floor, turning the otherwise invisible dust motes floating in the air into tiny sparkles of glitter. It would have been a beautiful sight if it wasn't a reminder that I hadn't cleaned the house in over two weeks.

"I'd make a horrible housewife," I muttered to myself without realizing what I was saying, and

started up the stairs. I walked into the bathroom and grabbed my toothbrush, intending on removing any traces of donut and skim milk from my breath before taking a shower. As I began to brush my teeth, I looked over to my bedroom door. I couldn't help the smile that crossed over my lips, and I only hoped that my meddling had paid off.

After rinsing, I realized that I didn't have my clothes with me, so I rushed into my room.

"Oh- dear-bananas."

A flustered and slightly embarrassed Graham pulled away from an equally flustered and embarrassed Lark as they stood in the middle of my bedroom, their eyes glassy, their mouths pulled into secretive smiles.

"Uh--hi, Grace," Lark said with a slight wave of her fingers. Graham grinned.

"Hi, Lark," I said, smiling. "I'm just going to grab some clothes and I'll be out of here in a second."

"Oh, no, don't do that. I have to leave anyway--I don't have anything to wear to school, and

these clothes are so last quarter," she said apologetically. She approached me, her movements slow and tentative. "Grace?"

I looked at her, confused. "Yes?"

"Thank you."

"What for?"

She hugged me and I had to push her away, the scent of her skin and hair far too familiar, each note like a knife slicing into the tattered remains of my heart.

"I...I'm sorry," I said, covering my mouth and nose with my hand. "I can't do this."

I ran outside and headed towards the only place I thought was safe. Matthew's room was a cluttered mess at the moment, with unpacked boxes and linens scattered around the floor, but the crib was nearly finished being put together, the outward facing rail still needing to be attached, which made it a perfect place to sit and calm myself.

I pulled my knees up to my chest and rested my chin on them, the pressure of my thighs against

my chest enough to help ease the painful tension that had been building inside of me. Things were supposed to get easier with each day--instead they seemed to only become more difficult.

How long does it take to mend a physical wound that no one else can see? What are the limits to what you can do to ease the pain that simply grows in intensity as each day passes? I didn't understand it; I tried to remain busy after simply lying like a lump didn't work--it hadn't worked the first time, I don't know why I thought it would have now--but just the slightest hint of a fragrance had turned the hollowed remains of my heart inside out, exposing new areas to the already all-consuming pain.

I brought my head down, pressing my eyes against the tops of my knees and tried desperately to keep the tears from flowing. The hurt at such a small reminder had almost eclipsed the hurt from the betrayal that I had experienced at the hands of the one person whose word should have been infallible.

Robert should have been the last person in

this world who would've hurt me; he wasn't human with human weaknesses and faults. He was born an angel, one of the divine creatures who roam the world disguised as normal, if not extraordinary humans who possess seemingly limitless powers and abilities that often times defines, if not dictates what their call, their sole purpose in their divine life will be.

And no call could play as important a role in human society as the one that Robert had received. He had been born amid flames and death, gifted with life eternal that would be used in return to take life. Robert's calling, his purpose in his world and in mine, was to serve as Death himself. The reality of such a thing was horrifying and upsetting to me at first, but I loved Robert so intensely, so wholly and unconditionally, my fear disappeared almost as quickly as it had appeared because I knew that I had nothing to fear from him--he wasn't Death to me. He was simply Robert.

But, I had also come to realize that as divine as angels might be in our eyes, their very existence depended on deception. Without it, they'd never be

able to blend into society as they had done since the beginning of mankind. And it was that deception that I had taken for granted when Robert's portrayal of a human being crossed the boundary between his kind and mine.

He lied to me. He lied to me about my mother's death, hid from me the fact that Samael, the archangel of death who had served as Robert's mentor and best friend, had been sent to kill not just my mother, but me as well. It was unexplainable why I had not died as intended, but whether or not it could have been, Robert chose never to reveal any of it to me, instead letting me believe that the car accident that had killed my mother had been unintentional and merely a random event.

But, as I learned not once, but twice, dying cannot be escaped, only postponed. Robert had somehow convinced Sam not to take my life after I was mowed down by a drunk driver. But this had only set into motion a series of events that would later convince Sam that I was more of a threat to him than he was to me, and so he tried to take my life...again.

I must have had a guardian angel by my side that night because I somehow managed to survive his attack. The events that occurred afterwards remain a mystery to me, but I had been led to believe by Robert that Sam was dead and unable to hurt me or anyone else again. But Sam wasn't dead. Until Robert's confession two weeks ago, I had no idea that because I hadn't died like I was supposed to; Sam had done nothing wrong, and had never been punished. I was the one who should be dead.

Because I had chosen to remain ignorant of what it was that Robert did, and how it was done, I never asked him how he knew who was supposed to die. Not wanting to know was simply my way of trying to appease this growing obsession within me to maintain a sense of normalcy in my life--what little I could, anyway.

And now it was clear to me that for however long I had left to live, my life would be as far from normal as humanly possible.

\*\*\*

The bells ringing in the school hallways and



classrooms sounded like a scream, announcing the tightness that had built up in my chest. First period loomed ahead as students around me began to stand up and gather their bags and books, homeroom now over.

Mr. Frey, who had died from an aortic embolism shortly after confessing to the hit and run that had nearly killed me, had left behind many unanswered questions that the students still spoke about. His confession had further served to confuse and titillate my fellow classmates, who found the idea of me somehow being a jinx to be quite amusing.

There was some merit to the idea, of course, when one looked at the evidence that had been compiled against me. The first point being that Graham Hasselbeck, Heath High's star quarterback, had somehow managed to lead Heath to its biggest loss ever at Homecoming last year, with the largest point deficiency in probably all of Ohio. Maybe even the world.

Erica Hamilton, Graham's ex-girlfriend, had been publically humiliated during a first quarter

assignment with me. It hadn't been my intention--I had only wanted to keep from being thoroughly trashed in front of what I later learned was nearly half of the school--but the results were just the same. I had cemented myself as enemy number one in Erica's eyes.

Stacy Kim, one of my best friends, had suffered as a result of that hatred when Erica had confused her with me and shoved her into a doorway, causing a significant gash on her head and a concussion. Erica had received a mild suspension, but not until after I blackmailed the vice-principal.

And then there was my biology teacher, Mr. Branke, whom I had first accused of being the person who had run me over. He had been known as the Octopus in school because he was always putting his hands on every girl in his class, including me. My accusation had destroyed what little good faith the students had held for him, and he had retreated into himself. Though he no longer touched the girls, he had also seemed to have lost whatever it was that had made his classes tolerable and even

semi-enjoyable.

Finally, there was Mr. Frey. No one wanted to believe that quiet Mr. Frey had been an alcoholic who had lost his family to his drinking, much less a hit-and-run driver who had mowed me down, but his confession couldn't be ignored. Unfortunately, its importance had been lost in the news that he had died just as suddenly as he had confessed.

I had spent a decade being called Grace the Freak by my classmates and even adults, but it appeared that I would spend the rest of my high school career being called Graveyard Grace--I killed reputations, careers, and now...people.

And even now, as everyone began to head towards the door, their whispered mutterings echoed to me like they were on loudspeakers. I tried my best to ignore them, but it was difficult when there were only two voices absent from the overwhelming consensus that I was, without a doubt, a walking jinx, and one of those absent voices belonged to a very pale, exhausted looking Stacy.

"So what did the doctor say about that

experimental-drug-thing?" I asked her as I pulled my backpack onto my shoulder.

"He said that I'm a good candidate for the drug trial, but that it can only happen when my markers get to a certain level. That means that I'll have to get a whole lot sicker before they'll let me be a part of it," she replied as she slowly stood up, her body under obvious strain.

Stacy had suffered from Leukemia as a child, finally going into remission just after her eighth birthday. A few months ago, a routine exam and blood test showed that the cancer had returned. Stubbornly, she had chosen not to tell anyone but Graham, and the doctors have given her less than a year to live.

"I think Sean is trying to rush me to the grave--he caught a cold from his new girlfriend and brought it home to everyone else. I was up all night last night coughing. I must've I hacked up half a lung and the leftovers from last month's school lasagna."

Stacy started walking and I joined her, not minding at all that her pace was unusually slow;

whatever it took to postpone the inevitability of me having to enter Madame. Hidani's classroom and face Robert. "Thanks for the visual," I said half-jokingly. "It'll really help me stick to my diet."

"Speaking of which, you *really* should start eating more, Grace. You look worse than I do, and I'm the one dying here, remember?" Stacy chided.

I shrugged my shoulders at her scolding. "I'm not exactly on the live-long-and-prosper list either, you know. Besides, I had a donut this morning for breakfast--my dad brought them."

The change of subject seemed to lift Stacy's mood considerably. "They're back already? How was the honeymoon? Any baby news yet?"

I nodded, but didn't return her smile. "Janice started having some early contractions, so Dad took her to the hospital this morning after picking up her hospital bag. The doctor says it's too early for her to have Matthew so I think they're going to try and stop the contractions from coming."

"Wow. That must have been some honeymoon."

I looked at her in shock and semi-disgust. "Stacy! That's my dad you're talking about! Ew--there are some things a kid should never have to--just...ew!"

She laughed at my reaction and her pace picked up as a result. "I think it's cute--they're still all lovey-dovey at their age. The only thing my parents ever do is ask each other to pass the soy sauce."

"Well, it should be pretty obvious that they're into each other--they did just get married, after all," I pointed out.

"That's true, but a lot of people get married who simply have nothing between them other than a bank account and some debts."

I bit back a reply when I realized that we had come to my classroom door. It was shut, which meant that my entrance would draw everyone's attention.

"You can do it, Grace. It's just French," Stacy said reassuringly. "Plus, I don't think he's going to be in there."

I looked at her, surprised. I opened my mouth

to ask why, but closed it quickly. I didn't want to know why. At least, that's what I tried to convince myself.

"Bye, Stacy. See you at third period," I said with a wan smile and opened the door.

As I had expected, every eye was on me as soon as I entered the class. Madame Hidani smiled at me weakly. I managed to avoid eye contact with everyone and found my seat at the back of the class. The chair beside me was empty, just as Stacy had suggested, and though I should have felt a sense of relief, instead I felt the burn of disappointment.

As the bell rang, and class began, I felt the occasional stares, but chose not to turn my head to see whose eyes they belonged to. Instead, I focused on what lessons Madame Hidani had in store for us this quarter. She spoke about the year's final, and what it was she expected us to know. I began to jot down some notes, listening to her lilting French as she explained the different methods of testing that we'd be given, and wondering just when it was that I had become able to write so neatly and

efficiently.

The rest of class passed by at a snail's pace. It took a strong effort to not believe that Madame Hidani had somehow morphed into the unseen teacher in all of those Peanuts cartoons as I fought against the pull of exhaustion. I felt a silent cheer run through me when the bell announcing the end of class finally rang. I gathered my backpack and ushered myself out of the classroom as quickly as possible, avoiding any attempt at distraction and conversation by the girls around me; I knew it would be patronizing at best.

The walk to Mrs. Hoppbaker's second period calculus class felt like a funeral procession, and I was the corpse. My legs felt numb, but they continued to propel me forward until I was once again seated in that all too familiar chair, trying to ignore the growing number of eyes that trained on me.

When the bell rang, and the teacher launched into her usual comic monologue that preceded every class, I removed my text book and binder, preparing for an hour of what would hopefully



be more mind-numbing, and altogether help me forget everything that kept creeping up to the edge of my mind, ready to leap out. The laughter that surrounded me was staggered; it was proof that once again, I was topic for whispered discussion and hidden glances of curiosity...or worse.

As humor gave way to derivatives, the class quieted down, leaving me to stew in my thoughts. I tried not to wonder why Robert wasn't in school. It wasn't for me to know anymore and I shouldn't want to, either.

But the question was there, sitting in front of me like a stupid birthday cake, and I was a starving, sugar-crazed child needing a fix.

I looked up at the clock and groaned when I saw that we still had more than half an hour before class was over. I picked up my pencil and opened my binder--what was the point in thinking when my thoughts weren't going to cooperate--and resigned myself to working on formulas for the remainder of class.

I bit back a squeak.

I closed my binder and looked to the seat next to me, giggling nervously when I saw that it was empty.

A few heads turned in my direction to glare at me for what they probably assumed was typical freakish behavior from me before turning away, shaking with disgust. I grit my teeth and pressed my hand against my lips as I once again opened my binder.

On a single sheet of paper was a flawless drawing of Robert. It would have been remarkable all on its own had it not been for one minute detail that I knew would have been missed by anyone else but me.

The lines that made up the chiseled angle of his jaw, the curve and spikes of his hair, the bends and bows of his mouth, even the silver of his irises were made up by the spelling of my name. Grace Anne Shelley ran throughout the construction of his face, down to his torso, and finally extending outwards, into the dark wings that separated him from the rest of his kind. The detail was amazing, the script small and tight, yet freely flowing and

moving, fluid in its purpose. I was awed.

And angry.

And hurt.

I placed my hand on the sheet and began to squeeze my fingers around it, prepared to crumple it up and toss it into the trash on my way out, but I stopped. The image was too intricate to destroy--I wasn't about to be the person responsible for that--and so I simply closed my binder once more and waited for class to end.



## PROTECTION

Third period--free period spent in the library--was filled with Stacy lecturing me on the dos and don'ts of walking around campus without either her or Graham at my side. After being left worrying when I had unknowingly walked to second and third period without waiting for her to join me, she had made it her mission to remind me to the point of exhaustion the danger I was in.

"You know that psycho is just waiting just shove you down some stairs or something," she chastised from her seat. "You can't just walk off, Grace. Graham and I already talked about this; I get first half, when I'm feeling the strongest, and he'll get the second half, after he's had lunch."

I shook my head at how ridiculous that plan sounded. "Let me get this straight. The girl with terminal cancer is supposed to protect me from Erica in the morning, and Graham's supposed to protect me after eating toxic waste for lunch? Oh yeah. I feel safer just thinking about it."

Stacy rolled her eyes at me and pointed to a

hand drawn school map. "Just look at this, okay? Erica's got three classes on the second floor at the same time you do. You two pass each other between fourth and fifth period, plus share sixth period together. That gives her more than enough time to try something."

"So what if she does?" I asked. "It's not like she's going to kill me. That would totally mess up her hair." As an attempt at lightening the mood, it failed miserably.

"This isn't funny, Grace. You saw what she did to me. She's not going to stop until something bad happens to you, and Graham and I are both convinced that could very well mean trying to kill you," Stacy said in a low whisper.

I looked at her and smiled grimly. "Stacy, you know that my time here isn't exactly long--you heard it yourself that Sam's still alive because I'm not dead. You should be more concerned with keeping yourself healthy and stop worrying so much about me. I can take care of myself."

"That's just it, Grace, you can't. Look, whatever it is this Sam person-angel...thing has

against you, Graham and I can't protect you from him; that's where Robert and Lark come in. But Erica is one of us and we *can* take care of her."

I started to scratch at the table with my thumb, staring at the small indentation that I was making as I tried very hard to respond without sounding too angry. "Stacy, I know that both you and Graham mean well. I know that Lark does, too. But this is my life, and I'd like to live it as normally as possible. That includes not having body guards being played by my best friends and my ex-boyfriend and his sister, okay?"

Stacy let out a "humph" and folded her arms across her chest, a stubborn line forming across her forehead. She looked at me quizzically. "Wait. Did you say 'ex-boyfriend'?"

I looked at her and then looked away, nodding as I tried to focus on the numerous books sitting on the shelf to my right.

"Whoa. I thought...I mean, I guess I had hoped that...wow. Are you sure?"

"I can't pretend that nothing happened,

Stacy. He-"

She held up her hand to cut me off. "I know that, Grace, but honestly, what he did wasn't done to hurt you. It was the exact opposite. He did it because he wanted to save you. You can't break up with the guy for that."

I pushed her hand down, furious at her defense of him. My eyes narrowed and my voice lowered to a barely audible hiss. "He did it for himself. He knew about what Sam did to my mother and me, and he put my life in danger all over again because he wanted things done his way.

"Everything has been his way from the very beginning, and I've had no choice but to accept it because he's the one with the divine wisdom, remember? He never gave me a choice on this matter, never stopped to think what it would do to me. He just went ahead and made the decision to keep me ignorant, all so that he wouldn't have to deal with the consequences of his association with Sam. I can break up with him for that; I did break up with him for that."

"Grace, you're angry and for the right



reasons. But what happens when the anger goes away? What will you be left with?" Stacy asked.

"The same thing that I've always had, Stacy. Nothing," I ground out before grabbing my things and storming out of the library, leaving a path of shocked teachers and students to stare as I left.

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The open door to the empty classroom was like a gift from Heaven. I walked in and found a hidden corner behind the stacked chairs and dust covered desks. The cold tiled floor offered strange comfort to me as I sat down, throwing my backpack onto the floor beside me. The sparkled sunlight shining through the closed windows cut ribbons of golden light across everything in the room.

I reached for my bag and pulled out the binder. I flipped it open and stared at the drawing that had awed me less than two hours earlier. "How can someone so beautiful cause so much pain?" I asked it before tearing it out and ripping it into several small pieces.

"I ask the same question of you."

The shredded scraps of paper fell from my fingertips as the voice filled the empty room. I lowered my body to the ground and placed my hands on the floor to look beneath the legs of the desks. No one was there.

Laughing, I raised myself back up to a sitting position, and reached for the scraps of paper on the ground. They weren't there. "What?"

My eyes flicked to the binder that had fallen out of my lap and I heard a sharp intake of air come from within me. The drawing was whole, the paper smooth and straight, locked in the folder like it had never left.

"Robert?"

"Yes, Grace?"

I felt a bubble of anger start to rise in me. "Why did you follow me here?"

"Because it's you."

I scoffed at the reply that seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere all at once. "Oh how convenient. Just go away, Robert-" I grabbed the

sheet of paper from the binder and tore it out. I crumpled it and threw it over the piles of chairs on desks "-and take this with you."

"Um...thanks, but I'm not going anywhere."

I jumped up at the strange voice. "Oh!"

"Why are you in my classroom?"

I turned towards the door and squeaked. Standing before me was a rather tall, almost too tall woman, who held her head cocked to the side as she obviously took in my appearance while I took in her own. Her hair was a ferociously deep shade of burgundy, pulled so tightly back in a conservative bun, her bronze eyes tilted up in an unnatural angle.

"I asked you a question."

Confused, I stared at her. She walked towards me and tapped my shoulder, but I was still unable to answer her.

"Not much for talking or are you afraid of what your answer is?" Her voice was deep, husky as she looked at my face with the same curiosity that I did hers. "What's your name?"

"G-Grace," I stuttered.

"Okay, Guh-Grace. Let's try this again. Why are you in my classroom?"

"I came in here to think. I needed to get away from a meddling friend and the door was open." My answer was honest and she knew it.

"Well, you're an odd one to come to a classroom to get away. Most girls go to the bathroom or go for a long walk, Guh-Grace, not to an empty classroom."

I snorted. "I haven't had much luck with bathrooms, and I'm a little wary of long walks at the moment, so an empty classroom looks very appealing to me. And it's Grace."

"Excuse me?"

"My name; it's Grace."

She smiled, her teeth long and white. "Well, thank you for the clarification, Grace. If you don't mind me asking, which class are you currently skipping in order to escape your meddlesome friend?"

It was impossible not to smile back at her; her face was so warm and inviting. "I'm not skipping class; I've got free period right now. I normally spend it in the library, but Stacy--my friend--she just wouldn't leave things alone. I didn't want to end up saying something to her that I'd end up regretting later, so I left."

She nodded and waved her arm in a semi-circle, indicating the classroom as she spoke. "Well, welcome to my classroom, Grace. I'm the new Psychology teacher. I was hired to replace one of your teachers that no longer works here, a Mr. Oliver Frey I believe his name was."

"Oh," I managed to say as I looked away, suddenly flustered.

"Did you know him? Were you in any of his classes?"

I nodded, and continued to look elsewhere, unable to give her a verbal answer.

"I've heard some stories about him that aren't all too flattering. He's going to be a pretty difficult hurdle to overcome, but I think I'll be alright."

What do you think?"

I forced a smile onto my face and nodded once more before turning and heading to gather up my binder and bag. I shoved the folder into my backpack and then hurried towards the exit.

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

Slowly, I turned to face her and grimaced when she held out a heavily wrinkled, yet uncrumpled sheet of paper. "It's very beautiful. I don't know who did this, but it must have taken a lot of time and effort to get such a message across. Who is he?"

I grabbed the drawing from her and shoved it into my backpack alongside the binder. "A meddler," I replied before leaving.

I was four steps out of the doorway when I walked straight into a wall. I looked up to see my meddler standing directly in front of me, a very concerned look on his face.

"You're in my way," I seethed. I tried to step around him, but I knew that the moment I thought of it, he was there, blocking my way once more.

"I'm not going to let you put yourself in danger like this, Grace," he said in a soft voice, one that caused an unnatural pain to burn through my chest.

"The only danger I was ever in was put there by you. Get out of my way, Robert."

"No. I left you alone once, resulting in someone messing with your memories. I will not let that happen again, Grace, regardless of where you and I stand at the moment."

"At the moment? Where we stand isn't going to change, Robert, and I'm not in the mood to discuss my memories, or my safety with you or anyone right now. I simply want to be left alone."

I tried to push past him, but he grabbed onto my arm and held firmly. I looked at his hand and then at him, quickly shutting my eyes to the hurt stare that came from those silver irises. "I will let you go, Grace, when I know you're safe. I won't bother you, but I'm not leaving your side. Your safety is paramount, not just to me, but to your friends and family as well. Think of how your father would feel,

knowing that you were hurt again just as Janice is in the hospital. Think of what it would do to him if something happened to you."

The truth in his words stung, and I couldn't admit to it. "Fine," was all I could say.

He nodded. I didn't see it. I just felt it. It was a relieved, almost elated motion, and then the pressure from his hand was gone. I opened my eyes and saw that he was as well.

"Are you still here, Grace?"

The teacher from inside the classroom was standing in the doorway. She looked at me with a curious stare, her posture showing a slight annoyance that I was still there.

"Um. Yeah," I replied. "What was your name again, Ms...?"

"Deovolente. Mrs. Deovolente."

I quickly glanced to her left hand and felt my lips twitch when I saw the glint of silver on her ring finger. "You're married then?"

She smiled and nodded, quickly hiding her



hand behind her back. "Is there any particular reason you wanted to know this, Grace?"

"Just...curious."

"Well, curious or not, it seems rather forward for a student to ask such questions. However, quid pro quo, right? I asked you some questions that probably felt a little forward for your liking, and now you have done the same to me. Now, if you don't mind, I think I'll go to the cafeteria to get some lunch."

She walked past me and stopped several feet away, her head turning from left to right.

She turned around to face me, her mouth opening to ask the question I already knew the answer to. I pointed to the left and watched as she smiled and headed in that direction. I listened as the sound of her heels clicking on the ground faded away, and then sighed.

"She's new to Heath."

"Gaaah! Why are you still here?"

I threw my hands up in frustration as Robert

looked on sadly. "I said you could follow me. I didn't say you could hang around like nothing happened."

"Grace, one day we will have to talk about what happened. We cannot leave things the way they are."

I glowered at him and shook my head. "We don't have to talk about anything. It's over between us. It probably never should have begun but it did, and now we're done. There's nothing that you can say or do to change my mind."

"You still love me, Grace."

"Of course I do," I said, swallowing the pain that accompanied the admission, yet unable to mask the crack in my voice. "That doesn't just disappear because my heart's dead, no matter how much I want it to. But it'll go away or be replaced, one of the two."

I saw it. A flicker of anger that darkened the silver in his eyes to a deep, antique pewter. He took a step towards me and then stopped. "Sometimes you can be so...so..."

"What? Human?"

He shoved his hands through his hair, the pitch strands gliding through easily and laying back perfectly, the image causing such an indelible pain to shoot through my chest, I nearly fell over. "So amazing."

What could I say to that? What was there to say? I stood there, silent as he took a hold of my right hand and brought it to his face. I felt the coolness of his skin against mine and against my will, the electrical connection that had always existed between us lit ablaze. It was all consuming and the heat was beginning to overtake what little sense I might have possessed.

"Where is your ring?"

The question acted like a damper, and immediately the flames were gone. "What?"

He pointed to my bare finger, the look in his eyes accusatory. "Your ring? Where is it? Did you get rid of it like you did everything else? Thrown in the trash like some meaningless piece of garbage?"

I stared at my finger and tried desperately to

recall what it was that I had done with it, but I kept drawing a blank. I looked at him and saw that my inability to answer his question was only confirming what he believed.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know what happened to it. I can't remember."

He let go of my hand and stepped away from me. "You did throw it away. Clothing and pictures...I can understand that. Those are meaningless. But that ring--I gave you that ring as a pledge of myself. It was a promise to you that I would always be with you, always love you, and you just tossed it aside like it was worthless. Like what we were was worthless."

Though I wanted to apologize, instead I grew angry.

"You mean like how worthless you viewed my trust? You were the only person I ever felt safe with, and you threw that away for ambition and who knows what else. I honestly don't remember what happened to the ring, but at the moment, I wish I *did* throw it away because it obviously holds more value

to you than I ever did."

I stormed off, heading towards the cafeteria just as the bell rang. He didn't follow me. He wouldn't risk continuing this argument in front of the school. The little round table that had held such fond memories just a few weeks earlier now seemed like such a cold and lonely place.

I placed my backpack on the ground beside me and my head on the table's surface. I listened as quickly, the noise level in the cafeteria grew to its normal state, a cacophony of laughter and chairs scraping against the ground, of forks clinking against dishes, and liquids being slurped through slim straws. I waited for the familiar sounds of the chairs beside me being pulled back, waited for the slamming of heavy, food filled trays against the table; I just...waited.

It felt like an eternity before I felt a familiar hand against my shoulder. I peeked up to look at warm and friendly green eyes and smiled. "Hi."

"Hey yourself," he said smiling back. He placed his fork into a mound of something unrecognizable and shoveled it into his mouth,

chewing slightly before beginning to speak. "So Lark told me that you've agreed to let Robert follow you around. Are you going to be okay with that?"

I shook my head. "Do I have a choice, though? He's going to do it whether I want him to or not, although I think he might not want to anymore."

Graham's fork was poised in the air at those last words. "What do you mean? What did you do?"

I showed him my hand, my bare finger showing evidence of a ring having once sat there. "Ouch. Did you throw it away?"

I shook my head. "I don't remember what happened to it. I know that I didn't throw it away, though. I wouldn't have done that."

He touched my finger with his thumb and rubbed the pale band the ring had left in my skin. "Of course you wouldn't have. He'll realize it soon enough."

I didn't know those why five words meant so much to me, especially when Robert's feelings were the last things I should have been concerned with, but hearing them gave me a slight comfort. I

rationalized it as me simply not wanting to be the bad guy in any way, to have that title belong wholly to him.

Stacy and Lark soon joined us, Stacy sitting next to me, while Lark sat beside Graham. Her face was exceptional, the smile on her lips one of genuine happiness and it was enough to cause most people who passed by to stop and stare for just a moment.

"You look like a loon," Stacy quipped as she spooned some orange gelatin into her mouth.

"A happy, content loon I hope," Lark replied. She turned her attention to Graham, who had suddenly forgotten the mountain of food he had in front of him. Instead, he had eyes only for her, and as the two of them stared at each other, their mouths not moving, I knew exactly why.

And I hated it.

I grabbed my backpack and stood up. "I've got to...go to the restroom."

I heard another chair scrape against the floor and saw Stacy stand up beside me. "I'll join you."

I groaned in disappointment, but saw that she wasn't going to take no for an answer. I sighed and nodded in defeat.

As we walked out of the cafeteria's doors and headed towards the restroom a quick burst of pain in my head caused me to close my eyes. Behind my lids, I could see a blur of movement, a flash of gold wisps before it was swallowed up by the darkness of my shut eyes.

When I reopened them, we were still walking, as though nothing had happened. Stacy was rambling on about something one of her brothers had done to another, and she was laughing, obviously whatever it was being funny though I had completely missed the joke. I could see the sign on the ceiling with the little blue arrow pointing towards the bathroom just a few feet away, and I sighed in relief.

As we passed the stairwell that led to the basement classrooms, I heard an exaggerated hiss, followed by the pumping of feet against tile. A curtain of gold suddenly appeared, and I was jolted



from the ground. People say that sometimes, when something happens to you that's traumatic, things seem to pass by very slowly, as though to help you remember them better when questioned about it later.

This wasn't the case with me as everything happened in real time. I saw the edge of the top stair move past me and saw the corner of a step further down come closer to my face before it made contact with my left cheek. I shut my eyes to the crunch of bone against concrete and reopened them to see my feet tumble above my head as I toppled downwards, landing awkwardly on my arm as a very loud and distinct pop could be heard in the empty stairwell.

Stacy's angry shouts could be heard above me, but all I could see was the mismatched pattern in the tile beneath my face. I could see a slow trickle of blood flow past me. I knew it was pouring out from my mouth, following the natural pull of gravity downward, and I watched as it made its way through the gap between the stairs.

The commotion at the top of the steps was

growing louder, but no one seemed to be coming to help. I tried to move my arms to push me up, but only one wanted to work, the other one stubbornly lying useless beneath me. I grunted as the pain shot through me, but finally managed to get myself to a sitting position, pushing myself back against the wall. It hurt to breathe, but I was grateful that I could do it.

My legs were fine but my left arm hung limply at my side. I reached up with my right hand and pulled myself to a standing position, groaning as a pain shot through my side. The groan, in turn, caused my face to sting, and I gingerly pressed my fingers to my left cheek, hissing as I did so.

"Grace? Are you okay?"

Stacy's voice called out above me and I raised my head to see a crowd of onlookers standing at the top of the stairs, their curious gazes all aimed directly at me.

"I'm okay, Stacy. I think I've got a dislocated shoulder though, and a cracked rib," I replied, wincing. "I also bit the inside of my cheek, but that'll heal."

I saw the crowd move and Graham came rushing down to greet me, his face stained with worry and anger. "Are you alright? Anything broken?"

"I'm alright, Graham. I probably won't know about anything being broken until I get to the hospital, though," I told him and allowed him to slowly pull me up the stairs. The gathering of students moved aside as we emerged from the stairway, and I glared at the struggling person who was being detained by a very irate Stacy.

Erica was fuming, her golden hair a wild array of tangles as she fought against Stacy's grip. "Let me go, you freak!"

I walked up to her, my head ringing as I did so, and I looked at her. She stared at me with glassy eyes, and I frowned when I saw the emptiness in them. "Robert was right. There is nothing in there," I whispered.

"Why can't you just die, freak? Just die!" she screamed at me, her eyes growing wild, her hands clenching into tight fists.

I tried to shake my head, but it hurt just blinking. I turned slowly towards the fast footsteps that were approaching us from down the hall. Several teachers and Mr. Kenner, the vice-principal, were storming towards us with a steely determination. The only question was for what?

Stacy bent her head low to mine and whispered into my ear before we were interrupted. "Now do you see why you need bodyguards?"

I looked at Erica and nodded grimly. I had no doubt as I looked into her blank eyes that had she been left alone, she would have continued her assault on me. The only thing that had kept her from that was Stacy's presence.

"You knew Robert wasn't here. That's why you came with me."

It was her turn to nod now, and I shook my head at the strange turn my life had taken. As the teachers started to ask their questions, I feared that things were only going to get more complicated. I had been back in school for only half a day and I had already managed to piss off an angel and

nearly get killed by my best friend's ex-girlfriend. If this was how the rest of the year was going to be like, life was going to be very difficult indeed.



## **LIFE OR SOMETHING UNLIKE IT**

The first time I could truly appreciate being eighteen was when I realized that the school didn't have to call the hospital to inform Dad that I had been injured. It was a revelation of sorts that I could spare him--at least for a little while--the knowledge that once again, someone had tried to kill me.

Mr. Kenner, having heard the details of what had happened, seemed far more apologetic towards Stacy and I as he took Erica to his office to await the arrival of the police. It had been Stacy that demanded they were called as soon as a student could make it to the office to relay the message.

Graham and Stacy walked me to his car. He drove to the hospital while Stacy remained behind to give her account of what happened to the police. He parked crookedly in the emergency room lane, jumping out and nearly sliding across the roof of the car to get to my side. He opened the door and gingerly pulled me out, insisting on carrying me inside despite my protestations.

"Grace? Is that you?"

I turned my head to the familiar voice and smiled. "Dr. Ambrose! Yes, unfortunately, it is me. Again."

Dr. Ambrose smiled, a soft laugh finding its way to me. "Well, I wish I could say that it's nice to see you, but under these circumstances you can understand why I'd rather not."

He motioned to Graham to follow him and we entered a long hallway before finally turning into a small room with a standard hospital bed situated in the middle, a pale pink curtain pulled halfway around it. "You can put her there, young man."

Graham nodded and gently sat me on the edge of the bed. "I'm going to go wait outside, okay?"

"Alright," I replied and watched as he quickly walked out the door. "He doesn't like hospitals too much," I explained to Dr. Ambrose who maintained his smile.

"I don't know anyone who *does* like hospitals. Even I dread coming here when I know that so many never leave. But that doesn't look like



it'll be the case with you, so let's just see what's wrong here, shall we?"

He began to ask me the usual round of questions while he examined my face and my arm. He pressed against my side when I explained the pain I had experienced there upon standing up and clicked his tongue in disapproval as I croaked and shuddered at the pressure.

"I'm going to need to get some x-rays done, but I think you fractured several ribs. They'll need to be taped, which means no clubbing or extreme sports for a few weeks. I'm also going to have perform a reduction on your shoulder in order to get your arm back into its socket. We'll do that following the x-ray just to be sure that nothing else is broken, alright?"

I nodded. "How long do you think this is going to take?"

He raised his arm and looked at his watch. "You'll probably be going home in about two hours. Why? Got a hot date?"

I shook my head and laughed. He frowned at

that and shook his own head. "Pity. If I were your age, I'd be asking you out in a heartbeat. As it is, my wife would probably have my skin if I even dared look at another woman."

"I didn't know you were married!"

He smiled and held out his hand. The silver ring on his finger gleamed under the florescent lighting. "Almost ten years this June. She's my balance; keeps me from getting too serious, and keeps me from losing all control. I don't know where I'd be if not for Vanessa."

He opened a cabinet to the side of the bed and pulled out a gown and a blanket. "You're going to have to change into this, but the blanket should help to keep you warm. I'll go and inform your friend outside about what's going on."

I thanked him and proceeded to undress after he left. I struggled to remove my clothes, the chill in the room striking once I had succeeded. In my underwear, and under the thin fabric of the hospital gown and stark white hospital blanket, I began to shiver.

After a few minutes, a nurse walked in with several bands to wrap around my wrists. She left, only to return with a wheelchair.

"I'm going to take you to x-ray to have your chest film done and then I'll bring you right back here," she told me with a cheerful smile. It seemed unnatural for someone to look so happy in a hospital and I forced a smile in return, which only seemed to make hers grow wider. I climbed into the wheelchair and watched as I was quickly wheeled out of the room and down hallway after hallway until we entered a room that smelled of bandages and bleach.

"Do you think you can climb up on that bed by yourself?" the chipper nurse asked me and I nodded. Of course, as with all things, it's easier said than done. Trying to keep the back of my gown closed while attempting to hop onto a table without the aid of my other arm proved to be quite difficult.

"Frank, lower the table," a voice called out. Almost immediately, the table began to sink before me until I was able to simply slide myself onto it.

The nurse smiled as she began to fiddle

around with several rectangles of thin metal boxes that bore strange markings on them. She slid them beneath the table that I was perched on and then turned to smile at me once more. "Alright, now I'm going to need you to lie down."

I did as I was told and followed her instructions; she left me alone to the buzzing and clicks of the machine that would take images of my chest and put them on film. It was over before I knew it and I was once again in the wheelchair being pushed towards my far off room.

"Have you seen my friend around?" I asked her as I looked for Graham. "He wasn't outside when we left and I don't see him now."

"He probably went to the cafeteria to eat. It's what most boyfriends and husbands do when they can't do anything else."

"Oh, he's not my boyfriend," I explained quickly. "He's my best friend."

"You have a male best friend?" Her tone clearly told me that the idea was foreign to her, and so I simply nodded. "Well, all the same, he's

probably eating."

I nodded, knowing that she was probably right. Graham's solution to most things usually came in the form of something edible. I sighed and said nothing else as the nurse returned me to the exam room. I waited until she left before climbing atop of the bed. I pulled the blanket over my exposed legs and waited for Dr. Ambrose to return with the results from my x-ray.

I must have drifted off to sleep because I was awoken by the gentle shaking of a cold hand on my good shoulder. I opened my eyes and stared into the doctor's dark brown eyes. He smiled at me and his almost unnaturally white teeth sparkled.

"I have your films back. It looks like you've got two cracked ribs and a classic anterior shoulder dislocation which will require me to perform a reduction on you to get that shoulder back into fighting form."

I smiled and nodded my head at the news, pulling myself into a sitting position. "So, what do we do now?"

"Well, I'm going to be giving you a little bit of pain medication through an IV and then a nurse and I will be relocating your shoulder. Hopefully you won't feel a thing." He reached for my hand and began to take my pulse.

The way he said hopefully caused a knot to form in my stomach. I didn't like the idea of pain and was beginning to rationalize to myself how living with a dislocated shoulder wouldn't be such a bad thing after all. I looked at Dr. Ambrose's face and watched as he concentrated on counting the beats beneath his cold fingers. His skin was incredibly smooth without a hint of a shadow.

I smiled at the infinite care he must take in order to keep his wife from having to deal with the rough patches of facial hair. He was a fairly attractive man with his wide smile and dark brown eyes, his auburn hair shorn to curl just in the front, everything else neat and presentable.

My gaze traveled down his smooth throat where it stopped. I stared and waited, each second passing by, fruitless.

"Well, something seems to have made you

nervous all of a sudden the way your pulse just kicked into high gear here. Are you afraid of a little pain? The needle isn't that bad--it's small and sharp, much more so than the ones used decades ago. And they're much sharper than teeth. That's a joke, by the way."

I tried to swallow down the bile that began to rise in my throat and I nodded stiffly, knowing that there was nothing that I could do to stop the blood from draining away from my face, leaving it pale and almost lifeless. Dr. Ambrose took one look at my face and he began to back away slowly. "Grace? Is there something wrong?"

I pointed to his neck and nodded once more. His hand flew to the side and he turned around to look in the mirror. He sighed with relief and turned around to laugh at me. "I thought there was a third eye or something growing out of me. Don't scare a man like that!"

"You don't have a third eye growing out of your neck. You don't have anything going on with your neck. Not even a pulse."

His body went stiff and the dark brown of his eyes grew darker as his pupils widened. "You don't know what you're talking about."

I shook my head and pointed once more towards his neck. "You don't have a pulse. I can see it." I reached for his cold hand and pressed my own two fingers against his wrist. "I can feel it. Dr. Ambrose...you're dead."

He pulled away from me and turned around, his hands gripping angrily to the sides of his head. I could see in the mirror that his face looked torn, his eyes wild with confusion and uncertainty.

"Why aren't you screaming? Running around and calling for help?" he whispered.

"I have a lot of familiarity with dead things," I managed to mutter.

He turned around to face me, a rather peculiar smile on his face. "So you do. I forgot that you're *his* mate."

"I'm no one's mate."

His head cocked to the side at my response.



"Has he chosen another then? Someone more suitable to his lifestyle and...erm--length of life?"

"You seem to know an awful lot about him. What are you?"

He smiled again, his teeth glistening unnaturally. "I should have thought that was plainly obvious, considering..."

I shook my head. "Look, I might know far more than most human beings about what goes on in your world, but I don't know everything. And what I do know is still very difficult to accept--not that I'm looking to be around it much longer to begin with--so if I don't know what you are, could you at least humor me and come out with it so that I don't continue sitting here looking like an idiot?"

He laughed at me, and then took my hand. The chill of his skin was meant to be another clue but I kept drawing a blank. "He's told you about my kind. I know this much already--I can see it in your eyes. Is it really that difficult to figure out? Do I not fit the image you have built in your mind? Was the last one you encountered so hideous?"

"I don't know what you are, so how can I have formed an image of your...kind?"

His smile was unnerving as he began to stroke up and down my arm with a cold finger. I looked at his face, and then back at the hands that held my arm still, the fingers that trailed along my inner arm. I could hear my blood pumping in my veins--the very ones he was caressing with an adoring finger--my pulse drumming a nervous beat in my ears as slowly the dawning of recognition began to take hold. When I looked up into his eyes, the rich brown had been replaced with red rings around jade green irises. My heart nearly skidded to a halt. "You...you're...you're an erl..."

He pressed a cold finger against my lips and smiled once more. "You don't have to fear me, Grace."

I coughed at his reassurance. "That's easy for you to say; the last one I met tried to eat me. That's like a coyote telling a rabbit it's got nothing to fear. I'm lunch to you!"

He shook his head with an amused glint in his eye. "I've been 'sober' for many years now, and

don't plan on falling off of the...wagon anytime soon."

The way he spoke made me think that he had somehow confused our conversation with something else. But when a nurse walked in with a tray of labeled syringes, I realized he was changing the tone of the conversation to keep the unknowing nurse ignorant to the topic of discussion.

"H-how long have you b-been...like this?" I asked him as the nurse began to wipe my arm with an alcohol swab.

He looked at me and began to speak, but his words did not come out in English. Instead, to my surprise, they took on the lilting flow and bend of French. "It's been nearly a hundred years. The first few days were like I was living a nightmare. I was an animal, but my mind was still...human. My body was so grotesque that I hid in the sewers and shadows until dark, and then I'd just roam the streets hating the people sleeping in their beds, oblivious to what I was, what had happened to me.

"I couldn't eat, I couldn't drink, but I felt so

hungry. I killed some drunken man without realizing it one night, hoping to steal the meat pie he'd had in his hand. He was still holding it when he died, and I ate it. I didn't realize until I was full that I had eaten the man's entire arm, along with the pie. I was horrified. I had killed someone over food, and now I wanted to kill again, because even though the pie had tasted wonderful to my empty stomach, his flesh tasted...better.

"The guilt upon realizing this was so great, I felt like killing myself. And I tried. I tried to drown myself, I tried to burn myself, hang myself; nothing worked because you cannot kill what's not living. It's a startling thing, realizing that you're dead. It's also incredibly lonely.

"I returned to my childhood home, where my mother was still living. I was so afraid that she would see what I had become and turn me away. I prayed so hard for her to recognize me, to know that I was her son, and when she opened her door and saw me, standing there in rags, my body shaking with the need to feed, she embraced me. 'A mother knows her child,' she said to me."

"But how?" I asked, confused. "How did she know it was you when you looked...when you looked the way you did?"

"That's the thing. I didn't look like a monster anymore. I had changed into my old form, with my old face and body, simply by thinking about it. My mother never knew what I looked like beneath the false face. But she did notice that when I ate, I touched nothing but the meat she'd prepared. And she continued to notice when I would request she not cook it at all.

"But the small pieces of pork or chicken weren't enough to keep my hunger down. And when she came home one day from church earlier than expected, she found me...finishing off the remains of a man who'd come to the house begging for food. She should have been terrified. Instead, she wept for my soul.

"Seeing her that way, seeing her refuse to reject me for the monster I was, it changed something inside of me. She had accepted me for what I had become, but she said that I could not continue to stay with her if I continued to kill innocent

people. So, I promised her that I'd find some way to...fight the addiction.

"It turns out that my decision to...quit came at just the right time. Methods on blood storage were just becoming popular, and with my training in the medical field, I was well suited for roles in blood procurement and storage. This method kept my promise to my mother and it, in conjunction with eating a lot of raw pork, kept me fed, although nothing compares to the fulfillment of human flesh.

"Over time I've grown much more accustomed to the pre-packaged varieties that can be heated and cooled to temperatures of my choosing. Plus, I have an affinity for type B. It has the best flavor."

I tried my best to keep from gagging as he spoke of his meal preferences like he was reading off some macabre menu, but it was difficult to hide the disgust in my face and he noticed.

"Oh, I've made you ill, haven't I?"

I nodded and looked at the nurse, who understandably assumed I was green because of

the needles and what lay ahead for my arm.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I haven't been able to speak to anyone new about this in decades and I forget myself sometimes. I just thought that, well, considering who it is that you're, um, well...who you were dating, I assumed that you'd be okay with me, with what I am."

I looked once more at the nurse, and seeing that she was oblivious to the nature of the discussion, finally responded to him with something more than just a nod or blank stare.

"Dr. Ambrose, in a short period of time I've had my entire view of the world altered in some very disturbing ways. I've had several attempts made on my life; I've learned that things like you exist.

"And I've learned that the people you trust the most are the very ones most likely to hurt you--although that's a lesson I obviously had to learn twice--so if I don't seem all too thrilled to actually find out that a monster is working in the hospital, don't take it the wrong way. It's just me adjusting to the really crappy news that no matter how hard I try, I'm never going to be normal."

He chuckled and nodded to the nurse who helped me to lie back. "Grace, let me tell you something. Normal is overrated an experience. Being just like everyone else, getting lost in the crowd is nothing to strive for. Especially when you're as special as you are."

The snort left me before the grunt of pain.

"There. All done.

I looked at him with surprise. "All done what?"

The bed raised and I was soon sitting up. "With your shoulder. I'll put it into a sling and then you'll be all set to go home."

"You fixed my shoulder? Already?" I was in disbelief.

"As well as taped up your ribs. You'll be feeling sore for a few days, but that's what the ibuprofen is for."

I looked at him as though he had just spoken to me in another language. "You're done?"



He waited until the nurse left to retrieve my prescription before he turned to me, a serious look in his face. "Grace, do you think that your angels are the only ones with incredible speed? My kind are nowhere near as fast--we're limited to what physics can allow--but we can do some things fairly quickly without you realizing. Like wrap a rib or two while rotating your arm around to relocate it into your shoulder."

I stared at him blankly.

"Grace?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

He smiled and I felt an eerie chill run down my spine when I took into his eyes once more. "I'm sorry, I've startled you haven't I? I suppose all of this has been too much for one day."

I nodded and allowed him to help me off the bed, flinching slightly at the cold, clammy feel of his hands against my skin. "I'd like to get dressed now," I told him, and began pulling at the hospital gown's tabs as soon as he was gone.

Unfortunately, I ran into some difficulty when it

came time to put on my t-shirt. I stood there in the cold hospital room in my bra and jeans, staring at my shirt the same way a soldier would look at a minefield.

"You'd think that the least challenging part of today would be putting on a t-shirt," I grumbled to myself.

As I pondered just how to put my shirt on without somehow re-dislocating my shoulder, I realized that the air in the room was growing warmer. I looked up at the air-conditioning vent, expecting the stream of cool air to have stopped, but I could feel it blowing, the air still chilly.

"I thought it would be more comfortable for you."

Him.

I turned around slowly, my arms crossing over my chest in a poor attempt at modesty knowing that whatever could be seen had been so already.

"Please give me a good reason why you're here, and why I shouldn't scream." I stared at him,

embarrassment fighting the anger within me as I stared at a pair of liquid silver eyes.

"I keep failing you, Grace. You're always getting hurt when I'm not around, like someone knows that I'm not there to protect you. This is the beginning--it will only escalate until the end goal is reached, and I cannot allow that to happen," Robert explained.

I scowled at him. "You cannot allow that to happen? If you had allowed it to happen when it was supposed to, I wouldn't be here right now, feeling the way that I do, having to hear you pretend to care about what happens to me."

"I know that I cannot convince you that what I did, I did because I love you. I know that you're not going to believe anything I say because of how you feel right now. But I do know that you don't believe that I don't care about what happens to you. I love you, Grace. I love you and I should have been honest with you but I wasn't and if not being with you is the price for that then I accept it, but I will not accept any harm coming to you because of it."

He began to unbutton his shirt and my eyes

widened in surprise. "What are you doing?"

He stared at me as he reached the last button and removed the shirt from his body. I turned away, not wanting to look. But, more than that, I turned away because I did.

I felt the shirt press against my back and then grow...softer. I tried to turn but was soon surrounded by a thick, black cloud that held me immobile. The feeling of the mist against my bare skin was unlike anything I had ever felt before. The slow, silken curl of it as it slid against my shoulders and down my arms made it impossible to keep a whimper from leaving my lips.

I was in agony; there was a building of something inside of me that needing something, I just didn't know what. But the swirling of the dark mist on my skin was urging whatever that feeling was to a point that made me bite my lips to keep from allowing that whimper to turn into a moan. Soon, both too soon and not soon enough, it was gone, and Robert was standing in front of me, his fingers busily buttoning up the shirt that was now hanging on me like a slinky, cream colored tent.

"As much as I would have loved to have had a different reason for doing that, this was the only way I could see to getting you dressed without causing you any significant pain. I would have preferred to heal you, but something tells me that you'd rather me not do that either."

I waited until he had reached the second to the last button before finally speaking. "I could have dressed myself, but thank you. And you're right; I don't want you to heal me. Not anymore. But...thank you."

The door opened behind me and I heard the gasp of shock before I saw the face of the nurse who entered with a pre-packaged sling and a bottle of pills on another small tray. "I-I-I" she stuttered as she took in Robert's shirtless frame.

I didn't know why but I felt a slash of anger cut through me as I watched her eyes grow wide and her pupils dilate at the sight of Robert. She looked so pleased and I felt the unfamiliar need to scratch her eyes out. A soft chuckle behind me brought me back to my senses and I smiled at the woman whose eyes were almost painfully fixed onto Robert.

I took the bottle of pills from the tray and grabbed the sling, tearing the package open with my teeth. Robert removed the triangular cloth from my hand and quickly fashioned a rather comfortable rest for my arm. "Thanks," I mumbled before turning towards the door.

"Can I leave now?" I asked the nurse who pointed to some papers on the tray without ever taking her eyes off of Robert.

I grabbed them and looked them over, rapidly signing my name at the pre-designated tabs with the provided pen and then left them there. I walked out into the hallway and saw Graham sitting down on the floor, his head resting in his hands, his blonde hair jutting out from between his fingers like golden blades of grass.

"Hey," I told him.

He looked up and bolted to his feet, his arms wrapping around me tightly. Too tightly.

"Ouch. Ouch, Graham--OW!"

It happened rather rapidly. Robert was

beside me, one hand keeping me pressed to his back, the other holding Graham up against the wall, his hand clamped around Graham's throat. "You-were-hurting-her," he hissed.

"I was hugging her," Graham wheezed. "Let me go!"

Robert knew that Graham was telling the truth, and I sighed with relief when I saw the tensed muscles in his arm begin to relax. Graham slid to the ground, coughing and sputtering as he did so. I rushed around Robert to comfort Graham, and turned accusing eyes towards Robert who looked unapologetic for his overreaction.

"Is this how you plan on protecting me? By strangling my friends?" I growled. I didn't wait for a reply, and instead pressed my hand against the darkening marks that were spreading on Graham's neck. "Are you alright?" I whispered and exhaled when he nodded.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I didn't mean to hurt you," he breathed as he began to rub the marks on his neck. "And what is he doing here? Did you guys make up?"

I looked at Robert and then at Graham and shook my head. "No."

Graham took one look at the shirt that hung loosely on me and rolled his eyes. "Sure. That's why he's half naked and you're wearing his shirt."

Before I could protest, he pushed himself up to a standing position and turned around, his head flicking to the side to warn me. I looked towards that direction and saw two police officers approaching with a very nervous looking Dr. Ambrose sandwiched between them.

I groaned when I recognized them as the same officers who had come to the house to discuss Mr. Frey's death. It didn't escape them that something had just happened between the three of us and I tried my best to look calm. Graham began to rub his neck fiercely. And Robert moved in front of me, his hands balled into fists.

The look on Ambrose's face should have been accompanied by sweat, but it dawned on me that if he wasn't alive, he wouldn't be sweating either. He simply looked frantic, and I couldn't tell if it



was because he was flanked by two uniformed police officers or if it was because Death himself was standing in front of me.

"Grace, these officers are here to take your statement," he said nervously as his eyes flicked from mine to Robert's. He briefly glanced at Graham, but I could tell that he viewed him as being of little to no consequence and I couldn't help but feel a bit angry by that.

I nodded stiffly, but I didn't move. If they were going to ask me any questions, they would have to do it from behind Robert, who gave off a very low, rumbling noise which actually caused one of the officers to cross himself. I smirked.

"Miss Shelley, could you tell us what happened exactly? We already have some information given to us by your friend Stacy, but we still need your version of the events before we file our report," the one who didn't look about ready to pee on himself said to me. "We'll also need your statement, Mr. Hasselbeck."

Graham nodded but stayed off to the side of me, his posture stiff but wary. I sighed and began to

explain to the officers what had happened, trying my best to keep the melodrama out of it and simply sticking with the facts. When I described the fall, the air around us turned frosty, Robert obviously not pleased with what Erica had done this time. I could hear the rumbling in him grow louder with each word, and I cast an apologetic glance towards Graham whose teeth were chattering.

It was only after Graham had given his statement, and we had both read them over and signed them did Robert finally quiet down and straighten his posture. He waited until the officers had left before he approached Dr. Ambrose, who once again should have been perspiring out of nervousness and fear, and instead simply looked pale and...cold.

A silent exchange went on between them and I itched to know what was being discussed, the surreal and paradoxical scene taking place before me was too great a curiosity and wonder for me to simply turn around and ignore. Death, the being himself, was standing in the middle of a hospital hallway, speaking to a man who helped save lives,

though he was dead himself.

Dr. Ambrose nodded enthusiastically at something and then looked at me and smiled, a knowing smile that did nothing to reassure me. Instead, I worried that yet another player was being added to this game that didn't need to be, and though it sounded ridiculous, I feared for his life.

Graham nudged me and I looked up at him, wincing as I saw the hand-shaped bruising that wrapped around his neck. "What do you think Robert is saying to that doctor? They must know each other for him to be talking to him like that, eh?"

I nodded and then shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know what they're talking about, but it most likely has something to do with me. He feels guilty that he wasn't there to stop Erica from pushing me down the stairs."

Graham nodded in agreement. "Well, he's supposed to care about you and yet he's always away when you get hurt. What does he do anyway? Where does he go?"

I looked at him and frowned. "You know you

can't know that, right?"

He shook his head. "Lark and I haven't exactly talked about...the rules. Not yet, anyway."

I shook my head at that. "She should have at least told you some of them. Like that, for example. You're not allowed to know the call of another angel unless they tell you themselves."

He nodded, understanding somewhat. "But he's Lark's brother. Doesn't that make me almost family?"

I laughed at that. "I won't get to know what Lark's call is unless she tells me. You won't either. It's how these things are. It has nothing to do with family or who you know."

He looked at me with confusion. "But you know about their mom's call--Lark told me that you knew, and that she didn't tell you."

I opened my mouth to protest, but stopped.

"Oh. My. God."

"What?" he said, stunned.

"I just realized something," I told him, and began to pull him with my good arm. "Come on. We have to get to the car and get home. There's something I need to check on, something that I need to figure out first."

He allowed me to pull him halfway down the hallway before he asked about Robert. "Are you guys back together or what? Because if you are, I don't think it'd be a good idea to just leave him here."

I looked behind me and saw that Robert was already gone, as was Dr. Ambrose. "I don't think we have to worry about them, Graham. And no, we're not back together. Stop asking that, will you?"

He shrugged as he followed me to the elevator. "Just saying--you guys don't act like you're not together."

"It's a shirt. He helped me with a shirt," I mumbled as the doors opened and we climbed in.

"Well, you remember that when you see me half naked and Lark wearing one of mine," he mumbled back as the doors closed.



## FULLEST

I had hoped to be able to have done some digging when I got home, but the presence of Graham, not to mention Stacy and Lark kept me from following through on the plans I had formed on the way home from the hospital. Lark chose to remain downstairs with Graham while Stacy and I went upstairs to discuss what it was that she had said to the police.

"I basically told them that Erica went bat-shit-insane and pushed you down those stairs for no reason," she explained as I lay down on my bed. "The kinda wussy police officer kept shaking his head when I told him how I held the psycho down while you were at the bottom of the stairs. I don't think he truly understands just what kind of person Erica is. I hope he got to see your injuries--maybe that'll scare him a little."

I shook my head and sighed. "All he saw was my sling. I wasn't about to lift my shirt up and show him the bandages wrapped around my ribs. Besides, he can take a look at the x-rays himself if

he wants to."

Stacy nodded and then tugged on the hem of the shirt. "So, where'd you get the new duds?"

I looked down and then groaned. "I don't really have to explain this to you, too, do I?"

She grinned and nodded in earnest, her mind already spinning with the numerous possibilities, none of which were correct.

"Like I told Graham, Robert gave it to me because I couldn't put my other shirt on. It was easy taking off the shirt when I couldn't feel a thing with my arm hanging all limp and useless, but afterward it's a completely different story."

Stacy huffed at my explanation. "You could have let him heal you, you know, then there wouldn't be any need for him to go walking around half-naked in the hospital."

I gasped and threw a pillow at her. "You already knew! You and Lark were spying, you little rats!"

She laughed and dodged the pillow skillfully.



"Lark wanted to know what was going on, and so did I, so of course we spied! But only after Robert nearly strangled Graham--remind me to thank him for that visual, it was totally amusing although I think Lark's not too happy with him right now--and we didn't listen to any of your private thoughts or anything."

I groaned and pulled the remaining pillow out from beneath my head and used it to cover my face. "I can't believe that of all the angels in the world, you had to become best friends with the one who can read minds miles away."

"Oh stop complaining. If it weren't for Lark's ability to do that, Robert wouldn't have shown up at the hospital and you would probably still be there trying to figure out how to put your t-shirt on."

I grunted at her reasoning and shook my head beneath the pillow. "I would have worn the hospital gown home."

She laughed at my response and removed the pillow from my face. "No you wouldn't and you know it. Admit it; you're grateful that he showed up."

I shook my head and reached for the pillow, pulling it out of her hands and covering my head with it once more.

"You know, I think you should give Robert another chance."

I pushed the pillow off my face and stared at her. "What?"

She fidgeted with her fingers as she stared out of the window, unwilling and unable to look me in the eyes as she began to plead Robert's case.

"He loves you, Grace. And you love him. It'd take a blind man to not see that, and Lark's pretty blind and even she can see that. You guys wouldn't get so angry with each other if you didn't."

"You and Graham fight a lot yourselves, but I don't see the two of you spouting out declarations of love," I scoffed.

"That's different. Graham and I like each other as friends. We never looked at each other and knew instantly that we were meant to be together--that's reserved for love, and that's what you have with Robert. Come on, he knew he loved you the

moment he saw you. What girl ever gets to have *that* in her life, huh?"

I groaned and pulled the pillow back over my eyes, but Stacy yanked it out of my hand. "Robert made a really big mistake, Grace. He knows he did, and he admitted to it. That's another thing you won't find in most guys--someone who'll admit he was wrong. No, not just wrong; really, really, stupidly, mega wrong. He'd shout it from the rooftops if he had to--you know that! And he didn't do this because he was trying to hurt you either, you know. He did it because he wanted to keep you safe."

I tried to sit up but the bandage around my ribs, coupled with the throbbing on my side allowed me only to roll over slightly, just enough to face her. "Safe from what? What more danger could I possibly have been in had I known, Stacy? You tell me that! Sam wanted to kill me. End of story. It didn't matter whether or not I knew that he had killed my mother because he was gunning for *me*."

"Robert let me dance with him, let me dance with the angel who murdered my mother, did you know that? No? I guess Lark left that little part out

when she told you about what happened, didn't she?"

Stacy shook her head and frowned at my outburst. "He didn't murder your mother, Grace. He was doing his job. Lark hates this Sam guy and even she says she understands what he was doing. Why can't you?"

"Because it was my mom. He took her from me all because her name was on some stupid invisible list. You don't know what that's like, Stacy; you have no idea what it's like to grow up without a mom around and then find out that the person you love the most in this world was best friends with the guy who took her away from you, and knew it," I cried.

She gave me a look that offered no sympathy as she launched into a rant of her own. "You don't get it, do you? Everyone's mom is on that list, Grace. They just don't all show up at the same time. And you're right; I don't know what it's like to grow up without a mom. But you know what? My mother is going to find out soon enough what it's going to be like to grow old without a daughter.

"Lark told me that by saving your life, Robert's put his own in danger, and you don't seem to appreciate that. He sacrificed his best friend for you, Grace--*he* did it, not Sam, and all you can think about is Robert not telling you something that wouldn't change the past anyway. You think that what Robert did was so awful, but you don't realize that at least you have someone who can keep you from dying, keep you from ever having to put your dad through the pain that my parents will experience soon."

She stood up and stormed out of the room, not even bothering to close the door as she left. I looked at the empty doorway and felt ashamed. It was easy to forget that Stacy wasn't as healthy as she looked, and that her time left here was down to mere months rather than the decades that she should have had. I pushed myself to a sitting position and tried to go after her, but by the time I reached the bottom step I could hear her car pulling out of the driveway.

Graham was standing by the front door, his head leaning against the frame as he watched her

leave. I realized Lark was nowhere in the living room and knew that she must have left with Stacy. Seeing Graham's lonely figure in the doorway increased my feeling of guilt.

"You're not making this easy on yourself, you know," he said as he straightened and began to close the door. "If you're angry at Robert that's one thing, but you're going to drive away the rest of us who care about you, too."

He turned around to face me and I saw the sadness in his eyes that hadn't been there when we had arrived home. "Stacy and Lark and I all see what not being with Robert is doing to you, Grace. We see that you miss him, we see that you hurt when he's not around, and when he is. What we don't see is why you can't."

I looked at him and felt a hot flush come to my face. "I do see it," I told him as the heat crept to the rims of my eyes, pulling the moisture from them and wetting my cheeks with scorching tears. "I do see it, but I'd rather live with how I feel now than with the possibility of him hurting me again later hanging over my head like a noose. I can't live life that way,

Graham. I won't."

He shook his head at my answer, disappointed. "And you're going to drive everyone else away because you're afraid that he might hurt you again? I could hurt you again, Grace, but you took a chance on me. Why?"

I tried to look away but he forced my face to hold still. Instead, I averted my eyes. "Why, Grace? Why would you give me a second chance after what I did to you? I broke your heart, remember? I made you the laughingstock of the school. I'm the reason Erica's in your life now. It was all my fault and yet you and I are closer friends now than we were before. Why?"

"Because I love you," I whispered.

"And you love Robert," he murmured. "You love him much more than you ever did me."

I shook my head and refused to look at him as I explained. "It's not the same. I've known you my entire life, we grew up together, we know everything about each other."

"And what do we have to show for it, Grace?"

We'll both be leaving here after graduation, right? You off to California and me to Florida--complete opposite ends of the country.

"And I won't have any real reason to come back here once the divorce is finalized--Dad's selling the house so I won't really have anywhere to stay. Stacy...well, let's face it, Stacy's going to be gone by the time fall semester starts, and Lark's already insisted that she's moving to Florida to be with me, so what do we have to show for that lifetime friendship, Grace?"

I felt the harsh sting of his words hit home when he pointed to his bag that sat packed beside the sofa. "Are you leaving?"

"I'm going to move back into my house tomorrow," he said in a low voice. "Dad's in rehab so the house is sitting empty. If he's going to sell it, it has to be cleaned up and Lark said that she'd help me with it starting tomorrow."

"So you're leaving."

"Grace, what do you expect? I can't exactly be with Lark if her being around here reminds you



too much of Robert, and even if that weren't the case, she's not exactly too happy with you right now after what happened upstairs with Stacy, so she's not going to want to even be here. I love you, Grace, but you've chosen to put everything on pause until you start to feel better, and I can't live my life at a standstill."

"I understand," I managed to whisper, and then turned around and walked upstairs to my room.

"Grace," I heard Graham call out, but I kept walking. I closed my door and crawled onto my bed, not bothering to pick up my pillows, simply laying my head on the comforter.

It didn't take too long for him to knock softly on my door and open it, not bothering to wait for my response.

"Grace, I'm sorry," he said as he sat on the edge of the bed. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I only wanted you to see that you allowed me back into your life for far less, and though I love you, and I know you love me, what we have is nothing compared to what you and Robert have. When he says he's going to love you forever, he means it. I

can't give that to you. I can't even give that to Lark-- she'd chew my head off for even saying that word."

I looked at him and laughed. "That's true. She's done it to me a few times already."

"I believe you," he said, laughing along with me.

We stayed that way for a while, softly laughing at the idea that Lark put the same kind of fear in the both of us, and all over a simple word. It was the kind of simple pleasure that one could only get from a best friend, and the idea that soon we would be separated by thousands of miles and an entire continent nearly overtook me.

"Are you going to keep in touch?"

"What, when I move back next door? Sure, I'll send you some smoke signals from the backyard," he quipped as we lay on my bed, his head towards my feet and mine towards his.

"No. I meant when you move to Florida. Will you keep in touch?"

"If Lark is with me, there's no way I won't be

able to. She's got a direct line to her brother, remember?"

I said nothing to this because I didn't have anything to say.

"Grace, whatever your decision when it comes to Robert, you have to realize that he's not going to leave your side. He loves you. I can say that with a straight face and totally not crack up because I know what it means to love someone the way he does you. I also know that what I feel for Lark probably pales in comparison to what he feels for you, what with his wings and his...winginess and all, but if I could, I'd stay by her side forever."

I pushed his head with my foot and smiled. "Look at you, getting all sappy and stuff."

"Hey, watch the feet. Or better yet, wash the feet."

I started laughing again and imagined that each bout of laughter was lifting a piece of the sadness that had nearly consumed me just moments before off me and sending it somewhere far away. I began to feel lighter, relaxed, and it

wasn't long before the lull of sleep pulled me under, closing my eyes to the sight of Graham's sock-covered feet beside my face.

It was those same feet that woke me up not two minutes later when he asked me something that I hadn't expected.

"Have you ever thought about going to church?"

Shocked, I replied with a garbled "no" followed with an even more garbled "why".

"I guess because of what Robert and Lark are. They're angels, you know? They're bona fide, wing-having angels. Granted Lark looks a lot hotter than I ever thought an angel could, they're still the things that are talked about in church and stuff. I just think that if I'm going to be dating one, I should at least know more about them, and I figured that going to church was a great way to start. Haven't you ever considered it?"

I shook my head. "No. Robert never asked that I go, never even brought it up. Whatever I needed to know, he'd tell me himself."

"I guess I could just ask Lark, right?"

Nodding, I told him that she was the best source for answers. "I don't know what you'd be able to learn from a church that you couldn't learn from her."

"That's true, I guess. I just feel like I should know so much more. Maybe it's because you already do."

I patted his knee and sighed. "Graham, what I know doesn't really amount to much, and most of it has to do with Robert more so than with angels in general, which is what you wouldn't be able to know anyway. Just trust that Lark will tell you everything you need to know, and maybe most of what you want to know, okay?"

"I guess," Graham conceded. "How does all of this work, anyhow? She can read my mind so I can't keep any secrets from her, which means if she tells me something that weirds me out, I won't be able to hide that from her."

I couldn't help but laugh at his fear. "Graham, you're the only person whose mind she's chosen not

to read. At first she did, but I think when she realized that she really liked you, she stopped. She's allowed you to keep your thoughts private, and I don't see why she would stop now just because you two are dating."

I could feel the tension in him leave at my words and he exhaled with relief. "You gotta understand why I'm so worried, Grace. I'm a guy--I can't help where my thoughts go sometimes."

I laughed harder. "I know exactly where your thoughts go, Graham."

"I guess you do, huh? So, totally personal question here so you don't have to answer it if you don't want to, but have you and Robert ever...I mean, I know you said you didn't, but I don't know what to expect if things get hot and heavy between me and Lark, and if you had any advice...you know, I could use some."

I raised my head to look at him, mild shock registering on my face. "Are you seriously asking me for sex advice?"

He rolled his eyes at my question. "Who else

am I supposed to ask? It's not like I can talk to the guys about this you know."

Sighing, I laid my head back down. "To be honest with you, nothing's ever happened between Robert and me. I wanted something to happen, anything, but he always held back. He said he couldn't control himself or something like that, that these are all new feelings for him."

Graham sat up and stared at me, his mouth gaping. "Wait, these are all new feelings for *him*? Whoa--are you saying that angel-boy is a flying V?"

I kicked his shoulder at the tone of his question. "I'm a virgin, too, Graham. And if I'm not mistaken, so are you so I suggest you quit with the false-shock."

"Oh, I'm not falsely shocked here, I'm genuinely shocked. He's how old and he's never done the deed? Ever?"

I covered my face and groaned into my hands. "Is this what you're going to be thinking about every time you see him from now on? That he's still a virgin?"

He leaned over me and grabbed my hands, effectively removing them from my face. "Actually, I'm just glad that you can talk about him without bursting into tears, and that you hinted at him being around more often."

"I told him he can follow me around, to keep me safe for my dad's sake. I didn't say that he'd be 'around' more often. Chances are you won't even see him when he is anyway, so don't get your hopes up," I mumbled. "And besides, you're supposed to be on my side. You're my best friend!"

"That's exactly why I'm hoping that you'll turn around and realize you're making a big mistake by not giving him a second chance. I see how good he is for you, Grace, even if I don't like what he did, even if sometimes I don't understand it. And I know that he loves you so much he wouldn't have done anything to deliberately hurt you."

"What do you know about love? You thought you were in love with Erica Hamilton."

He nodded in concession to that point, but he looked down at me from his position and



frowned. "I know that you've never been as happy as you've been since Robert came into your life. I know that he's given you reason to start living your life the way you should have been living it all this time: as your own person and not as someone clinging onto my coattails, hoping that someday, the jerks I hang out with would accept you.

"Before Robert, there was no way you'd have entered a costume contest, or worn a dress that looked way too good on you to be legal. Before him, you'd have never become friends with someone like Stacy or Lark, and you definitely wouldn't have ever stood up to Erica.

"You love Robert, and because of that, you see yourself capable of doing things that you wouldn't have been able to before. I'm not entirely bright--I know my reputation for being a dumb jock is well deserved--but even I can see that Robert's given you the courage to finally step out of your shell and show everyone just how great a person I've always known you to be."

I raised my good arm and wrapped it around Graham's neck, pulling him down in an awkward

embrace. "I love you, Graham."

"I know."

I laughed and punched his shoulder. "And oh-so-modest, too."

He rubbed the spot that I'd hit and laughed with me. "Hey, what can I say? I'm smooth with the ladies. I love you, too, Grace. Always have."

He grinned at me, a foolish, boyish grin that hinted of a time when we were younger and love involved action figures and cartoon characters. It was the kind of love that was safe and unfettered with other things; like life.

And I realized that it was exactly the kind of love that had kept me in that shell he had spoken about because I was afraid of what else was out there. It was safe to fall in love with him, safe to pretend that he was what I'd truly wanted and needed in life because even when he had hurt me, he hadn't. Not really. When compared to the pain that I felt when Robert had told me about Sam, I realized that Graham had merely bruised what Robert had been able to destroy. I simply had had

no basis for comparison with Graham, and so the first cut felt like the deepest.

But I also knew that the risk involved with loving Robert had reaped rewards far greater than anything I had ever experienced with Graham. I couldn't deny that, not when even now, thinking about him could still cause my dead heart to feel like it was whole in my chest, thrumming away as though it had never stopped.

I just didn't know if that was enough.

"Grace, promise me you'll think about it, think about giving Robert a second chance, okay?"

I eyed him as I responded. "Is this more for me or for you?"

"Well, to be honest, it would make things easier on me--I'm beginning to understand how hard things were with you when Robert and I didn't get along--but I don't see you being happy with anyone else, Grace. Who could compete with having an angel for an ex-boyfriend anyway? You've set that bar pretty high, you know."

I giggled at that. "That's true. Alright-alright,

I'll think about it, but that's it."

He pounced on me and brought me hard against his chest in a very brotherly embrace. "Thank you, Grace."

"Ow-ow-ow-squeezing-hard-ribs-shoulder-ow!"

He let me go, gently, and grinned sheepishly. "Oops."



## APRIL

Going back to school that next day drew a lot of complaints from Graham as he kept pointing to my arm and the swelling that had formed in my cheek from where I had bitten it. "You've got bandages around your ribs. How are you supposed to go to school walking around like half a mummy?"

On and on it went as we ate a cold breakfast of cereal and milk, while I brushed my teeth in the bathroom, and while I somehow managed to find a shirt that I could pull my arm through without causing any serious pain. Finally I'd had enough when we got to the car and he refused to unlock the door, insisting that I stay home.

"Graham, so help me, if you don't unlock this door I'll tell Lark that you wet the bed until you were nine!"

It was a low blow, but I had run out of patience. He gasped at my threat but unlocked and pushed the door open, saying nothing as I climbed in.

"Sorry," I said when we were turning into the school's parking lot, the quiet ride there finally too much to take.

"I deserved it, I guess," he mumbled before pulling into a stall and parking. "I still think this is a bad idea."

I sighed and acknowledged his concern. "I can't run from this, Graham. School is almost over. Two more months and I'll never have to see her face ever again."

"I wasn't thinking about you hiding out for two months, just a couple of days. Maybe even a few weeks, just until all of this dies down and people stop talking about it."

I looked outside of the window at the crowds of kids gathered outside of the school's entrance and sighed. "It wouldn't matter if I did spend two months hiding at home, Graham; you know the kids like good gossip, and I'm pretty good at giving it to them. I can deal with this."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Besides, I've got my trusty

bodyguard with me, right?"

Laughing, he nodded in return. "Yup."

He exited the car quickly to help me out, and together we walked towards the school's glass double doors. Surprisingly, no one made a single quip or comment, no jokes or whispered innuendos when we passed by. They smiled and nodded, some even waved and said hello. It was a very different experience to say the least.

As we walked through the entrance, Mr. Kenner was standing outside of the office, his face expectant. As soon as he saw me, he called me over. "Miss Shelley, could you come into the office, please?"

"O-okay," I replied as I followed him, Graham not leaving my side.

"Please, have a seat right here while I get some paperwork for you to sign," Mr. Kenner said as he pointed to a row of empty seats that sat in front of a long counter. From behind I could see the registrar, her pink cheeks flushed as she watched Mr. Kenner rush by.



"Why aren't you in your office Mrs. Mayhew?" Graham asked her. I looked at him in surprise. Who knew the registrar's last name?

"Oh, Miss Lampley had a family emergency and the office assistant, Mrs. Vickers, is on vacation so since I really don't have much to do until summer, I offered to fill in here. And how are you doing, Graham? Still handsome as ever I see. And who is this with you? Why it's Miss Shelley. Hello Grace, how has your school year been?"

I stared at her incredulously. "Are you kidding?"

She laughed and waved her hand at me, brushing off my shock. "Oh dear, I'm afraid that I don't get to hear much gossip when I'm in my little office--these young ladies here in the front get to hear some wondrous things, though, and I'm afraid that it'll take me until the start of next school year to catch up."

I looked at Graham with confusion. "How can she know who everyone is and yet not know what's been going on?" I whispered.

"How should I know?" he replied and then grinned at Mrs. Mayhew. "So, what kind of gossip have you heard so far?"

Though she made an attempt at a devious smirk, instead it came off looking more like a constipated grin, and she leaned over the counter so that her whispered words could be heard better.

"Well, supposedly Mr. and Mrs. Hoppbaker are going through a rough patch--seems Mr. Hoppbaker didn't take too kindly to Mrs. Hoppbaker's weight loss as well as she had hoped and he now thinks that she might be cheating on him with a fellow teacher."

My eyes widened at this tidbit of information and I looked at Graham who was grinning like a muppet on uppers.

"What else?" he prodded.

"There's a rumor going around that Mr. Chen in Advanced Physics is about to propose to Mr. Paulson in Accounting's daughter this summer, which Mr. Paulson is supposedly furious about. He doesn't think Mr. Chen makes enough money, and

doesn't think a teacher's salary is enough to take care of his daughter, can you believe that?"

I shook my head slightly while Graham's head twisted from side to side almost too enthusiastically. He urged Mrs. Mayhew to continue with her gossiping, revealing some details about a few teachers that made me either gasp or giggle before she grew very serious.

"It came to my attention yesterday that August Branke's putting in for a transfer next year."

I felt the pit of my stomach bottom out and I asked her why, though I could have probably made a very accurate guess on my own.

"Well, I'm still catching up to the news, but apparently he was accused of running over some poor girl and that's tarnished his reputation amongst the students here. He said that he can't teach them the way that they deserve and so he wants a new start, said that he'd be moving back to his home state--Nebraska I think it was."

"Wow," Graham and I both murmured.

Mrs. Mayhew's eyes grew shifty then, her

head leaning closer so that we could hear her. "I also heard that he's got a daughter and a wife up there, and that she ran away from home some time ago. His wife blamed him and kicked him out, which is why he was teaching here instead. I think he's going to try and reconcile with them or something."

"What was the daughter's name?" Graham asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

"I don't know."

With surprising speed, she pulled herself back behind the counter and began to fiddle around with some papers as Mr. Kenner suddenly appeared with a stack of sheets in his own hand.

"Okay, Miss Shelley, I have some release forms here for you, as well as an incident report that will go in your file."

I took the papers he held out to me and began to look them over, ever suspicious of his actions since he had tried to convince me that there was no need to suspend Erica for assaulting Stacy shortly before Valentine's Day.

"Why does this form say that I won't sue the

school?" I asked, pointing to the release form that lay at the top of the pile. "You don't seriously expect me to sign this, do you?"

Mr. Kenner's posture grew stiff and angry almost instantly at my insinuation, and I knew right away that he in fact did. "That's a standard release form, Miss Shelley, and all students must sign it after an altercation such as the one you had with Miss Hamilton has occurred."

My grunt of displeasure was quite loud as I began to tear up the off-white sheet of paper. "Sorry, Mr. Kenner, but I'm not going to sign this when you had been warned about Erica before and chose to do nothing. She attacked Stacy not even two months ago and all she got was two days worth of suspension. Now that she's tried to kill me you want to just sweep this under some rug? Sorry--it isn't happening."

"Now see here, Miss Shelley, I have Erica's statement that you started the altercation this time, and I'm wont to--"

"You're 'wont'?" I cut him off. "Who even uses that word anymore? Look, I don't care if you have

Erica's entire family's statement, Mr. Kenner; I'm not signing that form. She shoved me down the stairs as I was walking to the bathroom. I dislocated my shoulder and cracked two ribs because of her. Those will be in the hospital report that the police picked up yesterday, just in case you were wondering whether or not I was faking my injuries, and I'm fairly certain that I can get the attending physician to come and verify my injuries if you still don't believe me."

I looked over the other forms that he'd handed me and only signed the form that stated that I had left school early yesterday to go to the hospital. Everything else was worded in such a way that made me seem complicit in Erica's shoving me down the stairs.

"Did you make Stacy sign forms like these?" I demanded to know as I handed Mr. Kenner back the papers.

He glanced at me from beneath hooded lids and shook his head. "She refused to sign them, too."

"Well, good. Is that it? Can we go now?"

He looked at Graham and me and then nodded his head before turning on his heel and storming into his office. I felt a rush of anger flow through me as I looked at the sheets of torn paper that lay on the ground by my feet and nearly screamed in frustration

"Oh dear, he's really trying to save his tush, isn't he?"

I looked at Mrs. Mayhew who had come back to lean over the counter. "Save his what?"

"His tush, dear, his tush. You know, his rear end? His bum, his meat seat, his ass?"

"I know that, Mrs. Mayhew, but why?"

She crooked her finger and motioned for us to come closer. Graham and I sidled over to the counter and bent our heads as she whispered, "Student injuries at Heath have quadrupled since he's become vice-principal.

"Add on to that allowing an alcoholic to come to school drunk everyday and what happened to Mr.

Branke and you've got a man standing on the edge of suspension and perhaps a revocation of his teaching license. If he can keep this thing with you and Miss Hamilton hush-hush--or at least make Miss Hamilton's parents happy--he'll be able to keep his job long enough to be promoted to principal somewhere else and leave all of this behind him."

"No offense Mrs. Mayhew, but I think you're far more aware of what's going on than you let on, which makes you a pretty bad liar," Graham joked.

"Oh Mr. Hasselbeck, I'm just the registrar. Nothing more."

We said our farewells to Mrs. Mayhew and walked out of the office, nearly walking into three relieved individuals standing outside the door.

"So you didn't sign them?" Stacy asked anxiously.

"No, I didn't sign them," I replied, relieved that Graham's warning last night wasn't being proven right. "I know better than to trust that man."

"Hey, were you guys listening?" Graham



asked, eyeing Lark and Stacy's conspiratorial smiles.

"Yes. Get used to it," Stacy answered before Lark could get a word in, and then frowned at the office door. "That small man is weak. Weak-weak-weak! He's more concerned with furthering his career than keeping us safe from psychos like Erica."

"Hey, did you guys hear that bit about Mr. Branke leaving?" I asked, needing to say something to avoid paying attention to the pair of silver eyes that watched me silently from behind Lark.

"Yeah--who knew he had a family!" Stacy exclaimed.

"He's got a wife and daughter in Nebraska but he's living here in Ohio. He's got to have screwed up pretty hugely to be this far away from them," Graham remarked as we began to walk down the hallway.

"His daughter ran away, remember? That's what Mrs. Mayhew said--she ran away and the wife

blamed him for driving their daughter away," I reminded him. "I wonder what he did or said to have made her hate being at home so much."

Lark shook her head and sighed. "She didn't run away."

Stacy, Graham and I stopped walking and looked at her. "What do you mean she didn't run away?" Stacy asked, voicing the question that we all were wondering.

Lark closed her eyes and her head bobbed up and down slightly, her fingers pressing against her temple. "The registrar had it wrong--that's what she gets I suppose for listening to idle gossip--Mr. Branke's daughter did not run away from home. She was angry at her father, that's true, and she did leave the house in anger, but she did not run away--her parents just thought she did."

We stared at her, intrigued by this new bit of information. "Why did they think that?" I asked.

"Because she didn't come home," was the reply.

Stacy huffed, annoyed by Lark's answer.

"Isn't that the definition of running away? You leave your house and don't come back?"

Lark shook her head. "It would be if she had intended on not coming home."

Graham's hand reached out to wrap around Lark's shoulder, his hand rubbing her arm in a comforting motion. "What happened?"

"Her body was found on the side of a road two days later. She had been badly injured, and the police suspected she had been hit by a car and left to die. Mr. Branke's wife blamed him for their daughter leaving and accused him of being partially to blame for her death. She kicked him out of the house a few weeks after the funeral and he moved here after accepting a job offer for a teaching position."

It was difficult to feel anything but sympathy in that moment for Mr. Branke. It suddenly made sense now why he kept so close to the female students in his class, and why he had gone out of his way to come to my home after I had been hit by Mr. Frey. "Mr. Frey...he admitted to running over another person in Nebraska," I whispered. "It was him."

Lark nodded and Stacy and Graham both gasped in recognition. "That must be why he's heading home. He's got to tell his wife what happened," Stacy rationalized.

"Does he even know?" I asked Lark who shook her head.

"He doesn't know yet. The police haven't revealed what was in Mr. Frey's statement to the public yet, and I doubt they've sent any of it over to the Nebraska State Police to see if they can match up the dates with any hit-and-runs they might have had during that same time period. If and when they do, it'll be the Nebraska police who inform Mr. Branke, and not Ohio's."

Stacy sniffled. "Poor guy. We know who killed his daughter, and we can't say anything because they'd want to know how we know."

Graham groaned and began to rub his head. "This is going to take some getting used to--all of this information sharing and all of these secrets are giving me a headache. I can't imagine what it must feel like for you," he said to Lark just before he

pressed a kiss to her hair.

I turned away, the small gesture bringing far too many memories to the forefront of my mind.

Big mistake.

Robert stood with his back against the lockers, his eyes glued to mine. I could see in his face that my memories were his own, and that the feelings they dredged up were equal on both sides.

"I see you found something that wasn't too difficult to put on," he said softly, taking in the overly large shirt that draped over my jeans like a tunic.

"Yeah, well, I'm pretty resourceful," I replied, trying with great difficulty to avoid looking at him.

"I've always known that," his soft voice said.

I looked down and stared at my feet, saying nothing when they were joined by his.

*Grace...can we talk?*

I raised my head, but couldn't bring myself to look at him and so turned my face to the side. "About what?"

I felt his hand brush gently against a loose section of hair that had fallen over my shoulder, and I fought against the automatic urge to lean into his touch.

*Anything.*

I looked at him and opened my mouth to reply but the bell chose that moment to ring and whatever silent truce had been forged between us was gone. I shook my head and began to walk towards homeroom as quickly as my feet could carry me. I paid no attention to the rush of footsteps behind me as Stacy ran to catch up.

"You know the drill, Grace. You're supposed to stick with me during the first half of the day, Graham the second," she panted once she had reached me. "Ugh, I'm out of shape. You know it took me almost a full minute to pin Erica down yesterday? This cancer is doing a number on me."

I stopped walking. I looked at Stacy with an intense feeling of concern taking over everything else within me. "You shouldn't be doing this, Stacy. You should be focusing on getting better and not on

who or what's out there trying to get me. You have your own monster to fight."

She shook her head and laughed. "I can't win this war, Grace. I've accepted that." She began walking again, her feet moving quickly, her ponytail bouncing behind her. She turned around to smile at me. "Are you coming?"

I nodded and hurried up to her. We walked in silence until we reached our homeroom class. "Stacy, about yesterday," I began.

"Don't say another word, Grace," she interrupted. "I don't have the luxury of time to dwell on stupid things said in anger or frustration. It's not worth it. I'd rather we just be the friends we were meant to be, and leave all of that other stuff behind us, okay?"

I nodded and smiled. "Okay."

"Good."

We walked into the classroom and took our seats, the usual chatter around us predictably silencing as we did so.

Normally I'd turn red from embarrassment and hide behind the curtain of my hair. But today I felt something other than embarrassment. Today, I felt...angry. "Is there a problem?" I snapped, looking around at all of the faces that had turned to stare at Stacy and me. "Have I grown horns since yesterday? Did I suddenly sprout a third eye or something?"

One by one, heads turned away, *their* faces flushed this time, rather than mine. I frowned, finding no satisfaction in the result of my outburst.

"Whoa, harsh," Stacy said as she watched everyone look away. "I guess they had it coming though." This last bit she said more loudly than normal as she winked at me.

"I don't get it. Why do they always have to stare?"

She looked around at the backs of everyone's heads and smirked. "You know what happens when you eat the same thing, over and over again, every day for a long time?"

"Yeah, you get sick of it or bored."



"Exactly. Nothing ever happens in Heath, you know that. At least, nothing ever did. Everything here is so...beige, while you're...paisley, so when you do something, it gets noticed."

I glanced towards the front of the classroom, the empty desk where Mr. Frey would recuperate from his hangovers standing out like a silent warning. No substitute teacher that had been assigned his class since his arrest and subsequent death had ever sat there, leaving everything sitting exactly as it had on Mr. Frey's last day. "It's kind of hard to not get noticed when you're the reason why two teachers were arrested," I mumbled.

"Oh stop it," Stacy scolded. "You're not to blame for any of that. Besides, I think everyone's more interested in what happened yesterday than what happened last month."

"What *did* happen yesterday, Stacy? What happened with Erica after Graham and I left?"

Her gaze travelled around the room as she lowered her voice. "That's the weirdest part about all of this, the thing I think everyone else should be

focusing on more so than you. It was like a switch had been turned off inside of her the minute you left. She stopped fighting, stopped yelling, just...stopped. She was so calm when she gave her statement to the police it was creepy. They told her that they would have to take her down to the police station and she just turned around and put her hands behind her back, no fight in her whatsoever."

"So basically you're saying that the only time she showed any emotion was when I was there?"

Stacy nodded, a grave look appearing on her face. "It's like you set her off or something."

"Or something."

"Hey, change of subject, but Lark told me what Mr. Branke's daughter's name was."

I welcomed this change and eagerly waited for Stacy to reveal what it was that Lark had uncovered.

"Her name was April."

"Not an unusual name. Quite pretty, actually," I remarked. "It kind of puts things into perspective,

doesn't it?"

Stacy nodded. "Yeah. If not for Robert, you could have ended up just like April."

I hesitated acknowledging her statement, the truth in her words having always been known to me but somehow being made more so by the mere addition of April Branke's name. I had to live with the memories of the pain of my injuries, and the terror of being left to die on that road, but the point that I was alive had always seemed trivial, a given.

I had taken the fact that I hadn't died for granted because, unlike April, I had somehow known that things would be okay. I had known that because I had Robert. Who had April had on her side?



## VISITOR

Unlike yesterday, Robert was in French class and later, Calculus. He didn't try to speak to me, but I did find several more drawings in my binder. I wanted to admire them, wanted to take the time to look at them and appreciate them the way that they deserved, but I couldn't. I still felt angry and hurt and those two feelings warred with each other inside of me, leaving no room for forgiveness.

Final period in theater class was uneventful, save for the non-stop questions by Chad, Dwayne, and Shawn, the trio known as Chips, Dip, and Salsa; the only other boys in school besides Robert and Graham who had ever spoken to me of their own volition. When Erica didn't show up for class it served as confirmation for all of us that she had probably been suspended, and the floodgates opened up.

"Do you know why she did it?" Chips asked me, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"Did she look all crazy, like pet rabbit in a pot of water crazy?" Dip asked, chiming in.

"Did she look hot?" Salsa added.

Robert, who had ignored my request to not sit next to me, glared at the three of them while I laughed and tried my best to answer them.

"I never know why she does what she does, but I do know that she had to have been pretty far off her rocker to push me down the stairs. And I don't know if she looked hot or not, Shawn. I was too busy dealing with the pain from my dislocated shoulder and cracked ribs."

Chips whistled at that. "You've got to be related to Wonder Woman or something, Grace. You've been hit by a car, cracked your head in Mr. Branke's class, and survived being pushed down the stairs."

Dip shook his head in argument. "I say she's got to be part Irish--they're naturally lucky. Shelley's definitely an Irish name."

"You only say that because you're Irish," Chips hooted.

"I think you must have some kind of guardian

angel watching out over you, Grace. I've seen enough movies to know that when psycho meets pretty, only the supernatural can keep you safe. Either that or a really well-placed firearm," Salsa said with a far off smile floating across his face.

The conversation went on like this through the rest of class, carrying over outside as I found myself walking with the three of them down the hallway and out the front doors, Robert trailing behind with a perplexed expression on his face. It was only when I spied Graham's waiting form did I realize what had happened.

"Okay guys, my ride's waiting for me," I told them and motioned towards Graham with my head.

They all looked between Graham and Robert curiously, but chose to say nothing and instead waved and said their goodbyes, with Salsa winking as he rounded the corner towards the other side of the student parking lot.

"What's with the dweeb trio?" Graham asked as I approached him.

I ignored his question and instead asked him

one of my own. "Where's Lark?"

He frowned and stared at his shoes. "She's going with Stacy to her doctor's appointment."

I understood his disappointment all too well. "Well, that shouldn't take too long. She'll be back soon to help you clean up your house, and until then, I'll help."

His mood brightened almost immediately and he grinned. "Cool. Let's get started right now. I'll go and get the car."

I started to object, to tell him that I'd walk with him to the car, but he bolted and I silently cursed him because I knew by the feel of two eyes burning into my back that he had done this on purpose.

"He likes you."

I took a deep breath and counted to ten before I turned around to face him. "Who likes me?"

"Shawn. He likes you. His mind is filled with images of your face."

I couldn't help it. I burst out laughing. "Shawn? Salsa? I doubt that. He's got a girlfriend."



Besides, he knows how I feel..."

I bit my tongue and looked away, silently cursing myself for my near slip. Of course, it didn't matter that I had stopped myself--he saw the thoughts, knew what I had meant to say.

"Grace..."

I held my hand up, not wanting him to say anything more, but he pushed my hand down, his fingers not releasing mine. The brief contact sent flashes of fire through my arm and directly to my heart, hurtling it into a mad dash.

"Grace, I have to leave. I won't be here tonight to watch over you so I want you to be extra cautious."

I pulled my hand out of his and rubbed my arm vigorously, trying almost desperately to rub the tingling sensation out, to erase the feeling from my skin. "I don't care if you're going to be there or not, Robert," I lied. "I told you it was okay to follow me around during the day, but I didn't give you permission to skulk around outside while I'm sleeping."

I saw him stiffen, saw his body go rigid upon hearing my words. But then, just as quickly, he relaxed and smiled, a sad smile that hurt to view, it was so beautiful. I turned around and whispered a silent prayer of thanks when I saw Graham's rusty green clunker pull up to the curb.

"Stay at Graham's house tonight, Grace," I heard Robert say softly as I walked away. *Don't be alone tonight.*

I wanted to shout at him that the only reason I would be alone to night was because he had given me no choice, but I held my tongue and walked towards the car.

I saw Graham's head lift up, his gaze directed beyond me, and I growled in frustration as I saw his head nod once, then twice. "Don't listen to him," I demanded as I climbed into the passenger seat. "Do not listen to him, Graham."

Graham said nothing as we pulled away and headed home, his eyes continuously glancing in the rearview mirror as though he were running from something. I turned around several times just to

make sure that he wasn't, and felt the anger rising in me at having my life being organized by my ex-boyfriend and my best friend.

For the first time, Graham pulled into the driveway of his house and parked the car. He didn't say anything for a while, just sat there and stared at the steering wheel. I glared at him, vowing not to leave the vehicle until he promised he wasn't going to listen to whatever it was that Robert had told him to do.

Graham leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the backs of his hands, a low groan coming out of his mouth. "This sucks!"

He banged his head against his hands several times before turning to look at me, his face mottled with emotion. "I don't know how you did it."

"Did what?"

He closed his eyes and returned his face to the wheel. "This. Deal with Lark and Robert and a best friend and trying to make things work without hurting anyone. I have Lark in my head telling me to let you work things out with Robert on your own, and

then Robert tells me to not let you out of my sight, and you're over here hating me because of that.

"I don't know what to do--if I listen to Lark and something happens to you, I'm pretty certain that Robert will kill me. If I listen to Robert, Lark is going to think that she can't trust me. Either way, I'm going to hurt you and that's the last thing I want to do. Is this what it was like with you?"

I gave him a half-smile and nodded. "Every single day."

"And I didn't make it easy on you, did I?"

I shook my head and he laughed. "I understand now why humans and angels stick to their own kind--this is just way too complicated."

"Graham, nothing about this is supposed to be easy. If it were, it wouldn't be worth it."

He smiled. "I hope so."

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Darkness hit quite early. Graham and I managed to clean out the living room of empty bottles and cans, but ran out of places to store them

as we moved towards the kitchen. Realizing that there was no way to cook a proper meal while the house still reeked of stale liquor and who knows what else, not to mention the fact that the last time Graham's refrigerator held anything edible was probably before Christmas, we ended up back at my house for frozen pizzas and tossed salad.

"There's about two weeks of work in that house," Graham complained as he shoveled a slice of pizza into his mouth.

"Not if Lark does it," I reminded him. "I've seen her clear away an entire wedding reception and tent in less than twenty minutes with her mother. Well, I didn't actually see her do it, more like watched as things just started disappearing."

Graham's eyes grew large as I described yet another detail about Lark that he was unaware of. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. It's something else, really, watching them work. You'd swear they simply snapped their fingers and everything just magically got put away, but it didn't. They just move that fast."

"So, what you're saying is that I pretty much stand no chance of outrunning any of them if I happen to tick them off?"

I shook my head. "They're not like that, Graham. You can't upset them the same way you can upset someone like us. They're incredibly patient--they have to be in order to do what they do, be what they are--and they're capable of reading our minds and seeing our pasts so they can figure us out in the same time it takes us to blink, which makes it easier for them to choose how to behave around us. They're created to handle our human weaknesses of anger and rage and jealousy without experiencing any of their own. It's part of what separates them from us."

"So explain Robert's jealousy then."

That caused me to pause. I looked at him and couldn't stop the smile from forming on my lips. "He'd fallen in love. It was something he'd never experienced before and that opened the door to a whole bunch of related emotions, jealousy included. At least, that's what he told me."

"And what about that Sam guy? I get that

he's supposed to be doing his job and all that, but from what you and Robert argued about, he's got it out for you--why? Why is he so angry? And how did you even get away from him if they're that fast?"

I pushed the cold slice of pizza on my plate around as I tried to figure out how to explain things to him when I didn't quite know the answers to them myself. The look on his face, however, told me that it didn't matter what I told him, he just wanted to listen and that was how I knew that it was okay to tell him the truth.

"I really don't know, Graham. I wish I could tell you that it's because he was jealous, that he was heartbroken over a lost love or that he was angry, but from everything I've learned about him, I honestly don't think he's capable of feeling anything. He told me so many lies I don't know what is and isn't the truth when it comes to him.

"As for how I was able to get away from him, the truth is that I didn't."

Graham began to choke on his salad and I hurriedly poured him a glass of milk, which he

downed quickly. "What do you mean you didn't?"

"I mean I didn't. I'm not alive because I escaped, Graham."

He pushed aside his plate and reached for my hand, squeezing it comfortingly. "You're alive because Robert saved you."

"Well, yes, but that's not the whole truth. Sam...he took his time; he wanted to torture me, to enjoy my pain. I don't know what made me think of it, but I stabbed him in his eyes with one of Robert's feathers-"

"Wait, you stabbed him in his eye with a feather? Are you serious?"

I nodded but smiled at how ridiculous that sounded. "I know it doesn't make any sense, but I knew that I wasn't going to be able to hurt him with my bare hands. I mean, he's an angel; they can't be scratched or punched or kicked--we'll injure ourselves far more greatly than we could ever imagine doing to them. Trust me, I know."

"What about shooting them? Dad's got a gun somewhere in his bedroom closet..."



Shaking my head, I sighed. "Graham, you're not listening to me. They can't be hurt."

"But you just said that you stabbed that Sam guy with a freaking feather--that sounds a lot like you *can* hurt them, Grace."

"I said I stabbed him with one of Robert's feathers. I can only guess that angels can hurt other angels, which is why it worked, but he didn't die from it. It didn't even slow him down. He tried to strangle me next, but something stopped him, something I cannot explain."

Graham's face bore a look of skepticism. "I don't get it, Grace. This Sam guy is supposed to be the archangel of death--why didn't he just touch you or snap his fingers or something? If his job is to kill people, and he's been doing it for such a long time, why take the time to hurt you?"

I began to rub my neck, the memory causing me to feel the ghost of invisible fingers tighten against my throat. "I told you, I don't know. There's a lot about that night that went unexplained."

"Well, don't take this the wrong way, Grace,

but I'm glad that he took his time."

I looked at his hand, still holding mine, and smiled. "I understand what you meant, Graham. I have to admit that there are moments when I'm glad he took his time, too."

We sat in silence for a while after that, the pizza turning to cold, congealed grease, the salad wilting in the bowl. We didn't have the ability to read each other's minds, but we both knew what the other one was thinking as time passed. We were both wondering how we had ever gotten to this point where we were both grateful for Sam's sadistic need to cause pain, and what possibly comes after such a thing.

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Robert's instructions to Graham couldn't be avoided as I cleaned up the kitchen. In a compromise--though I certainly didn't view it as such, considering that I didn't believe Robert had any place giving Graham orders of any kind--Graham agreed to spend another night on the couch after going back to his place to grab some of the clothes that he had taken back, as well as take

a shower.

I went upstairs to take a shower of my own before finally climbing beneath my covers and falling asleep.

The dreams came quickly.

They had started the night of the wedding, the night the truth about Sam came out, always repeating itself like a DVD stuck on repeat.

I was sitting on a chair in the middle of the large field in the Bellegarde family retreat. I couldn't move, though my hands and feet weren't bound. It was the middle of the day; the sun was beating down on me and branding me with its intense heat. I wasn't wearing anything other than a tank top and a pair of boxers and my skin bore the results of the exposure by the bright red glow it gave off.

A familiar laugh behind me caused me to whip my head around, the sunburn on my shoulders and neck sending rivulets of pain through my body and I fought against crying out.

"Poor, baby. Don't like the light too much, do you?"

I shook my head without really meaning to. It just happened.

"Does it hurt? Does it burn?"

Again, against my will, I answered.

I felt a hot pressure against my shoulder and I whimpered, biting my lip to remain as silent as possible. I turned to look at what it was that was on my shoulder and I lost the battle.

I cried out. A hand, withered and frail was pushing down on me, the skin glowing white...hot.

"Hello, Grace."

"S-Sam," I whispered.

"Only my friends call me Sam. Are we friends, Grace?"

"N-no. We'll never be friends--you killed my mother."

The wrinkled skin, powdery with unnatural age rippled as a throaty, airy laugh escaped from the leathery lips that curled over the only part of him that had remained untouched by the strange light

that had taken away his youth and his beauty. His eyes were closed, hiding the voids that I had created when I had stabbed him.

"She was dead long before I ever got to her, Grace."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"I'm sorry, that's something I only tell my friends," he sneered.

I stared in mute horror as his hand curled into a fist, leaving one finger pointed outwards. He trailed that finger up my burning throat, along the curve of my jaw stopping when he reached the corner of my mouth.

"Remember this? I never did get to finish what I started. Why is that, did you ever wonder?"

I shook my head slightly, the small motion pushing my skin into the razor sharp nail at the end of his extended finger. He pulled his finger back to show me the blood that now pooled at the end of his fingernail and smiled.

I glared at him defiantly, but remained silent

as he brought his finger to his lips, the crimson drop creeping into the deep cracks and forming red streaks across the leathery surface.

"Miki would be proud of me, don't you think?"

Immediately, my vision switched to a battlefield scene littered with the bodies of countless victims, their skin pale and waxy, their open eyes bloodied and staring sightlessly into the endlessness of their own deaths. Off to one side stood a gathering of some of the most beautiful people to exist, the most beautiful people that I'd ever seen.

Their skin was flawless, their hair--though ranging in different hues from the palest of whites to the deepest blue-black--shone like silk, reflecting the midday sun shining high above the grisly scene. They didn't speak, though it was quite clear that a heated conversation was being held among them.

Two faces among the group stood out instantly. Ameila, her long, jet hair pulled back and braided with a leather tie, was arguing with a male angel whose shoulder length burgundy colored hair hung loose around his neck. He was the only one in

the group whose wings were out, the white expanse of them shading several others who stood beside him.

His face was shockingly handsome, but his eyes were what caught me off guard. One was a brilliant gold, while the other glowed radiant silver. His head rose and he turned his gaze in my direction, staring as though he could sense that I was there. I gulped, unable to move, unable to run, only able to stare back. Finally, he shook his head and turned back to face Ameila, the conversation instantly returning to the same heated level.

And then there was Sam, his golden hair unmistakable among the sea of gray that the dead bodies created around him. His face was frozen with anger and disappointment—I had a suspicion as to why, but I watched as the silent conversations all ceased, everyone turning to face Sam with grim expressions.

The one that had been arguing with Ameila shook his head and I watched as Sam lunged towards him, his teeth bared dangerously, his hands forming claws that grabbed at him relentlessly. He

stopped in mid-air, hanging there clumsily a though dangling from a piece of twine.

"Samael, this is for the best. We cannot do this for you--we endanger the lives of those we are sworn to protect if we allow this," the auburn headed angel said to him, his voice unnaturally soothing and melodic. "You will find another one to love, one of your own kind, and then you'll forget all about today, all about her."

"I will never forget, Lem" Sam hissed.

The sound caused my head to start throbbing and I fell to my knees, the pain striking quickly, much quicker than it had before.

"Of course you won't forget, Samael. It was a figure of speech; forgive my poor attempt at being human. I only meant that this need will fade. You will find another soon enough--you always do--and it will be one of us. I have seen it."

Sam shook his head. "I want *her*."

The one addressed as Lem laughed. "You're acting like a petulant child, Samael. This isn't about what you want--you have no say in this matter,



Juvenile. You think that just because you've grown wings you suddenly have a say? We are Seraphim-*you* are expendable. If you aren't willing to help us see this deed done now then I suggest you leave us before we decide to turn *you* instead."

Sam's eyes went cold but he did as he was told and the vision switched once more amongst a blur of colors that swirled around me so rapidly, I had to close my eyes to keep from getting dizzy.

I don't know what was my clue, what told me it was okay to open them again, but when I did I was lying on the ground staring into two black orbs as strong and angry hands wrapped themselves around my throat, silencing me and preventing me from breathing.

His face was contorted in pain as he rose, bringing me with him. The spangles of black and white that appeared as I slowly began the process of losing consciousness nearly blocked out something that I had missed. I saw...sadness. It was difficult to make out because the horrible disfigured eyes skewed my perception of his emotions, but I couldn't mistake the distress on his face--it was so

familiar, almost too much so--and I felt a slight pang of pity for him.

And then everything was gone and I was back in bed, the covers pulled up over my chest and pressed against my throat and mouth. I pushed them down and began gasping for air, each breath feeling like I couldn't get enough, each exhalation a struggle.

The darkness in my room was striking; I sat up and leaned towards the window, looking out onto the darkened street. The extinguished streetlights were evidence of a power outage while the sky was an endless swath of black, the moon and stars having seemingly vanished. Everything was dark with the exception of a few candlelit windows and the shine of a flashlight or two.

Out of habit, my head turned to glance towards my dresser and I sighed when I saw no backlit numbers showing the time. "Of course--no power, no clock."

Seeing no point, I lay back down on the bed and stared up at the ceiling, my thoughts filled with the scenes that had played out in my dream.

Nothing had changed; nothing had deviated from it in any way. After more than two weeks of seeing the same situations repeat themselves over and over again in my head, it surprised me that only now did I notice something that I hadn't before.

"It's just a dream," I told myself as self-loathing began to rise up within me. "It isn't real--I do not feel that way."

A sudden burst of light caught my attention and I sat up quickly. I looked out of the window and sighed in relief--the power was back on. It looked like everyone in the neighborhood hadn't read their blackout safety manuals because it appeared that every single light in every house on my street was on, including one that apparently hadn't taken down its Christmas lights yet. The sound of multiple televisions set to their highest volume levels mixed with various radios and barking dogs--who were just as startled by the sudden reappearance of the lights as I probably was--to create an almost unbearable concert of unintelligible noise.

The street shone with the vibrant overuse of electricity and it didn't look like anyone was ready to

turn anything off any time soon. I blinked as porch lights began to flip on, washing the street with even more light. Groaning, I pulled my curtain shut and threw myself backwards onto my bed once more, my arm crossing over my eyes to block out the filtered glow that remained behind.

As the sounds outside slowly died down, I waited patiently for the lights to soon follow--surely it was too late for most of my neighbors to still be up--but the glow that peeked through the cracks my arm left over my eyes didn't fade. Instead, it grew brighter, as though someone had turned on my bedroom light.

I squeezed my eyes shut and pressed my arm tighter against my face, but the brightness still seeped through.

"This is ridiculous!" I huffed as I sat up, shielding my eyes from the light with my hand.

I pushed aside the curtain and saw that the lights across the street were out--everyone was asleep. There wasn't a single light on.

"What's going on?" I mumbled to myself as I

turned around.

The glow that filled my room was a bright golden hue that came not from the streetlights or the neighbors' homes. The street was dark and quiet behind the curtain. No, the glow that nearly blinded me came from a singular source that smiled at me from the center of my room, a deceptively beautiful and friendly smile that was framed by a face that would have charmed anyone else.

His eyes glittered, the golden irises liquid from a nameless joy and his hand was reaching out towards me with unknown intent. Gone were the withered skin and the colorless hair. Gone was the frail and weak body. Sam stood in my bedroom, strong and youthfully handsome. And frighteningly real.

And I screamed.

Instantly the light was gone, my room thrown once more into darkness. I could hear my heart stomping in my chest from the fear of seeing that face again, and my hands were cold and clammy from nervous sweat.

"Grace!"

I turned around to see Robert standing beside the bed, his face awash with concern and fear. I barely had time to register his presence before he came to me and quickly wrapped me in his embrace, and for a moment I forgot about everything else but the feeling of being in his arms, being safe, being loved.

"Grace, I heard you scream--what happened? You!"

I turned around and saw Graham's angry expression being led by a clenched fist at rapid speed towards Robert's face. I threw myself in front of him without thinking--or perhaps I thought too quickly--and received the punch that had been meant for Robert squarely in my right eye.



## A CHOICE

I went down like a brick, landing at Robert's feet, my hand instantly rising to cover my throbbing face. He came down with me, his hand pressing against my own, his voice soothing and comforting as he brushed my forehead with his lips several times.

Graham just stood there, staring at me in shock, his fist held up in mid-air. "You...why did you...oh my God, I hit you! Oh my God. Oh. My. God."

"You didn't mean to," I mumbled as I began to feel the heat from Robert's hand flow through my own, his healing occurring much quicker than expected.

"It's only superficial," Robert murmured, his lips still pressed against my head. "This will be over quickly."

"What are you doing in her room?" Graham asked angrily. "Why did you scare her like that? What were you trying to do?"



Robert ignored his questions, but I didn't.

"I didn't scream because of him, Graham. It was Sam--he was in my room."

Robert didn't flinch at my explanation--he already knew what had happened--but Graham fell to his knees and crawled to me, placing his hands on my legs in supplication.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I'm sorry--I was downstairs, I was here and he still got in. He could have hurt you and I was here--what if he had hurt you? What if... And I hit you--the serial killing angel comes into your room and I'm the one that hurts you. Oh, God."

I pulled myself away from Robert and wrapped my arms around Graham's trembling frame, wondering just when I had become the comforter and he the scared victim.

"I'm okay, Graham. I'm okay, see? Graham, look at me."

His eyes rose to look at my face and as he took in the lack of damage, I took in the red-rimmed eyes and the blotchy complexion. "Graham, don't beat yourself up over this. It's my fault--I put myself in

front of Robert."

"Why?"

Robert and Graham looked at each other, both surprised by the question coming out of both of their mouths.

I looked at the two of them, my head swinging one way and then the other, surprised that they didn't know.

"Graham, weren't you listening to me earlier tonight? You can't hurt them. You can't punch them and expect to have anything other than every bone in your hand and arm breaking."

He looked at me in disbelief and I couldn't blame him. I probably wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't experienced it firsthand. Sighing, I punched Robert's leg. The audible crunch of my fingers as they cracked from the impact was enough to start Graham into hysterics.

"What the hell is wrong with you? I believed you; you didn't have to go and break your hand! Are you crazy?"

Robert chimed in, his anger at being used as a demonstration piece, not to mention a punching bag being eclipsed only by his anger that I had hurt myself. "This is highly irresponsible of you--your safety is most important to me and you go and hurt yourself to prove a point? He's not Einstein but he understands that when you're talking about us, you're not exaggerating, Grace."

I stared at the two of them and then turned my focus to my hand, which now resembled a lumpy, crystalline grape. "It doesn't hurt."

Robert and Graham both stopped their scolding at my comment.

"What do you mean, it doesn't hurt?" Graham asked.

"Just like the last time," Robert remarked as he took a hold of my hand.

The familiar honeycombed bruising that covered my hand and spiraled down my wrist made Graham shake his head several times as he took it all in. "What's with the funky pattern?"

"I don't know. It always does this and nothing

I have learned about the human anatomy explains why her bruising always takes on this appearance," Robert replied before he brought my hand to his mouth. He exhaled on the bruised knuckles and smiled as almost instantly, the skin began to pink up. "You're healing much faster than normal. The damage wasn't that extensive."

"So you really can heal people, huh?" Graham remarked as he witnessed the change.

"Not anymore," came Robert's sad reply.

"What are you talking about, man? You just fixed Grace twice in less than ten minutes! If that's not healing then what is?"

Robert looked at me and then turned to look at Graham, his expression one of disappointment. "I lost my ability to heal others when I got my call. The only person I am capable of healing now is Grace."

"Have you tried to heal others?"

"Yes, I have. I have tried several times and let me tell you that there is only one thing in this world that is more disappointing than not being able to save another person's life." He turned his head

once more to look at me and I saw the sorrow that filled his eyes.

"What is your call anyway, Robert?"

His head whipped around to glare at Graham. "Why?"

Graham's expression remained sincere as he answered. "Because I love Grace. You asked me to keep her safe-"

"Which you failed to do-"

"-Yeah, but you still trusted me to do it, and I think that if you're going to ask me to things like that, I should at least know who is asking me to do it."

Robert shook his head. "No."

"Why? Are you afraid that I'll tell someone? I already know what you are, Robert. You trust Grace, right? Well she trusts me. And so does your sister. I'm already a part of this, whether you like it or not, and I think I deserve to know."

"No."

Graham's body grew rigid with anger and he

jumped to his feet. "I can't believe this. I waited on the side for you to accept me as Grace's friend. I accepted the fact that you're uncomfortable with our friendship and kept my nose out of your relationship for the most part. I defended you to Grace after you broke her heart, and even tried to convince her to take you back. I agreed to stay with her even though I didn't know why, and you still don't trust me. You know what? I take all of it back. Grace, he's a jerk. Forget trying to forgive him--obviously the only person he cares about is himself."

Graham stormed out of the room. I turned accusing eyes to Robert and shook my head. "I can't believe you." I took off after Graham, nearly tripping down the stairs in the process, and managed to reach him before he closed the door. "Graham, wait!"

He paused upon hearing me call out but continued walking, leaving the door open behind him. I followed him outside and tried to get in front of him but I had forgotten just how quick he was.

"Graham, please, stop!"

He fumbled with something in his pocket and

I groaned as he pulled out his keys. Instead of walking to his house, however, he headed towards his car. He climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. I stood outside and watched as he put the vehicle into reverse and pulled out.

I was ready to turn around when I saw the passenger door open. I turned my head to look up at my bedroom window. Through the darkness I could make out the outline of someone standing there, and I bit my lip as I fought with the decision that stood before me.

Though I remained intensely upset at Robert for what he did, the fact that I still loved him kept me from wanting to hurt him in the same manner that he had hurt me and I knew that by leaving with Graham, that would be exactly what I would be doing. And then there was Graham, who had been put aside by me far too many times because of my love for Robert, and yet he had always returned, his friendship and loyalty stronger than it was before. Would he be able to forgive me yet again?

I felt the pull in both directions and was amazed as my heart began to throb dully, pain

starting to course through my chest as I simply turned away from both of them and began to walk down the sidewalk, choosing instead to quit the game.

I said a silent prayer of thanks that everyone was asleep as the further I got from the house, the more I realized that I was dressed sparingly in my usual boxers and tank. The quiet of evening only amplified the noises that came from within the homes that I passed by, a testament to the shoddy insulation.

Snoring, laughing, even the occasional toilet flushing could all be heard as I walked by the homes that were identical to mine in shape, if not by decoration. Of course, my front yard currently looked like a lily graveyard, which made me laugh, the sound of it carried further down the street than I had intended. It was when I reached the end of the block that I finally had had enough of the chilly air and personal noises and turned around.

"Why am I walking away from my house? It's my house for crying out loud," I mumbled to myself as I began passing the familiar houses once more,



their faces dark, the curtains all drawn against the black emptiness of the street.

I could see the porch light of my home blazing a swath of amber light onto the street as I approached. I silently hoped that Graham hadn't locked the door--I wasn't interested in climbing in through the kitchen window.

When I was just a few yards away I spotted the two figures standing on the sidewalk, both of them facing me, their arms crossed over their chests in defiant poses. Graham's car was now parked in front of my driveway, the headlights still on, beaming directly onto the garage door and revealing just how badly it needed to be repainted.

I walked towards them and, when they made no attempt to say anything to me, I walked around them and back into the house. I headed to my room, not caring that my feet were probably a filthy mess, or that my clothes were slightly damp from chilled sweat, and laid on my bed, belly down, my face buried in the crook of my arm.

The door to my room eased open slowly and I turned to see Robert and Graham walk in, their

faces solemn, their mood quiet. I stared at them, unwilling to say anything to either of them.

Graham and Robert looked at each other, obviously each of them equally as unwilling to be the first to speak. Standing beside each other made it easy to see the striking differences between them. Though they were almost the same height, with Robert standing an inch or two taller, it was clear to see that Graham was more muscular, if only in appearance. Robert's dark hair was longer than Graham's, and hung slightly in his face, while Graham's was clipped short and spiked. Robert's eyes, those silver eyes that could always send my heart into a gallop, were worlds apart from the deep green of Graham's that had once made me feel like the most important person in the world.

Even the way they stood was a study in comparison. Graham was so easygoing and laid back, his posture was lazy, his feet spread apart, knees bent. Robert, on the other hand, serious and intense, stood ramrod straight, his feet close together, his knees locked. Their choice in clothes only emphasized the differences between them,

light and dark, carefree and focused.

"Grace, we wanted to apologize for putting you in the middle of our...disagreement," Robert finally said, breaking my concentration.

"Yeah, we're sorry," Graham concurred

I could say nothing to them; I simply stared.

"Your life is in danger and we made it about us--it was wrong of us to do so, and we've come to an agreement," Robert continued.

Graham nodded his head. "Yeah, Grace. We talked about it, about what happened tonight, and we've kind of compromised on a few things."

"Compromised on what?" my muffled voice asked from behind my arm.

Robert and Graham looked at each other once more and then at me.

"I can't keep you safe, Grace. I proved that tonight and it kills me to know that, to admit that, but I have to in order to help Robert do what we both agree he's meant to do. So, Robert's agreed-"

"I've agreed to tell Graham what my call is if he agrees to keep your whereabouts a secret from everyone, including your father," Robert cut in.

The words didn't register with me for a bit and I stared at the two of them, mystified by what I had just heard.

"Grace, Robert's taking you away from here to his home, and I'm going to stay here so that no one knows you're gone. When your dad comes home, I'll tell him you're staying at Stacy's or visiting Lark."

I sat up, surprised and angry. "You're going to lie to my dad?"

He nodded and grinned. "It's not like I haven't done it before. Remember the time I broke the front window with the slingshot my dad got me for my tenth birthday?"

I scowled at him. "Yeah, you told my dad that I did it and I was grounded for a month."

"I know, but if he had learned that I did it, I would have been banned from coming over--at least I could still do that while you were grounded,"

Graham reminded me.

The mixture of amusement and guilt in his voice spoke volumes and I sighed in response. "I'm not going. This is my house. I won't let Sam drive me out of my own home."

"Grace, this is not up for discussion," Robert said, the authority in his voice something that I wasn't used to. "You're coming home with me. It's not safe for you here anymore."

"Oh, but it's safe for Graham?" I snapped.

"Yes, it's safe for Graham," he replied calmly. "Sam doesn't care about Graham, and no matter what Sam's intentions, he cannot hurt the innocent. Graham's life isn't in danger."

"Why isn't he allowed to hurt the innocent, Robert? Because of the rules? The same rules that you said kept me safe because I'm your wing-bringer? The same rules that you said kept you from lying? Excuse me if I don't believe anything you say anymore," I argued, the venom in my voice surprising even me. "I'm not going. The idea of allowing you to follow me around was hard enough

to accept--I'm not ready or willing to accept staying under the same roof with you when the only thing I can hear in my head is your betrayal."

"You have no choice, Grace," Robert insisted. "Graham agrees with me that you will not be safe here. If you cannot trust me then trust him."

I looked at him and smirked, doubt and smugness suddenly filling me up with blackness. "Tell him first."

His face turned stony at my demand. "No."

"I'll leave with you if you tell him, I'll go wherever you want as long as you tell him the truth. We'll see if he still wants me to go with you once he knows what you are, Robert."

Graham looked at the two of us and frowned, the dark looks on our faces speaking of things he was suddenly unsure of, things he didn't think he wanted to know.

Robert glanced at him, his eyes narrowing as he searched Graham's mind and heart for the possible reaction that lay in wait to the truth of what Robert truly was. When his expression showed

dismay, I felt myself being emotionally split in two; part of me celebrated at what he had seen, the small victory a sign that I would be staying home, while the other part felt regret for having once again hurt him out of spite, betraying the facade of anger I had put up.

"Graham," Robert began, his voice somber and low, his eyes cast down, unable to look at Graham or me as he spoke. "My call, what it is that I was born to do is not something that is easily accepted, and I hold no doubt that you will find what I do to be repugnant and reprehensible, but if this is what Grace wants, if this is what she needs, I will tell you."

Shaking his head, Graham refused the explanation. "No. Don't tell me, Robert. This is wrong. This is wrong, Grace. Your life is in danger and you're trying to put Robert on the outs with me just so you can feel better about all of this? What's happened to you? Since when have you become so spiteful and vindictive?"

"What?" I asked, my voice sounding distressed. "You can't possibly choose his side!"

"I'm not," he replied assuredly. "I'm choosing yours. The last thing you need is seeing the two of us hate each other again, Grace, and that's what Robert sees if he tells me. I get it now, I get why you wouldn't tell me, Robert."

He walked towards the bed and sat down beside me. He wrapped his arm around my sunken shoulders and leaned his head against mine. "No matter how angry you might be at him, Grace, you still love him. It's why you didn't come with me. It's why you're fighting so hard to not go with him—you're afraid that by doing so, you'll have to admit to yourself and to him how you really feel, and that scares you more than this Sam person."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I muttered acerbically.

"I think I do. I'm probably the only person who knows you better than Robert, and he can read your mind. I know you love him, Grace. You don't spent two weeks crying your heart out every single night over someone you don't love. You don't refuse to hurt someone you don't care about. You don't try to find reasons to stay away from them unless you



know that being around them means you have to confront how you feel."

I shook my head in denial, even as the tears fell down my face in hot streams. "You don't know what you're talking about," I repeated, my voice much softer this time.

"Go with Robert, Grace. Go with him and be safe. You know he's the only person who can keep you that way."

I raised my head to stare into his watery green eyes, the vision blurred by my own liquid screen. "I'm scared," I whispered.

"I know. I'm scared, too, but he loves you. He's the only person who loves you more than I do, and he's the only person who can keep you safe. Please, Grace. Do this, if not for him, and if not for yourself, then for me."

I sighed. "Okay."

Graham's arms pulled me into a fiercely tight embrace as his head leaned forward and pressed his lips to my own, a bittersweet act that pushed the tears in both of our eyes forward, past the gates of

our lashes and showering us with their damp reminders. This was a moment I had once dreamed of. This was the act that should have been set apart from all others. Instead, it would set apart the rest of my life from the one I'd lived up until now.

From somewhere deep within me I heard the sound of something shattering, and piece by piece, the broken images of a memory from a moment in time that had yet to exist, but that I had witnessed, faded into the darkness, falling with each tear that fell from my closed eyes.

We stayed like that for what could have been only a few minutes, or it could have been hours. I only knew that I didn't feel ready to leave his arms when he finally loosened his hold. He kissed the top of my head and ruffled my hair, an almost brotherly thing to do. "Let's get you packed," he said through a sad, half-smile.

I nodded slowly, hesitantly. I couldn't look at Robert, who had remained standing beside the two of us, taking in every single word, every single sign of affection. I wouldn't realize until later that I couldn't face him because of the guilt that I felt.

I stood up and headed towards the closet. I opened it and began rummaging around for a bag large enough to carry more than just a pair of jeans and some shirts. I settled on the bag that I had always taken with me when we'd go camping.

Turning around to face my dresser, I began to dig through my drawers and shove clothes into the bag. When I was satisfied that I had packed everything I felt I needed from there, I headed towards the bathroom to retrieve my toothbrush, but Robert stopped me.

"Leave it. Your father needs to think you're still here."

"He never comes in here--he won't notice if my toothbrush is missing," I argued.

"He will. He loves you, which means he'll notice that something of yours is missing."

I sighed, not wanting to press the issue. "Fine. I'm ready."

Robert took the bag from me, and then reached for my backpack, which Graham held in his hands. He headed towards the window and

disappeared into a sea of black smoke.

"Whoa!" Graham exclaimed at the sight, his face lit up with amazement. "How'd he do that? Can they all do that?"

I nodded, and smiled slightly, unable to resist the magnetic pull of Graham's excitement and curiosity. "Lark mists white, just in case you ever see something that looks like smoke creeping around you."

"Cool," he said, grinning.

"Graham," I began, "I-I don't know what to say to you now. I don't know what I'm supposed to say. You're my best friend, and I feel like I'm leaving you to face the wolves alone."

He shook his head and reached for me, his arms wrapping around my back, my head resting on his chest, fitting so well it seemed like it belonged there. Only it didn't.

"Grace, I'll be fine. I'm more afraid of Stacy than I am of this Sam person. And besides, I'm not the one he wants, remember?"

"Just promise me that you won't go and try to be the hero, Graham. Heroes only belong in movies and books."

He chuckled and rested his chin on the top of my head. "I promise that you'll see me tomorrow in school, Grace. I'll be fine, and, thankfully, so will you. Everything's going to work out. Trust me."

I nodded, sniffing.

"It's time," Robert said from the window.

Graham's arms loosened their hold on me once more and he pulled away reluctantly. "You'd better take care of her, man," he said fiercely, his eyes never leaving mine.

"I have no intention of doing anything but," Robert replied, his hand held out towards me.

I looked at Graham's sullen face and I mouthed a quick goodbye. He forced a brave smile onto his face as I accepted Robert's hand and was pulled quickly through the window and lost the feel of the ground beneath my feet.

My arms instinctively wrapped around

Robert's neck and I buried my face there as we soared through the quiet night sky. I didn't dare open my eyes to look at him or anywhere else. I wasn't ready for the confrontation that I knew was coming.

Instead, I listened to the sound of the air brushing past my ears, and the rustling of the wings that I knew Robert had brought out. My fingers brushed against the silky soft feathers and for a brief moment, I was able to relax.

When we landed at the backdoor of Robert's home, I realized just how much I took for granted the fact that he had always taken his time when travelling in this manner from his house to mine. We had only been in the air for a few minutes, a fraction of the time usually spent on the same journey on previous trips.

The door opened and Lark stood there, her face a rainbow of emotions as she pulled me inside. "You'll be staying in my room, Grace."

"No--she's staying with me," Robert disagreed.

"Mother's rules, Robert. She stays with me," Lark said firmly as she pulled me along the long hallway that led past Robert's room, past the kitchen, and into the living room. "I'm sorry about all of this, Grace," she said sadly as she began heading upstairs.

She opened the last door at the top of the stairs and pulled me into the large room. Lark's bedroom was the largest in the house. Ameila had opted for the smallest of the three rooms upstairs, while Lark used the master bedroom. Each of the walls were painted a different color, from bright orange to a turquoise blue, a yellow that screamed out at you, to a pink that I would have never allowed in my closet, much less my room.

Her large, contemporary bed was made up of a patchwork of the same colors, though the fabrics were a mixture of suede and chenille, cotton and silk, and the patterns varied widely as well though they all somehow worked together to mesh with the walls as well as the decor.

Hung up on the walls in black frames were the headstone rubbings that she had taken from the

different cemeteries she had visited. It made for a beautiful, if not macabre display of her hobby, and they contrasted sharply with the brightness of the room itself.

"Doesn't it strike you as ironic? A blind girl's room being painted like a crayon box exploded in here?" she had joked when I had first seen it several months earlier.

I knew better than to agree--she could see the colors just fine through my own eyes, though she did explain to me something that I hadn't realized until then. "Everyone sees things differently. While you see the colors as bright and beautiful, others might see them and think they're garish and offensive. I can only see things from the perspective of the eyes I see them through. It's one of the reasons why I trust you, Grace. You see things for what they are--you don't mask the things you see with labels and preconceived notions formed from the opinions of others. I know that what you see is the truth."

Now the room looked like a brightly painted prison, and I was its newest resident.



"Stop complaining," she snapped as she walked towards the bed and pulled back the covers. "I suggest you get to sleep. You have to resume as normal a life as possible so that no one thinks anything's going on. Sam will be sifting through the minds of those around you to see if anything's changed."

I stared at her with a strange feeling of disappointment flowing in me. I climbed onto the large bed and shoved my feet beneath the sheet and comforter, lying back slowly until my head touched one of the numerous pillows she had piled against the padded headboard.

"What? Were you expecting to spend the night with Robert in his room?" she asked, laughing when she took in my appalled expression. "Oh please, that's it, isn't it? You wanted to sleep with him! Well, sorry to disappoint you, Grace, but unlike your father, mother knows when we have...guests in our rooms. It has nothing to do with propriety, so don't confuse her with being a prude or anything like that."

"So why was it okay for Robert to spend the

night with me, but not the other way around?" I couldn't help but ask.

"It's not."

I sat up to ask why but Lark was gone, I was alone.

Sighing, I turned to the side and lay down once more. The lights slowly dimmed and my eyes followed them as they closed, shutting out the muted colors in the room, shutting out everything and every thought save one.

For better or worse, I had chosen to follow Robert and that had quite possibly put my best friend in danger. Would I be able to accept the consequences of my actions should something happen to either of them? What about if something happened to just one of them? Would I be able to face the other?

And what exactly would being here prevent? Sam had found my home, found my room. He was in my head now. How would he not know that something had changed?

Then it dawned on me that I already knew

how to keep him out--the ability to hide my thoughts had manifested itself quite by accident, but it was still available to me all the same, and I had learned to control it somewhat, allowing me to pick and choose who I let in. I hugged this piece of information to me, glad for its existence, and closed my eyes.

I opened them again when I felt the presence of someone in the room.

"Lark?" I called out, but knew that it wasn't her. "Robert?"

When no answer came, I climbed out of the bed and walked over to the door. I pulled it open, the bright light from the hallway streaming in to illuminate the dark bedroom and reveal where the light switch was located. I flipped it on and looked around the room.

It was empty.

Shaking my head, I turned the light off but left the door open a crack so that a sliver of light was visible from the bed. I climbed in slowly, pulling the covers over my legs and chest before lying down.

"What the-" I lifted my head and placed my hand onto the pillow, removing the object that had been placed there.

I sat up and leaned towards the scrap of light that shone through the door and brought the object to it, a quiver of warmth running through me as I recognized what it was.

The maroon speckled pink and white flower was perfect, its five petals pointed outward, as if in supplication. I brushed a fingertip against the soft, smooth surface of each one, the center stalks gently dusting the back of my hand with the bright yellow pollen that clung to it desperately.

I felt the upward pull of my lips despite myself, the smile betraying the hurt that I still felt. I raised my arm to throw the flower away from me, but again, against everything that told me it was the right thing to do, I lowered my arm and brought the flower closer to me. I leaned back and rested my head on the pillow, the flower now bathed in darkness but still beautiful in its silhouette.

"Why do you do this to me?" I whispered. "Why do you make me feel these things when all I

want to do is forget?"

I didn't expect a reply which is why it surprised me when, after not receiving one, I felt the sting of tears as my eyes watered in disappointment. I placed the flower on the pillow next to me and stared at it until my eyes closed.

For the first time in two weeks, I didn't dream of Sam.

I didn't dream at all.



## NOT FOR CHILDREN'S EARS

When I woke up to see Graham sitting beside me on the bed, I forgot where I was and moved to sit up but my feet didn't touch the ground. Instead, they encountered more bed, more sheets, more comforter; more of everything I wasn't used to.

"What?" I mumbled as I rubbed my eyes and looked at my surroundings, the brightness nearly blinding. "Oh dear bananas. How can she wake up to this every morning?"

"I like it," Graham said cheerfully, his large smile looking almost comical.

"You would," I muttered as I turned around to climb out of bed, this time accomplishing the job with little difficulty. "What time is it?"

"It's nearly seven. I'm taking you to school today--no changes to the routine; that's what Robert instructed."

"Since when did you become his lapdog?" I griped as I rifled through my bag of clothes. "I don't believe it--I forgot to pack my boots!"

Graham's smile grew impossibly wider. "I guess you'll just have to borrow something of Lark's."

Grimacing, I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I'm not wearing one of her prissy little shoes with my jeans. That'll look too...that's just not me, okay?"

He shrugged and leaned back on his elbows. "Well, you could go barefoot, I suppose. It's a good thing winter's gone, eh?"

"You're not helping, Graham," I said, my voice taking on a rather disagreeable tone. "I need my boots."

Lark walked in and gave me a once over, shaking her head at what she saw through Graham's eyes. "You're hideous in the morning, Grace. You'd think that sleeping in my room would help with your disposition, or at least with your appearance, but apparently some people can't be helped. Here," she said, tossing a bag onto the bed.

"What is it?" I asked as I reached for it, but got no response. I looked up and shook my head.



Lark and Graham were facing each other, their hands clasped, their foreheads pressed together. Despite myself, I felt a slight pang of envy.

Sighing, I turned my attention back to the bag and pulled out a large box. I removed the lid and whooped with joy. "My boots!"

I pulled them out and hugged them to my chest then quickly pulled them away from me, looking to make sure that no one had seen that.

"Oh, I saw that," Lark laughed.

"So did I," Graham chuckled.

I wrinkled my nose at them and quickly gathered a pair of jeans and a shirt together and then dashed into the bathroom, the boots gripped tightly in my hand. I changed my clothes hastily, not realizing I had put my shirt on backwards...twice, and then washed my face. I saw the packaged toothbrush beside the sink and opened it.

I brushed my teeth and then ran my fingers through my hair, trying my best to tame it before stepping out to face the amused gazes of Lark and Graham, who hadn't exactly changed positions, just

moved their faces so they could see me.

"Alright, let's go," I said as I shoved my sleeping clothes into the larger bag and then grabbing my backpack from the floor beside the bed.

"Aren't you going to eat breakfast?" Lark asked, surprised at my rush.

"Did your mother make it?"

When Lark nodded enthusiastically I frowned and shook my head. "No thanks. I'll just grab an apple or something on the way out."

Graham followed me out of the room and down the stairs, his voice tinged with confusion and semi-offense. "Why aren't you going to eat what Lark's mom cooked for breakfast?"

I stopped and turned to look at him. "Because she can't cook--the woman can't even make Jell-O, okay? I'm not about to eat something she cooked if she can't even make something that requires no cooking."

I heard him choke, saw his eyes bulge, and

knew--instinctively, down to the very tips of my toes--that I had just managed to monumentally swallow my foot whole as I turned around to face a smiling, yet visibly annoyed Ameila.

"Uh-I-uh," I stuttered as I tried to find the right words to say that would lessen the impact of my thoughtless statement, but I knew that there was no point when I saw her raise an eyebrow, curious and amused at the flustered state I was in.

"Oh hell, I'm sorry but it's the truth. I don't think you can cook, which is saying a lot since I'm pretty certain you can do everything else perfectly."

I braced myself for the backlash that I knew was coming, even closed my eyes and cringed, but nothing came.

Nothing except the beautiful, almost bell-like sound of Ameila's laughter. "Oh Grace, it's such a wonderful thing to have such honesty around me. You have to understand that until you entered our lives, the only thing I ever made was a glass of water, and even that I'm sure I did incorrectly. I take no offense to your opinion, dear. I welcome it, in fact."

"Thank...you?" I managed to say before she began to walk away. Suddenly I remembered something that had been weighing on my mind the past couple of days and I didn't want to miss the opportunity that lay before me so I ran towards her and blocked her path. "Um, Ameila, could I talk to you? You know, ask you a few personal questions?"

She looked at me, her eyes crinkled with amusement and smiled. "Of course, but not until after school, which I think you're going to be late for if you don't hurry."

Her tone was one that brooked no refusal, despite the motherly tone. I nodded and smiled, thankful that she had agreed to being questioned, and turned to face Graham, who still looked dumbstruck.

"She doesn't look old enough to be their mom," he managed to say when I kicked him in his shin.

"That's it? That's all you've got to say?" I laughed. "Come on, we're going to be late."

"Lark looks like her. Don't you think she

looks like her? Do you think that she'll age well? I think she'll age well," Graham continued to mumble behind me as we walked out the front door, Graham's car waiting out front.

"She doesn't age at all, Graham, or didn't you realize that when you learned she was five-hundred-years old?"

I turned around to see if Lark was behind me and frowned when she wasn't. "Where'd Lark go? She was right-"

"I'm already in the car. Come on, you heard Mother; we're going to be late," her chorus-like voice called out from the backseat of the green Buick.

Grinning, I opened the passenger-side door and climbed in. Graham looked miffed that Lark wouldn't be sitting beside him until Lark leaned forward her arms wrapping around the seat to hold him. I heard the slight crunch of metal as it buckled underneath her strong arms, and couldn't keep a giggle from escaping when Graham's eyes once again bulged out.

"Did you just hurt my car?"

"No," Lark replied, though the indentation her arms left in the shape of the seat was quite evident. "Just drive, okay?" She looked at me and motioned to the damage, a worried look on her face.

I simply shook my head and smiled. I reached down to grab my backpack from between my knees and stopped.

The flower that had been on my pillow was now pinned to my bag, a small folded note attached to it.

I pulled the note from the pin and opened it up, the familiar elegant handwriting forming three simple words and a name that made my heart beat just a bit faster in my chest, reminding me that it was still there, still alive, despite all of the evidence to the contrary.

I decided to let it continue to prove me wrong.

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Perhaps it was because my mind was

elsewhere, or perhaps it was because it was yet another day without the fear of running into--or being run down by--Erica Hamilton in the halls, but the day passed by rather quickly, the final bell a welcomed relief. As he had the day before, Robert walked beside me after class, though he remained off to the side and slightly behind me. I realized he was doing this to give me the space that I needed, and I didn't bother fighting the smile that formed on my lips.

Graham met me outside and quickly, almost too quickly, I was back in the car, heading towards Lark and Robert's house. Lark had opted to remain behind with Stacy, who had yet to be informed of what was happening. This bothered me, but as Lark had explained, she already had too much on her plate to be concerned about; adding another worry on top of everything she already had to face would just be cruel and selfish of all of us.

The drive to the Bellegarde house during the day was a sight to see. The tall, white walls that surrounded the property gave way to ornate wrought iron gates that were flanked, ironically, by two large

angel statues.

"Isn't that a little dangerous?" Graham asked as we passed them once the gates opened. "I mean, that's like a Vampire living in a house that's got coffins sitting in the driveway."

My laughter filled the car, the sound of it startling to the both of us. "Graham, no one knows that angels live here except other angels and the electus patronus."

"The what-us pa-who-us?"

I looked at his perplexed expression and started once again into a fit of laughter. "The electus patronus, Graham; EPs. I don't know much about them, really. I've met a few of them, one who actually dated Robert a long time ago, and they're a very...interesting bunch. They're all families who take care of the angels' secret. I'm sure that when Lark finally introduces you to them, you'll learn a lot more than I will."

As Graham parked the car at the front of the house, he leaned back into his seat, frustration rolling through his body. "Why, Grace? Why is it that



you're always kept in the dark about these things? I don't get why Robert isn't straight with you when you risk so much just by being with him."

Looking out the window, I felt a small sadness creep back into me, the laughter now long gone. "I don't know either, Graham. But I intend to get some answers to my questions today, and it won't be from Robert."

Graham nodded, his gaze locked on the blue front door of the Bellegarde home. "I hope you do, Grace. And I hope that you tell me everything that you've learned so that I don't go into this blind myself."

I hugged him and exited the car, standing outside the front door for a long while after he left before finally gathering the courage to step forward.

The door opened immediately, Robert standing on the opposite end waiting for me. I walked past him, entering the house as though for the first time, the bright afternoon sun filling it with warmth and light that hinted at the enlightenment that I would receive today, whether it be given freely or demanded by me.

Ameila stood in the living room, her hands held out in welcome, and I walked towards her eagerly, the promise on her face a very welcome beginning indeed.

"Grace, you're here at last--that Graham should learn to drive a bit faster," she said as she pulled me to the large couch.

"It's not his fault," I laughed, feeling at ease by her warm and friendly smile. "His car is older than he is."

She nodded, already knowing the story. "Well, if he continues to see Lark, he'll need to figure out a faster means of transportation, won't he?"

My head bobbed up and down in agreement as I bit back another laugh. "He loves that car, though. We've made a lot of memories in that car."

"I do not doubt that. Now tell me, what is it that you want to know, Grace?"

I moved to turn my head but Ameila placed her hand beneath my chin, forcing me to look at her

instead. "Don't worry about Robert--he's not here--I sent him away so that he won't make you feel all nervous with our girl talk. So tell me what's on your mind, dear."

I stared at her and took several deep breaths, gathering up the courage to ask the questions that had piled up over the past few months.

"Can I ask you anything?"

She smiled and nodded. "Yes."

"And will you answer them?"

"Yes, Grace, I will. I think it's time that you finally received the answers you've been looking for."

I felt an intense amount of weight lift off my shoulders at her reply and I began to mentally sift through the dozens of questions in my mind, each one seeming to have a greater importance than the other the more I thought.

"Grace, would it make it easier for you if I simply read your mind and answered the questions

as they came?"

I had forgotten that Ameila had chosen to block out the thoughts of humans around her; the dark scenes that played out in our minds were far too disturbing for her. Had she not, she feared that she'd lose her desire to continue to help my kind, and that went against the very nature of every angel's call. It was a painful decision, but she did it for both herself and for others like me.

"Sure," I told her, my smile reassuring.

She leaned in closer to me. "Such pretty brown eyes, Grace," she said with a soft lilt, her accent thick and rolling. "You have so many worries, so many questions. Poor thing, your head must feel so full."

She brushed her hand down my hair, pushing it behind my ears, and lifted my face so that I was staring directly at her. "First question--is what Robert told you about my call true. Yes, Grace, it is. I use my ability to change form to help others make their peace with those they have lost, those they have wronged, and sometimes, just to help them ease an unjustified guilty conscience."

"So...you really can change into something other than...a dog?"

As if to answer my question, Ameila's face began to change, almost dissolve before me into an amorphous shape that bore a striking resemblance to melted ice cream. Before I could grow accustomed to the appearance of melted flesh, the shapeless blob began reforming into the familiar face that belonged to Stacy.

Everything shifted around her, her body shrinking in height, her skin darkening slightly, her hair pulling up into her scalp so that the length was much shorter. The hands that held onto mine grew heated, almost too hot, and I stared in amazement as they became smaller, the perfectly manicured nails growing short and jagged.

"Holy-"

"Believe me now?"

My jaw dropped open at the sound of Stacy's voice. "I don't think I really doubted you, but yeah, I do believe you."

Stacy's smile grinned back at me before disappearing once more into a blob of flesh toned goo for what could have only been a fraction of a second before Ameila's flawless face appeared.

"Next question," she said, Stacy's voice now gone, replaced with the chorus of bells that made up her own. "You want to know if I've ever become someone in your life. I must answer this honestly, Grace, but I want you to know what it is that you're asking because the truth might not be something that you will accept."

"I want the truth, Ameila, no matter how difficult it is to take," I told her honestly. "I'm done with secrets."

"So be it. Yes, Grace, I've taken on the form of those in your life that hold a place of significance, the most recent one being the librarian shortly after she became too ill to work."

I nodded slowly, accepting her explanation with little hesitation. "You were the one who told me to read that poem, not Miss Maggie," I said softly, my voice wavering slightly from the weight of the truth that I had suspected for a while, but never fully

accepted until now.

"Yes. I felt that I needed to keep your head and heart above water when it came to my son--understanding the call and being patient when it arrives is a very difficult thing to endure for an angel, much less a human. And I knew that the only way I could do this was to be someone you trusted, someone whose opinions you would accept. Miss Maggie was the perfect choice. Being her allowed me to watch over you without appearing to do so, and it gave me every opportunity to help you."

I took this in and allowed it to ferment within me, pleased to find that it didn't leave me unsettled. "Who else? Was there anyone else?"

"Not anyone of significance, really; a paramedic after you were hit by that car, a nurse who made sure a certain doctor was aware of your importance to this family, a neighbor who kept interest focused elsewhere, rather than on your home. I've tried to remain distant in my true form so that you wouldn't be able to feel my presence when I was in another--I didn't want you to feel betrayed, Grace. It's a difficult emotion to accept, and even

more difficult to forgive. I never want you to feel that from this family."

I gazed at her, mystified by her words. Did she not know what happened between Robert and me? Was she unaware of his betrayal?

Before I was given a chance to ask her about it, she began to answer another question, one that I hadn't given much thought to but obviously one she felt needed addressing.

"The reason you were able to learn about my call was because you aren't just my son's girlfriend, or even his wing-bringer. You both are two halves of a whole, joined together by something that goes beyond angel and human.

"He is as much a human through you as you are an angel through him; your minds are not separate; they are not individual, which allows you to know our secrets without the consequences that others of your kind would face. It's why that first joining of thoughts caused you to black out--your mind was calling the thoughts home, welcoming them--his thoughts are yours, just as your thoughts are his."



My head jerked back in stunted confusion. "I don't understand. I'm human; Robert's an angel. How can his mind not be whole without mine when his is so much more...well, just more?"

"How can the sun be the sun without the moon to compliment it in the sky? The moon is incapable of shining on its own because it is not a star, and the sun can never truly be appreciated without the beauty of the moon because only then can one look directly at its light and not be blinded. You, Grace, are the warm sun, while Robert is the cold moon, and just as they bring balance to the sky, you bring balance to each other."

As hard as I tried, it was difficult for me to not digest what she had said, her explanation sounding far too beautiful to describe the ugliness that had become what now lay between Robert and me. "Ameila," I began, my lips turned down in a disturbed frown, "How much do you know about my relationship with Robert?"

Her lips curved up with pleasure, her eyes sparkling with it. "I know that he loves you very

much, and that he values your life far more than his own. Since the first moment he laid eyes on you, he's changed into someone that I feel immensely proud of. These past few weeks, he's sought the guidance of the Seraphim, which tells me that he's preparing to take a major step. I have chosen to keep from searching his thoughts, though I'm certain he'd have prevented me anyway, but there are moments when I wonder what he has planned for the two of you."

She seemed so serene and happy; I couldn't spoil her idyllic notions with the truth, no matter how much it begged to be told. I simply smiled through gritted teeth and stared out of the large window behind her.

"And so we have come to the crux of the matter, the question that stands apart from all others. I'm amazed that you didn't ask Robert to explain this, but then again, even he is in disbelief of the truth. Poor Grace, to be so close to the answers and yet denied them time and time again."

Confused, I turned my gaze towards her, her silvery eyes soft and warm with genuine affection

and concern. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the question of physical relations, Grace. You've been wondering why, though you love Robert, and know that he loves you, you have yet to consummate your relationship. Am I right?"

I opened my mouth, but quickly shut it as I didn't know what to answer, how to answer. The broaching of the subject had always been difficult with Robert, and I had never thought to ask Lark about it though I was fairly certain that she had far more extensive knowledge on the subject than he would, which had left Ameila. But the idea of asking their mother about what it meant to be...physical with one of her kind had always felt wrong. It would be akin to Robert asking my dad about what it meant to be intimate with another human--it was just uncomfortable and unimaginable, not to mention gross.

But as I looked at Ameila, saw the sad sincerity in her face, I felt a strange sense of ease come over me. I took a deep breath and began to explain to her what it was that frustrated me so

greatly.

"I want to know why he always pushed me away, why when I tried to get closer he kept telling me he's not ready, that he needs to learn to control himself first. There've been times when we'd start to lose ourselves in the moment, but then he just...stops. He said he was trying to protect me, but I know that's not it. He wants more. I feel it in the way he holds me, the way he looks at me.

"Why does he hold back? Does he doubt himself? Or is it just because it's me? I mean, I know I'm not beautiful like the rest of your kind; you're angels, for crying out loud! No one's gonna look as beautiful as you do. But he always made it a point to tell me that I was beautiful, and I believed him; now I don't know. I don't know what to think."

Ameila's smile grew pained, the sadness that formed at what I had just described blatant in her eyes. She patted my hand and sighed with great disappointment. I dreaded then what she was about to say, an intense need to flee suddenly coming over me. She must have sensed it too because her hold on my hand tightened, her

expression changing from grave to semi-hopeful.

"Grace, I'm about to tell you something that will undoubtedly leave you feeling confused and far more frustrated than you already are, but the answers to all of your questions lies in what you're about to hear. You won't be happy with them, but you will find a sense of closure and perhaps you'll see with clearer eyes just what exactly lies in store for you."

I closed my eyes as Ameila began her story, her voice flowing in and around me, surrounding me with its soft musical lilt.

"Angels are creatures that have a great affinity for love. We are born knowing nothing else, knowing a need for nothing else except that first contact, that first glimpse of love unconditional. As we age and learn about what we are, what our purpose is in life and existence, we forget love and instead we replace it with duty and ambition. It consumes us, drives us into distraction so that we forget what it first felt like to love and be loved.

"So, when it comes back to us, it hits us like a rocket, a burst of energy and heat that takes over

everything else, if only for a time. Unfortunately for angels, we, like humans, tend to confuse lust with love because they both incite the same initial feelings within us. Though we are portrayed as perfect by your kind, we are far from it. We are flawed in many ways which is why we have so many laws, so many rules, and the ones who end up getting hurt when we break those laws are those we are born to protect, to teach...to love.

"But, just like humans, there are those of my kind that rebel against the rules set before them. They go against the rules of God and of our own system of laws and the end results can be as mild as an errant guardian who takes his position too literally to a group of angels who turn life upside down, creating chaos and havoc in both worlds."

She paused and I could have sworn she looked flustered, her skin taking on a strangely pink hue that I knew didn't come from blood rushing to her cheeks but something else. After studying her in her silence I knew it to be the glow of anger that radiated outwards with such intensity it had created a screen of red around her. Her eyes closed as she

fought against the growing agitation within her, her hands squeezing almost cruelly on my own, her body vibrating with the fury that I feared instantly.

"A-Ameila?" I said, my voice low in my throat. I didn't move, didn't even blink as she silently endured her own inner turmoil.

Finally, slowly, she opened her eyes and sighed with relief, though it was plain that she had fought against a supernatural rage that had threatened to consume everything around her, including me, simply because she was remembering something that I would soon learn. Her eyes were tinged with a reddish hue, remnants of the thick veil of anger that had taken over her, and she quickly blinked it away in a shower of ruby red tears that fell into her waiting hand.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I needed to prepare myself for this--I have never spoken of it to any human and the consequences of my telling you without releasing some of the anger that still flows within so many of us would have been grave, indeed."

I shook my head, refusing her apology when none was needed. "I'm only concerned with whether

or not you really want to tell me all of this; if it upsets you this much, perhaps I shouldn't know any of it."

The coldness in her eyes told me without words that it was too late to stop now. I would hear the truth, whether I wanted to or not. "Now, let's talk about the Nephilim," she said in a grave voice.





# NEPHILIM

Ameila's voice was paper thin as she spoke, her eyes focused on something unseen. "The angels that you've seen, those of us who walk among you, are the second coming. There were others who came before us, before there were rules and laws that protected us from our own urges. They were the Grigori, the watchers. They came down from the heavens to watch over man, to help guide them down the proper paths, and to shelter them from the storms that come from war and famine, greed and hatred.

"Some of the Grigori were obedient in their duty, following their call as they were destined to. They acted as guides, as healers, as leaders for man while their civilizations grew and prospered. And then there were others who prevented the humans from living life as they were meant to, free of mind and free of spirit.

"God did not create your kind to be obedient dogs, Grace. He blessed you with thought and purpose and drive--much like angels in a way--but

he also gave you something that is far more valuable than anything else you could possess. He gave you choice.

"As a result, there were many of the Grigori who became angry at mankind. They resented the fact that humans--with your minds, stunted and ignorant when compared to our own--were allowed the freedom to do as you will, while we are bound by duty and obligation to our brethren, to our call without question and most certainly without doubt, and with punishments that can stretch centuries for failure of this.

"So the Grigori who had grown to resent man, resent what humans possessed simply stopped; they began to live their lives as dictated not by angelic law, but by human freedoms and the weakness of man. To the humans, they revealed our secrets, our history, our existence to anyone who would listen, anyone who would do as was expected of them and spread the tale. In exchange for this, the humans began to dote on them, forgetting the reasons why the angels existed in the first place.

"These rogue Grigori, drunk on the idol worship and the power they realized they possessed over man, soon adopted and adapted to the vices of their human charges, turning from intelligent creatures of divine birth into crazed and power hungry creatures whose only goal was to prove that they had the strength to defy God and His laws. They created a heaven for themselves amongst the humans they now viewed as their pets. Their lives were now free from secrecy and they could live openly among the humans in a world of their own making, Gods in their minds and hearts.

"The Grigori became lost to us then, for the whole of them fell out of God's graces solely on the acts of a few. These fallen angels, the lost ones as they are known to us, knowing that they were now denied entrance into Heaven, began to roam the earth as though it were their own playground, destroying and creating without care, without concern for the consequences.

"And I feel I must share this one bit of information so that you understand how things could become so disastrous in what amounts to a very

short time span for my kind: Angels, males in particular, are very...virile.

"The lost ones, with their beauty and their ability to charm humans, soon found that it was child's play to woo girl after girl, woman after woman--whether they be virgin, married, widowed, poor, wealthy, peasant, aristocratic didn't matter. They knew no preference, only that they felt a need, a lustful desire to mate with each and every female human they could find until the earth was littered with the far too easily gained results of these couplings

"These offspring were the Nephilim; half-angel, half-human children who possessed the divine gifts from their fathers. Some were wonderful children, of course, who possessed the beauty of their fathers and the humanity of their mothers, equally balanced to create a child so indistinguishable from their human counterparts, it remains unknown to this day just how many of them there actually were.

These Nephilim were blessings upon the people, with their abilities to heal, to teach, to see

the future and warn of famine, war, and even the coming of death himself. They were soon indispensable to their villages. The humans for a time viewed these children as gifts from God, and so it is quite easy to see why the lost ones were justified in their belief that they had, in fact, created their own heaven.

"But while there were Nephilim whose blood flowed pure and innocent, as with all things, there were others who were nothing short of monstrosities, evil little perversions that had the power of the divine flowing in their veins. They were giants, demons who terrorized their human counterparts and fellow Nephilim, lorded over them with their unnatural size, strength, and abilities and backed by their fathers who were hungry for control. Soon, the world was thrown into chaos, the natural balance of things having been altered beyond any form of redemption,"

She stood up and began to pace before me, her movements smooth and graceful in a way that could only be supernatural and divine. It was only in her face that you could see the agitation that

bubbled just below the surface.

"What those lost ones did, what they brought down on the world, it set in motion something that couldn't be undone, something that changed everyone's world--human, angel, creature--and not necessarily for the better.

"Have you heard of the story of Noah, Grace?"

"Isn't that the story of the old man with the big boat full of animals?" I said in response, my recollection dismally poor.

She nodded solemnly though she smiled at my answer. "Most people only know one segment of the story. Noah built an ark and filled it with two of each creature, as per God's instructions, and lived with his family among the animals while God flooded the earth. What they do not know is the real reason why the floods were brought forth. The story of God being upset at the wickedness of man is only the partial truth.

"The archangel Uriel, the first of my kind and the only one who was allowed to pass through the

gates between Heaven and Earth during the Grigori's domination and destruction, was given the task of informing Noah of what he was to do, of what God desired of him. Noah was a simple man who loved his God, but also loved his fellow man. It pained him to know that those whom he called friend were to perish for the sins of rogue angels and their offspring, but he was also a man of faith. He believed Uriel's words, and so did as he was told, obedient and dutiful despite his doubts.

"He built an ark that held within it the creatures of the world that couldn't fly or swim during the great flood, and soon he watched as the world he knew drowned right before his eyes, the murder of time burned forever into his memory.

"Millions died--humans, Grigori, Nephilim--they all perished beneath the rising seas and lakes as God's punishing rain took with it the immortality of those who should have survived. The innocent along with the guilty were condemned because of the actions of the lost ones and their spawn. Noah then asked Uriel as the bodies began to litter the surface of the water, stretching out for miles all



around the ark, 'why?' and Uriel could not lie.

"He told him that the angels had begun to fight amongst themselves, that there were those who agreed with the Grigori about the freedoms that humans were allowed to enjoy that angels were not. We, who had been born predestined, had all this ability and yet no free will to do as we pleased. It had angered so many of us, splintered us, and it became apparent that a war was imminent.

"Do you know what that will do to the heavens?' Uriel asked Noah, and Noah, ever faithful replied, 'the sun will disappear from the sky and the world will be covered in darkness'. Uriel was amazed at this answer, for it was correct.

"Heaven is the hope for the people of the world. It's the light that keeps tired feet moving, it's the bread that keeps the hungry working, and it's the water that keeps the thirsty searching. If the angels in Heaven were to start a war amongst themselves, Heaven would hold nothing for the souls that headed there except grief and suffering--imagine leaving loved ones behind to enter a war zone that you can never leave. This dark knowledge would be

reflected in the souls that still existed on Earth, and the darkness of despair and anger would blanket everything, suffocating everything. Faith would die--without faith, we would no longer be necessary, which means that we, too, would die."

Ameila returned to her place on the couch beside me and she gripped my shoulders tightly, her expression intense, the silver in her eyes cold and hard like steel orbs suspended in time.

"Grace, when the angels saw what God was willing to do to everything he had created, everything that we had guarded over for so long, it rattled us all. The flood had a divine purpose, to kill the mortal and immortal alike--wing-bringers, Nephilim, and children were all sacrificed to bring peace to the heavens.

"And yet Noah remained steadfast in his faith, despite the carnage that surrounded him, despite the betrayal of weakness from the angels and humans alike, and it surprised us all. From then on, we grew to be a rigid entity. Laws and rules replaced faith and fellowship for we had to ensure that those like Noah would never again be let down

by our immortal failings.

"We had been entrusted to protect the human race, and so we all became watchers--Seraphim, Archangel, Thrones, and others--and we began the cleanup of the world while the rain still fell, erasing the slate if you will.

"The first and most significant act of the angels after the rain had ended and the sun emerged was the forbidding of any physical intimacies between the human and the angel. Any violation of this brooked instant punishment of death for the human and banishment for the angel, insuring that nothing like the events that had led to the flood could ever happen again."

This last part was said softly, as though I wasn't meant to hear it at all. But I did.

"So you see, Grace," she said with a hopeful air, "The reason that Robert pushes you away is not because he doesn't desire you. It's that he loves you too much and doesn't want to lose you."

"I see," I whispered.

"This doesn't mean that the two of you

cannot be intimate, though. There is a way for you two to be together that would be acceptable."

I already knew the answer to that. "I'd have to turn." My voice was low, rough with emotion and the chaos that her words had caused within me.

Her hands dropped down to mine, her smile sincere as she nodded. "Yes, you'd have to turn, but that isn't all. You're a human, Grace. Humans, turned or not, possess the ability to attract angels because you still retain the one thing we want most of all. It is...difficult for some to resist the temptation that you present.

"Because of this, we demand that you commit yourself to us, body and soul. To fail to do this will result in consequences that are fatal to both human and angel alike."

"Wait," I cut in, Lark's words coming back to me as clearly as if she were whispering them into my ear. "I thought the only reason an angel died was because they lied, or did something seriously wrong."

Ameila's forehead puckered as she

struggled with how to respond. I could see her contemplate whether or not to continue on as she had before I had interrupted, the decision appearing far more difficult than I would have imagined. Taking a deep breath, she nodded to herself--or maybe she was nodding at something voiced in her head that belonged to someone else--and looked up at me with determined eyes.

"An angel can die for many reasons, reasons almost as numerable as those for humans. And while we do not dwell on death, we do fear it and for good reason. Painful though a death by lying can be, and as lengthy as dying as a mortal can be, those are not the most dreaded. They are just the most common."

"So what is?" I dared to ask though I wasn't exactly sure I wanted to know.

"Rage," was all she said. She looked away and stood up quickly, her body vibrating from some pent-up emotion.

"Ameila, if I asked the wrong question, I'm sorry," I said, my voice trembling with fear as I watched Ameila's reaction to her own answer.

"Angels aren't meant to understand or feel rage. We're not meant to experience jealousy or hatred. But there are the rare occasions when we do, and more times than not, we don't understand it. Jealousy is the more common of the three.

"But rage...it can physically change an angel, turn one's heart dead to forgiveness and charity; even love. An angel filled with rage will hunt down the source of its anger and destroy it and every living thing around it, finally destroying itself once everything else is gone. Do you understand what this means, Grace?"

I admit to not knowing much when it came to the world that Ameila described, with God and rules dictating sin and what not. But I understood what she was hinting at. "The angel commits suicide."

She nodded gravely, her skin almost turning grey with distaste. "A soul cannot enter Heaven when one commits suicide. There are no exceptions, for human *or* angel. Damned, for all eternity...that is what results from rage, Grace."

"And...the Nephilim and Grigori--did their

souls make it to Heaven?"

She didn't answer for a while, instead her gaze travelled to a slowly darkening window, the orange-red sky blazing like a warning to anyone who dared to look up. After the sun had finally disappeared and the black velvet of the nighttime sky emerged did she speak again, her voice much lower and severe.

"The innocent and guilty were all condemned."

"Why is it that I've only heard of the Nephilim from you, Ameila? Where is the description of them in history? I mean, angels are everywhere, and the story of Noah's Ark gets told so often it's almost a Seuss story. Why not anything about these monsters?"

Ameila stood up and headed to a bookshelf that flanked the fireplace that stood in the center of the far facing wall in the living room. Without even looking she pulled down a thick, black, leather-bound book. She opened it, the pages falling exactly as she wanted them to. An image of a boy holding a head that was at least three times the size

of his own stared out at us, a large body laying prone on the ground behind him.

She pointed to the boy, his dark hair full of bright curls, his face smug with pride. "David. He slew the giant Goliath not once, but twice in a battle for a kingdom, for freedom, and for hope." She waved her hand negligently over the pages and they began to turn, as though a strong breeze had just blown in. When the pages stopped on yet another image, they revealed a girl encircled in a sphere, half shaded, half filled with light, who wore a dress made of feathers, her feet flexed so that she stood on her toes, her arms held out like the wings of a bird. Behind her, a young man stood with his arms reaching for her, a look of enchantment in his eyes.

"Odette," Ameila said as she pointed to the girl. "Though not her original name, time has branded her as such, so Odette she is. She was a shape-shifter who could take on the form of any creature, though she preferred that of the graceful swan. The darkness you see here, that became the evil Rothbart who cast a spell upon Odette and turned her into a swan. Rothbart never existed, but it



made it easier to accept as a story a beautiful woman being cursed with the body of an animal than a young girl born with the ability to change into that form all on her own.

"So you see, Grace, biblical story or famous ballet, it is proof that stories of the Nephilim do exist."

"So, is what you've just told me a story, or is this a history?" I asked, needing to hear her speak, to fill the silence threatening to shatter what little resolve I had left that kept me from screaming out from all that she had already told me.

"I do not tell stories," she said simply. That would be as much of an answer as I'd get and I wasn't about to ask for anything more.

As darkness began to settle around us, Ameila walked over to a lamp and touched its shade, the soft light flickering on instantly. She seemed on edge, something I had never seen before. It made me feel quite uneasy.

"You've seen so much in the short time since you've been on this earth, so many things that one

so young should never have to. I wish...I wish I could tell you that from this moment forward that things will only get easier, but I can't. Your darkest days have yet to come, and I am fearful of it."

"Why?" I hesitated to ask.

She raised her eyes to me and in the lamplight, the silver became gold and I knew.

I sat in the semi-darkness with Ameila by my side for quite some time before the rumbling in my stomach reminded me that though I was among angels, I was still human, with human needs. Ameila's eyes lit up at the simple sign, and I groaned inwardly.

"I have a new method of cooking that I think you will enjoy immensely, Grace," she said cheerfully, glad for the change of mood.

"Oh...good," I struggled to say as she coaxed me into the kitchen.

She pulled out a stool for me to sit on and I balanced myself on it, dreading the display that was about to take place before me. She smiled--grinned like someone who'd lost their mind, actually--and

wiggled her fingers as she walked towards the refrigerator. She pulled open the freezer door and retrieved several containers.

"Voila, my new method of cooking: pre-packaged and frozen meals. I ordered them this morning. Which would prefer? There's a vegetarian lasagna, a penne with scallops and garlic cream sauce, and a chicken Marsala over farfalle?"

I stared at her in amazement and guilt and chose the chicken.

"Excellent choice. I only ordered dishes for one, since you're the only one who truly needs to eat here, but if you have guests over, you can always call up for delivery. There's a list of numbers beside the phone of the places that know this house," she explained as she placed the container of chicken and pasta into the microwave.

As the whirring of the microwave filled the quiet of the kitchen, I watched Ameila as she, in turn, watched the spinning dish. Her face held a look of an almost irreversible sadness and I felt a slight prickling at the base of my neck when she turned to gaze upon me.

"Grace, I know it seems like such an inopportune time to discuss such things, but I feel that I must ask you when you plan on turning. Robert hasn't spoken to me about it, but I feel that the sooner it is done, the better. We can only keep your mortal self safe for so long. Lark has yet to experience her call, but when she does, she'll leave.

"I have my own call that I must answer, and cannot be here with you at all times, either. Robert has more flexibility with his call than most--he has others who can help fulfill his duties--and so he will be the one who will be with you far more than Lark and I, but if you were to turn, you'd be safer from the reaches of Sam."

"Ameila, I"

She shook her head curtly, already knowing what my answer was. "I see. I am disappointed, Grace. I thought that perhaps you would have seen just how advantageous this would be for you, especially after what I told you this evening."

"Ameila, you don't understand," I began, but the ill-timed beep of the microwave signaled that my

chicken had done reheating.

"I understand, Grace," she said calmly as she pulled out the steaming hot plate of food, the plate sizzling in her hand. She laid it out in front of me, a fork and knife appearing beside it as though out of thin air. "Robert hurt you and now you want to hurt him back. Sometimes it's easy to forget that you're human...until you do things that remind us."

"If you knew that Robert and I weren't dating anymore, why then would you tell me anything about the Nephilim, or about how Robert and I could together physically?" I asked, anger staining the words.

"Because you still wanted to know, and I promised you that I would answer all of your questions; I didn't put any conditions on my promise."

Her head rose as though someone had called her name and she looked out towards the back of the house. "I must leave now, Grace, but before I go let me leave you with this question. Why did it hurt you so much to know that you could never be physically intimate with Robert as a human if you

no longer plan on being with him?"

I opened my mouth to answer, ready to recite a long list of reasons that would have never been good enough, but she was gone.

I sat alone in the kitchen, a plate of cooling food in front of me, and I couldn't eat. I pushed the plate away and headed upstairs to Lark's room. It was empty, as I knew it would be. I walked over to the large bag beside the bed and gathered some clothes; I felt an intense need to wash off the feeling of guilt that I didn't feel I deserved.

Lark's bathroom was large, with shimmering blue tiles that gave you the impression that you had somehow walked into a deep pool. The large tub that filled the center of the room only added to the feeling and I sighed happily. I couldn't recall when I had last taken a tub bath. I turned the faucets on and allowed the steamy water to rise as I turned to stare at my reflection in the mirror.

My eyes appeared hollow, the dark circles beneath them looking like purple half-moons. I leaned in closer to inspect the brown rings of my

irises and blinked several times at the golden ring that encircled the outer band. Had that always been there?

I moved away and sighed at the sight that stood before me. I looked like a corpse, my skin was so pale, my body so thin it was frightening to admit that I had done this to myself.

The tub was nearly full to overflowing by the time I turned off the water and I sighed as I stepped into the hot liquid. It acted like a balm to the wounds that I didn't know I had, soothing away the worries and making me forget everything I had heard save for one.

Robert could never be with me.

Simply acknowledging the thought felt like a little death. It was all I could do to keep from shivering from the icy truth of this fact in the hot bathwater. Ameila's question had been a just one--why did I care if we weren't even together? Why did it ache so much to know that something could never be when I had demanded as much already?

Perhaps it was because if I was being

honest with myself, if I put aside all of my protests and faced the truth, I'd be forced to admit that it was becoming almost painful to be without Robert. As distraught as I felt whenever he was near, it felt even more devastating to not be with him. Angry and hurt though I might be, knowing that he was nearby had offered me a sense of security that I had never known I needed nor wanted.

And I grew angry because he knew it. There was so much that he knew that I didn't, so much that he had kept from me under the pretense of keeping me safe...only I had to admit now that there was no pretense.

I knew now that being with me hadn't somehow furthered his ambition; rather, it had put him in danger. I pressed my fingers to my lips and shuddered as I thought of all the times I had complained, all the times I had made him feel guilty for not doing more, and yet he had given in somewhat to please me, knowing the harsh penalties that could arise as a result.

I pulled the plug on the tub and climbed out, quickly tip-toeing to the shower to rinse off and



wash my hair. The steam from the shower filled up the large room very quickly and I fumbled with the shampoo bottle, squeezing a far too generous amount into my hand and began to wash my hair.

I wrinkled my nose at the scent, the unfamiliar brand far too sweet for my tastes, but I couldn't complain as it was that I hadn't bothered to bring any of my own. I rinsed out my hair and turned off the water, opening the door and reaching for the towel that lay off to the side.

It wasn't there.

The steam from the shower made it difficult to see where I was going and I groped along the counter and the wall for anything that felt like a towel.

A pool of water had collected around me from my dripping hair and in a moment of unnatural clumsiness, I stepped into it, my feet slipping and sliding around on the cold stone floor. I braced myself for the fall, knowing that my head and hands were headed directly for the glass wall of the shower.

Instead, they were met with the soft, plush confines of a large towel that wrapped around me like a sling before I fell against something hard and forbidding. A strong pair of arms encircled me, pulling the towel around my body and tucking in the ends so that it wouldn't fall off.

I didn't breathe, didn't move.

Slowly the steam began to dissipate, the shapes around me becoming clearer, the colors no longer muted by the haze of heat and moisture.

I turned my head, not to look at who it was that held me, but rather to the mirror, its glass surface fogged up as I knew it would be, preventing me from having to view what I didn't feel ready to see. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, the scent of soap and shampoo unable to mask the comforting scent of the wind and snow, leather and sweet rain.

I slowly lowered my head until it rested against the cloth covered surface that was more wall than chest, and I bit back a sigh at the familiar silence that greeted me.

A harsh pounding at the door of the bathroom caused my eyes to fly open and I saw myself in the mirror, the crisp, white towel wrapped around my body tightly, my damp hair hanging limply down my back, dripping lazily onto the floor.

And that was all. I was alone, my arms wrapped around me, a self-embrace that felt awkward and unreal.

"Grace, are you alright? You've been in there for hours!" I heard Graham shout from the other side, his voice crackling with worry.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered nervously. "I'll be right out."

I reached for my clothes and pulled them on hastily, using the towel that had I had been bundled in to wrap up my hair. As I did so, I caught the hint of leather on my arm.

Startled, I brought my other arm to my nose, inhaling the complex yet simple aromas that had blended in with the scent of soap. My stomach lurched and I almost gasped as a thrumming began in my chest.

I pressed my hand against my chest and swayed from the sudden rush of blood. I reached for the counter of the vanity to steady myself and blinked rapidly. Another lily lay on a sheet of paper containing three distinct words in the familiar loose and flowing hand.

"Anything for you."

"We'll see about that," I muttered, and then smiled in spite of myself.

I took the sheet of paper off of the counter and, for some unknown reason, turned the paper over.

I screamed and watched the floor grow closer to my face as the sheet of paper slipped through my fingers, revealing what was on the back. "Die half-breed."



## UMBRAGE

The weekend came quickly. No other incidents occurred after the note in the bathroom, but the chaos that ensued because of it lasted long enough to have taken up the same amount of time and energy as a dozen.

"I wanna know how he could have gotten in to write that," Graham had shouted at Lark and Robert as he paced the room angrily, his hands rapidly running through his hair to keep from doing other things. "She's here because you're supposed to be protecting her--he got to her again; here, in this house! If she's not safe here, where is she?"

Lark had done her best to try and reassure him, standing in his way and acting like a make-shift road block, her hands staying him when all he seemed intent on doing was wearing a path into the floor. "He was never in the house, Graham. We would know."

"Then how did he write this?" He grabbed the sheet of paper from the bed and slapped at the words on the back. "Die, half-breed. He's a

murderer and racist? That's just perfect, isn't it?"

Robert's face had remained calm throughout Graham's outbursts of anger and frustration, but the mentioning of the note put a deep scowl on his face. "That is not something that Sam would write. Whoever wrote this, it wasn't Sam."

"You're defending him," Graham announced incredulously. "I can't believe it. He tried to kill your girlfriend three times, man. Three-freaking-times! When are you going to see that he's no good? Are you even capable of doing that for someone who isn't human?"

Robert sighed and snatched the paper out of Graham's fingers. "This isn't from Sam. I've known him for centuries. I would know if Sam had written that or not."

"So then who did it? Who wrote this, and how did they do it while it was in the locked bathroom?"

Robert looked at his sister, his gaze intensely focused on the unspoken thoughts that passed between them. As if on cue, his eyes

closed. Lark's eyes closed as well, minute, rapid-fire movements beneath her lids almost undetectable as she searched for the thoughts of the person who had written the note, or someone who knew about it.

Graham and I stared at the two of them, looking as though they had fallen asleep while standing up, frozen in time and statue-like. Graham occasionally approached Lark's still form, his fingers reaching out hesitantly to brush against Lark's skin, his eyes focused on the faint beating that could be seen beneath the flesh of her throat.

"I'm still alive, Graham. Be patient," she had said through gritted teeth, and he backed up obediently.

"Sorry," he muttered before shoving his hands into his pockets and pouting like a petulant child who had been refused a piece of candy.

"The chatter is very lively," she murmured, her head ticking as it followed the multitudes of voices that she was allowing in. "There's some hint that someone knows something, but I can't figure out who yet, the thoughts are too jumbled."



Graham groaned at the cryptic statement. "What do you mean by jumbled?"

She opened her eyes and sighed. "Imagine taking every single puzzle in the world and then dumping them all into one very large box. Then try and put every single puzzle back together. That's what I'm dealing with here, Graham, so if you don't mind, I'd like to be able to put this puzzle together before something else happens."

This didn't sit too well with Graham, who was now convinced that I would be much safer at home with him and argued the point very loudly, only to be shut down by Robert's cold and calculated response.

"You'll remove her from this home over your dead body."

The result of that threat went over as well as can be expected, with Lark immediately coming to Graham's defense, and Graham suddenly insisting that perhaps Robert had helped whomever it was that had written on the back of his note, since no one had yet to explain to him how someone could

have written something without even being in the same room.

Robert surprised me when he calmly walked over to Lark's writing desk and retrieved a sheet of lavender paper. He crumpled it into a ball and threw it at Graham, skillfully beaming him in the head with it. "Open it," he barked, and Graham did it, albeit begrudgingly.

Robert's expression never lost its seriousness as he stared at Graham's face, the effect he was looking for close at hand.

"Holy-how-you're-I," Graham stuttered as his gaze bounced from the paper to Robert.

"What is it?" I asked, and walked over to see for myself what had been written.

A caricature portrait of Graham filled up the entire sheet, the lines, as expected, were comprised of lettering forming one singular word that repeated itself throughout the drawing.

"How'd you write doofus with such tiny letters?" Graham asked, more impressed than he was upset at the insult.

"How do you manage to breathe without someone reminding you to exhale?" Robert replied, his voice saturated with disdain.

"That wasn't nice," I hissed, angry that he'd speak to Graham in such a way after everything that he'd done so far to keep me safe.

"You're right," Robert said apologetically. "I'm sorry, Graham. It was wrong of me to say such a thing about you. The drawing is still correct, though."

Graham laughed at this and shook his head. "Grace, don't make the guy apologize for something that was funny. At times like this, never, ever diss the funny."

Lark and I looked at him, our expressions almost identical. I felt my head turn from side to side in absolute confusion, while Lark simply stared at him, a bemused smile forming on her lips.

"Grace is safe here, Graham," Lark insisted. "She'll never be left alone, and we'll find out who wrote that note soon enough."

That had been enough for Graham, who

believed without a doubt that Lark would never lie to him, and so he had finally left the house and headed back home, knowing that with the exception of Stacy and my dad, there was no longer a need to keep up the act that I was still at home.

And so the week went by rather quickly, Robert remaining distant yet never far away, and Lark, Graham, Stacy, and I somehow finding a balance that allowed for us to enjoy the trappings of high school life without having to discuss the morbid topics of cancer, archangels of death, or cafeteria food.

When Friday arrived, I quietly asked Lark if she had spoken to Stacy yet about what was going on. Her quiet response told me that she had not, and I immediately made up my mind to tell her myself, ignoring the protests that sprang up instantly out of Lark's mouth and mind.

I decided to avoid revealing everything in homeroom, the classroom being too crowded and too nosy for any private conversation, and instead chose to tell her during third period when we were in the library. Erica's suspension had only lasted for

three days, an eternity according to some of the students who happened to mention it in not-so-casual conversation as I passed by, but I did not worry that she'd be lurking in some dark corner somewhere, just waiting to shove me down another flight of stairs.

There was no need to worry. Lark's promise that I'd never be left alone could only have been said if it were true, and it was. I turned around to see Robert's dark form standing several feet away, his grey eyes focused intently on me. I looked away before I could see the hardness in them soften, knowing that if I did, I'd probably forget where I was going in the first place.

The back tables behind a row of bookshelves sat empty, and I gladly waited for Stacy to arrive, rehearsing what I was going to say several times. I became anxious the closer it came time for the bell to ring, Stacy having always been punctual. When she finally arrived looking out of breath and quite pallid, I changed my mind about telling her. Lark had been right; it wouldn't do to tell Stacy anything when she was growing weaker and

less Stacy-like by the day.

"I think I'm going to need to visit one of those fake and bake places in the mall soon--I'm pasty," she huffed as she let her bag drop to the ground and sank into a cold chair. "I attempted to put on some makeup this morning and the color was too dark on me, so I had to borrow some of my mom's. I feel like I've got the body of an eighteen year-old, the energy of a newborn, and the face of a fifty year-old woman."

I giggled nervously and began to fidget with a deep scratch in the table. "You do look tired. Any word on that trial?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I won't know anything for a while. My next blood test is on Monday morning; I won't be in school so you'll just have to endure a whole day without me."

"I think I'll manage," I laughed before falling into an uncomfortable silence.

"So, what's up with you? How are Janice and the baby?"

I had never felt more relieved or grateful to

talk about Janice before, and I relished telling her about how Janice was faring during her hospital stay.

"I spoke to her last night on the phone--Dad's starting to annoy the nurses, but he refuses to leave her side--and she says she's gained almost ten pounds just by being in the hospital. The baby is doing well, but she's still having contractions, which the doctor said could bring along labor at any time. She's on some kind of medicine to stop the contractions, but it doesn't seem to be working very well. The obstetrician told her that if she makes it one more week, they'll allow her to progress naturally which basically means that Matthew will probably be born in a week or two."

Stacy's face lit up with excitement. "Oh a baby, I can't wait to see him! You must be so looking forward to meeting him!"

"I am. I mean, when I first heard that Janice was pregnant, the last thing I ever wanted to do was know the little germ in her belly, but now I have to admit that it's nice knowing that I'll have a little brother running around, wanting me to pick him up

and give him hugs."

"Don't forget change his diaper and clean up his baby-barf," Stacy added, laughing at my reaction.

"It's a good thing I'll be leaving soon then, I suppose," I said, my laughter joining hers. "As he gets bigger, the messes get bigger too."

"Are you going, you know, alone?"

I felt my shoulders hitch up. "I don't know. Part of me doesn't even know if I *want* to. But I just need to get away from here, from Ohio, and hey, Berkley actually wants me, go figure."

"I'd love to join you. I'd love to travel the entire world, to be honest. But, baby steps. I want to do this trial drug treatment thing first."

I nodded enthusiastically and pumped my fist into the air. "It'll work, Stacy. I know it will."

"Well, my mom says that if it doesn't, it'll be my fault for not listening to her about taking better care of myself," she said in an almost sardonic tone.



"What?"

"Yeah. The oncologist told me that I had been spending way too much time doing stressful things. You know, like school and crap. He said that if I didn't take it easy that I'd end up helping the cancer along, instead of fighting it. Mom had a fit, said that what I was doing was going to kill her and me and every ancestor we've ever had. It was pretty morbid a tantrum if you ask me, but she wouldn't let it go.

"For dinner, she served, with great fanfare mind you, 'succumb to cancer stew' with a helping of 'Stacy is a disobedient and dishonorable daughter salad'. It was, to be quite honest with you, one of the best dinners we've ever had at my house."

"Oh Stacy, I'm sorry! I know your mom's kinda neurotic but geeze!" I exclaimed, already imagining in my head the severe stares of disapproval her mother must have given after receiving that call. "Is she still going to let you do the trials?"

Stacy smirked as she answered. "She has

no choice. I'm eighteen, remember? I might not be allowed back in the house if they work, but I'm not exactly going to be prevented from leaving either."

"I wish I had your fearlessness," I said as I stared at her in amazement. "I can't even tell my dad that I'm staying at Lark's house, I've got Graham pretending that I'm staying there so he doesn't freak out."

"Why are you staying at Lark's house?"

I looked at her, her question not connecting with me. "What?"

"You said you were staying at Lark's house. Why?"

"I..." I tried to recall what exactly I had said and kept drawing a blank. "Um..."

Stacy's expression went from confused to annoyed and then angry in less than two seconds.

"You've been there all week, haven't you? With the way things are between you and Robert, there's only one reason you'd be there--something happened. Something happened and you didn't tell

me." It was a statement more so than a question and I could do nothing but nod, suddenly feeling incredibly foolish for having opened my mouth without thinking about the words that came out.

"I don't believe this. What happened? Was it Sam?"

"Yes. He was in my room," I answered, the fear from seeing his face still so potent, my words wavered.

"He was in your room? What did he do, did he try to hurt you? Did he attack you or say something?"

My head shook with my answer. "He was just there, standing there watching me. I was asleep and I was dreaming of him, dreaming of what he did to me. When I woke up, he was there, and he was...not the same. The last time I saw him, he looked like an old man, his hair was white, his skin all wrinkly and dry.

"But when he was in my room, he looked much younger. His hair was blonde again, his body was young. Everything that had happened to him in

that field was reversed," I said in a low voice. "It was like nothing had ever happened, and that's what scares me the most."

Stacy's expression wasn't one of sympathy or fear, and her body language didn't seem to exude any sort of compassion. Instead, the anger that had been there only seemed to condense, getting thicker and more intense.

"So let me get this straight. I've been watching your back, keeping your secrets--basically being a good friend--and when something important happens to you, I'm suddenly not good enough to tell? You tell Robert, but not me?"

"That's not it, Stacy," I tried to explain, ignoring the rolling of her eyes. "We didn't want to tell you because we didn't want you to worry. You're already going through so much and Lark was worried about what all of this would do to your health. We didn't want to set you back any, didn't want you to somehow get sick or anything like that."

Stacy sneered at my attempt at justification, her eyes narrowing with irritation. "You're telling me that you kept something from me because you were

afraid it would hurt me or make me sick?"

I nodded vigorously, the motion exaggerated by my need for her to believe that we had never intended on hurting her.

"I don't believe this. You know what, Grace? You're a hypocrite. A big, fat, lousy hypocrite."

Her accusation stung and I couldn't figure out where it was coming from, or why. She shook her head in disgust and started to gather her things. I made a grab for her bag and surprised myself when I yanked it from her hands quite easily. She was stunned as well.

"Stacy, don't leave. I'm sorry; we never intended to upset you. We care about you, you're our friend--all of this is too much for even me to take in, I thought...we all thought that it would be better for you this way. That doesn't make me a hypocrite," I tried to explain, the reasoning sounding right in my head.

Stacy obviously didn't agree when she reached for her bag and successfully pried it from my fingers. "No, you're right. It doesn't make you a

hypocrite. There isn't a word to describe what you are." She stood staring at me, her chest rising and falling rapidly with the building emotion that I had instigated.

"Tell me why it's okay for you to keep secrets if it means keeping me safe but it's not okay for Robert to do the same thing for you?"

I stood there, my feet rooted to the floor as she stormed off. I couldn't say anything to her, couldn't argue, couldn't even call her name. I simply stood in the back of the library, surrounded by books that held descriptions of every emotion one could feel, and I was fairly certain that none of them could describe just how low I was feeling.

When the bell rang for lunch, I couldn't find it in me to leave. I didn't want to face Stacy, didn't want to see the looks of disappointment on Lark and Graham's faces when they learned how I'd foolishly admitted the truth. And I didn't want to have to face Robert knowing that I had been complicit in hiding something from Stacy in the same manner as he had with me.

One of the school's librarians made her

rounds throughout the aisles, ushering out student after student in a mad dash for some peace and quiet during lunchtime. She reached me fairly quickly and wagged her finger at me.

"You know the rules, Grace. It's time to leave."

"Couldn't I just sit here?" I asked, not caring how cowardly that made me. I couldn't go out there and face the people I cared about the most, I just couldn't do it.

"Not today. You'll just have to find some other dark corner to occupy. Now get going."

She handed me my backpack and pointed towards the exit, as though reminding me that any other direction I took was out of the question. I sighed and trudged past her, finding my way out of the library and into the empty hallway.

The aroma of something pungent and overwhelmingly garlicky was assaulting my senses and my eyes watered from it. The sound of students' voices echoed as they traveled from the cafeteria and I had never dreaded a sound so much in my

life.

"You don't have to head to lunch, Grace."

I turned my head to see the red-headed teacher standing in front of me, a plate of food in her hand. "I'm heading back to my class. Want to join me?"

I nodded, thankful for her offer. We walked in silence towards her classroom, her heels clicking against the linoleum flooring like a stopwatch, each step another second passing by that I wouldn't have to face the consequences of my big mouth.

"So, why so afraid of the cafeteria? Is it the food?" she asked as she held the door to the room open for me. "If it is, I don't blame you. I'm fairly certain that they give you guys the failed dog food recipes."

As I sat down at a desk in front of her own, I eyed her plate suspiciously. "So why are you eating it then?"

She looked at the mess of food on her plate and smiled. "Because I can't cook to save my life and anything's better than starving."



I knew I couldn't disagree with her. Hadn't I witnessed Graham shoveling away at the same slop-like cuisine almost every day prior to moving in? "I guess you've got a point, but I'd like to think I'd chew off my own arm than eat half of what the cafeteria dishes out."

A bubble of laughter rose from her throat and a broad smile crossed her face. "I've actually had moments like that. Today, however, masochism and whatever this stuff on this plate is wins."

As she began to sift through the contents on her plate I looked around the room, taking in the changes she'd made since I had last been inside. Several movie posters and albums covered the walls, an unusual sight for a psychology class.

"What's with the posters?" I asked when I turned to face her again, almost gagging at the amount of food she had already consumed.

She quickly swallowed the contents in her mouth and then pointed towards the closest. "These are all psychological thrillers; movies that mess with your head. It helps me to get you guys to understand

some of the other applications of psychology."

I nodded in understanding. "As in something other than a couch and some bearded guy with a notepad in his hands, right?"

"Exactly. That one right there is my favorite," she said, her hand still pointing at the closest poster. "A movie that makes both men and women think about what they're doing and the consequences of their actions is very hard to come by; usually, the guys think about the action scenes or the girls, while the women empathize with the female leads and swoon over the male ones.

"That one right there gives you no choice but to appreciate the lessons since no emphasis has been made on the attractiveness of the actors, and there are no significant action scenes. It's all dialogue and imagery."

The poster was a rather innocuous one compared to some of the others, with just the image of a woman's face, her mouth silenced by moth. "I enjoyed the book much more than the movie, but I get why you use movies."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, since most kids my age really don't enjoy reading, especially if a book's good, it'll be turned into a movie anyway," I explained. "I just happen to prefer reading."

She placed her fork down onto her empty plate and wiped her mouth with a napkin. "I do, too, but your generation is just so...visual. You need to be able to see things before you'll believe it. Movies make it easier for me to get an idea or a point across."

"Do you really think that? That we need to see things in order to believe that they exist, or that they're real, true?"

Her head bobbed down once, her eyes studying me as I watched her. "I have seen it with my own eyes. For whatever reason, your minds require proof that's visually tangible. I suppose it's a trust issue, but it can get quite unnerving when dealing with something like psychology."

"What did you do to my sister?" a sharp voice demanded from the doorway.

Mrs. Deovolente turned her head towards the direction of the voice and smiled. "I'm sorry; I think you have the wrong classroom."

I shook my head and stood up. "No, he has the right one."

I faced the inquisitor, saw the pain and anguish in his face and instantly felt the guilt inside of me balloon. "Sean, this isn't exactly the time or place to discuss this."

He growled at me, his face mashed up in anger. He stood in an offensive stance, one that I recognized from the few classes I had attended at their father's Tae Kwon Do school, and I held my hands up in supplication. "Sean, what's wrong? What happened to Stacy?"

He jabbed his finger into my shoulder and hissed. "You made her sick, that's what. You know what's going on with her and you didn't care, you just had to do something, say something to her to get her upset and now she's on her way to the hospital. I always knew you and that friend of yours were no good, and now I've been proven right."

He began to walk out and I rushed after him, grabbing his arm and pulling him around. "What happened, Sean? Tell me what's going on. What's wrong with Stacy?"

"It's none of your business, you stupid honhyol. You've done enough," he shouted before yanking his arm free and storming off.

I stared after him and frowned. A comforting hand rested on my shoulder and I turned to see a concerned Mrs. Deovolente standing next to me, her gaze following Sean as he turned a corner.

"That was an impassioned outburst if I ever heard one. What's a honhyol?"

I turned my head down and whispered the answer, a prickling heat creeping into my face, traveling upwards and stinging my eyes.

"Half-breed? He called you a half-breed? How do you know that's what that means?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I just do." I returned to the classroom and grabbed my backpack. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Deovolente, but I've got to get going. I need to find out what's going on."

She had followed me inside and stood in the doorway, impeding my path. "I think you're making a mistake, Grace. If your friend's brother feels that way about you, chances are the rest of the family does as well. It might actually upset your friend a lot more if you showed up there and angered her family."

I looked past her and felt a slight rush of relief flow through me as I caught the silver stare of Robert looking back at me.

"I appreciate your concern, but I know Stacy. She might be mad at me, but she's not going to let her family dictate her life."

"I can't let you leave, Grace. School is still in session. You'll have to wait until the end of the day," she insisted, raising her arm up to block my exit.

My eyes flicked to Robert's and then back at hers. "I don't think so."

Robert's hand reached beneath her arm and grabbed mine, quickly pulling me through the small opening between the door frame and her waist. The movement was so brisk, she didn't have time to do

anything but flinch away.

I was whisked into Robert's arms, his silent thoughts confirming what I had already guessed and I nodded when he asked me if I would leave with him.

"Thank you for the talk, Mrs. Deovolente," I called out as she grew smaller behind me. "I'll see you on Monday!"

As we approached the front doors of the school, Lark and Graham stood there waiting, Lark's face looking as distraught as an angel's possibly could, and she held onto Graham's hand fiercely, the pain obvious on his face, but overshadowed by his own concern for her.

"What happened?"

My question had Graham immediately looking away, while Lark's expression grew annoyed. "You couldn't keep your mouth shut, that's what happened."

"Lark," Robert said softly. "She's not like other humans--keeping secrets and telling lies is difficult for her, you know that. She feels badly

enough about this as it is. Don't make things worse."

Lark's features grew softer as she acknowledged her brother's words. "Did you tell her?" she asked Robert, and then shook her head. "No, you didn't. Who then?"

"Sean," I answered. "He found me in Mrs. Deovolente's classroom."

"Who?" Both Graham and Lark looked at me, puzzled. Robert's head twitched at the unasked question.

"She's the new psychology teacher in room one-forty-three. I met her a few days ago when I was-" I turned to look at Robert and sighed "-running away from my problems. Sean came in and told me about Stacy, told me that it was my fault."

"That's not all he said," Lark scowled, her eyes narrow slits of anger as she sifted through my thoughts.

"That little jerkoff," Graham snapped, his head popping up. "He's never liked me, I know that much, but to say that to you--he's asking for it."



I glared at Lark as her intrusion became known. "Was that necessary?"

"Yes, it was," she said stubbornly, her chin tilting up in defiance. "You're too damn nice to have told us what happened, and what he said would have eaten away at you. You know that, Grace."

Robert wedged himself Lark and me, and spoke calmly, his words for her but his eyes only for me. "What was said to Grace was for her ears only until she felt comfortable enough to tell us. Now is not the time to go digging for information; Stacy is on her way to the hospital and she needs the people that care about her to be with her."

Graham nodded solemnly and Lark turned her head away, too ashamed to look at me to say anything. Robert shook his head at the gravity of the situation and then looked into my eyes, his own soft with concern and remorse, his voice low and gentle. "Do you want to go with Graham and Lark? I'll understand if you do-"

"I'll ride with you," I said before my mind ran through all of the reasons why I shouldn't. It

surprised me, but not as much as it surprised him.

"Wait here." He left before I could respond, and I knew it would be mere moments before he returned, his speed hindered only by the limits of the bike. I felt the gazes of Graham and Lark on me and I tried to avoid making eye contact with them, not sure if I wanted to discuss this new development with them or not, but knowing that now wasn't the time. I wasn't exactly sure if I wanted to even admit that it was happening.

"It's nothing big, Grace. It's just a ride, calm down," Lark reassured me, and I groaned.

"You're in my head again," I complained. "Could you stop doing that? I mean, just for a little while?"

She held her hands up in a conciliatory manner, a passive smile on her face. "I'm sorry."

"Are you going to be alright?" Graham asked, his eyes traveling from me to the parking lot. "I mean, you're not exactly going to have anywhere to go once you're on the back of his bike."

"I'll be fine," I insisted, hiding the slight twinge

of uncertainty behind a thin-lipped smile.

The sound of the motorcycle pulling up to the front steps killed any further chance at conversation, and I looked at the small space on the seat behind Robert, suddenly unsure of myself.

"How did you do it the first time?" Graham asked as he stood behind me, his hand at the small of my back.

"What?" I asked, confused by his question.

"The first time you rode with him; you didn't even know his name but you got on the back of his bike. How did you do it?"

I shrugged. "I just did. I guess I didn't really think I had much to lose; you were with Erica and pretending that I didn't exist; Dad wasn't too happy with me; I had just made a complete fool of myself."

"So what's stopping you now?" he said in a low voice.

"I'm afraid," I answered truthfully.

"Of what?"

"Of what it means."

He pressed the side of his head against mine and sighed. "What if it doesn't have to mean anything?"

I nodded in understanding and took a deep breath. As I exhaled, my feet began to pull me forward and I blindly followed, not stopping to think once until I felt my arms wrap around Robert's waist and the wind began to whip my hair behind me.

Inexplicably, I felt my head lower until it rested against the back of Robert's leather jacket. I inhaled the scent and relaxed, closing my eyes to everything and enjoying this piece of calm, if only for a moment.



## MELODY

There were eleven of us in that emergency waiting room, seven on one side, four on the other, like two warring factions kept apart by some invisible wall. Sean had repeated his tale to his parents and older brothers with great embellishment, and I tried my best to blend into the furniture as seven pairs of eyes bored holes into me, anger and frustration occupying so much space around me I found it difficult to breathe.

When a nurse came out with paperwork for Stacy's parents to fill out, I sighed with relief--the loss of two pairs of eyes was like a fifty pound weight being lifted off of my chest--and I watched as Stacy's brothers began to fidget in their seats, too bored with simply staring me down in hopes that I'd leave now to remain still.

As the nurse walked away, her hospital clogs making distinct squishing sounds on the linoleum, a familiar face appeared to speak to Stacy's family. His smile was warm, his demeanor calm as he explained in a quiet voice that Stacy had passed

out due to exhaustion and dehydration. He lowered his voice to whisper confidentially to her parents that she admitted to doing far more physical activity than she had been letting on, and that she wasn't getting as much sleep at night, which resulted in the exhaustion, which in turn significantly lessened her appetite by inducing serious recurring bouts of nausea, leading to the dehydration.

The next few lines sealed the Kim's family opinion of me as the doctor said gravely, "With all of the tests and the procedures she's had to go through these past few months, not to mention upcoming finals and graduation, she's experienced a lot of strain and that has only exacerbated the situation. I suggest you keep things at home as stress free as possible for the next few days, and minimize anything that might upset her."

As if on cue, seven fierce stares zeroed in on me as if I had a large bulls-eye painted on my face and I looked away, ashamed. A hand reached over to cover mine, offering a measure of support and comfort. I followed it to Robert, who was staring back at the Kims, his face rigid.

I flexed my fingers and smiled when his fell through the spaces, weaving between mine with a familiar ease. He eyed Stacy's brothers, his gaze lingering on Sean, and I saw his brow furrow in frustration at whatever it was that he found in Sean's thoughts.

He leaned his head to the side, closer to my own, and I felt the words flow from his mind into my own, like water pouring from a pitcher into a waiting glass.

*He's abnormally angry, but his anger was misdirected. He's closest to Stacy because of their bond in the womb and he feels guilty that he's healthy while she's not. He doesn't know how to express this without lashing out. It's difficult to feel anything but pity for him when I see how anguished he is over what he said to you.*

My focus switched to Stacy's other brothers and I saw the look of sympathy on their faces as they watched their parents receive all of the instructions for caring for Stacy. The paperwork that seemed endless kept appearing, handed to them by one nurse after the other; this was followed by



several white paper bags filled with prescriptions.

It was an hour later when Stacy appeared, wheeled in by Dr. Ambrose. He smiled painfully at me and nodded in acknowledgement of Robert. I gave him a half-hearted smile and looked at Stacy, shocked by her sickly appearance. She had grown paler since third period, her skin taking on an almost waxy look.

"She's going to need a lot of rest, and no visitors," he insisted. "There should be no lasting effects as long as you minimize the activities for a little while."

Stacy's head lifted at this and she asked in a weak voice, "What about school?"

"Sun-hi!" I heard Stacy's mother hiss, and Stacy's head whipped around to face her mother, her eyes narrowed in anger.

"I'm not going to give up on living, Mom. I told you this already. I don't have much time left. Do you want me to spend it living up to my name or living period?"

Dr. Ambrose clucked in disapproval and

rested a hand on Stacy's shoulder, his annoyed gaze focused on Stacy's family. "This is exactly what I was talking about, Mr. and Mrs. Kim. Stacy needs your support now, not your reproach."

Stacy sank deeply into the wheelchair, her head falling into a limp hand. "It doesn't matter what you say, doctor. My mother doesn't care about what I want or what I need. She only cares about what her friends think, where I fit on the social scale of their daughters. As long as I meet her goals, it won't matter what happens to me."

A sharp intake of breath, followed by several voices all speaking at once in two different languages soon filled the waiting room. Stacy's mother and father began to yell at Dr. Ambrose while Stacy's brothers all stood up and began shouting to have their voices and opinions heard.

Beneath the canopy they all formed, Stacy sat helpless, her face long and forlorn, her body hunched in defeat. I looked over at Lark who didn't have to look at me to know what I was thinking. Robert's hand gripped mine tightly, and I waited patiently as Graham stood up and began heading

towards the exit. Lark remained seated until the shouting grew more heated. Then she was gone.

And so was Stacy.

Robert squeezed my hand in warning, and then I felt myself being lifted, the movement so gentle, if not for the blurred lines and the colors of my surroundings melding into each other like some impressionist painting, I'd have thought everything was moving at a normal pace.

The hold that Robert had on me was light, yet secure and overwhelmingly protective as the florescent lighting soon gave way to actual sunshine, the stale, cleanser scented air dissipating into the sweet fragrance of cut grass and spring blossoms.

It was all over far sooner than I probably would have admitted I liked, and my feet were soon placed on sturdy ground, the surroundings the familiar living room of Robert's home.

"They'll be here in ten minutes," he said softly as he helped me to sit down. "They're traveling in Graham's car so that figure is quite optimistic."

I felt the pull of a smile on my lips and I turned away so that he wouldn't see it. "I'd say twenty then--thirty if he realizes he's hungry."

A quiet chuckle pushed the corners of my mouth up even further and I felt a strange uneasiness about it. "Grace, it's okay. We're not here for us. We can just focus on Stacy, okay?"

I nodded and pondered why I suddenly felt so disappointed. I didn't get much chance to wonder, however, when the sound of something dying drew our attention. Robert flashed to the door, his movement so quick it seemed as though he just vanished and reappeared fifteen feet away from me. He pushed aside the curtain that shielded the side glass paneling and grinned profusely at what he saw.

The door opened and Lark and Graham walked in, Lark carrying a very exhausted Stacy in her arms. "I'm going to put her up in my room," she informed us as she made her way past us and up the stairs.

Graham's eyes turned towards the door at the still rumbling vehicle parked outside. His bottom

lip jutted out in a well-formed pout as he watched his car stutter and stumble while it emitted the last cries of a dying mechanical animal. I watched his shoulders slowly sink, the car giving one last turnover before falling silent. I walked over to him, wrapping my arm around his waist and hugging him in comfort.

"I didn't want to push her. I knew she wouldn't be able to handle it," he moaned, his grief so acute, one would have thought that he'd just lost a family member or something. "Lark insisted on driving, and then she just resorted to pushing. It was too much for the Skylark to take, and now she's gone."

I squeezed him and shook my head at the metal corpse. "She was a good car and she died helping out a friend."

"I'm gonna miss her."

"I'm gonna miss her, too."

Graham's body began to ripple with laughter. "We sound like idiots."

I nodded in agreement. "Yes, we do. Come on, my fellow idiot--let's go and see how Stacy's

doing."

Robert, Graham, and I walked up the stairs and patiently waited outside of the bedroom door as Lark gently placed Stacy onto the colorful coverlet, rearranging the pillows both around and beneath Stacy's head so that she was comfortably lying in a semi-upright position.

"Thank you, Lark," her weak voice managed to utter. "Thanks you guys," she said, seeing the three of us huddled in the doorway.

Lark sat at the bottom corner of the bed and patted the edges around her, her gaze traveling to Graham and me. We took the hint and approached, Graham rounding the bed to sit opposite of Lark, while I sat on the edge closest to Stacy, my hand reaching out to hold hers in supplication.

"Do you need anything?" Lark asked, concern drawing lines along her forehead and around her mouth.

"I'd like some water," Stacy croaked. Lark smiled and headed out of the room, her head cocked to the side with a peculiar smile on her face.

Graham scooted closer to Stacy as soon as Lark was out of the room and he reached for her hand, his face amused at the role reversal. "I never thought there'd come a day when I didn't fear holding your hand, but for today at least, I'm there."

A quiet laugh emerged from her lips as she shook her head. "You just wait until tomorrow."

"Oh I don't doubt it. You just make sure that I get a running start," Graham chuckled.

Stacy's gaze turned to mine and I saw a flicker of something--anger? Resentment?--but it faded instantly when she saw Robert standing behind me. "Lark told me about what Sean said. I'm sorry about that, Grace," she said, her voice starting to sound hoarse. "He can be such a butthole sometimes--I want you to know that this isn't your fault. I was getting in some extra work-outs over the past couple of days, trying to build up my stamina; I guess I overdid it."

"Why?" I heard myself ask as I became aware of just how thin Stacy had become. Her arms looked like flesh covered sticks jutting out from her torso, and I felt instant shame when I compared her

figure to mine, our bodies similarly gaunt, though mine had been by choice while hers was unpreventable.

"I told you. I've got to watch out for you. Erica won't be expelled so close to graduation and I was too slow the last time--she caught me by surprise and you could have broken your neck in that fall." The list of reasons only further added to the guilt that was compiling within me, and I knew that just a few more and I'd leave indentations in the wood floors.

"Stacy, you need to worry about yourself. I've agreed to let Robert follow me around, and so far so good, right? Nothing really bad has happened here, so Lark was right for suggesting that I stay--just not right for suggesting we not tell you."

"Wait, what do you mean nothing really bad has happened here? What happened that wasn't so bad?"

Graham threw me a look of warning before telling in full detail what had happened in the bathroom. His face showed his disgust as he described what had been written on the back of



Robert's note, and I could see Stacy's color rise quickly as she grew angry.

"This is bad, Grace," she said in a breathy voice. "This is very bad."

"Finally, someone talking sense," Graham applauded. "I say it's this Sam person, but they all insist that it's not because it's not his handwriting or something like that."

I twisted my body, turning to face the door, and counted. When I reached three-hundred, I looked at Robert warily. He had already figured out what it was that had me so concerned and his face grew taut as he began to search, though his body remained directly beside me.

I watched him as his head ticked ever so slightly, a small frown followed by a crooked smile, only to be replaced with a deep scowl and then finally a grim line. This rapid altering of moods happened in the time span of a single second, yet I had been able to witness them all and appreciate each one as he listened to the thoughts that filled his sister's mind.

"Robert?" I called to him. It felt so strange, so...foreign to do so after having not willingly spoken his name without provocation for the past several weeks, but it also felt unbelievably welcoming, comforting.

"It's happening," he said out loud. His gaze locked onto mine and I absently reached out with my hand, his own quickly latching onto mine. It was a wave that hit me, a wave of information and images that bombarded me with their immensity. I wavered as I sat, and Robert quickly braced my body against his as I began to see what he was seeing.

Lark's face as she began to hear an unfamiliar sound--neither thought nor memory; her fighting against it as she tried to focus on getting a glass from the cupboard shelf; her body growing rigid with the increasing insistence of the audible demand; recognition: these filled my vision.

Her head lifted, rising towards the ceiling--no, not towards the ceiling, towards the sky--and she smiled. The back of her shirt bulged with intent and I felt my mouth open in awe as her wings burst

through the material, slicing through the fabric like feathered razors. She closed her eyes and smiled, her face beaming in delight, and it was difficult not to do the same.

It was with that smile that she appeared in the room, the vision in my head blending with the vision before me, two perspectives melding into one.

"It's come," she said breathlessly. "My call has come."

Graham stood up and rushed to Lark's side, his hands hovering over her arms, hesitant to touch her for some strange reason. "That's great!"

Stacy eased herself forward and her mouth lifted into a joyful smile. "Pure awesome!"

"I didn't even know what it was--I didn't recognize it, didn't expect it to sound the way it does," Lark began to ramble. She raised her arms to cross behind Graham's neck as she pulled him forward and pressed her lips against his.

I knew I should have looked away but I couldn't. I played the role of the voyeur as I watched

them embrace in quiet celebration, and I knew that I wasn't alone.

Stacy cooed at the scene before us, even going so far as to clap her hands.

Robert, on the other hand, fumed beneath his calm exterior. I knew that Stacy couldn't see it, and Graham definitely was oblivious to the rising heat that brewed within Robert, but I saw it. Against my better efforts, I had become far more attuned to him than I had liked, and I sensed his emotions almost easier than I could detect my own.

My thoughts were enough to distract him. His steady gaze turned to mine, and I felt almost trapped in its hold as he searched. I could see the shimmering flecks of platinum in the liquid mercury of his irises and I swore that if I didn't look away soon, I'd fall into them and drown...but what a way to die.

"I have to go," Lark said, breaking the bond between Robert and I, and I uttered a curse and a prayer of thanks at the same time.

"Wait, what do you mean, you have to go?"

Graham asked, upset. "Go where?"

"Oh Graham," she lamented as she cradled his face in one of her small hands, the other held fiercely between his. "I didn't think that this was coming so soon. I thought I'd get more time with you before this happened; I have to go...up there-" she pointed up with a free finger "-to speak with the Seraphim, to learn the full history of my kind, and to learn about what my call truly is."

Graham's head bobbed at each word, but it was clear he didn't understand what she meant. "So you'll be gone what, a couple of days? A week?"

She shook her head slowly, painfully. "I don't know. I can't give you an honest answer because there's no way of knowing."

She turned to face Stacy and her face sunk further with the slowly burgeoning depression. "Stacy, I didn't expect this to happen, I didn't know--I can't believe I'm going to leave you like this." She walked over to her and sat down beside her, adjusting her body so that her wings brushed up against the side of the bed.

Stacy gave her a bemuse smile and gave a soft jab to Lark's knee. "You're not leaving me like anything. I'll be fine. It's not the cancer that knocked me out today, it was my own stubbornness. I'll ease up on the exercising and as soon as the nausea goes away, I'll start eating like Graham."

"Oh, don't do that, Stacy," Lark laughed softly. "You'll end up looking like a blimp and won't be able to fit into your prom dress."

"Prom?"

Lark glanced at Stacy and I and her forehead developed questioning, frustrated grooves.

"Yes, prom. You guys have thought about it, right? It's less than a month away!"

Stacy and I shook our heads. "You're heading off to fulfill your destiny, something you've waited five-hundred years for, and you're worried about my prom dress?" Stacy asked, bewildered. "Your priorities are a bit skewed, don't you think?"

"I think that we've both been too preoccupied with other things to even consider prom, Lark," I

voiced to her, my head full of new thoughts and new concerns. "I never thought I'd be going anyway."

"Well why the hell not?" Lark protested. "It's Senior Prom! You only get one shot at it--well, if you're a human, you only get one shot at it--so why not go?"

Robert approached his sister and looked at her determinedly. "Lark, it's time to go. They're waiting for you."

"No, I'm not leaving until I get an answer as to why they're not going to prom. This is supposed to be a significant event in a human girl's life and you two are intentionally missing out on it for reasons unknown," she argued, her wings shivering with agitation.

"Well, I have no date so there you go," Stacy replied easily.

"I hate dresses," was my response.

Lark threw up her hands in defeat and spun around on her heel. "Fine. Spend the biggest night of the year at home like two old ladies."

Graham grinned like a fool at her exasperation, his hands shoved in his pockets as he kicked at the floor sheepishly. "I didn't even realize that it was so close either, and now it looks like I won't have a date, too, and since I hate wearing dresses almost as much as Grace does, I guess I'll be staying at home as well."

An amused smile crawled across her lips as Lark looked at Graham and his supportive posture. She walked over to him and I turned away, knowing that the moment had suddenly become too private for viewing. Stacy, too, turned her head, finding something quite interesting to stare at on the wall.

A soft coo was our only hint that we had been joined by another as Ameila appeared before Lark, her hand pressed over her heart with pride.

Graham walked away from them and came to stand by my side as Robert, Lark, and their mother stood in a small circle, their heads bent towards each other, their hands clasped. I saw Lark's body ripple with amusement and she looked up to grin at Robert, a smug grin that brought a smile to my own lips.



"You were always the good child, always the one who did what he was told, while I was the black sheep who ran off with the loser boyfriend--how does it feel, Robert, knowing that it took me one-third the amount of time as you did to get my wings and my call?"

Robert shrugged, his face showing no emotion. "I'm just glad that you'll finally give mother a reason to be proud when she mentions your name, Lark."

Though their words hinted at animosity, their faces spoke volumes as to their intense fondness for each other. I envied it; I couldn't help it.

"Will you both be coming with me?" Lark asked her voice now suddenly quivery with nerves.

"Only I will be going. Someone has to remain here to watch after Grace," Ameila responded.

Nodding in understanding, Lark turned to look at us one last time, a proud smile on her face. "I'll see you all later."

And without another word, both she and Ameila were gone, their departure so quick it was

difficult to discern just how they had left. Graham walked over to the window and peered out, his gaze lifting upwards, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

Stacy stared at her hands in her lap as she fidgeted with the comforter, a few visible drops of moisture visible on the edges of her thumbs.

Robert's eyes were closed, seeing the journey his sister was making behind his closed lids.

And I stood away from it all, Lark's departure causing a confused muddle of happiness and grief to form within me. It was painful to see such distraught faces among the people I loved so much, knowing that no matter what any of us felt, this was merely a waiting game to be played out between us.

It would be the hardest on Graham, of course, since he didn't quite understand what was truly happening, much as I had been unaware. I wanted to reassure him that she'd come back to him unchanged but I knew that would be impossible

without lying. However, I didn't worry about him. He had enough faith in his feelings for her that he'd understand and forgive anything--he forgave me for lying to him, didn't he?

No, I worried the most for Stacy who had found support and sympathy from Lark while I had wallowed in my own self-pity. I couldn't ignore the fact that I had been a horrible friend, all things considering, and despite the huge insult, I couldn't blame Sean's anger towards me. I had hurt Stacy emotionally while her cancer attacked her physically--I had done what the cancer couldn't, and there were few words to express just how horrible that felt, but I ignored this.

Stacy had given me her friendship when no one else would, and I couldn't skirt around that anymore. I had to admit now that I had been afraid of the commitment required of such a friendship, afraid of what it would cost me if the friendship soured.

But this was not about me. That time had passed. Stacy was dying and there was nothing I could do about it.

Graham coughed and dabbed at his eyes with a closed hand. "Ugh. Dust in my eyes. Lark's gotta vacuum this place more often."

I looked over to Robert, his eyes still closed, his body unmoving, deep in the vision of his sister's welcome.

"Did you want to go?" I said aloud.

When his lids lifted and his shimmery grey gaze reached mine, the bed offered me the support I hadn't been prepared for needing. "I'm exactly where I want to be," he replied in a low voice.

"In your sister's room?" Stacy murmured as she lay back, burrowing into the mountainous pillows.

Ignoring that, Robert once again closed his eyes, but not before he smiled at me, able to see just how disconcerted I had become by the silent ferocity that lurked behind them.

"Oh, what am I going to say to my parents--how am I going to explain this?" Stacy moaned as she wrapped an arm around a bright orange bolster. "They're probably frantic by now--it'll appear

as though I just vanished and my mother is such a superstitious person, she'll swear I was kidnapped by demons."

"No, just us," Graham mused.

"Your parents aren't worried too much, Stacy. They have been given an explanation that is satisfactory to an extent," Robert comforted, though he did not look at her. "A car will arrive in an hour to take you home, and a doctor will accompany you so that your parents aren't given additional cause to worry."

"You mean she's not staying here?" I asked, my voice sounding almost frantic in its desperation to keep her near.

"It's not possible, Grace," Robert sighed, his eyes open now. "She has a family waiting for her at home, two concerned parents who care for her welfare."

"And I don't," I mumbled as I stared at the floor.

"Your father loves you like no other father ever could, Grace, but deep down he knows that

you're safe, otherwise he wouldn't have allowed you to stay at home unsupervised."

I glared at the unmoving floor and found fault with it, knots and scuffs that marred the surface becoming the scapegoats to my anger at my lack of response. He was right--I couldn't argue against that, and that infuriated me.

"Grace, I'd love to stay here with you and have an extended sleepover, but even I know that staying away from my parents after what happened today is not going to do me any good. It'll be a miracle if I'm even allowed out of the house after this."

"Stacy, you should get some rest before the car arrives. I have a feeling that you won't be getting much after today."

Stacy nodded at Robert's instructions and closed her eyes, shutting out the world as she quickly fell into a fitful slumber.

I walked over to the window where Graham stood and pressed my hand up against the large glass pane. "She'll be back," I told him.

"Who, Stacy? Of course she'll be back. She's too nosy to let her parents keep her chained to her bed."

I felt my eyes turn upwards at his comment and I kicked his shin lightly, annoyed. "No, not Stacy; Lark's going to be back, Graham. Robert returned after a month, so you might get to go to prom after all."

His laugh sounded more like a choking cough as he processed that thought. "You know how I know that we were meant to be friends, Grace?" When I shook my head, he smiled and continued, "I didn't even think about prom either."

"Really?"

He nodded and began to rub the back of his neck, embarrassed at his lack of awareness. "I mean, yeah, last summer, Erica spoke about prom and like an idiot, I agreed that I'd take her, but that was the last time I even thought about it. I'm not exactly looking forward to wearing a monkey suit, but if it means that Lark will come back, I'd do it."

"I don't doubt that you would, Graham."

"What's he doing?" he asked in a hushed tone as he motioned to Robert with a quick flip of his chin. "It's like he napping or something."

"I can only guess that he's watching Lark's welcome," I replied. "It's probably Ameila's vision he's seeing, but it's coming from Lark."

"So how did Lark know that this was her time? I mean, I know that she hears something, but what? I thought I'd have a lot more time to ask her these questions, you know? Now I'm asking you, like you'd know," Graham said resignedly. "I'm sorry, Grace-"

"God, don't apologize, Graham," I cut him off. "You need to know these things if you're going to be with Lark," I voiced to him in as encouraging a tone as I could muster; it was difficult, the rational yet irrational fear of him getting hurt slowly pushing itself to the forefront of my thoughts.

Robert's voice startled me when he began to speak, his eyes open and focused on the two of us, his posture loose, his face relaxed. "When an angel hears their call, it's a song meant just for them. They hear in it the purpose for their birth, the history



behind the position they take among those who have ascended before them, and the future that they will help to ensure by fulfilling their destiny. It all plays out in a melody of the voices of those that came before them. One day, another angel will receive the same call, and he or she will hear Lark's voice singing among the others."

"And what is she hearing?" Graham asked, his face marked with curiosity. "What's the call telling her?"

"I can't tell you that, Graham--her call is her own to share or not."

"Well, can you at least tell me if I have to go and rent a monkey suit or not?"

Robert's eyes closed and he shook his head. "It doesn't appear so."

A mixture of relief and disappointment crossed over Graham's face as he sagged against the wall. "Well, that answers that, I guess."

I smiled at him and shook my head. "You already bought one, didn't you?"

"Yeah," he answered, looking away as he rubbed his eyes.



## A QUESTION

As I had expected, once Stacy had been dropped off at home, it became nearly impossible to get in touch with her. Phone calls had always been difficult with her mother not approving of them before a certain hour, but now they weren't permitted period. To add to the near-imprisonment, when she was finally allowed back to school, it was under the strict supervision of her brother, Sean. She was dropped off precisely one minute before the bell rang at the start of school, and immediately after the last class was over, Sean was dragging her back towards his car.

Stacy admitted that her parents tried to get her class schedule altered so that we weren't in any of the same classes anymore, but with the end of the school year so close, it was impossible. Instead, Sean escorted her to and from every class, skipping homeroom entirely to sit beside Stacy and prevent us from having any type of normal conversation.

It was only during third period that we were

finally able to discuss what had been going on since her collapse and Lark's receiving of her call.

"The worst thing about all of this is that doctor who comes to the house every other day to check on me agrees with every single thing that my parents say. I could kill Robert for that," she complained, pounding the table with a balled up hand.

"Robert was only doing what he thought was best," I argued.

"Oh, look who decided to figure that one out a couple of weeks too late," she said in retort as she shook her head. "I know he was thinking about my health, Grace. I've got cancer, remember? Not Alzheimer's."

"Sorry," I muttered. "Dr. Ambrose isn't that bad, is he?"

"Dr. Ambrose? Is that his name? He kept telling me to call him Dr. Bro for some reason, but I think I like Dr. Ambrose a lot better. How do you know his name?"

"It's a long story, one that I don't think I can

get through in just third period," I said lightly. "But I know that he's a pretty nice guy, once you get past his...quirks."

"Oh, you mean like how he always wears gloves, and how he only washes his hands in ice water?"

"Uh...yeah," I agreed, nervously looking away before she saw the lie in my eyes.

"Anyway, tell Robert that I appreciate his help and get him to tell Dr. Bro to tell my parents that I'm okay. I've spent the past three days at home, listening to Korean soap operas and my mother making my father miserable with her complaints about me--if I don't get a reprieve sometime soon, I might be forced to take drastic measures."

"Like..."

"Like wallpaper the kitchen with all five of my brother's skin mags--and maybe a few of my dad's--or hide some kim chi underneath the couch cushions; I don't know, Grace! I'm a prisoner in my own home! I can't even talk to you during school hours without Sean the Warden standing nearby,

ready to start cussing you out in the only Korean he knows, that stuck up little sh-"

"Okay," I said, laughing. "I get it. I'll talk to Robert about this."

"Thank you," she said, her laughter joining mine. "So, you two are on speaking terms again?"

"It's kind of hard not to be since I'm pretty much confined to his house," I replied, the laughter dying in my throat.

"I suppose. You're practically a prisoner yourself, huh? Stuck in a house with someone you'd rather not even speak to, some crazed angel is out to kill you, Erica's stalking you, and now my brother is trying to keep us from having a decent conversation. If it weren't for this whole dying thing, I'd ask if you wanted to trade lives."

"Since I've got that 'crazed angel out to kill' me thing hanging over my own head, I think we're pretty much in the same boat." A sound from behind the bookshelf brought my silence much sooner than I had intended, and I pushed my seat back to peek around, tipping myself back on the rear two legs of

the chair.

"What is it?" Stacy hissed.

"Someone's been listening," I whispered while pointing to the bookshelf.

She nodded in understanding and slowly stood up, backing up and heading in the opposite direction.

When she reached the end, with unspoken agreement, we both launched forward; Stacy on her feet, me on my back after falling out of the chair and landing prone on the ground.

"Uh-hi, Grace."

I stared up at Shawn's flustered face and groaned at the ramifications if he heard anything that he wasn't supposed to. He seemed to know exactly what I was thinking and began to shake his head, vigorously denying what I had not yet accused him of.

"I was trying to find you; I knew you had third period free and figured that if you'd be anywhere, it'd be in here, and so I asked up front and they



pointed back here," he rushed, his eyes darting back and forth between Stacy and I, his hands nervously clutching at his pant legs as though they were bolstering him somehow.

"What did you want, Shawn?" I asked him calmly, not wanting to send him into a full stutter.

"I don't want to overstep my boundaries," he started, sweat beginning to bead on his forehead.

"Don't worry," I told him with a forced chuckle. "There's nothing you can say to me that would make me think that. Believe me."

"Well, I've been wondering if you and Robert were still together. See, I've been watching the two of you and things don't look so copacetic, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean, and the answer is no, Shawn. We're not, but I don't see how that's any of your concern." My voice wavered as the words passed my tongue.

"Okay then, well, that makes this next part that much easier." He swelled up as he took in an encouraging breath--almost too much as he began

to cough from the over-stretching of his lungs and chest--and then grinned at me, his shoulders back, his head held proudly.

"Grace, I wanted to know if you wanted to go to prom with me."

"I-I"

I stared at him, flabbergasted. I could only utter unintelligible sounds as I tried to figure out why he thought of me to ask. The anxious look on his face didn't help me get any closer to an answer.

"Hey, don't you have a girlfriend?" Stacy asked, finally speaking up.

He turned around and smiled, a sad smile that was quickly replaced with a more quirky one. "Well, I did, but she decided that finals are more important than prom so I've got two prom tickets and no date. I know you probably think I'm so out of your league, but--"

I abruptly cut him off. "I think you're out of *my* league? Whatever gave you that insane idea?"

"Well, look at your friends; you hang out with

Lark and Stacy; you're best friends with Graham Hasselbeck. You dated Robert Bellegarde for crying out loud! It's a pretty big fall to go from that to Salsa Boy." His face pinked up from embarrassment, the first time I'd ever seen such a thing from him, and I suddenly felt ashamed.

"Shawn, I don't know where you got the idea that I somehow thought that I was better than anyone, but I gotta tell you, I don't think you're out of my league. I don't have a-a league, period. Yeah, Graham and I are friends, but we've been friends since we had baby teeth, we live next door to each other; it's kinda the law that we're friends, you know?

"As for Robert...that was a fluke. I'm the one out of his league--way, way, way out of his league. I just...I never thought about going to prom, and I'm not quite a dress wearing kind of person."

He smirked, pride puffing up in him. "So that means that I'm the first person to ask you?"

My eyebrows pulled together as I nodded, unsure as to where exactly he was going with this.

"Well then, if I ask you to prom and tell you that you can wear whatever you want, would you go with me?"

I looked at Stacy, my eyes widening in an open hint to give me some kind of advice, but she was too busy staring at her nails--nails that she never seemed to care about before, nails that were chewed so short, she'd be more likely to scratch you with the calluses on her knuckles--to even humor me with a response.

When my gaze returned to Shawn's and I saw the hopeful look in his face, I couldn't bring myself to disappoint him. Sighing with deep resignation, I nodded in a half-hearted manner, so shallow was the movement I doubted I had even done it until he grabbed my hand and began to shake it, clapping it against his own several times before giving me an off-the-wall salute and a bow that brought his head so close to the ground, I feared he'd slam it against the flooring.

"Thank you, Grace," he crowed as he turned to leave. "I promise you won't regret this."

"Oh, but you might," Stacy mumbled behind

me, suddenly losing interest in her hands, her arms, any other appendage as she watched Shawn stroll past the rows of books towards the exit.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

The look she gave me told me just how stupefied she was, and I sat down, intrigued by her reaction. "Grace, you've just agreed to go to prom with Shawn Bing. Do you know what people will assume when they find out? When they see you?"

"Yeah, that Robert dumped me and that Shawn's my rebound date," I replied harshly.

"And what will Robert think?"

I brushed off her question with a quick wave of my hand. "He can read minds, remember? Shawn's not interested in me, not really. And I'm certainly not interested in him that way either, so who cares? Besides, now you have reason to go to prom, too!"

"And what reason would that be, because let me tell you, in order for me to go to prom, it'd have to be with a pre-med Korean boy whose parents are richer than the national deficit the way things are

going at home."

"You can go with Graham," I answered simply. "Lark won't be going, and I know for a fact that he's got a tuxedo hidden away somewhere for just this occasion."

The look on Stacy's face was priceless as the suggestion began to take hold. "Well, that's a new one. Me go to prom with my ex-boyfriend who's now dating my best friend. It'll piss off my parents, that's for sure, and I'll probably end up being chained to my bed until the cancer takes me or I commit suicide by kim chi. Either way, I guess it'd make for a pretty good epitaph."

"That's one way to look at it," I said, not exactly finding her morbid take funny. "So that's it. You'll go with Graham and I'll go with Sal-er, Shawn."

"Does Graham know that he's going to prom?" Stacy asked as she began to put her things away.

"He will as soon as the bell rings," I said, smiling.

"Well, I guess I should be glad that I'll be

playing the inmate role for the next three-and-a-half hours then," she laughed. "When you do break it to Graham, please make sure he knows that this was *your* idea and not mine."

"Oh thanks," I joked. "Way to have my back."

The trill ringing of the bell echoed through the library and Stacy grinned almost maniacally. "I think I'll watch this from the back of the cafeteria now that I think of it. Oh this will be amusing--you trying to convince Graham to take me to prom."

Standing up, I suddenly felt a bubble of fear rise up in my belly. "Maybe I'll wait until after school."

"Oh no, you're going to break this to him now."

Stacy pulled my arm, dragging me towards the exit with a gleeful glint in her eyes. That scared me more than what Graham's reaction might be.

"What about Sean? He's going to be outside and I don't think he's going to want to see me suggest to Graham that he take you to prom."

For an attempt to keep her away, it was

weak. Stacy smiled and continued to pull me through the library. She shoved me behind the reference book shelf and squeezed herself beside me, a long, thin finger resting over her lips to quiet me.

It took less than a minute for me to figure out what she was doing when I saw Sean pass by us, heading towards the back of the library with such purpose, he could have left deep impressions in the floor had he the strength.

"Ugh!" I grunted as Stacy quickly yanked me from our hiding spot and through the library door, nearly slamming my head into it as we passed by.

"Hurry up--I might only have a few minutes!"

We rushed through the hallway, Stacy expertly weaving through the crowded space until we reached the cafeteria.

"Gross-it's goulash day," I groaned, raising my hand over my nose and breathing through the sleeve of my shirt.

"There he is!" Stacy led me to our usual table, a broad smile growing on her face,



cartoonish in size, frightening in intent.

"Stacy! What happened, did'ja get paroled?" Graham cheered, standing up to press a quick hug to her before seeing the way she gripped my arm. "What's up? Did something happen?" I felt incredibly irresponsible as soon as the lines of concern began to form on his face and I shook my head.

"No, no, nothing happened. It's just that I...I wanted to ask you something," I said slowly. When he nodded, awaiting my question, I threw a quick glance at Stacy, whose smug smile did nothing to reassure me.

"Well, see, Shawn Bing came up to me in the library and he asked me to prom-"

"Salsa Boy asked you to prom?" Graham hooted.

"Yes, he did, and I said yes," my reply came, and it hit him like a slap in the face. At least, that's what it looked like to me when his amused face instantly turned into one that was near hysterical with fear.

The loose grip of Stacy's hand was quickly replaced with the tight one of Graham's. He pulled me to a seat and brought his head down close to mine as he, too, sat down. He looked up at Stacy and then back at me, his voice a low combination of a hiss and a whisper. "Are you crazy? Do you know what Robert would do to Shawn? You saw what he did to me and all I did was hug you!"

"First of all," I began, my voice just as low, my anger just as palpable, "Robert never asked me to prom, and I doubt he ever intended to. Second, I want you to take Stacy to the prom. And third, who I go to the prom with is none of your business."

"Why would Robert ask you to prom? You broke up with him, remember? And you hate wearing dresses--you have to wear a dress to prom, Grace, just in case you thought you could get away with wearing jeans and a t-shirt. It's like, the law or something--you want me to what?"

"She wants you to take me to prom," Stacy chimed in.

"Why the hell should I do that?" Graham looked about as confused as I felt awful. "I mean, I'll

do it, but there's got to be a good reason. Prom's not cheap and if I'm taking Stacy, I'm going to have to rent a bodyguard, or perhaps just Robert, just to keep from getting mauled by her brothers, not to mention take out a life insurance policy to pay for my funeral if Robert says no."

"You should do it because it's prom. You should do it because we're all friends here, and this might be the last time we're together before...well, just before."

"I must be cracked," Graham groaned. "Alright. I'll take Stacy to prom."

It took me a minute to recognize that he'd agreed, and then I whooped with excitement.

"Yeah, you always seem to do that when everyone gets quiet," he laughed and I realized with red-faced shame that he was right.

Every eye in the cafeteria was turned to me. "Uh-oh," I breathed. "Trouble, Stacy."

"What?" Her eyes moved to look in the same direction as mine and a very audible curse escaped her lips before she began stalking towards two very

angry looking people standing near the far exit of the cafeteria.

"Shouldn't one of us go and help her?" Graham whispered into my ear as he watched Stacy's shoulders slump millimeter after millimeter with each step.

"And do what? Those are her parents, Graham, and they hate us, remember?"

With one last look at us, Stacy followed her mother and father out of the cafeteria, looking far smaller than she was and it angered me, seeing how defeated she'd become and knowing that none of it was caused by the cancer.

"So, are you going to tell Robert about Salsa Boy or will you let him find out on his own?"

I didn't want to answer that question. I didn't even want to think about answering that question.

"You won't have to answer that question."

"Hey, Robert! Er...it's about time you showed up!" Graham's voice was squeaky with nervousness and fear.

I looked at Graham's face and I could see Robert's reflection in the green of his eyes. Even through the emerald glass, I could make out the sadness that lurked there, feel it like it were my own.

"Did you hear? I'm going to prom with Stacy," Graham said in a burst of words, his eyes flicking from mine to Robert's. I remained still, unable to face him.

"I know. I also know that Shawn Bing asked Grace to go to the prom with him. He's a far better man for asking, since I did not."

I turned around, a question of my own now poised at the tip of my tongue. "Were you? Were you going to ask?"

His grey eyes looked down on me, his face unmoving as he shook his head. "No, I wasn't."

It was a brusque response, one that I had expected, but I had no idea that it would sting so much to hear. I nodded and then turned away. "Well, then I guess it's a good thing that Shawn asked."

"Yes, it is."

And then without another word, Robert turned and walked away. Graham twirled my body around to watch him leave, but I couldn't. My head hung down low, matching my mood.

"I'm not sure that was a good idea, Grace."

I closed my eyes and sank into a chair. "Haven't you realized yet that nothing that comes out of my mouth is good, Graham?"

He sat down beside me and sighed, his hand grasping mine. "That's not entirely true, Grace. It's mostly true, but not completely, and it's that small amount that's wrong that matters."

"You really know how to comfort a girl," I quipped. "I've messed things up again, haven't I?"

"No, you haven't. I think it's a good idea, you going to prom with Salsa Boy. It'll give you a taste of what it's like to date a human and make you totally swear us off for life."

"Swear off what, humans or guys?"

He chuckled. "Yes."

The bustling of students in the cafeteria

muffled our conversation, and I felt comfortable enough after a while to lean my head on Graham's shoulder and speak softly. "So why didn't *you* ask me to prom, huh? Why did the first person to ask me to prom have to be Shawn Bing?"

"Probably because he's harmless."

A chortle--that odd laugh that almost sounds like one's drowning on their own spit--came out of my mouth. "I guess you're right. I can tell you this much though, Graham. I never pictured myself going to senior prom, but if I had, it would definitely not have been with Salsa Boy."

"Who would it have been with then?"

I couldn't prevent my gaze from heading towards the exit, my eyes straining to see beyond it each time the door opened, hoping for a glimpse of mercury.

"I don't know..."





## BIG SISTER

April fifteenth. That was Janice's due date. I had the date marked on the small calendar that was taped to the inside flap of my binder, the little red circle a constant reminder that soon, I'd be responsible for someone else.

Though I had called the hospital every day, I had yet to go and visit, which I was sure Janice and Dad both took personally though they never mentioned it whenever we spoke on the phone. Dad's visits to the house were always met with an excited Graham, who'd rehearsed his various excuses so much, he sometimes used them during school.

On the fourteenth, the phone call that I had been waiting for arrived, though from a source I hadn't expected.

I sat on the sofa in Robert's living room, one of the old, leather-bound books from a bookshelf in my lap. I had gone through several of them over the past week and a half, each one holding a history that I had never heard before, events that took place

centuries, millennia ago that had only been captured in one or two volumes that had not left the care of certain families. This particular book told of the roles of the electus patronus that hadn't been explained to me by anyone.

"And though the hurt of the people began to spread like an infection of the flesh, the chosen few were there to stand and voice the dissention of the dissolution of faith. They bore the burden of such great hurt and suffering, their numbers grossly dwindled by retaliation and forced illness until less than one hundred existed in the world."

The idea that so few individuals were left to protect the countless amount of angels that existed on earth floored me. I knew that the electus patronus swore to protect the secrets of the angels, but I didn't know that they had also sworn to protect their existence, too, and at the cost of their lives.

The drawings of the torture that they had endured were reminiscent of the paintings and etchings of the Spanish Inquisition that I had seen time and time again in my history books. The pictures were graphic: children were set on fire.

Pregnant women were cut open and left to be fed to the hungry dogs that had rounded them up. Fathers were made to watch as their only sons were tortured, their daughters raped--the pain and horror on the faces of the victims was so palpable, I could almost hear their screams around me.

And then it was my own short scream that I heard as the phone rang, shrill and impatient.

I grabbed the cordless receiver and pushed the talk button. "Hello?"

"Grace?"

"Yes?"

"Grace, this is Dr. Ambrose at Licking. I wanted to let you know that your step-mother is in labor."

The phone dropped from my fingers and I scrambled to catch it, failing and then cringing as it clattered to the ground, the battery door flying off and sailing beneath the sofa opposite the one I was sitting on.

"Hold on, Dr. Ambrose," I called out as I

crawled on the ground for the phone. I picked it up and gripped it tightly, pressing the receiver to my ear and hoping that my embarrassment couldn't be heard in my voice. "Are you still there?"

"Yes, I'm still here. I'm calling you to tell you that your stepmother's scheduled for a c-section in an hour. The baby turned unexpectedly overnight, making a natural delivery impossible. Your father's tried to reach you at your house, but no one is there. Hurry."

The line clicked off and I pushed talk once more, turning the phone off. If no one was answering the phone that meant that Graham wasn't there, which meant that I couldn't get in touch with him to give me a ride to the hospital. That left one option.

"Robert?"

I didn't expect a response. Since the incident in the cafeteria, his demeanor had been cool and he'd remained only as close as necessary. The house was a quiet, empty place whenever Graham wasn't around, and even though I knew that I wasn't alone, it always felt that way.

"Robert, are you here?"

"Yes," his voice answered, though he did not appear.

"I have to get to the hospital," I said to the empty room. "Janice is in labor--Matthew is coming and I need to be there."

"Be outside in two minutes."

I looked at the clock and counted the ticks as the second hand scrolled by, once, twice.

As soon as that second rotation was completed, I ran outside. Robert stood in the semi-darkness but I could see his wings were out, his posture tense.

"What's wrong?" I asked quickly.

"Nothing."

I nodded with apprehension and approached him slowly. "Okay."

He grabbed my arms and placed them around his neck. I sucked in my breath when my fingers brushed against the black silk of his hair, tiny

bursts of shock shooting through my skin and directly into my chest. He bent down, one arm scooping behind my knees, the other supporting my back and with an unnatural swiftness, we were in the air, soaring above the treetops of the large homes that surrounded his own. It was quiet and I feared that the silence in the sky, the silence between us would force me to say something that I wasn't prepared to.

It took less than two minutes to arrive near the hospital, Robert choosing to settle me down behind the parking structure. As soon as my feet touched the ground, he was removing my arms from him and placing them at my sides, like I was a small child.

"Go on," he said softly.

"Aren't you coming with me?" I asked, strangely hopeful.

He shook his head and avoided looking at me. "I'll be here when you're ready to leave."

I wanted to ask him to come with me, but I couldn't find the courage. He continued to stare

away from me, his gaze locked onto something unseen. Not wanting to start an argument, I left, running as he had instructed, nearly stumbling and falling flat as I missed a slight step leading from the parking structure to the main walkway of the hospital.

The maternity ward was on the third floor, according to the sign in the lobby, and I searched for an elevator that would take me there. When the double doors opened and I walked into the little box, I sighed with relief. I pushed the circular button and waited as the slow pull of the cables began.

When the doors opened again, I rushed out, nearly heading the wrong way. The receptionist behind the registration counter smiled at me as I approached. "Here to visit someone?"

"Yes, Janice Shelly? She's supposed to be having a c-section," I answered, my voice sounding out of breath for some reason.

"Oh yes, hold on." She picked up the receiver of a phone that sat beside her and began to speak into it, her movements very animated.

I took that moment to look around the pale pink maternity ward. There were soft, pastel paintings hanging on the walls with images of women holding onto babies in various poses mixed with floral portraits of lilies and orchids.

"Okay, they've already taken her into the procedure room, but it looks like her husband hasn't been allowed in yet. He'll be out in just a minute," the receptionist said in a sing-song voice.

"Thanks," I told her quickly, my hands impatiently grabbing at the drawstring of my pants while I waited.

A door opened to my right and I turned to see the excited face of my dad staring at me; he was dressed from head to toe in deep blue scrubs, a shower cap covering his brown hair.

"Grace!" he cried when he saw me, and I ran into his arms, inhaling the familiar scent of coffee and aftershave that was my dad. "I'm so glad you made it. Janice is being prepped right now--I can't go in until she's ready, but she's doing okay. The baby's doing okay."



"That's great, Dad," I said cheerfully, my eyes watering at the sight of him, the sound of his voice.

"Come on. You can't come into the operating room with me, but you can wait outside." He pulled me through the same door and I walked with him down a long corridor, passing by two nurseries and several rooms where the muffled moans of women in labor sent chills down my spine.

"Oh, before I forget, Janice wanted me to give you this." Dad pulled something off of his baby finger and placed it into my palm. "She said you had loaned it to her for the wedding, but since you left early during the reception, she didn't have a chance to get it back to you."

I stared at the small object in my hand and felt a rush of something that almost felt like a piece of me had fallen back into place. "It's the ring that Robert gave me," I whispered. "She needed something blue...I forgot that she had it."

"Well, she kept that ring on until the end of the honeymoon, only taking it off the day before we left because she was worried her fingers would get too swollen to remove it," he explained, closing my

hand around the silver band with the round, blue stone. "She didn't want to lose it, and was hoping she could have given it to you sooner, but she understands that you've got a lot of things to worry about right now.

"So, how's school? You've been spending a lot of time studying with Stacy so I'm hoping it's going well. Is it?"

"Yeah, yeah. Sure, Dad," I said encouragingly.

"And the work program forms for Berkley, you got those out on time, too?"

"Yep."

He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me to his side, squeezing me the way he'd done so often throughout my childhood. "Well, that's good. Any response?"

I stared at him, unable to answer. I hadn't checked the mail in weeks.

"Ah, I see. Well, you know you got in, Grace. If I have to sell the house to pay for the tuition, I will."

"Dad, I"

Dad's head jerked up as someone approached. "Well, it looks like it's time," he said, smiling, grabbing me and hugging me in a way that made me feel like he needed my strength more than I needed his.

"Okay," I squeaked, squeezing him tightly before letting him go to follow a nurse clad in the same type of scrubs and shower cap.

"When I come out, you'll be a big sister!" he called out before disappearing around a corner.

The minute he was gone, my hand opened to reveal the ring inside. "I can't believe I forgot that I'd given you to Janice," I whispered to it. I grasped the band and examined the large, sapphire cabochon. When Robert had given it to me for my birthday the previous Christmas, there had been a brilliant white star shining from the center of the stone. For whatever reason, the star had faded away, leaving just the intense blue stone in a plain silver setting.

I placed the ring back on my finger and blinked rapidly to ward off the traitorous moisture

that threatened to escape as the weight of the ring brought back the memory of it being given to me, a close moment in my room away from everyone else, where hints of the future were laid out before me. It was the first time that Robert had asked me to turn, and the first time I had refused him, telling him that I valued being normal too much to even consider it.

The look on his face had hurt to witness, cutting into me like it had been my own rejection I was feeling, but I had remained steadfast in my refusal. And yet despite this, Robert had vowed to be Matthew's guardian angel; he'd watched over me, over my friends--

"Are you Grace?"

I turned to see the same nurse who had retrieved my father standing behind me, her face pale, her expression a mixture of annoyance and amusement. "Yes, I'm Grace," I told her. "Is the baby here already?"

She shook her head and then handed me something that I hadn't noticed in her hands. "Put these on, please. Your step-mother needs you."

I looked down at what she had given me and then back at her, perplexed. "What do you mean, she needs me? What about my dad?"

"He didn't listen and locked his knees, causing him to faint; fastest collapse ever. Your step-mother is all alone in there and she's asking for you."

I nodded and then stared at the dark blue clothes in my arms. "How..."

"Just put them on over your clothes. You can do that walking, can't you?" She yanked on my arm and I followed her, clumsily pulling the shirt and pants on as I did so.

"Wash your hands here," she ordered as we entered a room where several large sinks were lined up in an orderly row. "Use this-" she handed me a bright yellow sponge with an orange brush affixed to one side "-wet it and scrub your hands and arms. Quickly."

I did as she instructed, flinching at the brown foam the sponge created before rinsing and throwing the sponge into the trash can she pointed

towards. Without a word she pulled me through a set of double doors that opened when she stepped on a metal plate on the ground. Another set of doors followed and then we were in a round room filled with several people. They were all dressed in the same blue scrubs, white masks over their faces, only their eyes visible.

Janice was splayed out on the table, tubes running up and down her arm and crossing over her face. She turned to look at me and smiled, her features so serene I felt the tears begin to well up again.

"I'm so glad you came. Your father's just no good in hospitals, is he?"

I shook my head and grinned. "No, he's not."

One of her hands opened and motioned me to come closer. I looked at the nurse who had brought me there and she nodded. "Go on, you can sit beside her if you want. There's a stool right there." She pointed to a round seat by Janice's head, and I rushed over to it, sitting down and grabbing her hand as soon as I was able.

"Okay, Mrs. Shelley, we're going to begin now," one of the masked individuals said over the blue curtain that was draped over Janice's chest.

"Alright," she said answered, her voice hoarse with emotion.

The sounds of an operating room weren't many; the voices of the doctors and nurses filled up the silence better than any beeping could have, but they weren't enough to mask the groans of pain that soon came from Janice.

"Hold on, just a little pressure," a voice replied to the sound from behind the blue sheeting.

"That feels like more than just a little pressure," Janice moaned, her fingers squeezing my own painfully.

"All right, here he comes."

Something unexplainable caused me to stand up at that moment, my height allowing me a clear view of the carnage that the curtain had hidden from sight. But I didn't pay attention to that. Instead I was staring raptly at the slimy little person that had just been pulled out of Janice.

He was very pale, covered with blood and some gooey substance or other, with a patch of dark hair at the top of his head. He didn't cry, he didn't do anything; he hung in the doctor's hands like a doll, and it was the silence that had replaced all of the chatter and instructions that hinted at something not being right. I felt the stirrings in my chest, a constriction of emotion that burned in a foreign yet similarly familiar way. I turned to look at Janice who stared at the ceiling, waiting.

"Why isn't he crying?" The panic in Janice's voice was thick and I felt it in my own body, it matching the one I had adopted as soon as I had realized that something was wrong.

"Hold on, Mrs. Shelley," the doctor told her. The limp body of my baby brother was whisked to a corner of the room where he was placed in a clear looking tray, a lamp shining above him revealing the blue tinge in his lips that had begun to spread across his face.

"What's going on? Grace, what's wrong with the baby? What's wrong with Matthew? Why isn't he crying? Please tell me what's wrong with my baby!"



Janice's pleas and my own biting fear moved me towards the crowd of people that now surrounded Matthew, muffled dialogue flitting in and out of my comprehension. Tubes were pulled from its packaging and the sound of sucking became the only thing I recognized.

"He's not breathing," someone uttered flatly.

"I've got no pulse."

"Start CPR-"

"Already started."

Everyone spoke coldly, with little feeling that it felt like I was watching robots, controlled by some unseen figure hidden behind a curtain somewhere. They moved in a sort of chaotic yet organized dance, dashing around each other, passing each other packages and tubes and pads, and all the while the tiniest player in all of it remained still and quiet.

"Don't die," I whispered, my head buzzing with too many emotions to label. "Don't die, Matthew, don't die. I won't let it happen. I won't let

him take you."

Someone was pressing their fingers against his chest, doing compressions on him while someone else squeezed a bag attached to a mask over his tiny face. His body barely moved, lifeless beneath the activity, and each painful second brought another whisper from my lips.

It felt like an eternity--filled with strange words, intense stares, and hushed fear--before finally, a tiny cough, followed by a squeaky, pitiful wail broke down the last barrier that had contained and prevented my tears from falling down and marking my face with my own relief. Through a fog of salt and water, I saw the small slowly-pinking form squirm, tiny fists balled up and flailing angrily at the abuse he had endured at the hands of those who had just saved his life.

"Atta boy," a nurse said with a sniffle--proof that she was not a robot after all--and began to dress him, placing a blue knit cap on his head, and wrapping him up in a thick, white blanket. "Come and meet your mama, now."

She lifted him and turned to face me, a smile

on her face that seemed relaxed, betraying the stress and seriousness that had overwhelmed nearly everyone in the room just moments before. "Would you like to hold him, big sister?"

I didn't get a chance to answer as she shoved the warm bundle into my arms, the embrace awkward as I struggled to hold the wriggling form, his warm body filling me with a strange warmth of my own.

"What's his name?" she asked me, doing her best to distract me from the insecurity I felt at holding him.

"Matthew," I breathed, as I gingerly took the few steps back to Janice's side. "Matthew James Shelley."

Upon seeing her son, Janice began to weep, fat, heavy tears falling from her face and onto the floor. "Is he okay?" she asked in a fit of hiccups. "Is he alright?"

I looked at the nurse who nodded. "Yeah, Janice, he's fine." I bent my knees so that Matthew's head was level with his mother's.

"Oh, he's beautiful," she cooed between sniffs. "I always knew he'd be beautiful. Oh thank God that he's okay."

With his eyes open, I could see a silvery hue over what would end up being eyes the same dark brown shade as mine. His dark hair peeked out from beneath the hat, and it curled slightly around the edges. "He's got Dad's hair," I said smiling.

"He's got a lot of your father's features," Janice agreed. "But I can see you in him, too. He's got your lips, and the same stubborn chin; no, not stubborn--his chin is strong, just like his big sister's."

I blushed at the compliment, guessing that Janice had become so enamored of her newborn son she would go on throwing out compliments until either her son looked like a beauty queen or I ended up sounding like a leading man.

The nurse that had led me to the room came up beside me and held out her arms. "I've got to take him to the nursery now."

A feeling of protectiveness came over me

and I hesitated, looking at Janice's face, gauging her reaction before finally handing Matthew over. He had fallen asleep in my arms and the movement disturbed him, causing a perturbed and annoyed cry to come from his little mouth.

"We'll bring him to your room when he's checked out by the pediatrician," the nurse said reassuringly to Janice and me. "You'll be taken to the ICU for a few hours to monitor you and when we're sure that you've handled the c-section well, we'll take you to your recovery room."

I was ushered out of the room next, instructed to remove the blue clothing that had allowed me to blend in with everyone in the operating room, and given the room number where Janice would be moved to, and where Dad was currently sleeping.

When I opened the door, I could hear the odd snore that told me I had the right room. I walked in and smiled; Dad was curled up in a ball on the bed, the blue of the scrubs screaming against the white of the sheets.

"Dad," I said softly, shaking his shoulder.

"Dad, wake up."

He mumbled something about bacon and salad packages and turned over, his eyes remaining shut. I pushed him a bit more vigorously and said his name louder this time, my mouth much closer to his ear, amplifying my voice.

"Dad--Matthew is here, Dad."

"Wha-what was that?" He snorted and rubbed his eyes, blinking several times when the surroundings became clear. "Where am I? What happened?"

"You passed out, Dad; passed out cold in the operating room. They brought you in here and I went into the room with Janice so she wouldn't be alone," I told him as I helped him sit up.

He rubbed his eyes and yawned, stretching his arms out and then suddenly looking stricken. "I missed it? I missed Janice giving birth? Oh how could I miss this?"

"Dad, it's okay. I don't think Matthew will remember you not being there. Besides, I think if you had been in there when things got a little touchy,

you might have gotten in the way," I tried to explain.

"What do you mean, when things got touchy? What happened?" Panic marred his features and I had to grab his face and force him to pay attention as I went through the events in the operating room, skimming over the parts that I knew would send him rushing to the nursery or worse, the operating room, and relayed to him what Janice had said about Matthew looking like him.

When I told him that Janice would be in the ICU for the next few hours, he planted a fleeting kiss onto the top of my head and then left, leaving me with a quick explanation of how he was going to be with his wife.

"Alright," I said softly after the door closed.

I walked over to a pink chair that was situated in a corner of the room and sat in it, the uncomfortably thin cushion doing nothing to prevent the metal springs from pressing up. "Are you kidding me?" I complained, adjusting my position until the springs missed every part of me except a small section of my thighs.

"Those chairs have given the chiropractors' wing a lot of business over the past few years."

My head turned towards the door and I felt a smile creep up my face. "Hello, Dr. Ambrose--I can't begin to thank you enough for calling me. My Dad passed out in the operating room; if I hadn't been here, Janice would have gone through this all alone."

"You're welcome." He looked pleased, and surprised. "I didn't know whether it was right to call you at...that house. I only knew that if you missed such an important event, you'd never forgive yourself."

I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around him, the frank hardness in his cold body sending a deep shiver down my spine. I ignored it, however, and hugged him, my gratitude overwhelming.

"I won't forget this, Dr. Ambrose. You've done a lot for me lately and I don't know why, but I appreciate all of it."

With gentle hands, he pulled my arms down



and placed them at my sides. "I only did what was right, Grace."

"I don't just mean what you did today. It's what you've been doing--you're also helping Stacy."

"I'm merely doing what Robert asked me to," he said quietly.

"Yeah, but why? There's no reason for you to help her out, especially when her family can't afford home visits. Speaking of which, there's something I wanted to ask you. Could you tone down the doom and gloom with Stacy's parents?"

He straightened and his head leaned on its side. "Why would I do that?"

"Because she's one of my closest friends, probably my best girlfriend, and her parents are overbearing and overprotective and it's smothering her. If her parents don't start letting up, she's going to end up doing something that will only make her condition worse." There was plain truth in my words and he couldn't ignore it. I saw that in his dark eyes.

"I'm only doing what I think is best for her, Grace," he said apologetically. "I don't want her to

make herself any more ill than she is, but her parents need to be made aware of the dangers out there for her."

A mocking snort escaped me and I shook my head at the irony. "So I take it you've informed them of your little...problem?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

I grabbed his wrist and placed my fingers where his pulse should be. "This, Dr. Ambrose. The fact that you're not exactly alive. The fact that you're not exactly human, either."

"I'm human, Grace," he countered, but I rolled my eyes.

"You're not human, Dr. Ambrose, you're an erlking; you eat people, for crying out loud! And while I can kinda overlook it, I don't think Stacy's family ever could, or would for that matter."

His face grew long at the harsh truth. "Grace, while I appreciate the fact that you haven't revealed my...condition to Stacy or her family, it has little bearing on how I treat her illness."

"It has everything to do with how you treat her illness," I replied with an unexpected harshness. "You have the luxury of knowing that you're going to live forever--well, as long as someone doesn't shove a stake in your heart or whatever it is that kills your kind--but Stacy doesn't, she can't. She's going to die a lot sooner than she should because of something that's followed her since childhood, and you're making what little time she has left to live her life absolutely miserable."

"Grace, you don't understand--"

"I understand more than you know," I cut his words with my biting interjection. "I know what dying is, and I can tell you that I wouldn't want to spend my last days, weeks, months sitting locked up in my room while my parents and my doctor tell me how to breathe, how to sleep, how to handle stress."

"Stacy's never complained about being sick, Dr. Ambrose, because she's never let it keep her from living her life. But now that she knows she's going to die, all of you would have her just stop living altogether. After everything she's been through, that's what you offer her. It's not much of a

consolation, is it?"

Dr. Ambrose looked ashamed, and he shoved his hands into the deep pockets of his white coat, the motion jerking, his ID badge flapping. It was, in my opinion, a white flag of surrender.

"I'll speak to Stacy's parents tomorrow when I stop by after my rounds, but I make no guarantees, Grace. They're convinced that the only way to keep her alive is to keep her at home."

I gave him a mischievous smile. "Well, you can just convince them of exactly the opposite."

"I can see why he loves you; your devotion to your friends is admirable and quite uncommon."

I stared at him, stunned by the out-of-place comment.

"I'm sorry, did I say something untoward?"

Shaking my head, I allowed the creases on my forehead to relax. "No, no you didn't. It's just...never mind, Dr. Ambrose. It's been an eventful day, and I'm tired. I think I'll go and find my Dad and tell him that I'm heading home."

"Let me walk with you, then." He opened the door and held it as I walked through. "I have to head back down anyway."

Without saying anything, we walked together to the ICU where Janice was being monitored. She was sitting up, a peaceful smile on her face, Dad's hand in hers. She waved to me, a tube still hanging from her arm swinging and hitting Dad's face comically.

"How are you feeling?"

"A little sore, but otherwise quite well and happy."

"I feel embarrassed but I think I'll get over it as soon as I don't have to see those doctors and nurses anymore."

Dad and Janice looked at each other, now confused as to who it was that I had been referring. I simply smiled and patted Dad on his back and Janice on her foot.

"I just wanted to tell you guys that I'm going home. I have some studying to do, plus I wanted to call up everyone to let them know that Matthew is

here."

I could see a glimmer of disappointment in their eyes, but Dad's smile betrayed that. "Who's coming to pick you up?"

"Robert is waiting for me outside. I've got to go, but I'll try and come back tomorrow."

He stood up and brought me against his chest, his cheek resting against the top of my head. "Thank you, Grace. Thank you for being here for Janice and Matthew, and for me. You're more than I deserve, but I'm glad to have you."

"No problem Dad," I mumbled.

"I love you, kiddo."

"Love you, too, Dad."

I left them with a wave, and headed towards the elevator, Dr. Ambrose following quietly beside me.

"You have a nice family, Grace," he said after pushing the call button.

"I know," I agreed.

He didn't say anything else to me until we were back on the ground floor, the emergency room heading in one direction, the parking structure in the other.

"Grace, I want you to know that I will speak to Stacy's parents. I promise you."

He held out his hand and I took it gladly. "Thank you, Dr. Ambrose, really."

"I would, however, like to ask a favor of you, if you don't mind."

I looked into his dark eyes and nodded, willing to do just about anything if it meant he'd help Stacy regain some sort of a normal life again.

"If you could continue to keep my secret from your friends, I would appreciate it. There aren't many who would be thrilled to know that something like me is in this town, much less working in their hospital. In fact, if you could just forget what I am, not think about it at all-"

"Done, Dr. Ambrose."

He gave me an appreciative smile and

clapped his free hand around mine. "Thank you. In these strange times, you truly are an angel in your own right, Grace."

I left him standing by the elevators, and knew that he watched as I walked away. And it felt oddly comforting and safe, having him do so. I couldn't help but smile at the strangeness of that--I felt safe leaving my new baby brother in a hospital that employed an erlking, felt safe knowing that my back was to him.

"Strange times indeed," I chuckled to myself as walked through the hospital doors.





## OF DOUBT AND OTHER DUBIOUS THINGS

When the hospital doors closed behind me, the unnatural quiet that surrounded me was my first warning. With the intensely bright lights seeping behind me through the glass doors of the hospital, I could do nothing but squint as I tried to look at everything in front of me, wary of the darkness scattered with a smattering of dull, amber light that coupled with the silence that did not belong in a structure full of cars.

Forgetting that it was there, I tripped over the little step going into the structure, nearly falling once again, and I cursed my sudden bout of klutziness before righting myself and regaining my composure.

"Robert?" I whispered, taking tentative steps towards the far wall where I had left him standing, my sneakered feet making soft padded sounds as I went.

Concrete and steel cabling formed makeshift walls guarding row after row of cars in the parking structure. The yellow lights attached to the

ceiling turned their colors into drab, muted shades that darkened the atmosphere quite considerably, and I tried my best to simply stare ahead, ignoring the emptiness that the unmoving vehicles gave off as my breathing and my footsteps bounced and echoed all around me.

With a start, I heard the metallic rustling of keys a few yards away and saw the figure of someone climb into what I could only assume was a sedan. Realizing that I was not alone, I felt an incredibly rich sense of relief come over me, and I allowed Robert's name to flow off my tongue as I called out for him, letting him know that I had arrived and was heading towards him.

I walked with more surety in my steps as I neared the meeting spot, all the while listening for the start of the engine to the sedan as I approached, my ears straining for the sound of a radio or fan, anything that would indicate that at least the power was on. When my feet took me past the car, I could see the outline of the dark head of the driver inside and seeing it, acknowledging that there indeed was a person in there, made me

wonder what could be taking whoever it was sitting in the driver's seat so long to turn the engine over.

As I got closer to the end of the lot, seeing the dark expanse of space that held the unknown, the heavy weight of dread began to settle on me. The car hadn't started yet and with each passing minute, a sinking realization attached itself to me like a leech, draining me of any hope that it would, finally leaving me with nothing but doubt and an equally morbid curiosity.

I stopped walking, stilling my feet on the rough concrete surface and turned around with an odd and combative mixture of determination and apprehension. "This is crazy," I said to myself as my feet brought me back to the mustard colored car. "I have got to be one of the stupidest people in Heath; the stupidest person in Ohio. How many horror movies have I seen? Who's the first one to die? The dumb girl, of course--she's always the one to do something stupid, like approach a strange car in a dark parking structure. At least I'm a virgin--they never die first. Unless they do something stupid...like what I'm doing right now."

It wasn't comforting, this conversation I was having with myself, but at least it erased the silence that made things feel a lot worse.

I stood behind the car, waiting for something to happen, some kind of activity from inside. I bent my knees and leaned to the side to get a better view from the rear windshield, but there was nothing, no light from inside, no motion, nothing. I flinched when one of the yellow lamps above my head blinked out, plunging half of the car into further darkness.

Taking a deep breath, I walked towards the driver's side. I could see the outline of a hand resting on the steering wheel and breathed a short sigh of relief--whoever it was in the car, he or she was simply getting ready to leave, just taking their time--and I began to turn away.

My eyes, my stupid, curious, nosy eyes briefly caught a glimpse of something in the backseat and I was forced to pause. A label printed with a familiar name covered half of a large plastic container filled with bottles and jars that sat on the seat. An anatomy text book lay next to it, one that I

had laying on the desk in Lark's room, I turned around and tapped on the driver's side window, rapping on it loudly when I got no response from the first round.

"Mr. Branke?" I called out with uncertainty. "Mr. Branke, are you okay?"

I pressed my face against the glass when again I received no answer, and felt my mouth go slack, the panic in my chest rising to such a pitch I knew that any minute, it would come rushing out in a frightful scream. I took several steps back only to find my way of escape impeded by another car. I stumbled out from between the two vehicles and fell onto the ground, my face hitting the concrete and scraping against the scratchy texture.

"Oh my God, oh God, someone help," I squeaked as I pressed a hand against my stinging face. "Someone help me, please!"

I scrambled into a crouched position and pushed myself backwards until I met up with a cement pillar. I held my head in my hands, my fingers pushing my hair in all directions as I tried to control the dizzying feeling that began to take over,

my breathing too out of sync to send enough oxygen to my brain.

"Robert, Dr. Ambrose, someone," I whimpered, the image of Mr. Branke's lifeless, colorless eyes staring out from his bloodless face, his bruised and bleeding mouth hanging open in a frozen scream permanently burned into my mind. I closed my eyes, rubbing the lids with extended fingers, pressing hard, circling roughly as though the act itself would erase what I had seen. I began to rock on my heels, feeling the madness beginning to creep up inside of me and not liking it but I felt helpless to stop it when flashes of death kept filling my closed vision.

A strong pair of arms encircled me, pulling me up and into an embrace so tight, I would have suffocated if I didn't know immediately in whose arms I was in, didn't know with every nerve in my body who it was that held me so protectively.

"Robert, it's...it's Mr. Branke. He's dead," I gasped into his shirt, my fingers clutching onto the thin fabric desperately. "I saw him get into his car but he didn't start it. I waited and he didn't start the

car and I knew something was wrong, I knew that something wasn't right so I had to check on him. I went back and I saw him-

"He's dead, oh God, he's dead."

Robert didn't move, he didn't say anything. He simply held me until my breathing slowed down to a normal pace and I relaxed a measure or two. Only when he was sure that I was past the hysteria of what I had seen did he loosen his hold on me. Immediately, I felt a tremendous sense of loss and I involuntarily leaned into him, not wanting to be separated from him, not now.

"Grace, I have to look at him," he murmured into my ear, his breath hot and cold at the same time.

Reluctantly, I nodded and allowed him to pull away. I stood still, my fist pressed up against my mouth, biting into my knuckles to keep from calling him back, my other arm wrapped around myself, needing something to hold onto.

He looked at the shadowed figure from behind the car and then turned to look at me, a



mask of confusion on his face. He rounded the side of the car and tapped on the glass before stepping back, much as I had.

Only unlike my experience, the door opened.

And Mr. Branke exited the car, an annoyed look on his unmarred face.

"What's the meaning of this, Mr. Bellegarde? Why were you knocking on my window?" He gave Robert a once over and then, as though he just realized that he and Robert weren't alone, turned to face me, irritation visible in every single line on his face.

"Oh. It's you, Miss Shelley. What exactly are you up to? Why are you two skulking around my car?" he ground out, his voice filled with something far more grating than simple animosity.

My mouth hung open in dumb shock. I couldn't form any words--any sensible, coherent ones anyway--and simply stared as guttural noises somehow managed to eke their way out of my throat. His eyes narrowed into dark slits at the sound.

"It appears that Grace thought you were in distress, Mr. Branke," Robert explained, his hand held out in an offering of apology. "She was concerned for your wellbeing, sir, nothing more. I'm sorry if we disturbed you."

Mr. Branke refused the hand offered to him and turned pale green eyes in my direction. I saw the flash of anger there, another warning. "I highly doubt Miss Shelley is capable of concern for anyone other than herself, judging by her behavior in school and her treatment of those she calls her friends.

"In any case, as you can see, I'm perfectly fine. I simply dozed off in the car for a bit, and was having a fairly decent nap, too, until I was rudely awakened by you and your girlfriend."

"I saw you," my voice crept out between the two males, sounding more like a strangled animal than my own. "I saw you--you weren't asleep. I saw..."

"Grace, are you certain of what you saw?"

I turned to Robert, stunned. "I know what I

saw." How could he doubt me? He could see for himself, the vision in my head, and yet he looked at me as though I were speaking about something alien to him.

He nodded, the motion stiff, curt, as though simply a placatory gesture in front of the obvious proof that what I saw couldn't possibly be the truth.

"Robert, he was dead. He was sitting in his car and he was dead. He was bleeding out of his mouth; his eyes were bulging out like he had been strangled-" Saying the words out loud made it seem preposterous, what with him standing there right in front of me, but I knew that I was telling the truth. I hadn't imagined seeing him dead, of that I was certain.

I turned to look at Mr. Branke and his eyes were indeed bulging, but this time out of disbelief at the description I was giving when clearly he wasn't dead, he wasn't even injured. My eyes roamed over his face and his body, scanning for even the slightest hint of injury, anything that would corroborate my story, but he was impeccably dressed, his shirt smooth, his pants still carrying the

pleat that had been pressed into it. Even his shoes appeared to be perfectly polished, as though he had been spending all that time in the car getting them to shine.

"I can't believe that I'm standing here listening to this," he said, his voice cold and grating. "It's not enough that you have ruined my career, ruined my reputation. No, now you're having fantasies of seeing me dead, too. I never took much stock in the rumors about you, Grace, but the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that there might be some genuine merit to them."

Robert coughed in disapproval, but his tone spoke nothing of the sort as he consoled Mr. Branke. "I'm sorry that her words have upset you, Mr. Branke. She's had a very emotional day--her step-mother just gave birth to a baby boy--and I'm sure that exhaustion caused her to see something that wasn't there out of her concern for you."

Mr. Branke cast him a disapproving glance and shook his head. "If I were you, Mr. Bellegarde, I'd ditch this one and find yourself something far more suitable, something that didn't look like a

drowned mouse, something that didn't cause so much damn trouble. She's only going to cause you undue pain and suffering, mark my words. Her kind always does."

With that he turned and headed back to his car, climbing into the driver's seat and slamming the door shut. The vehicle started up with a loud, rumbling growl that matched in enmity what he had displayed outside when confronting me. The white lights signaling he was reversing lit up, blinding me, and Robert pushed me aside as the car angrily backed up, neatly stopping in the spot I had just occupied before peeling off, black tracks of burnt rubber still smoking on the ground when the red lights faded away.

"I can't believe you didn't defend me." I didn't recognize my voice, the disbelief in it causing it to change, deepen. "I can't believe that you would see what was in my head, know that I had seen it, and still make him think that I was simply tired."

Robert didn't try to avoid my gaze, instead staring at me, matching glare for glare. "I know what you thought you saw, Grace. I see it, I see it as

though it was my own memory, but even you know that the human mind is capable of great deceptions. You have memories that don't even belong to you, memories of events that never occurred, and yet they're your own."

I pointed an accusatory finger at him and let my voice rise in a tone that matched my hurt and anger. "And you said that they were planted there, but there's no way that this memory, what I saw was planted because I saw it as it was happening, and I was alone, Robert--no one else was here. I saw Mr. Branke get into the car and I saw him sitting in the driver's seat, dead, with blood coming out of his mouth. Those aren't false memories, Robert. Those are real. This is real."

"How can you be so sure, Grace? Are you positive that you weren't hallucinating? You haven't been sleeping well, you haven't been eating well; you've just gone through a very trying and emotional event with Janice and your father. All of those combined make for a perfect environment for producing hallucinations and false memories."

He sounded so clinical, so incredibly sure of

what he was saying that had it been any other person he was talking about, I would have agreed with him immediately. But it wasn't someone else he was talking about. He was talking about me, and he was speaking about me as though I were a patient and not...

"I'm not crazy! I know what I saw, and you're not going to convince me that it wasn't real." It was painful, having to defend myself to him, having to defend what my eyes had seen.

He said nothing, stoic as always when it came to my own distress and so I continued. "I don't get it. You kept saying that I was different, that you could trust me, but it always seems to be quite the opposite, doesn't it?"

I watched his reaction as the thoughts began to scroll through my head, the individual memories that still stung like fresh wounds.

"You don't trust me, Robert. I don't know why I didn't see it before, but I do now. You don't trust me; that's what I've been missing this entire time, why I've had to go to your sister or to your mother for answers. You didn't trust me with Graham, you didn't

trust me about the ring, and you don't trust me now about what I saw. I don't even know why you told me about what you are. I don't know why you even bothered to speak to me at all."

You can never truly understand just how capable the human heart is of feeling hurt, even after you're convinced that it's been broken, damaged beyond all salvation. And as I said these words, the scattered fragments of my heart were consumed by this hurt, and I couldn't stay there, seeing his unresponsive face, so beautiful despite all of the pain it was capable of dealing. I began to walk away, heading back towards the hospital entrance. I was blinded by the lack of trust, deaf to anything but my own heart breaking all over again--what little there was left of it.

It was futile, of course, to think I could have simply gotten away that easily.

Futile and foolish.





# CIRCUITOUS

In all the countless times that Robert had stolen into my room to whisk me away for an escape to the sky or a private moment somewhere, anywhere, he had never done so with such determination and speed that I didn't realize what was happening until my surroundings appeared to have morphed into something else entirely.

Gone were the concrete pillars and walls, the driverless cars, or the garish yellow lighting. Gone were the hospital and Dad and Janice, Matthew and Dr. Ambrose.

In their stead, the familiar site of a black, four-poster bed with a portrait collage of several black and white photographs in matching frames filling in as a headboard.

"Why am I here?" I asked when I had counted high enough to calm me down.

"Because I didn't think it was appropriate to have this conversation in a parking lot."

It was a simple reply, an honest one, and yet

it angered me. "You didn't think it was an appropriate conversation to have in a parking lot? It was the perfect place to prove that the conversation was necessary. It was the perfect location for you to confirm to Mr. Branke that I'm just a nut job. It was the perfect location to make me question why I even considered giving you a second chance. Why wasn't it also the perfect location to discuss just how big of an idiot I am for trusting you when you clearly couldn't do the same for me?"

A twitch of his jaw, the slight tightening of it was all I'd get in way of any physical reaction. He stared at me, immobile, enigmatic.

"If your intention was to bring me here so that the conversation could die, Robert, you're sadly mistaken. I'm done being kept in the dark."

I felt my fingers curl into my palm and my breathing slow as I took several deep breaths to steel myself for what it was that I had to say next.

"I'm not going to do this anymore, Robert. I trusted you with everything. I trusted you with every thought, every memory, even those I wasn't aware I had, and you couldn't do the same with me, couldn't

even try. You said you loved me, but love is nothing without trust, Robert. It's a useless and pointless emotion if you cannot trust me.

"Even after you lied to me, I still trusted you with my life because, as hard as I have tried not to, I still love you. So much so that it hurts just to say your name and know that when I do, it's not because I'm with you, but because I'm trying to convince myself to stop feeling the way that I do about you."

Robert's voice, soft but firm filled up the emptiness that mine left behind. "I love you, too, Grace. You can't even begin to understand how I feel about you, cannot comprehend the depth of my feelings for you. You have no concept of what it is like to feel the way that I do because you're-

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "Human? That's the crux of it all, isn't it? You're an angel and I'm not, and so everything that I feel is simply incomparable. You can lie to me, but that's okay because you love me so much. You can make me look like a nutjob and that's okay because your love runs deeper than mine. You can keep secrets from me but I'm an open book because I'm

incapable of comprehending just how much you care for me."

"Grace, you're being ridiculous. This is why our kind isn't supposed to mix--we're not compatible emotionally--you can't feel the same way we do."

"I'm through with being made to feel like my feelings are inconsequential because I happened to have been born human, Robert! You're right! I can't feel the same way that you do, just like you can't feel things the same way that I do because you're not human."

Sighing, I turned around to face the door, the blank, white surface far more comforting than the expression on his face. "Look, none of this matters anymore, Robert. I'm going back to my house. I don't want you to protect me anymore. I don't want you around me anymore. If Sam finds me there, then so be it. He'll only be doing what he was supposed to--you said it yourself: I wasn't meant to get this far and you've already risked far too much to keep me alive."

I didn't wait to hear an argument, didn't want

to hear an argument. I simply left him standing there, unmoved, unspeaking, untouched.

I headed to Lark's room and began to gather my things, not trying to be orderly, simply quick. As soon as I was sure that everything that I had brought was now tucked into my duffel and backpack, I reached for the phone beside her bed and dialed Graham's phone number.

After three rings, I heard him pick up and I breathed a sigh of relief. "Graham, could you come and get me?"

"Grace?"

"Yeah. I need you to come and get me, okay?"

"What's wrong, Grace? Did something happen?"

"Could you just come?"

There was a pause. And then...

"No."

I pulled the receiver away and looked at it in

disbelief, as though I would be able to see an explanation there, something that would give me justification as to why that was the response I received.

"What? Why?"

"Grace, you're running away again. It's time to stop running." I could hear the strain in his voice, hear how difficult it was for him, but there was also a finality that I wouldn't be able to get around. "I love you, Grace."

"I love you, too," I said softly into the phone before hanging up.

I stared at the two bags sitting on Lark's bed, my life contained in two canvas sacks, dark and constricting against a backdrop of brightness and light that had always been just out of my reach.

"You were right."

My body jerked at the voice, but it didn't betray me in any other way. I didn't turn to look at him, I was allowed that.

"You *are* right. I didn't trust you. Not when it

mattered, not when you deserved it. I was proven wrong each time I doubted you, and each time, I vowed to myself that I would prove to you that you could trust me, even if you never knew that you couldn't--I broke my vows almost as quickly as they came.

"I'm sorry, Grace. I know that I could say that with every second that passes through the rest of my existence and it wouldn't be enough for one tenth of what I've done to hurt you, but I can't let you leave without hearing what I have to say. Please. Give me a chance to explain, and then, if you still want to, I'll take you home and never bother you again."

"What do you have to tell me that hasn't already been said?"

"Everything."





# INNOMINATE

"Do you know why angels have calls, Grace?"

I looked at him and frowned. Why was he asking me questions when he was supposed to be giving *me* the answers?

"I'm sorry. I was being rhetorical. Let me start over; the reason angels have calls is because we don't have free will. We cannot choose the paths our lives take, no matter what our skill, no matter what our hopes, our dreams. If not for the call, there'd be thousands of guardians and no seers; there'd be healers but no angels of death. Or, the opposite would happen and humanity would be wiped out.

"Until we get our call, we're like children lost in a giant shopping center, looking at all of the stores, having no money to spend, and no parents around to help guide us, keep us safe, but we have a set of rules that we know we must follow. And we do.

"Most of us, anyway. Some of us...well, we

don't. The ties that bind us to our kind aren't as strong because we haven't received our call yet. And this small amount of freedom can act like a virus, spreading inside of us . This is like being that lost child and seeing two paths to take: one path will lead to help, the other to the game-filled, candy-coated unknown.

"I was meant to be Death because of the origin of my birth, the nature of my birth. Had I been given a choice, I would have become a healer, but then who would I heal when my hands can only save one person?"

His eyes looked into mine in a way that I could feel, the reach of them tangible. "You mean me."

"Yes, you. I accept that you're the only person whose life I can save, whose body I can heal. I would have it no other way. But, if I had chosen to be a healer and was unable to heal the dying around me, the sick, I'd be an angel without a call, lost.

"Mother told you about the Grigori--they chose to abandon our laws while still answering their call. The result was the earth being flooded

and humanity's relationship with angels forever altered.

"But there are those that refuse to answer the call entirely. They've tasted free will, they've seen the invisible shackles that those whom answer it are forced to wear, and they have no desire for it. The call's song, first sung in invitation, slowly turns angry and condemning. It in turn changes an angel's heart into something dark, full of horrible, uncontrollable hate.

"They lose their ability to hear the thoughts of others, the only thing that gives them comfort from the now harsh and piercing screams that the call has become. Nothing but the blackest of thoughts and ideas, the most ill intended of lies and deceit can now penetrate the incredible anger that fills their mind, and there is far too much of that in this human world to block out.

"They are called the Innominate, the ones who've become so lost to us that they are simply unknown. They are nomadic, existing alone and avoiding everything that lives. They care for nothing, love nothing, and you must see that for something

that is born to love incredibly, love intensely, that is a painful, horrible thing to endure. There is nothing left for them, nothing but rage, and you now know what comes of that."

Robert stopped speaking, his gaze sorrowful and his hand pressed against his chest, as though the heart that no longer beat in his chest pained him. He took a tentative step towards me then stopped, shaking his head before retreating several steps in the opposite direction, his body now resting in the doorway, one foot in the hallway, the other in Lark's room.

"I know you're wondering why I'm telling you this, what this could possibly have to do with the way I have treated you, despite my declarations. It's simple, really. For all of my existence, every single waking moment was filled with anticipation for the day when I would finally receive my call.

"Until you."

In a fraction of a second, he was beside me, his hands on mine, an intense and avid expression on his face. "Grace, I've always been dutiful, obedient, and faithful. I've never given anyone

reason for doubt or mistrust. But that moment I became aware of you, felt your presence, everything changed.

"I touched your hair, altered its appearance--the first time I had ever done that for anyone--and the breaking of such a small rule acted like a catalyst for something that I did not know was waiting deep inside me. And then you touched me--"

"Actually, I crashed into you," I corrected.

"Yes, for you it felt as though you crashed into me, and quite right, you did crash into my life, but for me, it was something else entirely. It was like a baptism, the feeling of your human life up against the life of my immortal one. It changed the way I saw things, changed the way I wanted to see things.

"I took a look at your life, from your earliest formed memories to the thoughts that ran in your mind for Graham. I wanted to see the moments that shaped you, molded you. And when I saw Sam there, saw what took place, what *should* have taken place, I knew instantly what it was that I should have done."

My hands in his were brought mere millimeters from his face as he looked at them, his eyes flitting from finger to finger, before bringing them to his cheek, the cool skin resting against the warmth of my own. "A song that spoke of your name in death began to play in my mind. And why wouldn't it? You had escaped dying. No one does that; no one who is meant to die survives. You were a miracle, a physical miracle.

"I made a decision then not to alert Sam of your presence. I kept you a secret, *my* secret. I couldn't bear the thought, even after such a brief encounter, the idea of you no longer existing in this world. I didn't care about anything else, nothing else mattered but knowing that you were safe, that you would live to see another day, and then another.

"The night of Hannah's wedding, I told you that I had hoped to be given the call to heal, because the truth is, all I wanted to do was be able to heal you. I prayed for it, wished for it, needed to know that no matter what, I could keep you safe, keep you alive and with me because my feelings for you run more deeply than blood. They run deeper

than life, than time.

"You were right about my not trusting you, but it had nothing to do with you, Grace--never you. I knew, knew without a doubt that I should trust you, but I simply couldn't. How could I, when simply by existing you had already seduced me into breaking the divine laws?

"But the irony here is that, with all of my secrets, I was the one who was undeserving of trust. I was breaking the laws of my own kind, one after the other, and all because I knew in my soul that so long as I loved you, it was justification enough for anything to keep you safe."

My voice sounded unfamiliar as it asked him what he meant by anything, what it was that he had done.

I held my breath as he answered.

"The song that played in my mind that first day, the song that spoke of you in death, wasn't just another part of being an angel, Grace. It wasn't me seeing your past and mourning along with you for the things you'd lost."



He stopped, his body stilling as his words filled up the quiet that followed.

"It was my call."

I pulled my hands out of his, the chill that ran through me seeming to come directly from his touch. His pewter eyes had lightened to an almost silvery-white, nearly colorless except for a ghostly ring circling the outer iris. "You told me that angels don't get their call until they receive their wings--how could you get your call before getting your wings?"

"I didn't understand it either. I didn't recognize it for what it was because I've been led to believe that the call can only be heard by those whose wings have emerged. It wasn't until much later that I realized that the call presents itself to each angel when their hearts and minds finally open to what it is that they were meant for.

"From the moment I saw you, I knew that I was meant for you. Healing, being an angel, all of that became secondary. I had to have you, know you...love you. There can be no greater desire than for what you cannot have, and there can be no greater love than for what you are destined for. You

are both, which conflicts with what I have to do.

"I am Death, personified and embodied. I am the reason life is both meaningful and meaningless, and why nothing in this world should hold any value to me. But I am not whole, not as an angel anyway, until I complete my call. I am not full until I fulfill the song's intent."

In the split second it took me to figure out what it was he had yet to do, he acted. We were now in his room, the stark black and white interior a dramatic change from the brightly colored walls that had been Lark's. I was as I had been in hers, standing by the bed, two bags placed there, now blending in rather than standing out. He, in turn, was by the far wall, near the large windows that overlooked the back of the house.

Seeing how he would not be able to voice the deed himself, I did. "You need to kill me," I said in an ironic voice, sad yet glad that I was finally hearing the truth, even if it meant that it would be the last thing I heard.

"I can help millions of people die, send their

souls to rejoice in Heaven, or to wither in the deepest recesses of Hell, but by keeping you alive, Grace, I am, in all essence, avoiding my call, ignoring it."

"So, that means you're a fallen angel?" I asked, not fully understanding.

"No, Grace, I am not. The fallen still choose to answer their call because it keeps them connected to their divinity. They've gone against the very reason we are angels, they've destroyed humanity's faith in us and to lose their place in Heaven is one of the worst fates an angel can suffer. But, there does come a time when being judged as fallen is the lesser of two evils."

My grunt of disbelief sounded like a gunshot in the serious quiet between us. "When? What exactly is worse than being kicked out of Heaven?"

Robert's voice, steady and calm, belied the words that he spoke as he looked at me with an almost unwavering sadness. "When I heard the song for the first time, and I ignored it, I set into motion the beginnings of something I did not understand, could never have known. By ignoring

the call before my ascension, even for a short period of time, I let the darkness of the Innominate enter into me. This darkness taints everything it touches, Grace. It is a black stain that spreads, causing me to see and feel things that I otherwise wouldn't when I'm with you--anger, hatred, jealousy."

He reached for my right hand, turning the silver band that clung to my fourth finger. "When I saw that you weren't wearing your ring, I knew that it wasn't because you had thrown it away, I knew that you wouldn't have done that. But this overwhelming feeling of anger took over. I only knew how to accuse, how to hurt, and I hurt you. I can never forgive myself for not being strong enough to stop myself from doing that. There's no other way to stop this, Grace, other than to finally answer the call. But I can't do that."

I watched silently as he walked over to the collage of photographs above the bed, images of the two of us collected during the various stages of our relationship. I realized that there were more, now, some that included Lark, Stacy, and Graham.

"You never said it, but I knew that you

wondered why I had put this up, why an angel would need photographs of anything when we can see and remember everything in our minds. I've put this here because when the darkness finally does take over, I want to be able to see that once, I was capable of loving, and that I had been loved in return. I won't know what it means, but I pray that it'll be enough to keep me from hurting you."

"Is this why you wanted me to turn, Robert? The *real* reason?" I don't know why I asked the question, but I felt it needed to be asked, if only because I needed to hear my own voice, convince myself that I was truly here.

"It's part of the reason, though only a part. You staying alive means more to me than anything. I'm willing to sacrifice my very soul to keep you alive, Grace. I fear that when the darkness finally takes over, I won't be able to stop myself or anyone else from taking your human life. But, if you were to turn, you wouldn't be susceptible to death and dying the way that you would as a mortal. Turned, you'd be safe. Even from me."

And it was at that moment that everything

inside of me changed. Everything that I had thought, everything that I had known up until that point was now inconsequential.

Because, though I had been angry, though I had been hurt monumentally, it had happened with the knowledge that whatever the consequences to me, at least Robert would continue to exist in this world. It was, I suppose, a testament to the permanence of love that I could accept dying, regardless of the manner involved, so long as I knew that he would live.

Because I did love him--there was no denying or avoiding it. I loved him in a way that defied the very logic of it. It made sense, yet didn't, flowed through my veins like my very blood, and yet coagulated all the same, thick as sludge and unmoving with the weight of its own intensity. It consumed me, and demanded to be consumed in return, and the more I accepted it, the more I welcomed it, the more I knew that I couldn't exist without it.

And when he looked at me, when the silver of his eyes met the burnt umber of mine, there was

an understanding. It wasn't met with words, or with gestures, but with the imperceptible darkening of the irises.

He moved beside me then, kneeling before me, his hands once again taking mine and bringing them to his face, his cheek fitting into the heart of my palm, my fingers grazing his ear. "Grace, I cannot take back what I've done to hurt you. I cannot undo any of it, no matter how much I want to. I can only tell you that from this moment, from this very moment until I can no longer see you for the love I have for you, I will be honest with you, I will tell you everything--there will be no secrets left between us.

"All I ask is that you forgive me. I don't expect you to allow me back into your life. I won't dare to ask for it or even hope for it. I only ask that you forgive me for the wrongs that I have committed against you, for hurting you despite your love, despite my own."

The feeling of his cool skin against the heat of my own was distracting, but it could not sway me from saying to him the thoughts that echoed like a vicious riot in my head.

"Robert, please, look at me. I cannot say this without being able to see your face."

As though merely thinking about it wasted too much time, his head snapped up, his hands dropping from mine, giving the impression that I now wielded the control.

His eyes were unblinking at the thoughts in my head, but I could see the raw emotion in them, the barest hint of hope tinting his eyes an almost antique pewter. "And so you do, Grace. I've denied it to you for so long, left you with the barest of truths and the results haven't kept you safe. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions is the saying, and I've added my stones with my lack of faith in you and in myself.

"I didn't trust you, not completely, but the hypocrite in me, the bastard that I am demanded that you trust me unequivocally. And all the while I was the one who was deceitful, while you had always remained truthful, more divine than I, and I paid the price for it by losing you."

My fingers moved from the side of his face to



his mouth, pressing down to silence him so that I could speak.

"Robert, please. Listen to me before I lose my nerve because I don't know if I can do this again before my mind starts to wander and I think of every single reason why I shouldn't.

"I do forgive you. It's difficult to understand why, but I do, and I won't question it, not when there are other answers that I need more than this one.

"I love you. I love you and I can't ignore that. I've tried. When I close my eyes I see your face, every thought that I know to be mine, every memory that I know to be real is filled with you and I hated it. I hated it so much because it felt like no matter what I did, I couldn't get away from you. It was like I had been cursed to see your face for the rest of my life as a reminder of what it was that I had dared to think I deserved.

"I mean, look at me. I'm not beautiful, I'm nothing special, and yet something inside of me dared to hope that you'd truly find me to be worth giving it all up for--and now I learn that in a sense, that's exactly what you've done.

"As much as you were selfish in your actions, so was I. I treated you like were human, expected you to have the same human reactions, the same human conditioning and when you didn't, I took my frustrations out on you rather than understand them.

"See, I'm a hypocrite, too; I condemned you for thinking so little of me because I'm human while I expected so much more from you because you're not, and it was me who had been thinking so little of myself this whole time. It's a typical human thing to do, I guess, to be so self-deprecating, but that's what makes it all the more galling to admit, because I kept blaming *you* for making me feel that way, only so that I wouldn't have to blame myself.

"And when I think about the choices you had to make, knowing that I was placing on you my own inability to accept myself for who I was when compared to you, I can't help but feel like such a jerk.

"And I want you to know, I understand now why you did what you did about Sam, because if the places were reversed, I'd have done the same

thing-"

He shook his head, denying my admission. "I don't believe it for a second. You'd have been honest with me from the beginning."

"If it came down to telling you and risking your life, or keeping it from you and lying in order to keep you safe, I'd lie, Robert. I'd take that secret with me to the grave if it meant that you'd live," I argued.

"I cannot imagine you no longer being a part of this life, not when your existence is vital to the balance of this world. What am I but a short blip in the grand scheme of things? I'm not meant to save souls or save lives. I'm only good at one thing and I haven't been doing such a good job at that lately."

I got down on my knees and, still holding his face in my hands, pressed my forehead to his.

*You have to do what you need to, Robert; for your mother, your sister, and for yourself. You can't risk yourself for me any longer. You have to answer your call, you have to kill-*

He pulled away from me violently, his hands gripping my wrists tightly, painfully. I tried to break free but I might as well have been trying to sprout wings and fly, the attempt was so futile I knew that my wrists would snap like twigs.

*You will never ask me to do that again, never think it. I'd sooner watch the entire world burn down than let myself or anyone else hurt you.*

His eyes had hardened into cold, unmovable steel as he glared into my own, undeterred and unyielding. *I will never answer that part of my call; never. Your life is too important, too valuable to me to destroy. Do not be selfish in denying me this, Grace.*

"And what kind of life will I have, watching you turn into a monster all because of me, dying because of me?"

His grip loosened and my hands dropped limply to my sides, throbbing and achy. "I won't do it, Grace."

"Does Ameila know about this?" He nodded. "And Lark? Does she know?"

"She will if she doesn't already."

"And they're okay with this? They're okay with you sacrificing yourself to keep me alive? A human?"

"They want what I want, Grace. They know that I cannot live with the idea of you no longer being here, and they understand that."

I scoffed at such a simplistic response, the ignorance that tainted it shocking. "They don't want to see their son, their brother die because of a human girl, Robert; I don't care what they say. This is the only way and you know it."

"This is not the way, Grace; not for me. I chose to go against the laws of my kind, knowing what the consequences were. I broke rule after rule, and ignored the very thing that I had been waiting fifteen centuries for because for the first time in my existence, I had doubts about what it was that I was meant to do, what I was meant to be. I couldn't see why your death was so necessary in order for me to fulfill my destiny, and I realized that I didn't care, either. I still don't."

I felt my fingers curl in to my palm, forming fists that shook in frustration at my sides. "But I'm going to die, no matter what you do. Don't you see that? Sam isn't going to stop trying to kill me, not now, even if I turn; you know that this is no longer him fulfilling *his* destiny--this is personal. And if I don't turn, I'm still human, Robert--anything could happen to me. You should know that by now."

"Do you want to die? Is that what you're saying? You want to leave behind your father, your brother, your friends just so I can continue killing people?" There was anger in his voice, anger coupled with disappointment, and I shook my head.

"Of course I don't *want* to die, but I understand and accept that there's simply no choice here. Not for me, not when I feel this way. Even if Sam gave up, even if I turned, I wouldn't be living. You told me once that before me, you were simply existing. You didn't begin to live until you met me. Can't you see that that's how it is with me, too? Until you came along, I always felt out of place, like the part of me that would help me fit was missing somehow. If you're not here anymore, things won't

go back to the way they were; they'll be worse because I'll know what I've been missing. I'll still be living, but I won't be alive."

He moved slowly, his arms coming around me and pulling me into a gentle embrace, my head resting against the curve of his neck, his scent unbelievably strong here. One hand stroked my hair while the other caressed the small of my back. He sighed when my hands went around him to hold him, and the circle grew smaller as he pulled me in tighter.

"I know. I know.. But you must understand, if there was any other way to keep you safe, it would have been done already--I would have made sure of it. But I've exhausted every option."

He gave a sort of half-hearted chuckle then, followed by a sorrowful sigh of acknowledgement. "I've even angered the Seraphim by accusing them of knowing how to stop this and simply refusing to tell me out of spite. Even if they did know, however, I cannot hold it against them for not revealing any of it to me; they're disappointed in me for refusing to follow the call and for preventing Sam from following

his. It doesn't help matters that I turned into a delinquent the moment I met you."

I felt my head incline once in understanding. "But you kept yourself from breaking one rule, didn't you." It was a statement, not a question. A point that I never thought I'd be able to bring up, and now here it was, and I was shaking with the implication of it, the sheer enormity of that one rule weighing far more heavily than all of the others combined--the consequences of it burned into both of our histories. As soon as the thought escaped my mind, I wanted to snatch it back and bury it forever under mounds of useless memories, but it was too late.

Robert pulled away to look at me and his eyes widened, the cold metal softening as the silver began to smolder and, God help me, I felt the heat inside of me bloom into something familiar, something almost...desperate.

"You understand now why I kept stopping, Grace. You know that it wasn't because I'm not attracted to you. On the contrary; I'd given up on feeling anything physical for anyone, angel or human, until I met you."



He reached a hand out to stroke my hair. "You're more alluring than a nymph, the way you tempt me with that smile; so genuinely sweet and generous."

His fingertips trailed to the corners of my eyes, fluttering over the lids when I closed them, sighing at the feather light touch. "The brown in your eyes are so rich, looking into them is like running through a forest of redwoods and never being able to find my way out--I never want to find my way out."

Robert's hand then moved down the side of my face, the backs of his hands stroking my cheek and running along my jaw line. "Your skin--the first thing I've ever been able to actually feel--will always be what I imagine every time I hear the word 'soft'."

An index finger traced along the bridge of my nose, trailing down and then across beneath my eyes, the touch almost reverent in its gentleness. "Freckles. I promised myself that one day I'd kiss you for each one. I plan on keeping that promise, Grace, if you'll let me." When my cheeks began to heat from the blush that crept into them, he stroked the color with that same finger. "How lovely."

With the pad of his thumb, he rubbed the curve of my bottom lip, the friction slightly pulling it down. "Your mouth is perfect--I've never seen anyone, human or angel, whose lips are as soft and generous as yours. I admit that I wanted to kiss you that first day. When I heard your name, I thought how sweet it would be to kiss Grace Shelley. I changed my schedule around just so that I could be in at least half of your classes."

I looked at him in surprise, this being news to me. "You did? Why?"

A sly smile spread across his face. "Well, how else was I going to introduce myself? I'm not one for the social graces. I've never needed them--your kind flock to me, it's instinctual. But you...you ran away from me. That had never happened before and I was a bit...confused by it. So I took a look into the registrar's thoughts and saw your class schedule and simply...altered mine to match. You're not mad at me, are you?"

"No, I'm not, but why couldn't you have changed your schedule so that you were in all of my classes?" I laughed.

"That would have been a little too obvious, I think, but there's enough time left in the year where I could make a few adjustments..."

His playful expression and the suggestion of changing his remaining three classes for the next five weeks filled me with a warmth that I had been missing for such a long time, I didn't recognize it at first. And when he looked at me, the warmth turned into something much hotter--I had to look away; I knew if I didn't, I'd burst into flames just by looking into his eyes.

"How strange--you're shy, like this is the first time you've ever seen me this way."

His comment caught me off guard. I had to stop and think about what he had said, and whether or not there was any truth to it. My eyes lifted back up to his and the warmth that had cooled after I had turned away flared up once more, quicker and more intensely. Once again my gaze turned elsewhere to keep from self-combusting.

A soft chuckle against my cheek, followed by a caress so gentle, I thought I imagined it, preceded

the whispered words that filled my ears. "So we meet again."



## THE ON/OFF SWITCH

"I've always wondered about that," I laughed as he gave me an innocent smirk. "With fifteen hundred years of knowledge under your belt, one would think you'd have learned a new line by now."

He grinned and I shook my head as his shoulders rose and fell in a careless shrug. "I just told you that I have no real social skills. Besides, that line worked just fine with you."

"Well, I'm easy to please."

I groaned inwardly at my comment and felt my face turn flush with embarrassment.

"Why do you feel so bashful, Grace? Have things changed that much between us?"

"Well, yes," I answered softly. "You're being honest with me for the first time--at least, I think you are; things...*are* different--you're different. And I'm not sure why that would affect how I feel, but it does, and not exactly in the way that I thought it would, or should."

We sat on the floor of his room, leaning against the side of the bed that faced the windows looking out over the back yard. Our hands lay at our sides, his smallest finger barely touching the smallest of mine, yet it was enough to feel like a thunderstorm was passing between us.

"Grace, you've changed, too. You're stronger, more self-assured than you were when I met you. I suppose that is why I find this shyness so endearing."

The sun was beginning to rise, the slowly creeping light turning the dew that clung to the grass into a reverse of the nighttime sky. "It's beautiful," I sighed, closing my eyes to the odd twinkling. "How fitting, you've turned my life upside down and now the sky is as well." It took just a few moments, and the welcomed weaving of Robert's fingers between mine, before the sweet pull of sleep finally won me over.

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They say that the dawn of a new day always brings with it time for reflection. What do they say when you've slept through the dawn and awaken in

the afternoon?

And what do they say when you awake in a bed not your own, and alone?

I opened my eyes and groaned, my body stretching to undo the tightness that had formed in my limbs. The afternoon sun was flowing through Robert's window, the dust that floated in the room sparkling like tiny fairies from some childhood fantasy. "I'm losing my mind," I muttered to myself before rolling over. The other half of the bed lay perfectly unused--the emptiness finding its mate inside of me as I realized that I had hoped Robert would be there.

With a grunt of disapproval, I sat up and swung my legs over the edge of the bed and a surprised squeal came out of me as something flowed around me legs. I looked down and saw the skirt of what could have only been the longest nightgown I had ever seen in my life. It touched the floor and swirled around my legs like I had just stepped into a pile of down. The fabric was whiter than anything in the room, and softer than my oldest shirt. It trailed up, a row of tiny buttons beginning at



my navel and continuing up to where the neckline began just below my collar bone, accompanied by thick, lacy straps that rested gently on my shoulders.

And the only thing that I could focus on more than that was the fact that I hadn't put it on, which meant someone else did.

I stood up and rushed to the mirror to look at myself. I didn't look any different--there was no dramatic change to my features or my expression. I simply looked shocked. My hair looked like Kansas probably did after Dorothy's tornado touched down, but that was normal.

The sound of activity beyond the closed door caused me to jump and I hurried back to the bed, diving beneath the covers and pulling them up to my chin. When the door opened and Robert appeared, a tray in his hand, I felt nervous...and giddy.

"I tried to be as quick as possible, but no matter how capable I am at other things, I'm simply not able to cook at a pace any faster than a human's." He was smiling in a rather peculiar way as he placed the tray on the bed next to me.

I looked at the contents with great trepidation. There was a small plate of buttered toast, a small cup of strawberry jam beside it, and a larger plate that held what looked like a short stack of pancakes and several slices of bacon.

"You don't like pancakes? Or is it the bacon? I wasn't sure if you were a bacon fan, although I know that Graham eats an inordinate amount-"

I stopped his speaking with a simple shake of my head. "It's not that. I like pancakes. And bacon, I like bacon. It's just..."

He sat down beside me and reached for my hand, confusion riddling his face. "What?"

"Well, it's just that your mother isn't exactly all that good in the kitchen, which is surprising since she is what she is, and I guess I'm a little hesitant to try something that's made by someone who's only had her as an example on how to cook."

The confusion soon made way for humor and amusement as his eyes crinkled and his mouth widened in a full grin. "I can assure you that I did not learn how to cook from my mother, although I should

tell you that when my mother tries to be good at something, she usually succeeds, which probably means she wanted to do poorly in the kitchen."

I picked up a strip of bacon and slowly brought it to my mouth, the smell of it turning my stomach traitorous as it began to rumble. I took a small bite and closed my eyes, bracing myself for sheer disappointment...and then proceeded to consume the entire tray of food, saying nothing, allowing only the sound of the fork hitting the plate to fill up the space around me. Robert stood off to the side, smiling.

When I was done, he took the tray away and disappeared for less than a minute, returning with a dish towel in his hands. "You ate that faster than I expected. I guess I've proven myself in the kitchen?"

Laughing, I nodded earnestly. "And then some. Of course, if I had taken my time, Graham would have shown up--he can smell bacon a county away."

"Well, it's a good thing I made the entire package for when he arrives then, isn't it," he joked.

"So he's coming?"

He nodded and then motioned to my bags sitting at the end of the bed, sitting on the trunk that rested there. They were still packed. "You should change--He's coming to pick you up and take you to the hospital to see Janice and the baby."

"Will his car make it that far? I mean, it's been struggling just to get here and back for school."

"We'll just have to see, won't we?"

He began to head towards the door and I finally asked him the question that had been on my mind since the moment I woke up. "Robert, did we...I mean, did you and I..." Okay, so I didn't actually *ask* him--it was too personal a question to ask, especially since I didn't know how to tell--but he could see the question floating around in my head, struggling to get out, and his eyes grew large.

"No. No, Grace, no. Nothing like that happened."

"Oh." I tried to hide my disappointment, allowing only the relief to show. I think I must have

mixed them up.

"Why would you think that?"

"Well, because I'm in different clothes--clothes that aren't my own--and I was in your bed."

His amused smile did nothing to encourage me to speak more frankly, and he only laughed at my reaction. "Grace, you fell asleep in your clothes, and I thought that you'd have been more comfortable in something meant for sleeping."

"So you changed my clothes?"

"Well, yes. But I didn't look--I promise."

My face felt incredibly hot at the immediate denial, and I had to look away. He understood why and was sitting on the bed beside me in a flash. He turned my face to look at him, his eyes searching mine. "Grace, I'm sorry. That came out all wrong--I told you, I'm no good at these things, and as time goes by I'm only going to get worse."

"Did you...want to look?"

It was impossible. Absolutely impossible, but there it was: a flash of red in his face that told me

that somehow, he was embarrassed by the question, and more so his response.

"Yes."

"Oh."

"I didn't, though. You didn't know what I was doing and I didn't want to get too...involved. But I wanted to. I can't deny that."

"But you saw me in the shower," I responded.

"No, I didn't."

I felt my jaw set in a stubborn line and I looked at him with doubt and exasperation. "How is that possible? You had to have seen something in order to catch me."

"I don't need to see you to know where you are, Grace. I can feel you near me, hear you, smell you. Everything about you is something physical for me. And, since I'm being completely honest with you, I have to admit that it's much more...enticing to *know* that you're unclothed and not see you."

There it went again, the rush of heat in my

cheeks. I suddenly didn't feel like asking any more questions.

"Well, how about if I ask one?"

I looked at him and nodded.

"Do you really think it would be that bad or that unmemorable, our being together...intimately?"

"W-what?" I sputtered, too taken aback by the question to fully comprehend what it was he wanted to know.

"You asked if we had been together--do you think it would have been that horrible that you'd forget it entirely and need to be reminded the next day?"

His face showed disappointment, but his eyes sparkled with amusement. I couldn't help but feel somewhat upset by that. "It's not fair," I whispered to him, my voice low and angry.

"What's not fair, Grace?"

"This," I answered, pointing to him and then myself. "You think that my assuming we had slept together is funny, but it's not. It's not funny, and it's

not fair because we can't ever be together, not in that way, anyway, because of something that happened way before either of us were born. And that's a pretty damn long time ago, just in case you forgot or something--and you can live with that because you've got this ridiculous and divine patience while I'm human with the patience of a flea on a frying pan, and--"

Robert had had enough of my ranting. He didn't have to say it. He simply showed it by grabbing my face in his hands and pulling me toward him, his lips making contact with mine so roughly, I wouldn't have doubted they had split from the force of it.

But any doubt, any idea that I might have had in my thoughts flew out with the very last bit of oxygen in my body as I felt his mouth open and his cool breath touch the bow in my top lip. The sweet aroma, followed by the smooth slickness of something else crossing that curve had my heart slamming into the empty wall of my chest. I watched the silver in his eyes darken into something stormy, almost frighteningly so, before everything became



lost in a snowstorm of white and black.

"Grace?" *Grace?*

It is quite the oddest thing to hear your name said in such a way. Two voices, both in my head, one heard through the filter of my ears, the other, untainted and clearer than glass. And I knew I must be delirious when the voices gave way to an urgent sort of pressure against my face, the feeling following the line of my jaw until finally ending at the apex where my neck began. The pressure held there for a minute, sweet and gentle against the pulse that beat beneath it before finally moving lower.

Once again, I felt the air leave me, but this time it surged back into me when the pressure met against the hollow between my shoulders. My eyes flew open and were met with the top of Robert's jet black hair tickling my chin and nose.

"It appears I have figured out your on and off button," he said grinning, his head lifting up to become level with my own so that I could see just how much enjoyment he got out of his newfound

discovery..

"That's not funny," I replied, gasping slightly as my chest grew accustomed to the renewed breathing.

"Oh, but it is. Just think of all of the arguments that I could have ended had I'd known about this."

"I..." What could I say to that? It's not as though I wouldn't have enjoyed it, preferred it even.

"I'm glad you see it my way."

"But you can't just end arguments like that, Robert. There are some things that need to be discussed. Like what do we do about us?"

He cocked his head to the side and smirked. "I thought we just figured that one out?"

"Making me pass out is your solution?"

"No. Making you pass out and then waking you back up with kisses is."

My head began to hurt as I realized that he had no clue what it was that I was trying to get at. I

grabbed his hands and pressed them against my face, his fingers gently caressing the corners of my upturned mouth. "Do we spend the rest of our time together like this? With you holding onto my face like it's going to fall off of my head? Or treating me with kid gloves just because I'm supposed to die at any moment? Good grief, now I understand how Stacy feels."

Robert's hands grew more intent as they escaped my grip and traveled to my shoulders, squeezing them gently. "Grace, there's a difference between you and Stacy. Stacy's going to die."

"Yes, and so am I. The only difference between us is that she gets to die openly."

"I'm not going to let you die, Grace. Not by my hand and not by anyone else's."

He looked so determined when he said that, I almost believed him. "You're not going to sacrifice yourself for me, Robert. I won't let you."

"You won't *let* me? Grace, in case you've forgotten, I'm the one who has to kill you in order to fulfill the duties of my call, and there's nothing that

you can do to make me kill you."

I grunted in frustrated at his smugness, but mostly at the fact that he was right.

"Graham's here--he just drove through the gate." Robert lifted me up effortlessly off of the bed and placed my feet onto the floor. "I suggest you hurry and change before he walks in."

I pulled the nightgown away from my body and looked at him questioningly. "Are you sure you didn't look?"

"Grace, what is it going to take to get you to believe me when I say that I didn't look? I kept my eyes closed the whole time; I didn't want you to feel like I was taking advantage of you. I believe I've acted quite honorably these past few months with you, all things considered, and have never given you cause to think otherwise in that particular department, so if at all poss--"

I pushed myself forward and allowed my mouth to cover his, the impulse just too great to resist. It was a burst of euphoria that washed over me when he didn't push me away, and I responded

by playfully pulling on his lower lip with my teeth before letting him go.

"Well, what do you know--you have an off button, too," I said slyly.

His hand went to his lip and his eyes lifted in shock at my attack. "Touche," he said softly.



## PAROLED

"I'm not going to say I told you so, but--aw, I told you so, Grace. You knew I was right."

Graham was sitting next to me with his hands on the steering wheel of Robert's Charger, his face smug with satisfaction, and I fought the urge to deck him...barely.

"I'm glad, of course, because when you're in a better mood, he's in a better mood. And-" he waved his hands around the interior of the car "-I get to drive *this!*"

"Graham, there are some times when the only thing redeeming about you is the fact that you can drive," I said under my breath as I stared out of the window. "How much longer until we get to the hospital?"

"You're acting like you don't know."

I sat up and jammed my finger at the speedometer, the dial stuck on a surprisingly low number. "And you're acting like you don't know where the gas pedal is. I know what this car is

capable of, Graham. I know that it's possible to go over twenty five miles an hour."

"Look, Robert said I could drive his car because he knew that the Buick wouldn't make it around the block much less to the hospital, but he also said to take care of her, so that's exactly what I'm going to do."

"And when he said to 'take care of her', you didn't think for one minute that he could have meant me?"

He looked at me, a sort of bewildered look on his face. "You're kidding, right? Look, I get that Robert's an angel and everything, but deep down he's still a guy, Grace. If not, he'd have bought a Saab or a Volvo or something. This, this baby right here is all guy, and guys never, ever call their cars anything other than a she."

"Sometimes, Graham, you can be so obtuse."

"Thank you."

Thankfully, he applied a bit more pressure to the gas pedal and we sped up to a healthy thirty-five



miles-per-hour, though we were still woefully slower than everyone else around us--why wouldn't we be? We were on the highway!

I knew why I wanted him to hurry, though. I couldn't quite explain to him what had transpired between Robert and I to affect us working things out. There was too much that he already knew that could put him in danger--he didn't need to know that his girlfriend's brother had to kill his best friend or else die himself.

"So, have you heard from Stacy?"

My head shook in response. "I spoke to the doctor who's treating her at home yesterday to see about talking to her parents about easing up on her restrictions, but it's too soon to know whether or not he did."

"I don't understand her parents. She's dying, for God's sake. Can't they see that if they keep her locked up like a freaking poodle that she's just going to die that much faster?" Graham's anger matched my own, but aside from breaking her out of her own home, there wasn't much else we could do.

The hospital was far busier when we walked in than it was the night before, the lobby full of people wearing concerned expressions on their faces, worried looks dashing between one person and another. It was a chaotic scene, really.

"What's going on?" My question was directed to no one in particular and the look on Graham's face told me that he knew nothing, too.

"There was a fire at the Indian Mound Shopping Center," a man carrying a rolled up newspaper said as he passed by. "Two stores and the theater went up in smoke--there are at least fifty people injured."

"Oh my God," my low voice managed to exclaim while I watched him walk away. "That's why Robert's not here."

"What do you mean, that's why Robert's not here? I thought he quit."

Graham's question caught me off guard and I couldn't do anything but stare at him with my mouth gaping open in shock. The news that Robert had quit his job was a total surprise.

"Grace, what's he going to do there? He can't heal them--he said so himself that you're the only person he can make better, so why would he go there?"

"He's an angel, Graham. Where else would he go if not where a lot of people have been hurt?" It wasn't a lie, not entirely. But it wasn't the truth, either. It was one of those half-truths that I had learned angels got away with telling, and I realized then that I had been spending far too much time with them if I could come up with something like that so quickly, and say it with such ease that Graham didn't even blink.

"So is that what's going to happen when Lark gets back--she's just going to up and go to a train wreck or earthquake or something?"

"Who knows? It all depends on her call, I suppose."

"Do you know what it is? Has Robert hinted anything?"

I felt my head swing from side to side in response. "She's going to tell you before me, that's

a given, so I suggest you just be patient and wait."

He grunted in disappointment, his hands shoved into the pockets of his jacket in frustration. "I hate waiting."

I smiled, knowing exactly how he felt. We hurried into an open elevator and rode it to the third floor maternity ward, the sounds of crying babies and soon-to-be mothers in pain taking Graham by surprise.

"Oh, I'm never having kids," he vowed as he removed his hands from his pockets and covered his ears. "This has to rank up there with chest waxing."

"You need chest hair first, Graham." Laughing, I took him to Janice's room, knocking softly before opening the door and walking in. Janice lay on her bed with Dad passed out in a chair beside her. In a plastic bassinet lay a sleeping Matthew.

"Hey, Janice," I whispered when she saw me.

"Grace! I was hoping you'd come. Hello,

Graham, nice to see you!"

Graham nodded and eyed the unmoving Matthew. "Is that the baby?" he asked softly, his face wary.

"Yes. I just put him down after a very painful feeding experience, but I think I'll get the hang of this breastfeeding thing soon."

The face he made at the word "breastfeeding" was classic--his nose and forehead wrinkled in disgust and his mouth turned down, his lips popping out in horror at the mere idea, the picture that probably formed in his head only cementing his opinion that seeing such a thing was now wholly unappetizing. I snorted, amused by the reaction.

"So how are you feeling?" I asked as I bent down to examine my new baby brother more closely--the last time I had seen him, he was covered in blood and goop. Now that he was cleaner, I could see that his hair was a lighter shade of brown than my own, more closely resembling Dad's, and he had very plump, pink cheeks with a matching pink pout.

"I'm doing okay, stitches are doing fine and I'll probably be allowed to go home the day after tomorrow."

"You've got stitches?" Graham looked at Janice's face and winced when she pointed at her abdomen.

"It's okay, Graham. The stitches look a lot better than the staples they used to use."

When his face turned green, Janice and I began to laugh, startling both Dad and the baby who began a soft wail. Dad rubbed his eyes and blinked several times to see what was going on.

"Hey kiddo, Graham, you're finally here!" He stood up and stretched, rolling his neck around to ease out the stiffness he had gained from sleeping in the chair. "I miss my bed," he grumbled before walking towards me and wrapping his arms around me in a fatherly hug.

"You'll be home the day after tomorrow," I said happily, returning his embrace. "And then you'll never get to sleep."

"Don't I know it," he laughed as he let me go and then clapped Graham on the shoulder. "So, how are you doing, Graham? I talk to you more than I talk to Grace, but I have no idea what's been going on with you guys--I suppose I should get used to that, what with you two going off to college in a few months. Tell me what's going on with the house. It's still in one piece, right?"

"Yes, it's in one piece," Graham reassured him. "I'm actually planning on moving back into my house when you come home. My parents are selling it so Grace and I have spent some time cleaning it up, but it still needs a lot of work before it's presentable. Besides, with finals coming up, I think it'd be easier to study in a house without a newborn." He looked at the still crying Matthew, mild distaste quite obvious on his face.

Dad missed nothing and he nodded knowingly. "I completely understand. I only wish it were so easy for Grace."

"Aw, Dad, I'll be okay. I can always just shut my door," I told him. I bent over the bassinet and then looked over at Janice. "Is it okay if I pick him

up?"

She nodded with a broad smile spreading across her face. "You might as well get it all in now. When my sister arrives, I don't think I'll be able to do anything but feed him."

I felt disapproval jerk throughout my body as the news of Janice's sister Katie coming to stay with us hit me. "Is she coming to visit or stay?" The tone of my voice was flat, and I could tell by Janice's reaction that her answer wasn't going to please me at all.

"She's going to stay for a month to help me out with the baby while I'm healing from the c-section."

I immediately knew that I wouldn't be going home after all, and as I picked Matthew up, his warm, tiny body resting in my arms offering me a comfort I didn't realize I needed, I looked at Janice and smiled. "She can sleep in my room. I'll go and stay at Stacy's house."

"What?" Dad and Janice both said at the same time, while Graham nearly choked on his own



reaction.

"Well, Graham doesn't mind sleeping on the sofa, but I don't think your sister would enjoy that too much, so she can sleep on my bed and I'll just stay at Stacy's."

Another half-truth slipping out of my mouth far too easily, and I hated myself for it, hated the way that dad and Janice swallowed it up so quickly and without complaint or question.

"Well, you'll at least be there when we come home, right?" Dad asked, his hand stroking Matthew's head, while the other cupped my chin. "I'm a father of two now, which means I have twice the worry."

"Yeah, I'll even make dinner," I said softly. When he bent to kiss to my hair, I felt my eyes begin to burn and I knew that I needed to focus on something else before the waterworks began. Dad didn't need to see me begin crying, and I didn't need to tell anymore lies to get out of telling the truth.

"That's sweet, Grace," Janice said with an

appreciative sigh. "I'm afraid Katie isn't exactly a good cook. If I were to be completely honest, the woman could probably make Robert's mother look like a gourmet chef."

Graham choked on that, and Dad raised a thoughtful eyebrow in my direction. "How is Robert, anyway? The two of you are usually joined at the hip--did I just say that without wanting to strangle him?"

I chuckled at the shocked and confused expression that began to spread on his face. "Yes, Dad, you did, and he's...busy."

"Oh. Well, be sure he's there when we get home. And tell him to bring his mother and Lark. I want the house to be completely full when we get there so that when there's only Katie left, it'll feel emptier."

"James!" Janice's mouth was open in mock shock, and I fought against a giggle.

"I'll try, but I think Lark and Ameila are both busy that night, Dad," I said to him as I brought Matthew up to my shoulder, patting him on his back

to try and ease the sudden fussiness that had come over him.

"I think he might be hungry, Grace. Hand him over to me," Janice said, reaching her arms out towards me.

I handed the baby to her and watched, awed as she unsnapped the top of her gown and brought the baby to her chest. Realizing that this was an intensely intimate moment, I turned around, pulling Graham around with me.

"Was she doing what I think she was doing?" he whispered harshly.

"Yes, and you were staring," I whispered back, slugging his arm in the process. "You perv."

"Ow!"

A knock on the door brought Dad walking past us to answer it. His murmured words were indistinguishable, and a large bouquet of flowers and an even larger balloon blocked the face of the person who had just come in.

"Grace, Graham, look who's come to visit!"

He stood back, holding his arm out to lead the way towards us.

"Stacy!" I heard myself shout.

She grinned at me, a goofy, thankful, highly excited grin that said more than words could just how relieved she was to be somewhere other than in her room. "I've brought the essential baby welcoming hospital kit; flowers, balloons, a layette, and something other than hospital food."

She held up the bag of take out and I could almost hear Janice's mouth watering as she said loudly from behind us, "Thank you!"

"Is she busy?" Stacy asked, waving over my shoulder.

"She's feeding the baby right now," Dad explained, taking the items from her hands. "Why don't you three go walking around for about a half-an-hour. That'll give her enough time to feed Matthew and change him."

We all nodded and left the room, glad for the ability to talk without having to explain too much to dad and Janice. The hallway was filled with people

heading to and from the nursery and other rooms, so we headed downstairs to the cafeteria.

As expected, it was practically empty.

"What is it about the word 'cafeteria' that makes people think of regurgitation?" Stacy asked with a smirk.

"I think it's because it has the same number of syllables," I replied.

Graham harrumphed and shook his head. "While you two discuss vomiting and English fundamentals, I'm going to order myself a cheeseburger and fries."

As he walked away, Stacy couldn't help but smile. "He'll eat anything anywhere, won't he?"

"Pretty much," I concurred.

We laughed as we watched Graham place his order, pointing at a few things from the a la carte menu, throwing his hands in the air when he found something that piqued his interest. His head bobbed up and down when the woman behind the counter asked him a question, and when she

clapped, he broke into a little dance.

"So, listen," Stacy began, turning her attention away from Graham and looking at me. "I wanted to thank you for speaking to Dr. Bro. I don't know what he said to my parents, but they were very...apologetic. It was almost like they had the fear of death put into them or something."

I felt a twitch in my lips as I fought the smile that wanted to creep onto my face. "It was nothing, Stacy. I'm just glad that you're finally out! So did you drive?"

She shook her head and grimaced a bit as she looked at her nails. "Sean dropped me off. He and I have been spending a lot of time talking--it's probably the only real good thing to have come of all of this imprisonment--and we've come to a kind of understanding about things."

"An understanding?"

"Yeah. I'm going to live these last few months of my life the way that I want and he won't insult my friends anymore. *And* I won't come back and haunt him after I die."

"Well, that's a great understanding," I laughed.

"It's conditional, of course, and he still has to apologize to you for calling you a half-breed. He feels like a total jerk for that, Grace, but he's got that stupid pride thing going on and wouldn't admit to it until I promised that I'd curse him with premature balding if he didn't get over it."

"Aw Stacy, you didn't have to do that. Trust me, I'm more accepting of him calling me a half-breed than-" I stopped, unsure whether or not to tell her about the note.

"Than what, Grace?"

No. I couldn't keep this from her, too. My guilt had pretty much feasted on me for what had happened the last time, and I didn't want to go through that again. I told her about the note that Robert had left for me in the bathroom. Stacy listened intently and then her mouth formed a grim line as she folded her arms across her chest, upset and angry about what she had heard and that I had kept yet another thing from her.

"I'm going to forget about the fact that you took forever to fill me in on this. I'll need a few minutes to do that, but I'll get over it. What bothers me the most is that this happened when Robert *and* Lark were right there. How is that possible?"

"I know that Robert can write things, draw things without even being in the room. I've seen him do it. I guess that it's not exactly a unique ability since neither he nor Lark ever questioned how it was done but rather who had done it," I explained.

"So you think that whoever wrote that was outside? But wouldn't they know? Wouldn't they sense it?"

I shrugged, unsure of what the answer was. "I only know that since then, nothing else has happened; Robert's been hyper-vigilant about making sure that I'm safe."

"And how's that going? Are you at least treating him a little better?"

"Oh, she's treating him pretty nicely. She was in his room when I came to pick her up," Graham answered her, placing a tray of food on the table in



front of us. "I think she slept there last night."

A knowing smile formed on Stacy's lips, and she nodded to Graham, who had a smug look on his face that complimented her. "It's about time. I was thinking you might hold out until I was on my deathbed or something--which would have been completely romantic, but totally un-Grace-like--but now is good."

"Yeah, good news all around, I guess. You've been paroled, Grace's done being stubborn--at least for now, anyway--and Janice's given birth. Now all we need is for Lark to come back and everything will be perfect," Graham said quickly before shoving a greasy cheeseburger into his mouth.

"I don't know about perfect, Graham. I'm allowed out of the house, but only for a few hours a day, and *only* during the day. I've yet to convince my parents to let me go to prom," Stacy said, her fingers snatching a fry from his tray and quickly dispatching it into her mouth before he could stop her.

"Well, we'll just have to convince them to let

you out at night, too, right Grace?" Graham managed to say while chewing. "Hey, I just thought of something; if everything's cool between you and Robert, are you still gonna go to prom with Salsa Boy?"

"I told Shawn that I'd go with him; it wouldn't be right to suddenly say that I wouldn't just because Robert and I are working things out," I replied.

"It's nice that you've got principles, Grace, but if I had to choose between Robert and Salsa Boy, I'd choose Robert," Stacy chimed in, her voice tinged with exasperation. "He's your boyfriend, your soulmate for crying out loud. You can't go to the most important senior function besides graduation with someone else. It's just not...kosher."

"I gave Shawn my word and I'm not going to break it, okay? Besides, what's not kosher is you going to prom with your best friend's boyfriend."

"You're the one who suggested it!" both Graham and Stacy shouted at me before laughing in unison.

"I know I suggested it--did either of you have

to agree? No. You're doing it because it's better that you two go together and have fun than staying at home and wondering what I'll be doing with Salsa Boy."

Graham eyed me suspiciously, one eyebrow raising in the process. "And what *will* you be doing with Salsa Boy?"

"With my luck, probably getting him killed," I answered with little humor. "I should probably just not go period. I haven't even begun looking for something to wear and it's less three weeks away. I don't even know how to shop for a prom outfit."

Stacy groaned as she rubbed her temples. "Dress, Grace; you're going to be wearing a prom dress. Not an outfit, not jeans, not a t-shirt--a dress. And now that I've got a little bit of freedom, I plan on making the most out of it, starting with a shopping trip to the mall tomorrow so that we can get some girl time in."

Graham shook his head and said with food still in his mouth, "I-don-thing-tho. The-mall-wuth-on-fire-member?"

Stacy and I looked at each other and then turned our gazes to his. "What?"

He swallowed his partially chewed cheeseburger and took a swig of soda before repeating what he had said. "I said, I don't think so. The mall was on fire, remember?"

"That's not the only shopping center in Heath, Graham," Stacy pointed out. "Besides, everyone else is going to be going to the same stores at Indian Mound anyway. I want to go somewhere else, someplace where there won't be a dozen of the exact same dress hanging up, where we can find something that's unique."

"Well, don't expect me to be unique. I got my tux from the same place the rest of the guys did. We got it as a group so we could get a discount," Graham said proudly before patting his belly. "I'm going to look hot."

I looked apologetically at Stacy and sighed. "Graham, if you keep eating the way you have been, you're going to look like a hot ham."

"With bad taste," Stacy added.

"Not to mention cheap," I laughed.

"Oh, so I should just let you two dress me? You, Grace, who had your boyfriend buy your dress for your first date? And you, Stacy, who haven't worn a dress in your life that wasn't a costume of some sort? Thanks but no thanks, I'm perfectly capable of picking out my own tux, thank you very much."

Graham stood up to empty his tray and with his back turned, Stacy turned to me and lowered her voice. "I don't care what he says or what he pays; he is not going to wear one of those tux-in-a-bag things that everyone else is going to be wearing. Good grief, he'll probably even get a cummerbund that matches his bow tie." She groaned as she formed a mental image in her head and I couldn't help but picture it myself, giggling as I did so.

"Don't laugh," Stacy hissed. "You know I'm right. He'll look good in the pictures from the neck up if I let him pick what he's going to wear, but since I'm about a foot shorter than he is, everyone will be forced to look at...everything. Nope, it's not going to happen. We're taking the both of you shopping

tomorrow."

"Good luck convincing him of that," I laughed, motioning to Graham as he returned.

"Are you two still talking about what I'm going to wear?" Graham returned, a grimace still plastered onto his face.

I nodded and Stacy frowned at him. "You're coming with us tomorrow. If I have to take pictures with you, you're going to at least look like you made an effort to compliment my dress."

"You work fast, woman," Graham muttered.

"Lark made it, if you want to know the truth."

"Too bad she's not here so she can make something for Grace, huh?"

"There's no dress out there that can be made or bought that'll make me look good enough for a prom," I grumbled.

She waved off the comment and began to fidget with a droplet of water that had fallen onto the table. "Robert and Janice bought you dresses that looked great on you, so I'm fairly certain that with a

little determination, I'll be able to do the same. You're only difficult to shop for because you've got this idea in your head that you're not pretty enough to wear dresses, Grace. You should know by now that that simply isn't true. If I have to, I'll even get Robert to come with us."

Graham thumped his fist against the table in agreement.

I stared at her, mortified. "Are you kidding? It's one thing to have him buy something without me. It's another thing entirely to have him pick out dresses for me to wear while I'm standing right there...for a prom he's not taking me to!"

"Yeah, speaking of that, you said you're going to keep your date with Salsa Boy, but what if Robert has other plans?"

Graham's question was something that I hadn't taken into consideration. Why would I? Robert had made it quite clear that he'd had no intention of asking me to prom--and in front of Graham and Stacy, no less--so him having any objections to my going to prom with Shawn was simply a non-issue.

"He won't," was all I would say.





## THE WISHING WELL

Stacy's plans for the next day didn't materialize thanks to a doctor's appointment she'd completely forgotten, so I went with Graham to his house to help him clean up. He had been doing a fairly decent job alone; the kitchen counters were now completely clear of liquor and beer bottles, but the carpet still smelled like it belonged in a bar.

As he was packing some of his things for his move to Florida, he came across an old photograph of our two families together at an open house when we were just six. "Isn't it weird how things can look so completely different when you're a kid than they do when you're older?" he commented while staring at the picture.

"I mean, I know that when I was six, I thought that no one was happier than my mom and dad, but now that I think about it, they were always fighting. Usually it was about stupid stuff, like leaving the lights on or the toilet seat up, but sometimes they argued about Dad's drinking, or Mom's shopping sprees.

"I think I must have known, though, that something was wrong because once I wished that I had your parents instead of mine. Your mom was always hugging and kissing you, like you were the most perfect kid in the world. I always had to try extra hard at stuff, be the best just to get some kind of compliment. It was only when I won at something that it felt like I was doing good."

It was strange, listening to him talk about the childhood he kept secret. I had always been the one to admire his life, his popularity, his assumed normalcy, and as he stared at our six year-old faces it was easy to see that normalcy was in the eye of the beholder.

"Even after your mom died, your dad always accepted you just the way you were. You never had to try to be something else, never had to try and impress him because you always did. He was happy with you. I was jealous of that. Weird, isn't it?"

My head ticked up in acknowledgement, and I felt my face twitch as I thought about what it had been like for him, watching my dad and I laughing and playing while his parents were too busy fighting

to notice just how much he wanted their approval.

"Graham, you know that my dad never thought of you as just the neighbor boy, right? I mean, aside from what happened last summer, you've pretty much been the son my dad never had."

He shrugged before putting the photo into a book and shoving that into a box filled with other books. "Well, now he has a son, and if everything goes good between you and Robert, he might end up with two."

"You'd like to think that," I mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," I lied quickly.

"Hmm. Well, I think that's it for the books and junk. The trophies are all in that box over there, and the clothes I won't need are in the garage for donation. The only thing left in here is the furniture." He looked at the bed and grinned. "I think when Lark gets back, I'll start sleeping in my parents' room."

"Why?"

He winked at me. "I don't think that's something for virgin ears."

A bubble of panic began to build inside of me as Ameila's words filled my head.

Laws.

Forbidden.

Death.

"Graham, if you're thinking of being having sex with Lark, there's something you should know."

"What? Does she have eleven toes or something?"

"If only it was that simple."

We were sitting on Graham's unmade bed, the sheets balled up in the corner for washing. I looked at his face and wanted to keep the amused expression there, but I knew that what I had to tell him would erase it, perhaps forever. And as he listened, I tried to gauge his reaction, hoping that understanding rather than anger and disappointment would reign over his emotions.

"Grace...I get what you're trying to say, but I don't care. I love Lark."

"You don't get it, Graham. Loving her isn't enough. You have to turn, and that's not something that you can just choose. It's not like taking a vacation from being human. It's forever."

"But you were willing to do it before everything happened," Graham reminded me. "Don't you still want to?"

I traced the indentations in the mattress that the quilting had created, my fingers rounding the wide fleur pattern, knowing what my answer was, but unsure as to whether I could give it without having to explain my reasons why.

"Grace?"

"No. I thought it was the best choice for me but the truth is that it isn't. Robert seems to think that if I were to turn I'd be safe, but he's wrong. I know he is."

Suspicion clouded Graham's thoughts as he looked at me through hooded eyes. "What do you know, Grace?"

"Nothing that I can tell you. I wish I could, Graham, I really do, but there's simply nothing that I can tell you without you learning about Robert's call, and that's not something you need to know. That's not something you *can* know."

"If it's about you, then I need to know. I'm your best friend, Grace. I know you better than anyone--I don't care if Robert can see every single damn memory you've ever had; he can't live them and feel them the way that I do. If something is going to happen to you then you need to tell me."

"It's not like you tell me everything, Graham," I scoffed. "You keep secrets, too; don't deny it."

Graham stiffened, his gaze turning cold before he stood up off of the bed and then knelt down and reached beneath the mattress, lifting it up and nearly toppling me off in the process. He pulled out something and then handed it to me.

"I don't want your skin mags, Graham," I told him in distaste.

"It's not a skin mag, Grace. Look at it."

I forced my eyes to look down and frowned when I saw that he had handed me an ordinary composition tablet, its cover worn and faded from both use and age, an oddly familiar scrawl forming the title that had been written in the only visible space available.

"The Wishing Well," I read aloud, confused. "What is this?"

"Open it," he answered, sitting back down on the bed and pulling his legs in, crossing them in front of him.

With slow fingers, I lifted the cover and exposed the first page, a whisper of shock coming out of me as I took in the extreme amount of writing that filled up the sheet of paper. The penmanship, though childlike, was often neat and organized, but there were occasions when exhaustion and fatigue would cause slipping of the steady lines and things would become almost illegible.

Each page was dated, the first one going back to the date of the accident that had killed my mother.



"Read it," he said to me softly, leaning back to get comfortable.

With his avid gaze on me, I began to go through the words that had been written there, the seven year-old phrasing so simple yet they hit me with the force of a train.

*"Grace was in a car crash. She is my best friend and I do not want her to die. I wish that Grace never has to die."*

I turned the page, the date at the top now several months later, the handwriting a bit smoother, clearer.

*"Mom and dad are fighting again. I went to Grace's house and watched movies all day. Grace said she did not want me to go home. I did not want to go home. I wish I could stay with Grace and her dad. I wish Grace was my family. I wish Grace and I was friends forever."*

Several more pages, months apart, were filled with the same, almost desperate need, and then the dates jumped by years. As I reached the middle of the book, Graham's penmanship had

grown almost frantic in his need to hurry and get his thoughts down before he was interrupted. It was freshman year, and he was just starting out with the football team.

*"I had my braces taken off today. Grace was with me, holding my hand because those things hurt! I told Grace that she was an awesome friend and that I didn't know what I would do without her. She told me that she wasn't going to go anywhere, that we'd be friends forever. I wish that was true because she's the only one cheering me on during practice. Everyone else calls me the shrimp. Even dad. But Grace always sticks up for me, even when she gets teased for it. I wish that one day people would stop teasing her because she's a good person, no matter what anyone else says."*

I smiled at that, remembering that day when I had nearly been thrown off the bleachers for calling Gregory Capelli a jerk. The cheerleaders had instantly put me on their hate list, and from then on, only tolerated me because Graham proved that he had the chops to be on the team.

It was when I reached the page that had changed our friendship forever that I lost my smile. There were obvious tear stains that blurred the words written down with such haste, and the liquid fuzziness of my own tears did not help to clarify anything as I struggled to read what he had written after he had effectively broken my heart.

*"I hurt Grace today. I didn't want to do it, but I had to. She told me she was in love with me. I wanted to tell her that I loved her too but I couldn't. Why didn't she tell me sooner? Why do girls have to always wait until after a guy's made his decision to say something?"*

*"I wish I could take back what I said. I wish I could take back everything I've done these past few months, especially agreeing to go out with Erica. It's not like we've got anything in common. She doesn't make me laugh, she doesn't get my jokes. Things would be so much better with Grace."*

*"But it's better this way. She'll learn to stand on her own two feet, finally see that she's the stronger one out of the two of us. She never*

*changed who she was to make someone else happy, even if it meant that they'd treat her better. I wish that she'll forgive me one day for not being strong enough to tell her the truth, and for hurting her. I wish that one day she'll find someone who doesn't want her to change everything in her life just to make him happy. I wish that she'll find someone who will love her just the way she is."*

I sat there speechless, unable to process what the short lines of text meant. Had he been able to have been honest with me, had he told me how he felt, things would have been very different for us--drastically different.

There would be no Erica Hamilton. It would have been him and me standing there on the first day of school comparing class schedules, laughing while he stroked my hair. He would have been there to comfort me when I learned about dad and Janice. I would have been with him instead of on that road when Mr. Frey was driving home drunk--I might have been able to keep Mr. Frey from driving at all.

There would have been no despondent faces in homeroom, and I'd have felt no strange

inclination to trust Stacy's offer of friendship. She would have continued on through life and suffered alone when her cancer came back. Lark would have continued to find humans distasteful, her heart locked away, and Robert...

Instantly, my mind flashed to the vision I had had of an old Graham and myself, dying together on a bed surrounded by photographs of our lives together. We had been happy in each one. It was the future we would have shared. But then the vision grew pained as I remembered Robert coming into the room.

He had scribbled something onto a piece of paper that burst into flames, just moments before I watched him die. The image still had the same impact on my heart as it strained in my chest with spasms of fear and distress at the idea of him dying, of him not being there...with me.

I looked at Graham and I knew, without a single ounce of doubt in my body that by not telling me about how he had felt, Graham had saved my life. He had saved the both of us.

"Read the last one," Graham spoke up then.

It wasn't a request, and I turned the pages to find the last dated entry, unsure of what else he could possibly reveal.

This one was dated just a few days before Lark received her call. I looked at him, my eyes unsure, and then began to read.

*"I wish there were more hours in a day, more time to spend with Lark, more minutes to talk to her and tell her things. She tells me that she wants me to talk to her. She doesn't want to read my thoughts anymore, just hear my voice. We talk for hours about everything. It's incredible.*

*"She told me about her childhood and I told her about mine, and there wasn't anything that we couldn't say to each other. It's something I've never been able to share with anyone besides Grace. I've never felt closer to someone in my life.*

*"Lark told me she wanted to be with me. I didn't know what to say. I wish I had been more romantic about the idea, but I just stuttered like an*

*idiot. She said it was charming. She said that she had never felt this way before, and I told her that I hadn't either.*

*"It was the most unbelievable thing I have ever experienced. I can't write down what it felt like or what it was, but I know now that I'll never want anything else for the rest of my life. I feel like I could do anything now Except fly. She takes care of that."*

The book dropped from my fingers, and I stared at Graham, my hands shaking with fear. He was stoic, my reaction obviously expected, and I felt even angrier, more upset than humanly possible.

"How could she?" I breathed, bringing my fingers into my palms, balling then into fists that dug into the mattress. "She knew-she knew what would happen and she didn't care."

I threw myself off of the bed and stormed out the room, my feet stomping down the stairs with loud clomps. I didn't pay attention to the footsteps that followed, didn't care. I flung the front door open and looked up at the sky, dusk having split the sky

into a before and after of time.

I pressed my hands against my head as I focused my thoughts. *How could you? How could you do that to him?*

Over and over, the questions repeated themselves in my mind and I shook with the force of my anger. Graham was beside me, one hand pulling an arm down, the other pressing something against my chest.

"Grace, please finish reading. Please."

My eyes bulged as I looked at the book he had forced into my hold. "What else is there? You're going to die, Graham. What else is there to read? What does it matter?"

"Read it, Grace."

I tore the book from his loose grasp and quickly returned to the last page. There was nothing after the last sentence I had read, nothing but blank lines where I had left off.

"What? Read what, Graham--there's nothing here."



His finger stuck out and he pointed the bottom of the page where a single line was written in small letters, Graham's handwriting clearer and smoother than anything else he'd written in the entire book. I brought the tablet up to my face to inspect it more closely, the words themselves not of any concern until I saw one word.

It was then that I actually read what had been written, and I gasped.

I looked at him, wondering why I hadn't seen it, why I hadn't realized it. He didn't look different; he didn't look different at all.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I whispered. "Why didn't you let me know?"

"Lark told me not to tell you, that you had enough to worry about. She said that when it was time for you, you needed to be able to do it without any outside sources influencing your decision, whatever that means."

"But I'm your best friend," I said to him, my voice even softer this time.

"There's a lot that we don't know about each

other, Grace, a lot of secrets that we've kept from each other. This was just one of mine."

I shook my head, surprise, shock, sadness all fighting for control inside of me. "But this is...this is not just a secret that affects you, Graham. This is something that affects your parents, too."

"My parents, Grace? My dad's in rehab, trying to get off of the booze. Mom's in Florida with her new boyfriend, too busy tanning and trying to be all...tan and crap to care what I'm doing, who I'm with, or what my plans are. She wants me in Florida because she knows it'll piss off my dad; that's it."

"The only person who's ever given a damn about me beside you was your dad, and why would he have to find out?"

"Graham, did you do this with permission?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Are you absolutely sure?"

"Yes, Grace. Ameila was there."

My eyes widened, shock winning out.

"She was?"

Graham's head bounced once in confirmation and I stumbled backwards, nearly tripping over the boxes of trash we had piled outside for pickup.

"She was the one who did it. She insisted on it."

I looked back at the one line sentence on the last page and shook my head, unsure whether it was disappointment or jealousy that now caused the throbbing in my chest.

*"I was turned tonight. Forever is now more than just a word."*



## FULL HOUSE

I spent the majority of the next day in my kitchen, cooking for Janice's arrival home from the hospital. Robert helped with the preparation, his speed far more useful than any food processor or mixer, while Graham vacuumed the entire house. Stacy had Sean drop her off an hour before Janice was scheduled to arrive home with Dad and Matthew, her hands full of packages of diapers.

"I did a search online and read that a newborn can go through twelve diapers a day; twelve!" she announced as she plopped on the sofa, the diapers falling all around her and interrupting Graham's cleaning. "That's a lot of crap! I think that Janice will appreciate as many of these things as she can get."

"I'd appreciate you picking all of them up and taking them upstairs," Graham grumbled, "and putting them in the nursery where they belong."

"Oh give me a minute, would you?"

Graham, not willing to spare a minute or

even a second, bent down to pick up the packages and with a huff, stomped upstairs.

"He's so easy," Stacy laughed, jumping up and coming to hug me. "How exciting, the baby's coming home today!"

"You need to be nicer to Graham," I said to her with a laugh, returning her hug. "He's going to be your prom date, remember? If you want to look good in the pictures, you're going to have to give him a good reason."

"Oh, he will, don't worry. Speaking of which, tomorrow after school, we're going to this awesome vintage clothing store I saw on the way to the doctor yesterday. There's a dress in there that I know will look fabulous on you."

She winked at me before her smile disappeared. "Oh, hey, Robert."

"Hello, Stacy," he said casually, his knife a blur as it turned onions and peppers into tiny cubes on the cutting board. "So you're taking Grace shopping for her prom dress, tomorrow?"

"Um, yeah," she answered nervously, her

eyes flicking to mine in a silent apology.

"Well, I'm sure that she'll look beautiful in it. Just try to make sure she's not *too* beautiful. I'd prefer that be saved for me."

He winked at her and I saw the hint of a blush on Stacy's cheeks as Robert quickly scraped the vegetables into a bowl and began working on the tomatoes for the salad.

"Well, yeah, okay," Stacy stuttered before pulling me away from the stove. "So, he's okay with this?"

I looked at Robert and nodded. I hadn't intended on discussing the topic with him at all, not wanting to have to come to a decision between breaking my promise to Shawn and turning down Robert should he have asked, but it looked like I wouldn't have to do either.

"Grace, I told you that I had no intention of asking you to prom. That hasn't changed," he said as he expertly arranged tomato wedges onto the salad. He reached for a cucumber and began to slice them as well. "You told Shawn that you'd be

going with him to prom. I'm not going to stop you from doing that."

Stacy frowned, her face matching my own. "Why don't you want to go to prom with Grace? Why are you letting her go with Salsa Boy?"

I looked at him expectantly, wanting to hear the answer that I had been too afraid to ask for myself.

Robert looked at the two of us as he continued to slice. "Because Grace deserves to have a normal prom; she can't have one with me as her date."

"Of all the-" Stacy began.

"The fact that I'm going to prom at all is abnormal," I said, cutting her off. Sighing, I returned to the stove, adding the onions and peppers that Robert had diced to the pot. "We'll be the dorkiest couple there."

Stacy grunted, unsatisfied by my response but knowing that there was nothing further to discuss if I wasn't willing to change my plans. "What are you making?" she asked, standing on her toes



to peek into the pot.

"Stuffing for chicken breasts. We're having that plus a salad and I've got a cake cooling on the table." I pointed to the round pans behind us and she turned to examine them.

"Well, what can I do to help?" she asked, seeing that there wasn't much that she could do to outpace Robert's quick knife skills.

"You could make sure that the nursery is aired out and that everything is organized," I answered.

"Okay. I can't believe there's going to be a baby in the house!" she clapped. "Does it make you look forward to having one of your own, Grace?"

The metallic clink was the only warning. Robert's head turned so swiftly, his body launching forward at such an intense speed he became a blur and I felt the rumblings of a scream form inside of me as the knife he had been using clattered to the ground, half of the blade now missing.

Stacy's eyes widened before she disappeared, Robert's body pushing her out of the

way of the wayward tip. The strangled sound that had built up in my throat made its way out as Graham stepped forward, directly into the path of the sharp piece of metal.

"Graham!" I cried out, my hand lashing out to grab at nothing but air, my foot catching on the table leg. I jerked it free and rushed toward him, my eyes large as I watched the metal shard, followed it as it headed towards its final destination.

There was a soft crunching sound as the blade entered his shoulder. His eyes widened and I reached a hand out to cover the wound, my breath coming in quick bursts as panic began to take hold. "It's okay, it's alright, Graham. We'll get it out, you'll be okay. Everything will be okay."

I waited for the warm trickle of blood to begin to flow through my fingers, and I watched Graham's expression change from frightened to confused. He pulled my hands away from the wound and we both gasped at what we saw.

The broken blade of the knife had embedded itself deep into his right shoulder, the slice in the shirt clean, the wound smooth, a glint of

metal visible outside of it. But there was no blood.

"I don't understand," I whispered, and looked up at him. "You're not bleeding."

"What do you mean he's not bleeding? Why isn't he bleeding?" Stacy asked as Robert helped her recover from the shock of being tackled by him. "What the hell? Why aren't you bleeding, Graham? Why the hell aren't you freaking bleeding, Graham?"

Robert walked over to me and slowly edged me aside, his fingers gripping the remaining edge of the blade that remained outside and pulling it out. Stacy and I both uttered expletives as the wound began to seal itself once the foreign object had been removed.

Graham, on the other hand, had just a one word response. "Cool."

Robert's hand clenched around the knife blade and I flinched as sparks flew out from between his fingers. His hand opened and a perfect steel sphere dropped onto the floor and rolled towards my feet, the metal scorching hot from the pressure it took to alter its form so drastically.

"When?" he demanded as he gripped Graham's shirt, lifting him up as though the shirt wasn't attached to a whole person.

"What?"

Robert slammed Graham's body into the frame of the entryway, the act causing the whole house to shudder. "When?" he said again, this time his voice taking on a deep, rumbling tone.

"A-a few days before Lark left," Graham gulped, genuine fear flooding his eyes.

"Why?"

"I I-love your sister. I can't be without her, and after what she went through with that Luca person, she doesn't want to be without me. We got permission, Robert. Everything was done on the up and up, I swear."

Stacy's face was one of utter confusion...and heartbreak. I held my hand out to her and when she grabbed it, I squeezed it reassuringly. "So...this means he's turned," she said to me softly.

I nodded, unable to say it with words.

"I guess that leaves me as the odd man out," she said with a sad chuckle. "As usual, I suppose. I'm happy for you, Graham."

"Thanks," he replied sheepishly from his perch above the floor, Robert's grip still pinning him to the frame. "I didn't exactly want it to be found out this way, you know. I'm sorry that we didn't tell you."

Robert looked away, his eyes searching for mine, and seeing in them the knowledge that I had known, and that I hadn't told him. I could see the flash of hurt in them before they turned dark.

"Robert," I started, my hand reaching out to him, but he was too fast, much too fast. In less than a blink, he was gone. It was as though he had never been there to begin with.

"Oh God," I moaned. I had hurt him by not telling him about Graham, broken the fragile trust that had begun to grow between us with one stupid omission.

"Grace, I-I'm sorry," Graham said to me from his position on the floor. He stood up, his hands quickly wrapping around me. "I shouldn't have told

you alone. This is all my fault."

Stacy's fist whipped out and crashed into his side, pushing a loud grunt out of him. "You idiot--you're right, this is all your fault. Why didn't you tell me first?"

"Because I wasn't planning on telling anyone," he responded, letting me go only long enough to rub the area that Stacy had assaulted. "Not until Lark came back, anyway. But I wanted Grace to see that she could trust me, and in order to do that I had to tell her about...this. I didn't think that something like this would happen. My God, what *did* happen?"

Stacy bent down to pick up the metal ball that had rolled towards the kitchen, stopping just shy of the doorway. "I think I asked the wrong question."

Graham rubbed his shoulder, the hole in his shirt still visible but the flesh beneath it smooth and undamaged. "I didn't want any of this to get out yet--Ameila said that I can still get hurt, just that I won't die from it. I didn't think that I'd find out so soon that she was right. And I didn't want it to happen in front

of Robert. God, I'm such a colossal screw-up."

"It's not your fault, Graham," I said in a small voice. "I should have told him last night when he picked me up, but I kept thinking that it was your secret, that you should be the one to tell him. I thought it was the right thing to do."

"Well, whether or not it was right doesn't matter right now because you're burning your dinner, Grace," Stacy spoke up, her head motioning towards the kitchen.

"Oh no!" I cried out, pulling out of Graham's embrace and running towards the smoking stove. "It's all ruined."

Everything that had been sitting on the stove was now charred, and I shook my head in disgust as I pulled my pots off of their burners, covering my nose to block the acrid scent of burnt rice and onions. "What am I going to do? I don't have time to go to the store and buy more groceries."

Stacy bent down to pick up the handle of the destroyed knife. "Or a new chef's knife."

Graham held up two pieces of wood. "Or a

new chopping board."

"What time is it?" I asked, spinning around to look at the clock on the stove and groaning as I realized that it had not been set since the blackout a month ago.

"It's almost five," Stacy told me, pointing to the clock on the wall.

"I've got four-thirty," Graham answered, his eyes pointing at his watch.

"Well, whichever is right, we don't have enough time to get dinner done before Janice and the baby get here. All of my plans are rui--the cake!"

Only at that moment did I realize that the small table that sat in the middle of the kitchen was now lying on its side, and everything that had been resting on top of it, including my cake, was now scattered on the floor behind it.

"What the hell am I going to do now?" I dropped to my knees to try and gather up the crumbs and chunks that littered the tiles, knowing that it was hopeless to try and save them, but finding my motivation to do anything else completely



gone.

Stacy and Graham knelt beside me, helping me with cleaning up the mess, each of them saying nothing. Graham lifted the table, setting it back on its legs, while Stacy began to sweep the floor. The two of them quietly began to dump the ruined food into the trash as I sat on the floor, feeling absolutely miserable.

"Come on, Grace. You've got to get up and help clean this place up. We'll call for pizza or something." Stacy bent down to lift me up, her hands strong around my arm.

Graham grabbed my other arm and together, they got me to my feet. "Grace, come on. I'll wash, you dry." He led me to the sink and began the task of sorting through the pots and pans, discarding the broken knife and split chopping board as he did so.

"I think I know how the knife broke. The question now is how are we gonna cover this up?" Stacy asked, pointing to a deep gouge in the countertop where Robert had been slicing the cucumbers.

"Stacy, one thing at a time, okay?" Graham chastised, his head nodding in my direction.

"Oh. Right. Never mind, Grace."

It took twenty minutes to get all of the dishes done, and I sat on a righted chair as I stared glumly at the empty stove top while Graham took out the trash bag that held my carefully prepared and quickly ruined dinner.

"I'll go and order those pizzas now," Stacy said, to Graham more than to me, before heading into the living room.

The doorbell ringing brought a slight head-raise from me, but I didn't move to answer it. It wouldn't be Dad--he had a key--so I let Stacy check to see who it was. I listened to the muffled conversation as Stacy spoke to whoever it was that was outside, then heard the door close. Stacy padded into the kitchen with her arms loaded with boxes, the smell of food wafting from them, a welcome change to the carbon aroma that still permeated the room.

"It's food," she said with a grin on her face.

"All paid for!"

She placed the boxes in front of me and began to sift through them, dancing when she saw the restaurant's label. "This is from the same place that catered your dad's wedding!"

I looked at the hand-stamped logos and knew right away that Robert had known what would happen to my dinner; he had saved the day with a quick call.

"See, everything's fine," Graham said enthusiastically. "He just needs some time to cool off."

"I was never mad at Grace to begin with," Robert said as he stood in the kitchen doorway. "I simply knew that human nature was going to get in the way of finishing up dinner and with all of the work that went into it, I couldn't let Grace fail."

I fought back tears of relief and gratitude and walked into Robert's outstretched arms, barely needing to take a single step, he had already reached me, embracing me and holding me as tightly as possible, almost to the point of pain.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I repeated into his shoulder, too overwhelmed to say anything else.

His hand stroked my hair while his thoughts mingled with my own. *There's nothing to be sorry for; do not apologize to me when I am the one who left. You did nothing wrong. If I felt any anger, even in the most infinitesimal amount, it left me faster than it arrived. I cannot blame you for doing for Graham what you've done for me.*

He stiffened just then, his head raising, turning towards the door. "Stacy, hurry and unpack that food--James and Janice will be here in five minutes."

Robert eased himself away from me and took a quick look at the kitchen, his eyes lingering on the damage he had caused to the counter. He left me and began to move rapidly back and forth, his movements so quick, he was no longer a blur but rather simply unseen. Graham stood behind me and whistled in amazement as the gouge that had marked the countertop quickly disappeared, Robert leaving no trace that anything had happened to it at

all.

When the keys could be heard in the door, the kitchen was spotless; the food had been removed from their delivery containers, and said containers hidden in a dumpster down the street. Robert stood behind me, a supportive arm placed around my waist, his chin resting on the top of my head. Graham and Stacy flanked me on either side, and we waited as the door opened, cheering softly when dad held the door open for Janice, Matthew held snugly in her arms.

"Hey guys," she said with a smile, looking exhausted but relieved to finally be home. "Something smells fabulous--I hope whatever that is, it's done because I'm ready for something other than hospital food."

"Everything is ready, Janice," Graham said with a grin.

"Oh good. I'm going to put this little guy in his crib and then I'll be back down."

I stepped forward and held my arms out to her. "Let me do that. You shouldn't be walking up

and down those stairs so much with your stitches."

Nodding in agreement, she placed the warm bundle in my arms, being careful not to disturb him. I looked at the tiny face in my arms and couldn't help the wide grin that crossed my face. I headed up the stairs towards the room at the end of the hall, quietly opening the door and stepping into the brightly colored room.

"Okay, Matthew. This is your room. I hope you like it. If you don't, you can blame your mom; she chose the decorations. This was my crib, the one I used when I was your age. I read all of the baby safety books that your mom left lying around so I know that it's okay for you to use, just in case you've somehow inherited that anal retentive thing she's got going for her.

"You're going to have to get used to that because she's your mom, and she's a nurse, but other than that, she's okay. I rather like her a lot. Just don't tell her that or she might hold it against me one day."

I laid him down gently onto the mattress and then leaned in, pressing a kiss to the top of his

head. His hair and skin were incredibly soft, his scent so sweet, I felt a tug at something inside of my heart, something strange and utterly foreign.

"I hope you're not getting any strange ideas," I heard Dad say from the hallway.

"What? Oh no, no, Dad, no" I answered him, nervous laughter belying my words. "No ideas, no ideas at all. None. Zero."

"That's good to know," he chuckled before his face grew somber, eager feet bringing him towards the crib. "Grace, I don't know if I thanked you-"

"You did, Dad, in the hospital."

"No, Grace," he said, his hand stroking my head like he used to do when I was little. "I meant for being my daughter. I can't imagine what my life would be like without you in it. You made it easier to wake up every morning, gave me a reason to look forward to going to bed each night, and I don't know what I'm going to do without you when you leave."

He choked up on that last bit and I felt a closing sensation in my chest as I thought about

what it would do to him when I was gone forever. I blinked back the tears that threatened to fall when I heard the soft whimper behind me, the sound comforting in a way. He would have Matthew, and Janice. He wouldn't be alone, and for that I was eternally grateful to Janice.

"I love you, Dad," I said to him in a wavering voice.

"I love you, too, Grace." He ruffled my hair playfully before succumbing to the fatherly need to hug me. I didn't fight it, instead relishing this quiet moment with him before I had to leave.

"Come on, let's leave your brother to sleep and go and have some dinner."

I smiled at the word "brother", and hand-in-hand we walked out of the room. I stopped at my door, noticing the light that gleamed from beneath it.

"Oh, Katie's in there unloading her things," Dad said casually, pulling me along. "She'll be down later."

I knew that I had agreed to allowing her in my room, even suggested it, but I couldn't help but feel



violated somehow with her in there among my things. I wanted to set down some rules but knew that it would have been rude.

*No more rude than her trying to cover up one of your best features.*

I smiled as I looked towards the stairs, glad for the silent support in my corner. "Let's go and have dinner then," I said cheerfully, pulling Dad downstairs. I couldn't help it, though, when I whispered "make sure she leaves only with what she came with" into his ear halfway down.

Dad turned to me and winked, completely understanding my hesitation and suspicion. I was going to miss him.



## THE PERFECT FIT

A week after Janice came home, Stacy was dropped off at Robert's house so that we could finally go shopping for my prom dress. She tried to coax her brother inside, but he was still too ashamed to face me. At least, that was what she told me.

"Is Graham going to come here or is Robert taking us?" she asked when I pulled her upstairs into Lark's room.

"We're all going together. Graham's supposed to be here in about ten minutes, and then we'll all leave in Robert's car. He's been nervous these past few days and doesn't trust me to out of his sight anymore."

Her eyes roamed our surroundings and then raised her hand in question. "So why are you still in Lark's room?"

With a loud groan, I flung myself onto the bed, landing on my back with a flop and stared at the ceiling. "It's complicated."

"Oh give me a break. All of this 'it's complicated' bull is getting pretty damn annoying, Grace. Just spit it out, okay? Save me from having to form wrong assumptions in my head, please."

Frustrated, and needing to tell someone, I finally blurted, "Because if I stayed in Robert's room, nothing would stop us from...you know."

"And what's wrong with that?" she questioned. "You two love each other, right? You're meant for each other and plan to be with each other. What's wrong with doing the deed? God, I'm going to die a freaking virgin; get some while you can!"

I felt like a broken record, having already explained this to Graham, but I told her the same thing that Ameila had told me, explaining to her the rules and the consequences that came with breaking them.

Stacy sat in silence once I was through, her face registering disappointment and shock. She opened her mouth several times to say something, but shook her head, changing her mind before the words could come out.

Only when the doorbell rang and the time to leave had arrived did she finally say what had been hounding her thoughts.

"You should do it anyway. To hell with the rules--you're not planning on populating the planet with giants and monsters for crying out loud, and you're gonna die anyway, so what's there to lose?"

I gaped at her, shocked by her suggestion, but more so by the fact that I had had the same thoughts.

Stacy got up and pulled me to my feet, a sympathetic smile on her face. "Come on, let's get going before the guys get restless and Graham starts digging around for food."

"Yeah, once that happens, we'll never get him to leave," I laughed.

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It took almost an hour for Stacy to remember where the antique shop she had wanted to visit was, and another ten minutes for Robert to maneuver in the busy parking lot until he found a parking stall that allowed us to open our doors.

"You could have just dropped us off and then found a stall," Stacy griped. "I mean, it's going to take us almost as long to walk to the store as it did finding this stall."

"For you, perhaps," Robert said with a wink to me. He took a hold of my hand and with a rush of wind and a blur of color we were standing in front of a kitschy little store; a wire rack mannequin standing in the window was adorned in a bright red flapper dress.

I giggled, amused by the annoyed and frustrated look on Stacy's face as she and Graham hurried to catch up to us. I immediately felt a wave of guilt wash over me as I took in Stacy's pallor; the walk in the sun had been a little too much for her.

"You-owe-me-an-iced-latte," she huffed at Robert.

"Gladly," Robert said to her, holding out his arm to her for support.

She took it willingly while I rolled my eyes at Graham's bemused face. Together, we walked into the small store, the smell of moth balls and incense

combining to make for a rather noxious aroma.

"Ugh, I can't stay in here," Graham complained, covering his face with an open hand. "I'll wait for you guys outside."

Stacy shrugged, too busy sifting through the racks, focused on her hunt. Robert came to stand beside me, his hand once again finding mine, our fingers weaving around each other.

"So...I heard you talking to Stacy..." his voice trailed off when as he watched Stacy fight with a tangled hanger.

"And?"

I knew where the conversation was heading, but didn't want to lead it there.

"Do you really agree with her?"

My eyes flitted to Stacy to make sure that she was too involved in her war with an overly stuffed clothes rack to pay attention before turning to face him.

*I'm not going to lie and say that I don't. I do agree with her, but I also know that the*

*consequences are too severe for just a few moments of feeling good.*

His eyebrows raised in mock offense, his mouth hanging open. *A few moments? I'd like to think it would be a bit more than just a few moments.*

I laughed softly before sobering up quickly when he leaned in, his cool breath mingling with the warmth of my own, the smoothness of his forehead pressing against mine. The tips of our noses just barely grazed each other as he brought his lips to mine and I knew, down to the very ends of my toes that a few moments would definitely be worth dying for.

"Found it!"

Robert pulled away and sighed, his eyes liquid and dark, stormy as he brushed my bottom lip with an errant finger. "She's found it," he said with a wry smile.

Wrinkling my nose, I turned with great resignation to see what it was that Stacy had found. Her face was triumphant as she held up what



looked like a bag filled with black webbing. "Where's the spider?" I quipped as I tried to figure out what exactly it was that Stacy held so proudly in her hands.

"It's your dress! Well, part of it, anyway--we still need to get a slip to go underneath it--but it's vintage, it's cut perfectly for your shape and height, and no one else is going to have it. *This* is your dress." She shook the garment bag, the bottom tied to keep the end of the dress from dragging on the ground, and I couldn't help but feel skeptical at the lump of black that lay just behind the filmy covering.

"But what exactly *is* it, Stacy?" I reached out to take the hanger from her, needing to take a look at it more closely.

"It's an overdress, Grace. This dress is over a hundred years old--we're talking true vintage, a classic. They don't make dresses like this anymore." She looked at Robert and held it out to him. "Tell me this dress isn't perfect for her."

My hands remained empty as Robert took the hanger from her and held it up, the poor lighting

in the store revealing nothing to me, but his eyes lit up as his gaze roamed the dark item in his hands. "Stacy, I don't know how you found this particular dress, but you are right, it is perfect for her."

With a smug, tilting smile, Stacy took the dress back from Robert and walked over to the saleslady who stood in front of an ancient cash register, the keys circular in shape and all of them taking up only two rows. The register itself was very ornate, its alternating shiny and rusty metal housing embossed with fleur de lis and intricate scrollwork framing each corner. Next to it, the plump saleslady looked rather dowdy and plain, but I suppose anyone would.

"Well now, let's see what you've got here, young lady," she said to Stacy in a raspy, sing song voice. "Oh, this one is one of my favorites. I'd have kept it if my figure would have allowed it, but as you can tell, I'm not exactly a featherweight. We can thank my six kids for that." She began to untie the bottom of the bag and once it was undone, gently lifted it up and over the dress, revealing that the webbing was actually an elaborate lace.

"This dress was made in nineteen o'eight for a young woman to wear as part of her wedding trousseau, which makes this dress almost as old as God," she laughed as she shook it out, a little tag that had been pinned to the seam slipping loose and dangling by its string. "Well, I don't know if you young ladies have deep pockets, but this dress is quite expensive--I hadn't realized until just now."

"I'll take care of it," Robert spoke up, stepping around Stacy to stand in front of the woman, a small card in his hand.

Her reaction was evidence of Robert's charms, as the half-smile that had formed on her lips upon seeing the price, which had replaced the meant-for-customers-only smile just moments before, disappeared. In its place, a new smile emerged, one that was warm and accepting, almost loving. But, what stood out in my mind, what made me feel a tremor of unexplainable anger, was the flicker of desire I saw in her eyes.

"Well, it's really sweet of you to buy this for your sister," she said to him, her voice now an octave lower, the rasp more pronounced. "But we

only take cash." She pointed to the register, embarrassment tinting her skin a bright red.

"Okay," Robert answered simply, reaching into the pocket of his jacket and pulling out his wallet.

"You don't have to buy it, Robert," I said to him softly, mortified that he'd even consider paying for a dress that he wouldn't even see me in. "I have some money saved up. I'll pay for it."

"It's twelve-hundred dollars, Grace," Stacy gasped as she spied the number written on the tag.

"Oh dear bananas."

"I'm sorry, Grace, I had no idea it was going to be that expensive. I'll go and put it back." Stacy reached towards the dress in the saleslady's hands, her intent clear on her face, even if she hadn't stated it.

Robert grabbed a hold of her hand and shook his head. "I've got it, Stacy, don't worry."

"No, Robert, this is too expensive," I said in a low voice, still unable to comprehend how

something so old and lacking in...well, fabric, could cost so much. "I'll find something else."

He looked down at me, his eyes having not lost their darkness, and let his lips brush gently against mine, once, twice, the third time just a slight graze of skin. I felt him fight against adding pressure to the kiss, and I silently prayed that he'd lose.

"Not this time," he whispered against my lips, kissing me once more before straightening up and turning to face our awestruck audience of one. "We'll take it."

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"Oh come on, Grace. You can't still be bothered over what that doily cost."

Graham was seated across from me, a plate of fries and a burger sitting in front of him, a cup of soda held securely in his hand. "If Robert wants to pay the same amount for it as a used car would cost, I say let him."

"Quit it, Graham," Stacy hissed, jabbing at his ribs with a well-aimed elbow before taking a

greedy sip of her iced coffee. "I think that it was a very romantic gesture, Robert. I only wish you'd be able to enjoy seeing her in it."

"Stacy," I warned.

"I'm going to ask the question, Grace, even if you're too much of a chicken to do it." She turned her entire body to face Robert, the circular table we occupied now her stage as she directed her gaze to him.

"Why don't you want to go to prom with Grace?"

I threw my hands in the air, exasperated by her prying.

And yet...I strained to hear what Robert's reply was.

"I know you want me to give you some elaborate excuse, Stacy, something romantic, like how it's all about protecting her safety, or perhaps something practical, like I'm allergic to formal school functions, but the simple truth is that I just want Grace to have as normal a prom as possible."

Stacy wasn't going to accept that answer, and she pressed him for more. "How can it be a normal prom if she's going with someone else? You're her boyfriend. You're supposed to take her. "

He shook his head, a bemused smile stretching on his face. "And what happens when I have to leave because of my call? Grace will be abandoned by her date--just what every girl wants to experience at her senior prom.

"She'll have a much better time with Shawn, and that's all I want."

I knew that I wasn't the only one who looked at Robert with an appreciative gaze; I hadn't planned on changing my mind about going to prom with Shawn, regardless of what Robert's answer would be. But hearing his reasons, knowing that it wasn't that he didn't want to go with me, but rather that he didn't want my experience to be anything but pleasant, it made me feel rather guilty.

Robert's face grew pinched as he listened to the thoughts in my head, and I saw that he did not approve of my feelings.

*Of course I don't approve. Why do you feel guilty, Grace?*

My eyes flitted to Stacy and Graham, who were now extolling on the virtues of Robert not going to prom with me, and I allowed my gaze to travel to the white canvas garment that lay beside me. *I feel guilty because now all I'll be thinking about when I'm with Shawn is how much I'd rather be with you.*

His chuckle went unnoticed by the others and I blushed, the uncomfortable warmth in my cheeks annoying and frustratingly obvious.

"Okay, so we've got to get the slip and your shoes and then you'll be done. I just need to pick up a new nail polish, and then it's all about you, Graham," Stacy said, ticking off an invisible list on her fingers.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa. I told you, I've got a tux," Graham argued. "It's a nice one, too, with matching tie, vest, and cummerbund."

Stacy looked at me, her face screaming "I told you so", and I burst into a fit of laughter. She



returned her gaze to Graham's blank face, a thin line forming where her mouth should have been. "You are not wearing a cummerbund."

"But it's a packaged deal. All I have to know is what color your dress is and then they'll try and match it. They even have paisley if you want to try something funky," Graham replied before taking a bite of his burger.

Stacy's head turned towards mine once more, her eyes saying all sorts of things I knew her mouth wouldn't, and I began to choke on my laughter, the expression of utter mortification on her face too much to bear.

"He said paisley," she gasped.

"It could have been worse," Robert said as he took a fast sip of his water. "He could have said it was neon paisley."

"Oh, God," Stacy whined into her hands before throwing an accusatory glance at me. "This is your fault. If he shows up wearing a paisley, neon tux, I'm going to haunt you for the rest of your life. I'll haunt your children, and your grandchildren. I'll even

haunt your dogs and your goldfish. I can't believe I was talked into this."

Robert reached out a comforting hand to Stacy, his laughter not as boisterous as mine but full of amusement all the same. "I'll make sure he looks his best, Stacy," he said to her reassuringly. "You just worry about making yourself look beautiful."

Stacy's face softened at his words. "You don't have a brother hidden somewhere, do you? Or perhaps a friend who isn't psychotic? Just in case?"

"No, I don't have a brother, and I'm afraid that there are very few of my kind as open to the idea of dating a human as I and my sister are," he answered her, his voice laced with sadness.

"Well, should you, you know, ever find one who happens to share your views before prom, could you let me know? I might need a back-up."

Graham's head lifted at that and he frowned. "Hey! I'm right here!"

Stacy, Robert, and I laughed at Graham's outraged face and soon, he joined us in our amusement as we finished our lunch and prepared

to head to the next store on Stacy's list.

It turned out that it was at Indian Mound Shopping Center, and it gave us the opportunity to view the damage to the theater and the two adjacent stores.

It was a disturbing scene, to say the least, to see the doors that had once led you into the theater's lobby were now missing. The doorway's frame was charred black, the smell of burnt wood and plastic still permeating the air despite the air-conditioner's filters and the multitude of flowers that were piled in front of the blackened entrance in a makeshift memorial.

"Does anyone know how many people were hurt in the fire?" I asked to no one in particular.

Stacy nodded, a somber expression replacing the amused one that she had carried over from lunch. "Twenty people were hurt, four died, including the new manager of the theater."

I looked at Robert and, though I knew that the blaze wouldn't have caused him any harm, the idea that it could have been him in that fire still brought a

tightening to my chest that was both uncomfortable as well as pained when I acknowledged that he *had* been here.

"I want to get some flowers," I said, my voice hushed by the overwhelming sense of sorrow that filled this corner of the shopping center.

Robert nodded and wrapped his arm around my shoulder, leading me away gently. "Let's go and do that right now."

"I'm coming with you," Stacy called out, running to catch up.

Graham, however, didn't follow.

My feet stilled as I turned to look at his motionless figure, his shoulders slumped forward with something I couldn't place.

"Graham? Are you coming?"

"If I had still been working here, I might have been able to save them." His voice was rough, catching with each word on the pain that had formed inside of him.

"Graham, you don't know that," I told him,

returning to his side. I looked at his face and saw the look of guilt and despair in his eyes that I knew had no place there.

"I'm not going to die, Grace. At first that sounded so awesome, but you were right. I forgot about everyone else, forgot that other people are still going to die. If I'd been here, I could have stopped them from dying. I could have saved them because I wouldn't have been afraid of dying--I wouldn't have worried about trying to save myself. Does that make sense?"

"Graham, you've had your mortality lengthened, but that doesn't mean you're invincible. Nothing is invincible, not even faith." Robert spoke up then, his voice lowered to prevent others from hearing. "Had you gone into that fire, you would have saved a few people, sure, but what if they were meant to die? You'd be interfering, and turned or not your life is still subject to the whims of those who made you. Did you never stop to think just how far your immortality went?"

When Graham shook his head, Robert pulled him off to the side, his face stern, his posture

rigid. "You saw what happened the other day when the knife punctured your skin. You still possess the same fragilities as you did while mortal, Graham.

"You can still be burned, you can still be cut--you're not impervious to injury, no matter how you feel or what you think; you'll heal when you otherwise wouldn't have before you turned. Your skin will return to its previous state, you won't bleed, you won't scar. It is because of this that you cannot play the hero and risk revealing to others what you are. Humanity loves the idea of superheroes, but they're not ready to truly accept their existence or how they came to be."

Graham seemed to understand the message that Robert was trying to get through to him, though the guilt was still visible in his eyes. He nodded, the motion jerky--I would have sworn it was a defiant gesture if I didn't know better.

"Let's get the rest of Stacy's list done," he said with a weak smile.

"Are you gonna be okay, Graham?" Stacy asked, her plans obviously taking second place to concern for him.

"I'll be fine. It's just going to take some getting used to, you know?"

Graham's answer was half-hearted, but it was all we were going to get out of him--we all knew that--so instead of pressing the issue, we turned around and headed towards the opposite end of the mall, the idea of laying flowers down among all the rest now forgotten.

While Stacy and I walked ahead of them, Graham and Robert continued to discuss what had happened at the scene of the fire. Though I couldn't see them, and though it was impossible to listen in on their conversation without turning around, I was still able to hear what they were saying.

"I know that you went into this with very little thought as to the consequences, Graham, but don't think that you made a mistake. You were given permission to turn because you have it in you to protect what's not just my secret anymore, but yours now as well.

"You've proven that you love my sister, and I already know that you love Grace. There's not much

else you can do to prove to me that allowing you to turn was the right decision."

Stacy looked at me and smiled, just as relieved as I was that Robert was accepting of Graham, both as Lark's boyfriend and my best friend, but more so as someone newly turned.

"You two look quite pleased," Robert remarked as he sidled between us, his hand fitting into mine.

"Among other things," Stacy chuckled.

When we approached the department store that Stacy had intended on purchasing the rest of the items on her list at, Robert took Graham in one direction while Stacy dragged me in another.

"I put something on hold for you the other day," she said as we approached a saleslady. "It's what you're going to wear beneath the overdress. I know you probably can't picture what exactly the entire ensemble is supposed to look like but I guarantee that when you put this together with the dress, you'll be a believer in me."

I shrugged, totally ambivalent. A dress was a



dress. It didn't matter what it was called, or what someone else thought about it.

"Hi, I have something on hold under the name Stacy Kim," she said to the woman who looked up and down at the two of us, a shiver of revulsion running through her as she took in my holey jeans and worn t-shirt. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," Stacy said with a knowing smile.

Unsure, the woman walked towards a far wall and opened a hidden door, revealing a closet filled with a rack of clothes, hold tags pinned to the garment bags that covered them. She sifted through several of them before finding a tag bearing Stacy's name.

"The dressing room is right around that corner," she said to us as she handed the garment to Stacy.

"Thank you," Stacy said to her and pulled me with her towards a side room full of glass covered doors. She walked towards the one furthest away from the entrance and pushed me into a dressing area that was roughly the size of a public restroom.

"Put this on first," she instructed, handing me the garment that she had the saleswoman retrieved, "and then put this on over it." She handed me the garment bag holding the overdress.

Once the small door closed after her, I turned to face my reflection times three, the wall of mirrors surrounding me quite overwhelming.

"Stop freaking out at the mirrors and put on the first dress," Stacy called out from behind the door.

I bit my tongue to keep from throwing out a retort as I undressed and then pried a silver slip dress from its padded hanger, the light from overhead bouncing off of the shimmering fabric. I gathered the material up and pulled the garment over my head, allowing it to fall around me, the silky material fluid and free flowing, the ends draping a bit on the ground. Its thin, spaghetti-like straps just barely grazed my shoulders and the fabric was so light, it felt like I wasn't wearing anything at all.

The dress clung to me as though my skin was wet, hugging me in a way that gave off the impression that my figure was far more lush than it

was, the curves of my body suddenly coming into focus, surprising me; the dress was like a mask that hid the real me underneath it. After taking the requisite time to appreciate everything that this first dress could do, I removed the black overdress from its bag, finally able to see and feel it after merely glancing at it from over a counter.

It was very fragile, made entirely of black mesh lace with ornate and decorative embroidery accenting everything from the bodice to the long sleeves. There were swirls and hearts woven into the lace using the same black thread, and they varied in thickness from faint and delicate to thick and stiff and almost applique like. The dress' hook-and-eye back made me wonder how I was going to be able to close it when I put it on as I stepped into it, lifting it to my chest and pulling my arms through the sleeves.

"Are you done?"

"Yeah," I responded, and opened the door to allow Stacy inside the confining room.

The minute she saw me, even with the back

of the dress wide open, she clapped her hands and brought them to her face, pleased by what she saw.

"I love it when I'm right. Turn around, let me close you up."

With a few quick tugs, she managed to bring the back together, the lace now hugging my body against the silver dress beneath it, the contrast of the shimmering fabric peeking through the black lace quite startling.

The necklines of the two dresses met up exactly, meshing into one perfect garment. The bottom of the overdress fanned out behind me, the effect far more dramatic than I had expected out of something that was nothing more than a whole lot of black string.

Stacy needed nothing else to confirm that she had, indeed, chosen the perfect combination of garments when the saleswoman came in to check on us and her jaw dropped in shock at the image that I made, standing in front of a room full of mirrors, dressed in silver and black.

"I'm going to assume that you're taking the

dress," she said to Stacy, though she stared at me, her eyes sparkling with appreciation. "Did you put these two together?"

Stacy nodded enthusiastically. "Yup."

"You've got an eye for this thing. You should fill out an application--we could use someone like you," the saleswoman remarked as she walked around me, admiring the blend of the two dresses together.

"I'd love to, but I'm afraid that I'm not going to be here much longer," Stacy replied, a slight catch in her voice.

"Oh? Going away to college then?"

Stacy shook her head and looked at me, a rather sardonic look on her face. "Nope, just dying."

Speechless. That's the only word one could use to describe the saleswoman's reaction to Stacy's response, and she was that in spades. I wondered how often Stacy had dropped that little bomb on people in passing, and whether or not their reactions were similar.

With the saleswoman distracted, I focused on removing both dresses, handing Stacy the silver one over the door while carefully placing the black one back on its hanger and into its garment bag.

Afterwards, we stood in front of the register where the saleswoman fiddled with a safety tag, still unable to converse on any level with Stacy, too flustered to say anything meaningful or simply conversational. The total for the silver slip was a marked difference from the black one, and I nearly felt like we were cheating both of them somehow, the disparities in prices so vast it was almost laughable, but the fact that they both seemed to have been meant for each other couldn't be ignored, even by me and my fashion ignorance.

Stacy and I headed to the men's department to seek out the guys and found Robert sitting in a leather chair as Graham stood in front of a mirrored wall, his hands resting in the pockets of white, pin striped jacket. Beneath it he wore a black shirt with a white vest, pin striped to match, and a tie that was a deep burgundy color.

He looked like a movie star dressed the way

he was, with his blonde hair and green eyes and mega-watt smile. If he hadn't been wearing his ratted sneakers, the vision would have been flawless.

"How'd you do that?" Stacy said to Robert, breathless as she watched Graham take a few steps and pose, examining his reflection. "How'd you take him from human garbage disposal to that?"

"He's always been...that, Stacy. He just needed his packaging changed," Robert said with a smirk. "Does the color suit you?"

She walked up to Graham and grabbed the tie, grinning like a loon when she discovered that it was no clip-on, his head lurching down towards hers when she tugged on it. "This is the exact same color as my dress--how did you know that?"

"Let's just say that an angel told me," Robert said with a sly smile.

"I'm impressed."

"Thank you," I said quietly to Robert as Stacy examined the lines of the tux while Graham held his

hands up, posing as though he were being frisked by the police.

"I want you to enjoy your prom, Grace. In order to do that, I have to make sure your bodyguard is happy, too," he joked.

"I know, but you've done a lot for someone not even going."

"Who said I'm not going?"

I looked at him, stunned. "But I thought-"

He silenced me by placing his hand over my mouth, his smile still whimsical, though now with a hint of mischief added to it. "I may not be going as your date, but I'm still going, Grace, if only to make sure that Salsa Boy keeps his hands to himself."

I pushed Robert's hand away to protest. "Shawn wouldn't dare-"

Robert chuckled and replaced his hand with his lips, effectively ending any complaint I might have had.





# THE MISTAKE

"Grace, Grace get up."

It was three days before prom. Well, two days and half a night, but the time didn't matter. It was the urgent shaking, the lights that drilled into my eyes when darkness should have--would have--been far more welcoming that mattered.

"Mmm. What's wrong?" I looked into grey eyes and blinked to adjust my vision. They were wrong.

"There's nothing wrong with my eyes--it's your vision that needs adjusting. Good grief--you mortals and your shortcomings."

I sat upright on the bed, my body jerking as I took in the long missed face. "Lark!" My arms whipped around her and I pulled her into a pathetic embrace--pathetic because, quite simply, it's pretty impossible to pull an angel anywhere.

"Were you expecting someone else?" she grumbled, turning the tables on me and pulling me towards her, hugging me the way I should have

been able to hug her. If I didn't know any better, I'd say it was an act that was filled with a sense of desperation.

"Well, yeah. You've been gone--it's just been Robert and me in this house. What are you doing here? When did you get back? Does Robert know you're here? What about Graham? Did you see him? Why didn't you tell me about you turning him?"

"Whoa--chill. I'm an angel but even I can't answer all of those questions all at once." She stood up and walked over to the dresser, returning with a shirt and a pair of jeans that she had removed from my bags, the action so quick, I didn't even see it. "Put these on and I'll try to explain while you do."

I grabbed the clothes from her hands and did as she told, waiting only until she began to speak.

"I'm here to bring you home, Grace. And yes, Robert knows I'm here. He nearly took my head off when I showed up--he's on edge right now." She looked at me, seeing that I had paused, one leg in my jeans, the other hanging out. "Don't stop, keep dressing otherwise I'm going to dress you myself."

"As for Graham, he's part of the reason why I'm here."

I slipped the t-shirt on and pulled my hair into a quick ponytail, my attention now all hers. "What's going on? What's wrong with Graham?"

"There's been an accident, Grace."

"What do you mean? What's happened? What's happened to him?" I felt panic begin to flood my chest as I ran towards Lark's bedroom door, flinging it open to see Robert standing there, his dark hair standing on end, his eyes half-crazed.

"What's going on?" My breath was short and I felt the blood in my hands turn to ice as I saw his eyes turn just as cold.

"Someone died in your house tonight, Grace."

You know how in the movies, when the female character is told something shocking, her hand flies to her mouth to cover a scream, a gasp, whatever? This doesn't happen in real life. No. Instead, your hands go to the part of you that starts

to hurt first. Mine flew to my stomach and my heart, each one simultaneously convulsing in pain.

"Who?"

Robert looked at Lark, and my gaze followed his, just in time to see a flicker in her eyes that spoke volumes in silent communication. I let out a sigh of relief because in that split second of silent dialogue I knew that it wasn't Dad or Matthew. But Graham...

"Let's go," Lark ordered, her hands reaching towards me.

I stepped away and turned my gaze back to Robert, confusion taking hold when he stepped back, his face contorting in pain and an almost infinite sadness that I could not place.

"What's going on?"

"I'll explain on the way. Let's go, no more stalling." Lark grabbed a hold of my arm and pulled me towards the window, her movement effortless though I struggled against it, pleading with Robert to tell me what was going on even as he stood there, motionless.

And then we were outside, Lark holding on to me as though I were her child, cradling me in her arms while I stared behind us, the house growing smaller in the darkness of the midnight sky.

"Why are you taking me and not Robert? Why isn't he coming?"

Lark did not answer me, and her silence did wonders to build up an acute and almost dangerous anger inside of me as we passed over rooftop after rooftop, the neighborhood slowly becoming familiar until I knew exactly what street we were over, and how much longer until we reached my house.

"You said you'd tell me what was going on. You're not supposed to lie, remember? If you don't tell me in the next minute, you're going to be very sorry-"

"I'm supposed to protect you, Grace." It was an answer with dangerous corners to it.

"Yeah, I kinda figured that part out when I started sleeping in your room."

She shook her head and squeezed her eyes

shut, her face looking pained. "My call--God, it's like things just had to get more difficult, nothing can ever stay calm for just one damn minute. My call is to protect you, to keep you alive."

"What does that have to do with Robert not taking me home?"

"Grace, I know he told you about his call, so you should see where the conflict lies here."

"No, I don't see. He doesn't plan on killing me, Lark. I told him to do it--I...I want him to. He's refused, so I don't know why there'd be a conflict."

As we neared my street I could see the flashing of lights, reds, blues, yellows--the universal sign that something bad happened--and once again the panic began to set in. I tamped it down, not wanting anything to distract me from what it was that Lark was telling me.

"Tell me what's going on, Lark. I need to know what's really going on here. Don't let me go into this blind..."

She sighed, our bodies no longer sailing through the sky but rather drifting slowly downward,

landing just a few yards away from my home in the darkness of an unlit yard. She looked at me, her expression almost pitiful, but the pity wasn't for herself. No, this was all mine.

"Grace, Robert's call as Death includes taking your life because your name is in the final manifest. It records each human's birth and when they're supposed to die. Your name's listed there and there's no erasing it--he's a threat to you, whether he chooses to kill you or not. He's going to continue on fighting against the call until it turns completely black and angry, eating away at who he is until there's nothing left of him to keep him from hearing anything but anger and hate.

"If he doesn't kill you, he'll start hurting people, people he wasn't meant to, and he'll begin to rage. You know what that means."

"He'll kill himself," I breathed, the words acting like a knife in my gut, the idea of Robert dying slicing me in two.

"He intends to destroy his soul to keep you safe, but when the rage finally hits him, whatever he wanted, whatever reason he had for rejecting his



call will be forgotten. It's your life or his.."

It was the way her voice wavered, the way her eyes grew moist before the divinity wicked away any human-like qualities of her tears that finally clued me in on where the conflict existed.

It wasn't between Robert and Lark.

It was between Lark and me.

"You don't want to protect me."

She nodded, an angry laugh coming out of her mouth as she looked down the street. "This is all a big joke. It has to be, because it's not a mistake--it can't be. I've had that drilled into me from the very first moment I heard the call's song in my head. I'm supposed to keep you safe, which means I have to help my brother die. How the hell am I supposed to *want* to protect you knowing that?"

"Then don't," I said simply.

"Don't, she says," Lark scoffed. "And then what? End up in the same boat as Robert? Isn't it enough that one of us is going to die because of you--do you want both of us to die just so you can

live a mediocre mortal life?"

"What? N-no! I don't want anyone to die. I'm the one who should die. I'm the one who should be dead right now and not-"

I let my head turn to the commotion that took up the majority of the street ahead of me. I knew then.

"Katie," I breathed. "She was sleeping in my room. Oh, God."

My feet began to move on their own, falling one after the other in rapid succession as I ran towards the house. The scene that spread out in front of me was chaotic--neighbors were standing about in their pajamas, their hair going this way and that, some without shoes in the spring night air--chatter about who it was, what had happened mingled with the intermittent blaring of a police radio and a cell phone ringing.

And the overwhelming theme of everyone's conversations was that another death had happened to the Shelley family.

One of the benefits of being socially invisible

is that no one seemed to notice my arrival, and I used that to my advantage as I walked around the side of the house, entering it from the kitchen door. Janice was seated at the small table that stood in the middle of the room, her back to me, her shoulders slouched with the weight of loss pulling her forward while pushing her down at the same time, making her seem smaller, almost child-like.

Dad was seated beside her, his head resting in his hands. A bustle of activity went on just beyond them as police officers and paramedics discussed amongst themselves what it was they had seen.

"Grace! How-when-how did you get here? I tried calling Stacy's house but there was no answer and Graham said he couldn't get in touch with you either."

Dad's voice was cracking, emotion drowning every single word as he stood up, the chair falling down loudly behind him.

"Does it matter how I got here? What happened?"

He didn't answer me, simply grabbed me and nearly suffocated me in a hug that spoke of all his fears and his overwhelming relief. I could almost smell it just as much as I could feel it in every quiver of his trembling body.

"Dad, tell me what happened," I tried once more. I wasn't sure if he heard me since my mouth was lost in the folds of his thick robe, and my thoughts were too muddled by the aroma that lingered on the terrycloth to repeat myself.

"Matthew was crying. I went to check on him and he wasn't in his crib, so I figured he was with Katie," Janice said from behind me. "I went into your room; I didn't turn on the light because I didn't want to startle Matthew. I saw him lying next to Katie on the bed, and so I picked him up..."

Her voice trailed off before a sob was wrenched from her. Dad allowed me to pull away, if only to finish where Janice had left off, though it wasn't any easier for him to tell it judging by the way his voice shook with every syllable.

"Janice wanted to thank Katie--she's been very good with waking up with Matthew to change

him and bring him to us for his feedings--and so she bent down to kiss her cheek. It was cold, ice cold. Janice called out to me and I came to see what was wrong. I didn't think; I just turned on the lights-" Even he couldn't finish.

But he didn't need to. I could see the image in my mind, see the twisted body and the blackened face. I knew that what happened wasn't caused by anything natural. More importantly, I knew that Katie had been tortured and killed because she had been in my bed instead of me.

"I'm so sorry, Janice," my meager offering managed to get out before I heard the sounds of loud footsteps clomping down the stairs, a repetitious banging accompanying it as it grew louder, closer.

A man dressed in a dark blue jumpsuit emerged from the stairwell, his body facing in the opposite direction as his hands behind him held on to one end of a gurney. A black, vinyl bag lay on it, heavy with its contents. Katie.

Janice began to weep when she realized

what was happening and moved forward with remarkable speed, her hands grasping at the edges of the gurney. Dad stopped her, holding her back with a strong arm, caressing her hair as she wailed with grief.

"Where's Matthew?" I looked around the kitchen for some sign that he was here but saw nothing that indicated as such. "Where's the baby?"

Dad's finger pointed up, and I rushed around him, around the paramedic who made up the rear of the gurney, a police officer who tried to stop me from heading up the stairs, and launched myself towards Matthew's room. The smell that hit me when I reached the landing was a combination of decay and destiny. I was rocked by it in a way that didn't seem to affect anyone else who stood around my bedroom door, spectators to the grisly scene.

Quietly I made my way down the hall to the last room there. The door was closed and I opened it carefully, not sure who or what I'd find, but knowing that the sound of silence meant that Matthew was asleep.

Graham was standing in the middle of the

room, the baby resting comfortably against his shoulder. He was being bounced ever so gently as Graham repeated a rather odd sounding nursery rhyme.

"...And when you get everything just right, when you've done everything just as you had practiced, you end up with quite possibly the best team of burger toppings you've ever seen."

"Graham?"

He turned around slowly and the instant I saw the foreign look on his face I felt my heart lurch in my chest. He looked older, worn. More than that, though, he looked changed. The world as he knew it was no longer his--he had turned; he would now have to witness those he knew, those he cared about die. He had discovered the dark side of immortality.

"No one else seemed to be worried about him--I thought if you were here, you'd want him to be with someone," he said, his voice filled with the crags where disillusion had chipped away at him.

"Thank you, Graham. That means...*this*

means so much to me," I said encouragingly, wanting him to take heart in my words. "You're his hero, my hero."

"Your father said he was with her, that she was dead when Janice came in and got him. Who knows how long he was there, being held by a corpse. What do you think that does to a person, a baby?"

"Graham, he's only a month old. I don't think he's going to be bothered by it as much as you think-"

I moved my arms out to take the baby from him, wanting him to be safely in his crib. Graham sighed and relented, allowing me to gently lift the baby from his chest and lay him down in his crib, pausing when he stirred.

When I was sure that Matthew had resumed his deep sleep, I replaced the warm emptiness in Graham's arms with myself, holding him, comforting him.

A scratching sound came from the window as it creaked open. A willowy stream of smoke



trailed in silently with the first push of air that flowed in. It swirled around the crib, lingering for a while over Matthew's slumbering body before turning towards Graham, thickening, wisps of mist forming limbs and hair, clothing and eyes that were as dark as wet ash.

"Lark!" I exclaimed.

She turned away to look at Graham, her expression defiant and yet, at the same time saddened. I heard my intake of breath as Graham began to change, his face growing thin, looking almost gaunt, his hair darkening and lengthening in one swift movement. His height diminished and his frame grew smaller, feminine, his broad shoulders replaced with delicate bones, his wide chest now narrow with a pair of breasts that pushed through a dark silver gown that now covered his body.

No. Not his body.

"Ameila? What's going on here--why are you pretending to be Graham? Where is he?"

"I'm sorry, Grace, but we had no choice."

"No choice? What are you talking about?"

Ameila was rigid in her usual form, the casual looseness that was Graham now gone. "Things are happening now that could destroy the tenuous balance we've managed to hold here. Because of what has transpired between you and Sam, and now with Lark and Robert forced to wage an internal war against their own flesh and blood over you, a rift has formed amongst my kind; something that hasn't happened since-

"Since the Nephilim," I finished for her.

I looked at the two of them, mother and daughter looking so similar it would have been difficult for most people to tell them apart. But I could.

I could see the anger in Lark's eyes, sightless though they may be. They glittered with the same distaste they had held the first time I had seen them, and contrasted so greatly from the deep compassion and sorrow that lingered in Ameila's darker ones.

"And so, because of this we're back to being enemies, Lark?" I asked softly, not knowing what

else to say.

Her voice was in my head, icy and stabbing into my thoughts like a million needles, each one looking for a specific point to target...and finding it.

*My call tells me that I have to keep you safe, knowing that doing so will mean Robert dies. If I go against that, it means that I will die. But because of what happened here tonight, Sam has taken Graham. If I don't go against my call and bring you to him, Sam will kill him. I am left with choosing between my call and my heart.*

The feeling that had taken over me when I had first seen Graham's face--actually, Ameila's--returned with a vengeance, only this time it brought along its friends: despair and a clawing fear that growled from deep inside of me.

"We've got to save him," I said to her, frantic, panicked. "We've got to get Robert and have him help get Graham back. He'll know how, he'll fix this."

I sounded desperate, my faith so much like that of a little girl who believed her dad could do anything, and I didn't care. I ignored the way Lark's

eyes shifted with rapid movements, her seeing my expression through her mother's vision, knowing that she could hear my thoughts.

"Grace, there's nothing Robert can do to stop any of this," Ameila said to me with false calm.

"What do you mean there's nothing Robert can do? He's Death. If he can't stop someone from dying, who can?"

"Sam is still an archangel of death. Despite this...mistake-"

"A mistake?" I ground out. "A mistake? You call murdering Katie in front of my baby brother a mistake?"

My outburst startled Matthew, who opened his mouth to let out a pitiful wail--until Ameila softly clucked at him, and his mouth closed, his body relaxing almost instantly as he drifted into an unnatural sleep.

She turned disappointed eyes towards me and sighed. "You must understand, despite what you have seen, what you have experienced, we cannot call what Sam did anything but unintentional.

He intended to kill you tonight and instead he mistook your aunt for you. It was a mistake."

I returned her disappointed gaze with an angry one as I scoffed at her explanation. "He didn't kill Katie. He murdered her because she wasn't me. This was no mistake and you know it. Angels don't mistakes, Ameila."

"I understand your frustration, Grace, but if you'd just listen-"

"No. No, I'm done with listening to this." I turned around and looked at Lark, focusing on keeping my thoughts as simple and clear as I could. I didn't need to hear any more explanations or arguments. I didn't need any other persuasions because I know what needs to be done.

*I love Graham as much, if not more than you do. He's my best friend; I've known him longer than you have. But I also know that I'm not supposed to know him for the rest of his life, only for the rest of mine. Your call says that you have to keep me alive but that's only until I die.*

*And I'm going to die. Sam's not going to*

*stop trying to kill me--he's even more determined than he ever was before. I'm not worth one life, let alone two, Lark; I'm giving myself to Sam.*

Though she had displayed vehemence and utter dislike for me just moments earlier, the face that I saw in that moment spoke of something entirely different; it was one of hopelessness and regret.

"Grace, I didn't mean...you don't have to--"

I shook my head as Lark's words came softly to me, her voice hugging my mind both gently and fiercely--almost painfully--the way it always did. "I have to do this. I can't let the people I love die because Sam screwed up and left me alive. If it's not Graham or Robert it'll be someone else...my dad, or Matthew...even Janice. I can't live with that."

I walked over to the crib and placed my hand on Matthew's head, the soft, downy hair tickled my palm, and I felt the hot anger mixing with the even more fiery sadness, turning them into liquid emotion that fell down my cheeks and landed beside him.

"I'm sorry I'm not going to be here to see you

grow up, kiddo. I wish you'd been born with a normal big sister, but you got me instead. I only hope that when you do grow up, you realize that sometimes, being normal simply means being uninteresting. There won't be many kids out there on the playground with genuine guardian angels watching over them--you're going to be okay, Matthew. I promise."

I bent down and pressed a soft kiss to his warm cheek, and then turned away quickly, not wanting to see him stir again. "I've got to speak to my dad."

With grave expressions on their faces, Ameila and Lark both nodded silently as I headed towards the door and into the hallway. The crowd of people that stood outside of my room had diminished somewhat, although there was still a significant amount of activity inside. I crept down the stairs and headed back into the kitchen where a blotchy, red-eyed Janice stood in front of the kitchen sink, a broken coffee mug in her hands, a puddle of brown liquid at her feet, dad standing behind her with his hands on her shoulders.

"Dad?"

"Yeah, Grace? How's your brother? How's Graham?"

My mouth stopped working for a moment--not long enough for him to realize anything was wrong, of course, but long enough to quickly throw together a reasonable response.

"Matthew's asleep and Graham's quite a...changed person--he's really taken to Matthew."

"Well, that's good. Listen kiddo, I think it would be much better if you go on back to Stacy's, or perhaps even head up to Robert's. Things here are going to be crazy for a while and Janice and I still have to go to the police station and answer some questions. With finals and prom coming up, the last thing you need to be thinking about is sleeping in a crime scene."

"What about Matthew?"

"Janice needs him right now, honey. And I...I need him, too."

It bothered me to an infinite degree that this



was going to be much easier than I thought, that he was making it easy for me to go. I wanted him to ask me to stick around, to stay because he needed me, too. I wanted to tell him that I was going to stay with him forever, that I wasn't going to leave him or Matthew or Janice, but that lie would have been harder to tell than any other lie I'd told over these past few months.

Instead, I walked up to him and hugged him. I hugged him like a little girl scared of the monsters underneath her bed. I hugged him like the young lady who had watched him embarrassingly explain the inner workings of the female body so that I wouldn't be frightened when puberty set in. I hugged him like the teenager who'd had her heart broken by her best friend. And I hugged him like the woman I'd never become, the woman he'd never know because I knew that I'd probably never see him again.

"I love you, Dad," I whispered against his ear, and squeezed my eyes shut as I felt his arms grow tighter and tighter, his grip growing stronger and stronger around me, and I didn't care because I

needed every ounce of it to give me the strength I needed to finally let go.

Just before our embrace grew slack, just before self-preservation took a hold of me and erased any plans I had made, Dad pulled his head back to look at me and whispered, "I love you, kiddo." And then I saw his eyes flash with an unbearable sorrow that I knew stemmed from the death of Katie, but I couldn't help but feel like it was meant for me. I couldn't stay there any longer. I pulled away from him and turned around, only one person left to say goodbye to.

I patted Janice on her arm, a silent farewell because there were no words I could say to lessen her grief... or prepare her for the grief that was yet to come. She lifted her head to look at me, her eyes red and tortured by loss. Her hand closed around my fingers and she patted them in return, a weak smile just barely forming on her lips--it took everything in her to give me that small gift, and I held it close to me as I walked away.

And then I was gone, out the back door and down the street again, away from the flashing lights

and the curious neighbors, away from my family, before Lark swooped in and carried me off into the now early morning sky, the sun beginning to rise, the hint of dawn scaring away the darkness that had enveloped Heath, if only temporarily.

"Where are we going?" I asked when the streets were no longer familiar to me and the silence was just too much to endure any more.

"I'm taking you back to my house. If you're going to do this, if you're going to hand your life over to Sam in order to play the damn hero then you're going to have to be the one to tell Robert."

"But he's going to try and stop me," I protested. "He's not going to let me anywhere near Sam, and he's definitely not going to let me sacrifice myself to protect Graham!"

"Thank you for the lesson on obviousness, Grace, I was a little behind there," she said sarcastically. "No, you're going to tell him because he won't accept it coming from anyone else but you. He's going to need to see that you're doing this because you want to, that you came to this conclusion, this decision all on your own. He needs

to be convinced that you weren't coerced."

"And what if he doesn't care? What if he tries to stop me anyway?"

Lark's face grew far more shadowed and mournful than I thought possible, even for an angel as she spoke the words that neither of us wanted to hear.

"Then I stop him."



# HUMAN NATURE

The closer we came to that white house surrounded by the white wall and its guardian angel statues, the more nervous I became. I could feel my heart's erratic beat, almost hear the blood shooting through my veins with each wild thump. How was I going to explain this to Robert? How was I going to be able to make him see reason when I knew that the darkness that had already begun to take over him would block out anything save the fact that I was making his sacrifice pointless.

As we passed over the wall and shrubbery, the yard and the house came into view. Lark slowed down her flight and we came to a gentle landing right in front of the rear door--the door closest to Robert's room.

"I'm leaving you here, Grace. You have to do this on your own"

I wanted to ask her where she was going, as well as thousands of other questions that needed to be answered, but she was gone, her departure too swift and silent for me to do anything but groan in

disapproval at the suddenness of it.

I stared at the emptiness she left behind, and silently fumed as I breathed words that would have gotten me grounded only a few months ago had Dad heard me say them. Lark was supposed to protect me, and yet at the first sign of trouble she was gone. But...this was how it's supposed to be. This was my inevitable path. It had been for the past eleven years and I had cheated death long enough.

It didn't matter anymore what angels thought. My decision to give Sam what he wanted in exchange for Graham's life, and to protect Robert and Lark from the cruel ironies of their calls negated whatever it was they could say about me because I would soon no longer exist.

Accepting this, I turned around to face the house.

With great reluctance, I opened the back door and let myself in, walking through the dark hall that led to the kitchen and Robert's room. I tried to keep my head clear, and keep my heart from jumping out of my chest with nervousness so that he wouldn't come to the conclusion that something was

wrong. But, I also knew that this was Robert—he wasn't going to believe that simply because I wasn't rattled in some way that I was okay. If my thoughts didn't give me away, the way my hands shook, or the way my skin suddenly became clammy would.

I stopped in front of his door, barely able to control the shaking that had now begun to spread up my arms. I knew that behind the wooden panel was the only person whose life I valued above all others, as selfish as that sounds, and who valued mine so much so that he was risking not only his life but also his soul to keep me alive; I felt overwhelmingly unworthy of such sacrifice. There was no denying it now, no matter how I might have doubted it before. Robert loved me. That knowledge, the acceptance of that was enough to get me through anything.

But now I had the herculean task of trying to somehow convince him that there was no sense in putting off the inevitable anymore. He wasn't going to let me go that easily, no more than I was willing to let him. But when the cost of either of us living was the death of the other, there was no question that



between the two of us, the world wouldn't end if I were to die. I was merely one of billions, an insignificant blip. But the world couldn't lose him; his contribution, his calling was far too great. He was what gave life meaning--him continuing to live would give my death meaning.

And as committed as I was to this, I couldn't deny the part of me that screamed foul. I was being cheated out of the life I had always wanted. I had a family; a father who felt whole again after losing my mother, a little brother who would need someone to protect him from the bullies who would tease him for being related to me. I had a stepmother who tried to be what I needed, rather than what she thought I wanted. My best friend and I were closer than ever, and I had new friends who were just as much a part of my family as they could be.

And, more importantly, I had someone who wanted to be with me forever. It felt wholly unfair and I couldn't appreciate what lesson this was meant to teach me because all I was feeling was complete and utter despair.

And so I stood in front of Robert's room with

this weighing down on me like the world itself, trying to hide it with a determination that was waning with each passing moment. My weary eyes stared at his door; it was closed, no light peeking in from underneath--it was like a reminder that there was no hope for me now.

I steeled myself, silently promising to keep my emotions from taking over, to allow common sense and logic to win out any argument that he would throw at me because I knew, down to my bones, that it wouldn't take much for him to convince me to stay with him forever...

I took a deep breath, filling up my lungs to full capacity to prevent any excited utterances from escaping my lips, and I raised my hand to knock on the solid, wooden surface...only to find that the door had opened, Robert's chest now pressing up against my fist.

I looked at him, the words, the argument I had quickly put together in my head disappearing the instant I took in the haggard and forlorn expression that marred the beauty of his face. The lines that formed in the pucker between his brows

and the downward turn of his mouth were just mere glimpses of the turmoil that churned within him. He grabbed my wrist in his firm hand and yanked me inside, the door slamming shut behind me with an almost eerie finality.

"Do not do this," he whispered to me, his voice gravelly.

"There's nothing left to do, Robert," I replied with false stubbornness, biting my lip to keep it from quivering.

"There's everything left to do - I can get Graham back. I can keep your family safe."

"How?" I asked him desperately. "Even if all of that were possible, eventually the consequences of not answering your call would make things so dangerous for the both of us that Lark would separate us and I might never see you again. That's worse than either of us dying because we'll both know that the other is alive, and that we can't be with each other--I can't live with that. At least this way, I'll know that the people I love will be safe, I'll know that you'll still be alive, and you'll know that

nothing could hurt me anymore."

He shook his head at my words, tossing them from his memory like scattering dew from a shaking leaf. "Being alive without you would be no life at all. Existing merely to exist was what I spent the past fifteen hundred years doing--now that I know what living is, what loving you is, fifteen seconds without you would be unendurable."

"There's no other way," I said hopelessly, my entire body starting to shake from the sheer impact of feeling the time I had left with him growing shorter and shorter with each second that ticked by. "I can't allow you and Lark to grow to hate each other because of me. I can't allow my family to end up getting picked off one by one just so I can continue to count the days until you're gone, too. I can't live with that, Robert."

Robert gathered me into his arms and held me against him, my stomach twisting and rolling like a disturbed shoreline whose waves were crashing onto the shore as I inhaled his scent of leather and sweetness, never wanting to leave the enclave that kept me safe from everything but myself. He began

to rub my back with slow, languid strokes, and the shaking turned to shivers when his breath tickled my ear as he bent his head down to whisper soft words of love and regret, heartbreak and unfulfilled dreams.

I felt my eyes fill with the tears that I had silently promised myself I wouldn't shed. There was so much left to do, so much left to see and say and the fact that there simply wasn't enough time in the world for any of it only made things worse.

"There's time," he insisted, hearing my fears as though I had shouted them out loud. "There's time for everything."

"Time for what? I don't know when Lark is going to come back, but she will and...I'm afraid that when she does, I won't want to leave you."

It was as honest as anything I've ever said to him. He knew it and it broke the both of us, knowing that the next time we separated, it would be forever.

"I can't let you do this," he said firmly, his arms tightening around me, my heart thudding in my chest so violently, it felt like a desperate animal

trying to claw through to his own silent one. I smiled sadly as I thought of the lyrics to the song I associated with him, with how I felt about him. How true it was that my heart beat for only him.

"Grace, don't do this. Stay with me--be with me."

I raised my head, the sudden stillness in my breathing taking away any words I might have otherwise been able to say in response.

"Be with me, Grace. Damn the consequences, damn the Seraphim, the rules, damn everything. We may not have been meant to be together, but we're here together now. We've wasted too much time already--I've wasted too much time." He pulled away from me just long enough to swiftly remove his soft grey shirt, the buttons popping off and scattering around our feet as he did so.

"I've denied this to the both of us because I didn't want to do anything that would hurt you. I didn't want to give anyone else any further reason to harm you, but there's no purpose, no point in abstaining any longer if you're not even going to fight to live. I

want to be with you, Grace. I want to hold you and love you--please."

The blood in my body screamed at the sight of him, my hands splayed on his bare chest, gently resting there as he pulled me back against him. His skin was just as perfect, just as smooth and taut as I knew it would be, warm and firm beneath my itching fingertips. I had never taken the time to appreciate what he looked like when he had given his shirt to me at the hospital, and I knew now that had I, I might have never left.

"Should I feel threatened by that?" he chuckled softly as he covered my hands with his own. His smile faded when he noticed that one hand was held directly over his heart, the unmoving flesh beneath my palm contrasting quite pointedly with the soft pulse that echoed down to his. "Does it bother you?"

I shook my head and leaned my face in closer, pressing a warm kiss to the spot that contained the most precious thing this earth held for me. "I only wish mine could beat for you forever."

I raised my head suddenly and looked at him with a steely determination. There was something I wanted, something that I knew I had to do in order to ensure that my plans weren't fruitless.

"I want to turn. I want to do it now. If for nothing else, so that you know that I wanted to spend forever with you."

His hands left my own with startling speed, moving up to embrace my face so lovingly, so gently it nearly broke my heart. He wove his fingers into my hair as he brought my forehead to his, our breathing quickening as our thoughts mingled. *I've waited a lifetime to hear those words.*

*I've waited a lifetime to say them.*

He smiled at me, a slow, lazy, pleased smile that did things to the insides of me, and I fought very hard to keep from changing my mind and telling him that we could wait for that, too. He chuckled at my runaway thoughts and without another word, pulled me into his arms and lifted my feet off of the ground, swinging my legs into the crook of one strong arm while my back rested against the other.



I looped my own arms around his neck, securing them with a knot of my fingers, and watched with the same unyielding awe I always felt. The black plumes swallowed up every color around us, returning it to anything that had the privilege in a dark, rainbow sheen as they unfurled from his naked back, the muscles that strained and tightened as the two massive, feathered limbs pulled away from his flesh, stretching and filling the room. They soon blocked out any light that streamed through the wall of windows that stood directly behind us.

"Where are we going?" I asked as he moved towards one of the large windows and kicked it open.

"To the one place where we won't be disturbed," he replied before the house, the ground, and my life as I knew it was left behind us.



## IN A FOREST FILLED WITH EYES

I hadn't thought about this place since I had learned the truth about my mother's death. The wooded area that surrounded most of the field at Robert's family retreat held dark memories for me. Even in the light of midmorning, I couldn't shake the miserable feelings that clawed at me like desperate weeds, yearning to have just one more seed of doubt plant itself into my mind.

Robert did not let my feet touch the ground as he walked quickly through the quiet darkness that offered little in way of light, save for a hint of sunlight every few dozen trees or so. I instantly recognized the spot where Lark had received her wings, the joy of such a momentous event overshadowed by the fact that it had been me who was her wing-bringer, and not Graham or Stacy.

This was also where I had learned the truth about my mother's death; where I learned that I wasn't supposed to have survived that accident at all. Soon, it was behind us, the trees and the brush becoming denser, the ground softer as we moved

deeper into the darkness of the canopy.

"Bala," Robert called out when we stopped moving and lowered me carefully to the ground. I shivered as the name brought back the vividly terrifying images of the green, plant-like woman with the jet black eyes and the moss-like hair. "Bala, I know you're here."

A snickering sound came from the trunk of what looked like an ancient willow, its branches, heavy with leaves, hung down over us like an umbrella. The bark on the impossibly wide trunk was nearly invisible beneath a blanket of moss that clung to it like a second skin. Straggled ferns jutted out from the twisted and knotted base, looking like missed feathers on a plucked chicken, and tiny blossoms were scattered all over the moss, like tiny, petaled stars.

There were several areas of darkness on the tree, holes where animals or insects burrowed to escape the deluge of rain or snow that would have undoubtedly blanketed this area with unnecessary moisture. It was then that I realized that we had approached the edge of a small lake. The lower

hanging leaves gently skimmed the still water and I shivered at its liquid darkness.

The snickering grew louder and I returned my focus to the tree, blinking several times before my eyes could focus on two dark spots in the tree, spaced apart just so that they gave the tree the appearance of having eyes.

And then those eyes blinked.

"Holy crap!" I yelped, stumbling back into Robert's arms.

"It's okay," he said to me reassuringly. "Bala's not dangerous."

"So you'd like to think," a raspy, almost sultry voice laughed from deep within the tree itself.

The tree began to vibrate, the leaves and branches above our heads swaying gently as the eyes that blinked grew defined, the bark that surrounded them grew smooth, taut. A shape began to emerge, pulling away from the trunk of the twisted tree; low hanging branches smoothed out to form long, lithe arms. Moss pulled away from the bark to become the hair that quickly moved to cover the

torso and waist of the woman that now stood in front of me, the flowers that still clung to her now opening and closing with each rise and fall of her chest. She moved towards me as though she were floating on the leaves, fluid and graceful despite the thick foliage that rested beneath her.

"Aren't you glad to see me, little Grace?" she asked me. The way she said my name caused tremors to run down my arm, and I couldn't do anything but stare at her, too frightened to respond.

"How she trembles, your Grace who stared down an Erlking," she laughed. Her hand reached out to touch my cheek and her coal black eyes closed with a sigh. "So warm, so soft.

I, in turn, flinched at the cold, clammy feel of hers. She didn't miss this. "I'm sorry that I am not pleasing to you. I was once like you, you know. My skin was just as soft, just as warm as yours."

"I don't understand," I began, looking at her features and wondering how it was possible that someone who looked like she did could have once been human.

"Of course you don't, child. You've lived in your own little world, where I'm but a fairy tale, a story in a book that you only read when you have nothing else better to do. But my life is no fairy tale. Unlike you, I didn't ask to be turned."

I turned a surprised glance to Robert, whose grim expression told me in wordless terms that such things were possible. I returned to look at Bala, her face now a mixture of anger and sadness, and asked her what happened.

The emotions on her face were quickly replaced with pleasure, the comical smile that pulled up the corners of her mouth almost as beautiful as it was frightening. Almost.

"It has been so long since someone has asked me that. And you ask me because you genuinely want to know--how rare in a human to be so concerned. Let's sit." She grabbed my hand and pulled me down towards the ground.

I stumbled, unwilling to sit in the muddy ground beneath my feet but powerless against the unnatural strength that Bala possessed. Before I fell, however, an unearthed root rose to meet me,

bending to cradle me like no chair ever could. I watched, fascinated as another root rose from beneath Bala's feet to form a seat for her, a rather crude one that looked more like a rough hewn barstool, but she relaxed in it as though it were the softest leather chair.

Robert, bemused by the scene before him, simply stood behind me, one hand resting on my shoulder reassuringly, the other playfully running through my hair.

"I haven't told this story in so long, I don't know how to begin it," Bala said to me with a laugh, and I felt the vibrations of her laughter in the root that perched beneath me.

"I lived in a small cottage at the edge of a wooded area with my family. I was sixteen, ready for marriage, ready for a family. My two oldest sisters had already married and borne babes, and my two younger sisters were both betrothed. I was the only one without a match, the one destined to care for my parents until their deaths, so you can imagine how I felt when I first saw *him*.



"He approached me when I was alone fetching water. I felt...drawn to him, like ants to honey. He was like a god, a god who dropped down from the sky just for me. I would have gone anywhere with him. And I did. I followed until we were so deep into the trees that day had died, and night had taken over.

"And then he said to me 'because I have found you amongst the trees, this is how you will always be remembered'. I thought those words were the most beautiful ever spoken. His voice filled me with joy and with hope.

"He kissed me, my first kiss, and it was like it invaded my mind, filled my head with so many thoughts I became lost in them. I was so lost, that I couldn't find my way out of them; I fell out of that world and woke up in this one. I tried to walk home, but I couldn't move further than a few feet. It was like I had been tied to something, something heavy and unmoving. And though it was dark, I could still see everything as though the world was filled with nothing but light. I saw that there was no binding on me, and again tried to walk home, but my feet were

rooted to the ground.

"Only then did I notice that my skin had changed. What used to be the same shade as thin clay had become the color of the muddy grass, and the hair that I had kept covered beneath cloth, like my mother and sisters did, was loose and hanging around me, longer than it should have been. I screamed when I saw that it wasn't dark, like my mother's, but green like moss, and thick like it, too. It moved as though it was alive, and I fell into the sleep of the dead.

"When I awoke the second time, the sun was rising. I could hear the calls of my father and I called out to him, helping him find me. When he saw me, he began to curse me, told me that I was not his daughter, that I was some kind of monster who had eaten her. He ran away, frightened by what he saw. I waited for him to return--three times the sun rose and set before he finally did, and when I heard his approach, I stood up to see that he was holding an axe in his hand.

"He hadn't returned to save me. He had returned to kill me. I turned to escape, running

between trees and shadows until I felt myself being pulled towards a large tree. It seemed to be calling to me, whispering my name. I ran to it and hid behind it. My father passed by, looking possessed. I was so frightened, my body was shaking. I didn't know then that I wasn't hiding behind the tree, but rather inside of it, and that my emotions traveled through the tree, my fear becoming its own, rattling its branches and leaves.

"My father saw this, saw this large, quaking tree and he fled back home, dropping the axe on the ground as he left. It was the last time I ever saw him, the last time I saw anyone for a long while. I didn't leave the safety of the tree at all, convinced that I had committed some grave sin by following that stranger, by allowing that kiss, and that this was my eternal punishment.

"That is, until one day I saw a beautiful woman walking by. She was magnificent, with dark hair and glowing skin, and she was singing the most beautiful song. I couldn't understand the words but I knew that I was meant to speak to her, and that she wouldn't run away.

"But she already knew. She came to my tree, held out her hand without even seeing me. Her smile was so warm, so friendly, so accepting, and I cried. I wept like a newborn as I left the safety of the tree that had protected me for so long, and she held me like a mother would her own child, allowing me my grief. She said to me 'I have seen your past and I weep for you, too' and she did.

"Afterward, she revealed that she was an angel, and that one of her own had changed me. She called it 'turning'. She explained to me what it meant for me. She could see the limitations I had, and see what I was capable of--all of the things I had never considered, never thought to consider because I had resigned myself to forever being lost in my tree--and she helped me to understand them and use them to my advantage.

"My tree is not just my home, it is my heart. Harm my tree and you, in turn, harm me. I can only travel as far as my roots have grown, which was why I couldn't run away when my father found me--my tree was still rather young, its roots only going several feet into the ground.

"I asked her why she was helping me. She said it was because free will is so precious to them, she did not believe that anyone should have it taken from them. When she left me, she promised to return whenever I needed her help. I did not believe her.

"Then came the fire."

Bala's eyes, already darker than coal, deepened. "I had thought that my father had never spoken of me again after that day in the woods, that he had simply pretended that I had never existed. But one day, children began to come into my forest. They were looking for the 'tree woman', tapping the trees to see which held the person who filled their nightmares. Their quest soon turned violent, and their attack on a dead tree caused it to topple onto one of them.

"The others fled, leaving the young boy pinned beneath old trunk I lifted it off of him, but it was too late. He was so young, not long past a babe. I moved him towards the edge of the tree line so that his family could retrieve him and thought that would be the end of it, but the children who hadn't

been hurt...they told tales of blame. That the boy's body would end up at the edge of the woods only proved their tales true.

"The villagers were angry, superstition controlling every decision, every fear, and so they reacted violently, at first chopping down the trees that framed the woods themselves. When one villager's carelessness caused a tree to fall onto another man, I was blamed for that as well. The villagers decided then to set fire to the entire forest.

"I couldn't escape; my fears of being in hell had finally been realized. The animals that had lived beside me fled, I could hear the cries of pain from the trees that surrounded me. My death was so close, I could do nothing but embrace it. And then, like Heaven itself had opened her doors to me, the angel returned..

"She told me to retreat into my tree and remain still as death. I had to make a decision then to trust her or to die in the fire that was so close, the tips of my leaves were turning brown from the heat. The pain from that alone was nearly unbearable and I knew I would do anything to escape that torture. I

did as I was told and closed my eyes to the world as the digging started.

"It took only minutes for her to unearth my roots. I had pulled them in as close as possible, away from the scorching heat of the fire that was just feet away. And then there was no soil around me, no soil beneath me. I was as vulnerable as I had ever been, the danger to my life more palpable than even the fire.

"I don't know how long it was that we were moving--it felt like we were chasing the sun across the sky because the warmth of it never seemed to die out--but finally I recognized the cool, familiar embrace of soil, rich with delicious things for my starved body.

"My roots--oh they were so tired and cramped from being pulled up--stretched out into the loose earth until I was firmly seated in my new home. The angel told me that this was her forest, and that I would be safe here. I allowed myself to open my eyes and found myself here, in this place of immense solitude and beauty.

"But I was weak, almost too weak to

appreciate the great lengths to which the angel had gone to bring me here, to save me. She brought her son to me, a companion who would keep me company while I mended she said. He told me about how the world had changed since I had been turned, how many centuries had gone by, and how the world had changed. I wept for the joy and the sadness of it, and I wept for the loss of my home."

"Where *did* you call home?" I asked, speaking for the first time since she began her story.

"Greece."

"So you're the reason we have those myths about nymphs."

"They are not myths! They are real. You can see that now."

She stood then, her hair moving to shield her nakedness as she moved towards me, never truly walking though her body undulated as though she were. She took my hand and I fought against the recoil that came from the shock of such cold, clammy skin.



"I talk so much--I did not ask why you are here." She looked to Robert, her height equal to his so that they were at eye level. "You did not bring your Grace here to hear about me, N'Uriel, so tell me now why you have come. Another lesson in fear, perhaps?"

Robert shook his head. "Grace has asked to be turned. I've brought her here to keep from being disturbed. I wanted you to help ensure that."

A light of recognition flashed in Bala's eyes and I watched, fascinated as the two of them began to speak to each other, her in her own Grecian language, while Robert through his thoughts. It was such a surreal image: this tree-like woman, freakishly beautiful and otherworldly speaking so casually to this dark angel of mine, with wings that towered above him. How did I get to this point, where seeing such things no longer depended on the depths of my imagination but rather the lengths to which I'd allow my own eyes to see.

With a few curt nods and a small smile directed at me, Bala began to retreat towards her tree, the root I was sitting on gently lifting me to my

feet and disappearing beneath the soil. Soon she was gone, lost in the tree once more, the dark spots that I recognized as her eyes invisible to me now.

"Was that real? I mean, I saw it, I spoke to her and felt her, but was all of that real?" I asked in disbelief.

"As real as I am," Robert answered with a wry smile.

"So..." I said, my voice trailing off as I struggled to find the right words to ask what was next. "What now?"

"We wait," he said simply.

I nodded with limited understanding, and decided to look around us, walking towards the water's edge as whatever it was that he and Bala had discussed came to be.

The water was still, strangely unmoving as it touched the odd, peachy soil. I peered in, expecting to see the murky brown of a shallow bottom. Instead I stood amazed at the clarity of the almost emerald green water that reflected the tree and sky that hung above it. "What makes the water so green?"

"The water's full of salt and other minerals--my mother made this lake for Bala so that she'd always have something to remind her of her home--this is as close as one can get to the beaches of Greece in Ohio, I'm afraid."

I knelt down, my hand reaching out to skim the water and finding it unusually warm. "Is it supposed to be this temperature?"

"Yes, although it's about to get much warmer."

"Wha...?"

True to his word, the water began to warm quite rapidly. I removed my fingers just before steam began to float on the surface, and jumped backwards when the water roared to life in a full boil.

"Stay back," Robert said, pulling me behind him as the water began to rush up.

"What's going on?" My voice was tense, and I winced as splashes of sizzling hot water landed on my jeans, soaking through to burn my skin.

"Dammit," he cursed before turning around and lifting me off of the ground, his wings closing in around us, shielding us from the growing waves of blistering liquid. I shook with fear at the sound of water splashing and rolling beneath us, my leg throbbing as the fabric of my jeans began to stick to my scorched skin.

"What's going on, Robert? Why is the water boiling?" I shouted through gritted teeth, reaching for my leg to lessen the pain somehow.

"Bala's expending a lot of energy right now--it's causing the water to superheat. It'll be over soon, just a few more minutes."

I didn't know what was worse, the pain in my leg or the fear that at any minute, scalding hot water was going to seep through the dark feathers and melt away what was left of it. I focused on the soft glow that came through Robert's skin, the color a muted blue turning everything violet--whatever was going on outside of the safety of his wings was pleasing him.

Finally the rumbling ceased, the water having calmed down. Slowly, Robert eased his wings

apart. He lowered me gently to the ground, careful of my now blistering leg, and I exclaimed quite loudly, "Holy crap!"

The lake had calmed down considerably, though the surface still rippled as millions of tiny bubbles burst through, but the water was no longer a brilliant green. An island that had not been there moments earlier now floated at its center like a crown, its bank lined with trees so tightly grown together that they weaved into a dense wall of bark and leaves, their tops bowing in at such a sharp angle, I was certain no light could pass through.

A curtain of silvery moss, dripping with muddy water, lifted as though it were being pulled away, revealing a narrow entrance, what lay beyond it dark and foreboding.

"What is that?" I breathed as I limped closer.

"Sanctuary."

"What?"

"It's where angels come to be alone. Once inside, no one else can enter until we leave, and no one but those that live here may enter."

"But you don't live here," I reminded him.

He chuckled and shook his head as he lifted me into his arms, floating the short distance to the island. "Not anymore. But at one time, this was where we lived. The simplicity of the trees and the sky was all we needed; we had no humans to fool, no false lives to live here. It was the only place that ever truly felt like home. You're the only person I have ever brought here.

I hobbled towards the moss curtain, my shoes sticking in the wet surface of the soil. "Why?"

"Because now I know that home can be more than just a place. It can also be a person, a heart. I've found my home in you. And this is the last part of me that I've kept from you."

"But why turn me here?"

His mouth turned down at the corners, the frown disconcerting. "Because each person is different. When a human is turned without permission, the results are almost always disastrous, but the actual turning feels like sleep. It's that ease of transition that makes it so desirable to

those who do not understand the consequences.

"When a human is turned with the blessings of the Seraphim, however, the transition is powerful, almost violent. If you remain awake through it all, you will feel surges of strength through your body that you won't be able to control as your human self dies and your immortal self is born.

"I want to protect you as much as you'll let me, Grace--if this is what you truly want."

I looked at the dark opening and then into the silver light of Robert's eyes. I knew that my path lay with him, no matter where it led, and so I offered him my hand, sighing when he took it gladly and followed him past the moss curtain. As always, currents of feeling, emotion, and thought ran through us, the connection between us only growing stronger as our time together grew shorter.

Robert's face grew pained as he heard my thoughts, and it hurt me to see that. I didn't want to cause him any pain--it was why I had chosen this. I just couldn't deny the fact that it didn't matter what my decision was; someone was going to end up

losing everything, and the consequences would be great.

As Robert slowly pulled me into the darkness of the trees, I stopped for one moment to take a last look at the world that I had known as a human for the past eighteen years. I stared at the sky, the sun heading ever westward, afternoon slowly approaching dusk. Would it look different when I returned? Would it look more brilliant than it already did? I gazed at the ordinary looking willow tree, with its leaves hanging low over the water, the gnarled trunk seeming so normal, never giving a hint as to what lay just beneath its bark. Would Bala look at me differently after today, knowing that I was choosing the same path she had been forced on? Would I even see her again?

"Robert, why did Bala leave?"

"She is the only one who can raise the sanctuary--its place is deep within the floor of the lake, held there by her roots--and in order to do that, she needs to remain with her tree. It requires an enormous amount of strength, and she's strongest when she's within the tree itself."



"But it's here now. Why hasn't she come out? I was actually starting to like her."

"She's keeping the eyes of the forest turned away," he replied.

"She's what?"

He stepped out of the shadows to point to the darkness of the woods in front of us. "You remember I told you that there are things out there that you've never seen, things that can be very dangerous?" When I nodded he continued.

"This is my family's land, but there are things here that are uninvited or remain here because they have nowhere else to go and they blame your kind for that. Bala is keeping the eyes of the forest turned away from us so that they do not see how vulnerable you are--now, more than ever, you carry the smell of death on you, Grace--"

"But I like your smell," I said softly, inhaling deeply to emphasize my point.

"Not that smell," he said, brushing his palm against my cheek. "You've chosen to die, which changes your very makeup, alters the way you smell

to those who seek it out. Bala is keeping the creatures of the woods from finding you, though they can smell you near. Doing so keeps their thoughts free of you, and as such, free from invasion by Sam. If he cannot find you in the thoughts of others, he cannot find you."

I couldn't have imagined ever being grateful to a tree for keeping me safe, even if only for a little while longer, but I sent out a silent prayer of thanks to Bala. She never asked to be turned, never wanted the life that she now had, and yet she didn't hate the very people who had caused her to lose so much. Instead, she was helping them, and in turn helping me.

It was very humbling.

Robert tugged gently at my hand and with one last look, I turned to follow him into the darkness, my footsteps steady though my leg throbbed immensely.

We had only gone in a few feet when the wall of trees seemed to groan around us, swallowing us in a crush of darkness and the scent of earth and

greenery. The lack of light added to the growing fear inside of me as the groans turned into a long, loud rumbling. The curtain of moss fell behind us, cutting off the outside world.

In the pitch black, I fell into a state of panic. I could almost hear my heart as it galloped inside of my chest that now felt as closed in as I was. My hands groped around in the darkness, looking for something familiar and reassuring.

"It's okay, Grace," Robert said in a gentle tone. The soft light that flowed through him was a slightly opaque orange, just bright enough for me to see his amused smile. He filled my desperate hands with one of his and pulled me up against his side, holding me with a possessive authority I'd never felt before. I heard a muffled clicking sound before a diffused white light broke through to my side, revealing tiny curls of plant life that grazed my arm as we moved further into the center of the island.

"How'd you do that?" I asked in amazement.

"How'd I do what?"

"Create that light," I replied, my hand pointing to a round, muted glow that seemed to come straight through the bark.

He laughed at that. "Some double-a batteries and a dome light that I bought at the dollar store next to the theater. They sell them in three packs--quite a good deal if you ask me." He proceeded to pull me along, pressing down on the white rounded covers of several more lights, eventually giving the small clearing an almost dreamlike haze of brightness.

He turned to face me then, his eyes sparkling with hope, and then he spoke. "Are you ready?"



## MELDING

I knew the answer to the question. I did. I just couldn't say it.

"I understand if you're nervous. I'm nervous, too. I've never done this before."

"I would hope not," I said with nervous laughter.

"Come," he said to me, his expression serious now. He knelt down and took a hold of my ankle with one tender hand, warmth radiating through his palm and up my leg, easing the pain that shot through me. With one swift movement, he tore the leg of my jeans in half with the other hand, the rip climbing to my thigh, exposing the blistered and melted flesh that covered my lower leg.

"It's not healing as quickly as it should," he mumbled, placing his now free hand on the wound itself, the heat from inside of me dancing in warm streams with the heat that generated from his hand.

"Does it need to be healed?" I asked, knowing that this was taking up precious time, time

that we did not have.

"Yes. If we do this while you are injured, the injury could have a hold on you forever."

"But," I began, looking at him sadly, "I'm not going to be here forever."

His head lowered and I heard his teeth gnash in frustration as he battled against the truth of my words.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, hating myself for hurting him. He stood up gruffly and gripped my shoulders, shaking them as roughly as he dared, the hard, etched lines in his face telling me of the torment that lay inside of him. No matter where we were, the harsh realities still existed outside, waiting for us, waiting for me.

"Don't apologize for anything, Grace. You aren't at fault here. If I had been stronger, or had left you alone from the beginning, maybe none of this would have happened."

My eyes popped open wide at what he was saying. "Why would you say that? Why would you say such a thing? If you had left me alone--do you

think that my life would have been any better had you not been in it, that I would have been as happy?"

"I know it would have."

"Why? Because I would have lived a long life? Because I'd end up with Graham and we'd die an old married couple, alone in our bed with no children, no family, and with you dying anyway? Is that what you call better? That's not the life I want, it never was. I'd rather die tomorrow having spent the past eight months with you, than live to be a thousand, never knowing you even existed. Even if we had never met, I would have missed you."

He stared at me in shock, the image I conjured in his head a direct and accurate description of the dream I'd had shortly after we had broken up.

"That was no dream, Grace. What you just described was a possibility, a prediction of what could have happened had I not followed the path I was on. I have never shared that with anyone; how did you see this?"



I didn't get a chance to answer. His hands left my shoulders, instead filling his palms with the sides of my face, pulling me towards his own as he bent down to press his smooth forehead against mine.

Instantly the thoughts began to swirl around in my mind. He sifted through the visions that drifted there. The memories that still stung with their bitterness; the thoughts that filled up endless corners with fear; the dreams that had plagued me and haunted me from the moment I realized that I could lose Robert. It was all darkness and black hope.

And then he saw something unexpected, something that shocked him, and I felt his body jerk in response. He delved deeper into my thoughts, searching, his body twitching and seizing with each thing that he found.

And then he tore himself away from me, a hand pressed against his head like he was staving off the bleeding of a wound, his eyes wide and full of astonishment.

*I don't know why I didn't see it before.*

"See what?"

He grabbed my hand and the memory of what seemed like a lifetime ago began to play in my mind like a miniature movie. The two of us were sitting on a bench, his hand securely holding onto mine, a strange, pleased smile on his face, and I was staring at our clasped hands curiously, shocked that such a thing was even happening. And then the flood of thoughts came flowing into my head from that touch like a broken faucet, filling it up with untold amounts of information, things that had made no sense to me, things that had no place in my waking state because they were things that I could never see happening, never believe possible.

They were his thoughts, his dreams, his visions, all bombarding my mind like soldiers storming a beach and taking control, my own memories retreating in defeat. My head had throbbed because of that, because of how much had been flowing in and filling me, stretching my mind in ways that seemed impossible. I had passed out as a result, and I realized that the vision I was

seeing wasn't mine but rather Robert's because though I lay limp in his lap, blood pouring out of my nose at an unhealthy rate, the view was still focused on me.

He quickly tore a strip of fabric off of his shirt--I never realized that the cloth that had been used to wipe the blood off of me had been a part of the shirt he had worn that day--and began to clean me up as best he could. He touched my hair and stroked a still cheek with an errant finger, a smile forming on his lips that caused my stomach to tumble inside of me.

But then his face grew confused, anxious, his body tensing up at something he had expected to happen, yet hadn't. His hand moved to the back of my head and he pressed his palm there, his other hand coming to press up against my forehead. Minutes passed without a single movement from him--not a twitch or a blink--he had stopped pretending to breathe, stopped blinking, looking for all the world like a life-like statue who just so happened to have a comatose girl bleeding in his lap.

A flicker in his silver eyes was the only sign that something had begun, and with a sigh, he relaxed. Whatever it was he had been waiting for had obviously happened.

"What was it?" I breathed, still trying to recover from that slow smile that had crossed his mouth. "What were you waiting for?"

*When my thoughts overtook your own and caused you to lose consciousness, they stayed in your head far longer than they should have. In doing so, they became burned into your mind as though you had lived through them, experienced them yourself. I did not think it was possible. The power of suggestion is one thing, but my visions became your dreams, your memories.*

His eyes twinkled as he spoke to me, realization and recognition dawning on him like the sun itself. *Grace, do you see what's happened? You've taken possession of some of my own thoughts and now see them as your own. You have a piece of me inside of you.*

He grinned at me like a fool, as though I had

just won the mental jackpot or something. He laughed at my thoughts and yanked my hand, my body effectively colliding with his painfully. But I ignored the pain--forgot it completely, even--when his lips crashed down onto mine.

It was easy to forget everything right then and there. With the outside world far away from us, and the security of knowing that no one else knew where we were, Robert's mouth became insistent. He kissed the corners of my mouth before seeking the curve of my jaw, trailing alternating kisses and nibbling bites down to its apex, and then pressing his now warm lips against my pulse as it beat erratically just beneath my skin.

My hands moved on their own to burrow into his hair, the silky strands sliding through my fingers and turning the nerves there into miniature exploding firecrackers. I bit my lip when I felt his mouth open, hot against my throat, and stifled a moan when the wet tip of his tongue licked at the racing beat that chased after the one in my chest.

I was very close to giving in to the feelings that made my blood boil beneath my skin,

especially when my hands moved down and came into contact with the bare skin of his back, feeling the muscles there straining as he, too, fought to maintain some sort of control. I heard the sound of ripping fabric, and felt his hands and then his lips against my shoulder, every rational thought suddenly replaced with want, need, fire.

My breathing was quick and shallow, the dizzying lack of oxygen turning me into a willing zombie, and I knew that if things didn't stop now, they never would.

It hurt--oh, dear God, it hurt--but I managed to breathe out the word "stop" several times before it was loud enough for both of us to hear, and we pulled apart. Robert's body was shaking--or was that mine?--with the intense desire to keep going, his eyes dilated with hunger. I could see my reflection in them, and saw that my irises were almost overtaken by the black of my pupils as well, my chest rising and falling violently as I tried to control my breathing, my body turning against me in frustration.

Robert looked at me with rueful

understanding but his hands were still holding onto my arms, and I did not protest when he pulled me back to him, my stuttering heart slamming against my ribs, the vibrations thundering straight on through to his. "It's time," he whispered raggedly, his breath blowing across my face in sweet waves.

"T-time for what?" I panted, not realizing how difficult this was going to be.

"I have to turn you...now, otherwise it won't happen at all."

"W-why?" I sputtered.

"Because I'm barely hanging on here, Grace--I'm not capable of stopping again, I don't have the strength or the willpower anymore. I don't *want* to anymore. I'm losing control here and if I don't focus on doing this, we might both be sorry."

I understood, down to the marrow in my bones, what that meant, and I blushed profusely. Nodding, I placed my hands in front of me, pressing them against his chest and closing my eyes to the sight. "Okay."

A sigh a long time in coming escaped his

lips as he brought me as close as physically possible to his body. He pulled my head beneath his chin and showered the top of my hair with gentle kisses, each one followed by words of encouragement, love, and promises that we both knew could never be kept.

I wrapped my hands around his waist, my arms grazing against the wings that he had not retracted, the buttery soft texture of the dark feathers tickling me. I pressed a quick kiss to the hollow in his throat and vowed silently to never stop loving this man, no matter what happened from this moment on.

Robert began to hum. It was a low sound, something that I would have missed had we been anywhere else but here. My eyes flew open and I watched as the walls around us began to vibrate, though no soil fell, and the web of roots that crisscrossed across them did not shudder or shake. The humming grew louder and the vibrations grew stronger, turning everything into blurry replicas of what they were. The lights that Robert had turned on looked like they were dancing against the dark



walls, resembling small moons in a nighttime sky.

My body, still warm from Robert's kisses, began to heat up again. It wasn't an uncomfortable heat at first, but the level of discomfort quickly increased when my clothes began to grow damp as it wicked away the moisture that formed against my skin.

The parts of me that touched Robert were heating up at a rapid pace, the burn on my leg making it feel like it had been doused in lighter fluid and set ablaze, but I did not scream because despite the pain, I did not feel the urge to. It was as though the pain was an afterthought, a distraction from my true goal.

I became aware that the vibrations that had seemingly been surrounding me were actually coming from within me, the humming I had believed to be coming from Robert, actually coming from deep inside of me, numbing me. As the vibrations increased in speed, the humming did so in pitch until the sound was deafening, a high, piercing sound that dug at my mind like nails on a blackboard.

My eyes began to strain as the light in the room started to grow increasingly brighter. I winced at the combination of sensory attacks and squinted when I realized that the dome lights that were perched in the wall were now becoming dark spots in the immense, white glare that blocked out everything--like a curtain being pulled over my eyes--I couldn't even see Robert anymore.

As if there was no Robert.

Gasping, I realized that my arms were empty, my hands reaching out in the middle of a vast white emptiness to grasp at nothing but air.

The vibrations had stopped, the humming disappearing along with it.

"Robert?" I called out, flinching as my voice returned to me in a screechy echo, perverting the name that meant the world to me.

"Robert?" I said again, this time my voice firmer, the resulting echo that bounced back sounding weaker, sillier.

"Well, isn't this just great," I mumbled to myself as I turned around, the view never changing

no matter where I looked.

"So you've chosen to turn after all."

A jolt ran through my body at the voice.

"You know you're only doing this because you want to save Graham."

I spun around on my heels, wanting to catch the person who was speaking to me in this room full of nothing.

"Would you have made the same choice had none of this happened?"

I covered my ears with my hands and began to sing loudly, trying to drown out the voice that still found its way inside of my thoughts,

*Would he have made the same choice for you?*

"Ugh--would you stop it already?" I shouted into the endless light.

"Well...would he?"

She stood in front me, her face exactly the same as it had been the last time she had come to

me this way. Her thick, black hair hung loose around her shoulders, and she wore a simple white cotton dress. She smiled and nodded towards me. I looked down and groaned inwardly.

"Did I need to wear one, too?"

"Do you not like it? It looks just like mine--a matching mother-daughter set."

"Look, you haven't exactly been around the past eleven years so you don't really know, but I don't like dresses. I don't think I ever did. And if this is a dream, and if this is my dream, then I think I should be wearing what I normally wear."

She waved her hand at me with little care. "Girls should wear dresses. It's not feminine to wear jeans and t-shirts all of the time."

"Mom, I'll wear what I want, okay? Besides, you're just a figment of my imagination."

"Am I?"

I looked around and nodded. "The last time you came to me like this, I was passed out cold on the ground. What else could you be but the

workings of an overstressed mind?"

She approached me with her hands on her hips, a bemused smile glued to her face. "Did you not forget what happened the last time? Was that the result of me being a figment of your imagination, or am I more than that?"

How could I forget about what had happened the last time? It was the beginning of the end for me. I just didn't know it.

"I told you to make a choice, then, didn't I? I told you to be careful about your decision, that it would affect generations to come."

I nodded, unable to look away from the disappointed expression that began to take shape in her forehead, pinching her brows together, turning the corners of her mouth down.

"You did not make the right decision, Grace."

"What do you mean I didn't make the right decision? What decision was I supposed to make? You didn't tell me that, you just said to be careful."

"Because I thought you would have chosen

to follow your heart. Instead you chose to follow your stubborn pride. You wasted so much time being angry and resentful and what did that gain you? You're about to give up everything you've fought for, everything you've ever wanted, and for what?"

I looked at her, incredulous that she did not know.

"For love. I love Robert. I love him in ways that seem impossible to me, but I do. And I don't, for one second, believe that I made the wrong choice. If I had simply forgiven him and forgotten everything, I would still be ignorant today about the sacrifices he's made for me, and I'd end up losing him. I can't do that, don't you see? I can't live without him. It took me leaving him to realize that, to realize that the reason for that is because I wasn't meant to be here to love him..

"That's the one thing that I cannot ignore above everything else. I'm supposed to have died with you. Everything that has happened since that night is a result of one colossal screw-up, and I can't let Dad, or Graham, or Robert, or anyone else die because of it. I love them too much."

Her eyes rolled in annoyance and I was taken aback by the gesture. "You've squandered precious time with Robert, and now that you have the opportunity to be with him in the way you want, you once again waste it, and for what? To turn? What does that accomplish? You'll live forever...until you let Sam kill you. It all seems pointless to me."

"It's not pointless," I argued. "It's not pointless because this means a lot to Robert. It'll also allow us to be together without risking his life. If I had listened to you, if I had somehow convinced him to forget the rules, he would have died."

"And you think that simply turning makes it okay? Did you forget what else was required of you, what Robert's mother told you that you needed to do in order to keep the wrath of the elders from coming down on the two of you?"

I sorted through the thoughts in my head and searched for the answer, a hopeless moan coming from deep within me when I found it.

"I have to commit to him, commit my life to him."

"And what does that mean, exactly?"

"It means I promise him to love him forever. I'm giving up my life for him; I think I've done the commitment thing, don't you?"

"You promise to love him forever. You're vowing to share the rest of your existence with him, vowing to love only him until death do you part. Does that sound familiar to you?"

I felt my face turn cold as the blood drained away. "No...it's not...no."

She nodded triumphantly upon my realization.

"But I haven't done that," I whispered.

"And it would be wrong."

I looked at her, flustered by her response. "Why would it be wrong?"

"Because you'd only be doing it to have sex, which is the worst reason possible. And because I don't approve of him as a son-in-law. He's put your life in danger, lied to you, and now you're planning on handing your life over to save his. The man who



deserves your hand should be willing to face the fire for you."

"But he's doing that right now. He's been risking his life from the moment he met me," I cried. "How can you not see that? He's risked everything for me."

"Has he? Has he really risked everything for you?"

I glared at her and nodded my head vigorously, her attack on Robert's integrity bringing on a defensive mood within me. "I don't doubt it for a second."

"But you did."

My mouth opened to refute her statement, but I couldn't. "That was different."

"Why? Because you didn't know about the true nature of his call? What's changed since then? Did the fact that he lied to you simply erase itself? No, it didn't."

"Why are you doing this? You're the one who wanted me to sleep with him. Why is it that when he

was lying to me, you wanted me to jump his bones, but now that the truth is finally out and I've made up my mind about everything, he's suddenly not good enough?"

She grabbed my arms with a strength that contradicted her diminutive size. "Because he exists only to kill you. You are not supposed to die. You *cannot* die, do you understand that?"

The look in her eyes was crazed. I wanted to pull away from her, to tell her that she was being ridiculous, but she was too strong. She began to shake me, my head wobbling back and forth from the violence.

"Let Robert die, let him sacrifice himself so that you may live. Another angel will take his place, just like he did. You're the one who is irreplaceable. Don't do this, Grace. Don't give in to dying. Don't give in to Death!"

With a ragged cry, I tore myself away from her, staggering away and falling in a heap onto the white floor. I could see myself reflected back at me in the shiny surface. Why hadn't I noticed that

before?

"I can't let him die. I don't know why, but I can't. I can't lose him--just the idea of it feels like I'm suffocating." My tears began to pool in my eyes, threatening to spill over at any moment. I wiped them away angrily as I threw an accusatory glance at her, her expression surly, her posture careless and apathetic. "You're supposed to be my mother; you're supposed to want to keep me from being hurt."

"And so in order to prove that to you, I'm supposed to tell you it's okay for you to commit suicide?"

"You're supposed to support me and trust my decisions. I'm not doing this because I'm some stupid, headstrong teenager who does everything based on how I'm feeling at the moment. If I were, I'd have been dead a long time ago and this entire conversation wouldn't be happening. None of this would be happening at all if it weren't for Robert."

My mother's lip curled back in a surprising snarl, anger marring her features, distorting them into something more frightening than real.

"And what has he given you except a delayed death sentence?"

I raised my chin defiantly, unwilling to let her break down my reasoning. "He's given me time."

"Time? What good is that when you now stand to lose everything?"

"It means everything! I got to make things right with Dad, and with Graham. I got to meet my baby brother, go on a date, and fall in love. You ask me what good is time--I wouldn't have anything to lose at all if I hadn't had any time to begin with."

I couldn't look at her anymore, her face rigid with obvious distaste at my argument. I stared down at the ground again, my heart heavy with the burden of knowing that my time was running out and I was stuck somewhere in my own subconscious arguing with my mother instead of being with Robert.

"I thought that seeing you again, being able to speak to you again would reassure me about what I was doing, that I was making the right choice," I said to her, my voice barely audible.

"Well, I'm glad that you've come to your senses and see that you aren't," she said behind me, her body looming over mine, casting no shadow.

I closed my eyes and sighed. "That's just it. You did, just not in the way that I thought. I stupidly imagined some kind of special, mother-daughter moment between us, but I forgot that you're not really my mother. You're just the last spark of a memory that died eleven years ago. I can't rely on you to help me through this because you're not real."

"How can you believe in angels and erlkings and other monsters but not your own mother? What is wrong with you?" Her hands grabbed at my shoulders to drag me up and my eyes flew open at the assault.

"Let me go!" I twisted away from her and fell, hard, onto my chest, my chin hitting the floor. I felt the metallic bite of blood filling my mouth, my tongue throbbing from having bitten it. Crimson drops fell onto the white, glossy surface and my hand came up to lips, swiping away what was left that

threatened to join the others.

My hand stilled when I saw my reflection.

I was staring down at myself, recognizing the awkward face that looked back. But the reflection of the woman who stood beside me was anything but...

The ebony hair was gone, in its stead a halo of gold locks, perfectly draped over a masculine shoulder. The umber eyes had vanished, replaced now with golden plates that sparkled with the joy of seeing my blood spilled once more.

"No," I breathed, not wanting to believe it. "It's not possible."

"What's not possible, Grace?"

My mother's voice. It was still her voice, though it was Sam's lips that spoke, and I turned to look at her, fighting against the fear that was multiplying within me.

"You didn't answer me, Grace. What's not possible?"

My eyes widened, and I closed my mouth

which had fallen open at the realization that he could not read my thoughts, not here in the deep recesses of my own subconscious.

It had been months since I had even bothered trying to keep my thoughts locked away from Robert or Lark, so to know that I was still able to protect myself in this manner reassured me, a small comfort but one that I clung to as I stared at the person who stood in front of me. My mother, formed from the few memories I had left of her that had not been lost to me, was nothing more than the gloss that covered the poisonous apple.

"I have to go," I said hurriedly, pushing myself to my feet, my hand smearing the blood on the floor, the deep red stain standing out like a warning.

"No! You can't leave yet. You have to promise me that you won't give yourself to Sam. Promise me, Grace!"

I looked into my mother's eyes and felt a twisting in my stomach as the golden flecks that danced in the warm chocolate of one eye began to increase in size, drowning out the deep brown until only it remained, hinting at what else lay just

beneath the surface. How I could have missed such a thing? I only knew that to promise such a thing to this monster was the last thing on earth I wanted to do.

"I'm not going to do that," I said defiantly. "I've already made a promise to myself that I'd make things right, and I will, whatever it takes."

"You don't know what you're doing here, Grace," she said to me with a growing rage in her voice.

"I know exactly what I'm doing. I'm fixing your mistake."

I felt a pull against me, like an invisible line that had been connected to me was being reeled in, and I waved as the light began to fade, the image of my mother's face with Sam's eyes becoming dimmer.

The pulling continued as the walls around me changed, and the weight of a chin pressed against the top of my head could be felt. My arms were still wrapped around Robert's waist, his chest still absorbing the unnaturally rapid pounding of my



heart.

"Robert?" I whispered, noticing that the humming had not returned, nor the vibrations.

"Grace? Are you okay?"

"How long have I been out?"

I felt his head lift off of mine and he pulled away from me slightly so he could look down at me, his eyes filled with confusion at my question. "What do you mean?"

"I mean how long have I been unconscious? Is it over? Is it done? Because if it is, I have to tell you something."

"We haven't even begun, Grace. I appreciate these distractions, I do, but if you keep talking, I'll never be able to turn you."

I looked at him in shock. "What do you mean? I passed out. You were humming and this whole place was shaking and-"

He shook his head, the confusion spreading to his forehead and mouth. "Grace, I just told you that we haven't even started. Nothing that you

described happened. What's going on?"

His hands clasped around my lower arms and pulled them away from his waist. He took my palms into his own and then looked at me with genuine concern. "Your hands are clammy, and your heart rate is dangerously fast. You're either about to faint or-"

I cut him off. "I told you, I already did. It feels like it's been hours...but, that can't be...can it?"

"What happened? Tell me everything," he insisted.

And so I did.

And then things went from bad to worse.



# THE ELEGANCE OF EMPTINESS

"You have to be absolutely certain about this, Grace."

"I'm positive. For whatever reason, Sam's pretending to be my mother. I don't know why I didn't see it that first time--my mother's eyes aren't that light, and she'd never have encouraged me to do the things that she did--but this time, everything was different."

Robert paced the floor, one hand scratching his head, the other hanging limply at his side, seemingly useless as he went over everything that I had told him, everything that I had showed him.

"If Sam's truly taken on the form of your mother in your mind, and he's now telling you to not give yourself over to him, then something has changed."

He stopped at the end of the small room, a small shiver running down the length of his wings, rainbows of colors shimmering off of the black feathers. He raised his limp arm, his elbow

swinging back before the entire arm launched forward, embedding itself into the soft, malleable soil.

Water began to trickle in around his forearm, turning the dirt floor to mud very quickly.

"We need to get back to the house--I need to speak to my mother. This has all gone too far."

He closed his eyes and the shadow of movement beneath his lids told me he was speaking to someone. I just didn't know who.

The trees began to vibrate with a tremendous amount of energy, leaves and twigs raining down on us with each rattle. Robert grabbed my hand and half-pulled, half-dragged me out of tiny forest, my feet stumbling to catch up and never quite managing to do so before they were no longer on the ground.

Robert had leapt, the motion far less smooth than usual, his arms holding on to me by my waist, leaving my feet dangling beneath me. I wrapped my arms around his neck and buried my face into his shoulder, the sights around us moving by too fast to

do anything but turn my stomach with dizziness.

He didn't say anything to me during the short flight and I fought against the urge to ask him if it was because he was too busy trying to figure out what had happened or if he was bothered by the fact that Sam had been inside my head and had taken over a part of it, tainting it somehow. I looked at him and waited for him to respond to my thoughts, thankful that I wouldn't have to voice the questions at all.

When he remained stoic, I frowned. Was the answer that bad? Did he really think me tainted, my mind defiled by Sam's infection of deceit?

I opened my mouth to tell him to answer me, but I couldn't. There wasn't enough time to do anything but brace myself for the landing that came then, rough and unyielding to my human body. My feet hit the ground and had barely enough time to right themselves when I was once again dragged through the front door, pulled into the living room that now held a concerned Ameila and...

"Dr. Ambrose?"

The pale, auburn haired man stood up and nodded his head to Robert before offering me a half-smile that was more out of courtesy than anything else. His friendly demeanor had been replaced by a tenseness that I could only assume was because of the close proximity of Robert.

"Hello, Grace," he said to me, his voice low and steady as his eyes darted warily between Robert and me.

"Why are you here? Is it Stacy? How is she?"

It was such an insignificant thing, but had I not known where I was, and who I was surrounded by, I would have dismissed it when I saw Ameila's silver eyes blink, and Dr. Ambrose's pupils dilate, turning his already dark eyes near black.

"Something's going on. What's happened?" My voice had cracked a bit, the fear that had somehow lost its edge while locked away with Robert--even with Sam in my head--was back.

Robert looked at me and shook his head, his hands taking a hold of mine in an effort to offer me

the support I didn't know I needed. "I promised no more secrets, Grace. Dr. Ambrose is here because Stacy is in a coma."

I threw accusing eyes at the pale doctor and demanded to know what happened, especially when she'd been perfectly fine the last time I had seen her. He looked away at first--an almost guaranteed sign of guilt--and then slowly his gaze returned to mine as he answered in a firm and honest voice.

"She came in for her weekly testing yesterday. While she was getting dressed, something happened. A nurse found Stacy unconscious on the floor. We've run a multitude of tests but can find no medical cause for it, no reasonable justification that can be explained by any of the results, which leads me to believe that this has more to do with you than it does with her cancer."

My hands clenched into tight balls at my side. "You think...you think that this...this is my fault?"

He shook his head and looked nervously at



Robert, his hands shaking as he spoke. "No, no. I don't think this is your fault at all. I just know that there's nothing more that I can do for Stacy. Her family is distraught, as you can expect. They've not left her side once, and I can't offer them any advice or comfort as to what to do since I don't possess the ability to see what's going on in her mind, I don't know to what extent her unconsciousness goes."

"So you're here to seek Ameila's help?"

He looked at Ameila and then shook his head. "I'm afraid that even if I knew what was going on in Stacy's head, it wouldn't be enough to figure out a treatment that would be enough to satisfy her parents. They've been preparing for this moment since Stacy was a little girl; in their minds, she's already gone."

My body screamed in silent denial as I realized what he was telling me. I pounded on his chest, each blow to the cold stone of his body emphasizing my grief. "No! No-no-no! You have to convince them that she's going to be okay. Tell them that she's going to wake up, tell them that she's going to be fine!"

Ameila eased between Dr. Ambrose and me and took my hands, holding them still until I couldn't struggle anymore, letting them fall to my sides like dead weights. Gently, she slipped her soft hands into mine, warmth filling them and radiating deeply into my skin, warming my blood and lulling me into an unwanted calm.

"No!" I shouted, yanking my hands away from hers and turning to Robert, grabbing onto his arms, my head shaking furiously in denial as tears streamed down my face. "No. This isn't supposed to happen. None of this is supposed to happen. We're supposed to go to the prom in two days--she went to all that trouble to find me the perfect dress. Graham got that matching tie...

"And he's supposed to move to Florida and live happily ever after with Lark--it's why he turned, it's why he made that choice. And none of that is going to happen now and it's all because of me. This is all happening because of me--it's all my fault."

Robert's hands found themselves at my shoulders, gripping onto them tightly, supportively.

"This is not your fault. You did not ask for any of this, did not do anything that would warrant any of this happening. Don't blame yourself."

"This is all the result of Sam's mistake. You couldn't have caused any of this if you had planned it out yourself," Ameila added. She filled the curve of her palm with my chin as she forced me to look at her, her eyes soft and warm, despite the icy silver that greeted me.

"Do you believe in destiny, Grace?"

I looked at her through the blurry haze of tears, confusion only adding to the warped image I took in of her. "If I believe in you, I have to, right?"

She smiled, her head bouncing up and down in agreement. "Well, there are many different types of destiny. Destiny isn't always a set path. Sometimes, destiny is the need for you to make choices that you otherwise wouldn't have. If you don't make that choice, your life veers onto another path, sometimes for the better, sometimes not."

"But what does that have to do with what Sam's doing to my friends?"

"You have to remember that they're going through this with you. Your choice to be with Robert gave Graham the choice to be with Lark. Stacy chose to be friends with you, and in turn, she chose to befriend Lark. When they learned what we are, they had the choice to end their ties to us, but did not.

"Humans have the luxury of choice, and as a result, destiny doesn't force them to follow the same paths as it does for us. You cannot lay the blame for their choices at your feet, Grace. Destiny is many things, but it is never a lie."

Her words caused a tremor of shock to run through me. "You're blaming this on them?"

"I'm saying that when they chose to become a part of a world they knew nothing about, they opened themselves up to its dangers."

"And they accept it," Dr. Ambrose said, his voice full of conviction.

"Don't give me that," I snapped, pulling away from all them to stand in a lonely corner near one of the tall bookshelves.

"There's no way that Graham agreed to be kidnapped and have his life traded for mine. And Stacy didn't agree to have her cancer come back and fight through it, only to end up in a coma. And what about Katie? She didn't know anything, didn't have anything to do with this. She was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"And what more perfect example of destiny could there be than the execution of that exact phrase?" Ameila asked. "There's no such thing as being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Everything happens for a reason, Grace. Everything. It doesn't seem that way because most humans can't see beyond their emotions, but every action, every decision made that led up to that point makes it the right place at the right time."

The logic in her explanation didn't ease my guilt any, succeeding in only further hardening my resolve to do the only thing I knew could help save the lives of those that I cared about, those that I loved.

"Where's Lark? I want to get this over with as soon as possible so that no one else gets hurt."

"That's the main reason why I'm here," Dr. Ambrose commented behind me.

"What? Why?" I turned around to face him.

"I need Lark to see into Stacy's mind."

"Couldn't Ameila do that?"

His head shook with disappointment. "She's already tried. There's nothing there."

Robert, who had appeared to be lost in thought, cocked his head to the side. "What do you mean by that?"

Ameila placed a hand on her son's arm, a million thoughts exchanging in that simple touch. She looked at me and spoke out loud what she knew I'd understand. "I went to the hospital to see Stacy at the request of Ambrose, but I found no signs of life within her mind. She is not dead--her mind is intact, healthier than it might have ever been--but it's empty, void of thought or memory, like it had been wiped clean of everything significant in her life."

"That's just like Erica! But, how?" I asked, my

eyes bouncing back and forth between hers, Robert's, and Dr. Ambrose's. "And what can Lark do that you can't?"

Ameila sighed and looked at Robert once more. Only then did I see the darkness that had filled his eyes as he glared at Dr. Ambrose, who was now much closer to me than he had been just moments before, and his skin was paler, if such a thing were possible.

"Someone--more specifically an angel--has tampered with Stacy's mind. The human mind is so fragile that it wouldn't take much to overwhelm it to the point of breakdown."

"But if her mind is blank, what's Lark gonna do?"

"She's going to find Stacy."

There are some things that I can understand with little explanation, some things I can come to figure out on my own after some examination, and then there are things that leave me completely at a loss for words. This was one of those things.

Sensing this, Ameila continued. "Every

human's mind is like a house. There are doors and windows into it that let in light and information. Eventually, what goes into the house comes out by means of our actions, our words, what we create, but they still leave behind their imprints, their memories.

"Sometimes, these houses are broken into. The damage varies, but you repair them, you clean things up and move on. The proof that the human being is resilient can be found when trauma changes one's perception of everything around them, only to fall back into a state of peace after some time of healing.

"But then there are moments when these houses burn down to nothing. Intense grief, disease, and the deprivation of things necessary for the human to survive are just a few of these causes, but the end results are the same. The homes have to be rebuilt. But how? Where do you start? There are no blueprints to the human mind.

"That's when you discover that some minds, like homes, possess a safe hidden deep within itself, protecting the owner's most valuable assets--



memories too precious and important to forget, information that is essential to the very essence of the human soul, and love that can keep the human spirit willing to push past the emptiness.

"Lark's ability to hear the thoughts of humans and angels alike, no matter the distance, could find these thoughts if they exist within Stacy. Depth is, after all, just another measure of distance. Stacy had a strong mind, and a strong heart, and we believe she's still in there...somewhere."

My eyes lit up at this news. "So that means that Stacy can be saved? She'll wake up and everything will be alright?"

I felt the icy sting of a bloodless hand on my arm and turned my head to see Dr. Ambrose's head shaking once more. "What? If Lark can find Stacy and help her with her memories, then things will be fine. Right?"

"Grace, even if Lark is able to bring Stacy out of the coma, she's still going to die from the cancer." Dr. Ambrose's voice carried a somber tone that I didn't like. I felt my eyes narrowing in a glare that mimicked Robert's.

"So what's the point? If she's just going to die, why even bring this up? Why give anyone hope? What's the point in hope if no matter what anyone does, she'll still end up dead?"

"Ameila and I have both agreed that if Lark can determine that Stacy's mind still possesses some ability to understand and process thoughts, there might be a way to save her life."

My head flew to Robert, his expression having grown much darker, his wings ruffling with agitation. "You're not saving her life," he hissed. "You're turning her into a meal."

"Robert!" Ameila gasped.

"Don't pretend that it's not true, mother! Your plan might allow Stacy to exist beyond what her mortal body would allow, but she won't have her life, and she definitely won't have her humanity. She'll be a monster, just like you!" His eyes were full of raw disgust as he glared at Dr. Ambrose.

"Robert!" admonished Ameila, her head shaking in disgust. "I condemned Stacy to die when I turned Graham--but Ambrose is offering her

another solution. It is not the best one, but isn't it better than her being turned without permission and perhaps becoming something worse? You know what could happen-"

"I asked you to watch over her, to protect her and keep her safe," Robert snarled, his anger causing the deep black of his pupils to stretch over the silver of his irises until only a faint ring of light could be seen. "If you take her life only to condemn her to an eternity as a flesh-eating beast like you..."

"I will not be taking her life," Dr. Ambrose stated defiantly, his nose and chin rising up to face Robert's challenge. "If she decides that what I have to offer her is what she wants, I'll be giving her life. My body might not be living, my heart might not beat, but that doesn't mean that I'm dead. *You* should know that better than anyone else."

Robert's eyes widened, and I sighed with pained relief when the darkness began to edge away from him, Dr. Ambrose's point hitting home.

"I've come to know Stacy quite well. She accepted the fact that she was dying, bypassing

denial and anger altogether, and she's shown a tremendous amount of humility as well. She even has a sense of humor about it, which I find quite...remarkable. I think that given her nonchalant attitude about death, she'll be very amenable to my offer. And I promise you that if she agrees, my wife and I will see to it that she learns to control her urges, that she learns how to live as normal a life as possible among the humans, the way that I do," the doctor vowed.

I watched as Robert began to pace, his fists clenching and unclenching at his sides while the tips of his wings dragged across the wooden floor. "This goes against everything I believe in, everything that I've been brought up to believe...We tolerate you because you were created before the new laws. If I had my way, you'd all become extinct."

"You're no different than I am," Dr. Ambrose countered, his newfound courage bolstering him in a way that made him seem almost as frighteningly dark as Robert had been just moments before.

"You take the lives of innocent people just as much as you do the guilty, and in doing so you

destroy their families, their hopes, their dreams. When you kill them, you not only take their souls, but you damage the souls of the people that care about them. When I take a life, I at least leave them their soul, allowing them to choose what they do with it."

"I've never taken a life that wasn't meant to be taken, and I've never left a soul behind to grow darker and darker until there's nothing left of it to send anywhere." Robert ground out.

"But you know that it won't be that way for her," the doctor reminded him. "She has choices now, choices that I didn't have. And with me to help her, I can prevent her from becoming the monster you fear."

"I don't like it either but you must see that this is the only way to save her," Ameila interjected. "She doesn't have that much time, Robert. Without her memories to hold on to, Stacy's body will start to give in. And even if she somehow fights it, her parents won't. They've already made the decision to take her off of full support."

Robert turned to face me, torment and anguish engulfing his features. "It doesn't seem fair,

does it? Everyone else gets a second chance but us. What do you want to do?"

I didn't hesitate.

"If it means saving Stacy's life, then I say we do it."

Ameila and Dr. Ambrose both sighed with relief.

"We need to find Lark," Ameila announced. "Where did she say she was going, Grace?"

"I don't know."

She turned a frighteningly angry face towards Robert. "And you," she growled. "You were about to break the law of the Nephilim! Are you that desperate to die?"

Robert's eyes turned cold and hard. "I know my place is to be with Grace. Dying is only the journey to get there."

My heart stumbled at those words.

Ameila turned her head to look at me, the anger that lit up her face having enough of an effect

to cause me to step away. "Swear that you won't break our law, Grace. Swear it."

"Don't!" Robert shouted at the two of us.

"I-I swear," I stuttered.

Satisfied, Ameila's face softened, the ethereal glow returning to her perfect features. "Thank you," she said, matter-of-factly before moving to stand beside her son, a consoling hand held out to him. "N'Uriel, you must understand why--"

Robert cut her off, jerking away from her outstretched hand in disgust. "You have no right. Being Seraphim gives you dominion over me, but not over Grace. Her choices are not yours!"

I rushed to him, placed my hands on his chest and pleaded for him to calm down before his anger grew out of control. "Robert, please. This isn't going to help anyone. I had the choice to say no and I didn't. Your mother has no choice but to want to save your life--you're her son."

"She had no right, Grace. She had no right!"

"It's okay," I whispered.

"You and I both know it's not."

I smiled sadly, my heart breaking as I took in the pain in his eyes, in his voice. I let my hands move around him, pulling him in close to me, sighing with relief when he completed the circle and held me against him, tighter than I possibly could.

"Grace..."

My head shifted so that Ameila was in my line of sight. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry about what's been happening, but there's a reason for all of this..."

My head bobbed down once, acknowledging her apology, but I said nothing. I knew the reason why all of this was happening. We all did. Even poor Dr. Ambrose, who had lived under the radar for who knows how long, only to now be exposed not just to the threat of discovery, but also to those who could end, if not his life, then surely his very existence.

"You're quiet," Robert said to me softly, his hand rising from my back to stroke and smooth out the tangled mess that was my hair.



"Just thinking," I mumbled against his neck.

"That's such a typical answer--not at all what I'd expect from you. You know your mind is as blank as an empty notebook."

"It's true," I argued. "There's so much to think about, so many things to sort out in my head, and I don't know how much longer I have to do that..."

"Grace, I'm telling you that your mind is quiet--it's as though you're in the middle of a dreamless sleep."

Recognition of what was going on came to me like a bolt of lightning, only instead of coming at me from the sky, it came to me from deep within.

"I'm doing it again. I'm locking you out of my thoughts."

"You've been doing this on and off for a while now," Robert agreed. "But I didn't think that you weren't aware of it."

"You thought I was doing it on purpose?"

I felt the nod without needing to see it. "I thought it was because you were still hesitant about

trusting me. I didn't want to bring it up and upset you."

I lifted my head and took in the strong lines of Robert's face, the silver eyes that swirled and rippled like molten silver, the lips that were deceptively soft and capable of making me forget everything and anything save for what it felt like to have them on mine.

"Ahh..."

Robert smiled, a slow, lazy grin that caused my stomach to turn into one large knot that weighed heavily inside of me. "I hear you now."

"So when I'm thinking about how I feel about you, my thoughts are clear, but when I'm not..."

"Your mind is empty."

"If only that were true," I sighed before placing my head back down, settling it there and basking in this rare moment of calm before everything that I feared demanded attention.



## COMPULSION

Exhaustion forced me upstairs to Lark's room where I slept for several hours, waking up just past midnight. Though I had wanted Robert to stay with me, I knew that he had a lot to speak to his mother about, and more so, he had to come to terms with the solution that she and Dr. Ambrose had come up with for Stacy. He did stay with me until I fell asleep, a moment of rare peace for the two of us that included no worries or fears from the outside world.

When I emerged from the room, rested and refreshed after a quick shower, the house was ablaze with light. I headed down the stairs and stepped into the large living room, surprised at what awaited me there.

"Did you get enough sleep, Grace?"

I looked at Dr. Ambrose and nodded out of courtesy before turning my attention away to the others who now occupied the room.

Ameila stepped forward with a woman I

recognized from the wedding Robert had taken me to on our first date. Her silver hair had been piled atop her head then in a cacophony of braids that hung like metallic vines down past her ears. Now it was loose, a waterfall of light cascading down her back, contrasting with the black sweater dress that clung to her body.

"Grace, may I introduce you to Sera," Ameila said with a knowing smile. "Sera is my mother."

My eyes flew from mother to daughter, their features so different and yet so alike--how had I not seen it before? As she smiled at me, the deep purple that ringed her pupils thickened, the violet hue sparkling with a joy that seemed misplaced, given the circumstances that most likely warranted her arrival.

"I have seen your face so often these past few months and I must confess, the visions I have received of you from my grandson pale in comparison to seeing you in person. It has been a while, has it not?"

Her voice hinted at some strange accent that I couldn't place, but her words flowed off of her

tongue like water from a spring, free and soft yet with purpose and drive. I felt compelled to walk towards her, pulled by something unseen and I didn't want to fight it. Instead I helped it by quickening my feet, hurrying to be beside her and answering her, if only to hear her speak again.

"I saw you at the wedding," my mouth spat out, the sound rough and awkward, like cardboard to the filmy satin of her reply.

"Yes. I had hoped that we would have spoken then, but it wasn't the right time."

I nodded clumsily, my head bobbing up and down like it was on a large spring. She smiled the most stunning smile I had ever encountered, and I began to feel a liquid-like warmth spread inside of me, like I had just drank a cup of hot cocoa and it was easing its way into my chilled bones.

"How odd; just as you had then, you now keep some of your thoughts hidden away like secret treasures to be sought out. What a clever girl you are!" she said to me before turning to look at Robert, who stood behind me, his hand resting

protectively against my waist. "It's alright, N'Uriel. She is worth it."

"Worth what?" I looked at the both of them, my eyes flicking back and forth, waiting for a response.

"My grandmere believes now that you're worth dying for."

"Oh, I've always believed that. I knew it the moment I first saw you, sweetling. You're far more special than N'Uriel gives you credit for. To be able to resist so well the pull of our kind--my charms barely worked on you."

"Was that what I was feeling? Oh no, your charms worked very well--I would have done cartwheels if you asked," I blurted out before clamping my hand over my mouth.

Sera laughed, the same musical laugh that I had grown accustomed to from Lark and Ameila. "Oh Grace, I so look forward to getting to know you better, but that time will come. For now, we must focus on this terrible deed that has been done to Lark's husband."

"Husband?!" I choked.

"Yes, her husband," she said with a sly smile. "I admit, when I learned that she had planned on taking a human for a partner, I was quite shocked. But it's been centuries since one of our kind has found a mate, and seeing how her last union with one of her own kind fared, I felt it was quite necessary that she be allowed this happiness. Besides, turning a human is a trivial thing--he's good to her and loves her. There's nothing trivial about that."

"Husband?" I squeaked, unable to fully accept the term.

"I know they married quite quickly, but given the consequences had they not, I think they made a wise choice. Besides, Lark's had half a millennia to get used to the idea--"

"But Graham's only eighteen!" I gasped, my voice raising in pitch just enough to cause every head to turn to look at me in shock and disbelief. "He's never had time to get used to the idea--he's never even thought about it."



"You fail to understand that it wouldn't matter whether he's thought about it or not, Grace."

I didn't understand why Graham told me about being turned but not about getting married. And why didn't I figure this out on my own? I knew the rules, I knew what was required, and yet the thought that he'd have to have gotten married in order to be with Lark intimately had never crossed my mind.

"Is the reason you're so upset about this because you're feeling some jealousy, Grace? If so, it's understandable. I must admit, after fifteen-hundred years, I'd like to think that my N'Uriel would be ready to settle down but, given the circumstances..."

"Given the circumstances, it's far better that he not get married to a dead girl walking?" I finished for her.

"Well, not that exactly, but there's always time to discuss this later."

"Will you stop speaking as though I've got all the time in the world?" I snapped, my limit having

finally been met. "I'm not like you. I'm not like Graham.

my life and it's about to go off. There's not going to be any 'getting to know each other better', or 'discussing things later' so let's stop pretending, alright? It's not making me feel better--it's making me feel worse."

Sera's smile didn't waver, but the sparkle in her eyes dimmed a bit at my words.

"I didn't mean to upset you. Forgive me for doing so."

"It's okay," I mumbled before turning away to face the others, many of whom I did not recognize at all, others whose faces were very familiar.

Robert began to make the introductions, with each individual standing up to greet me as though I were the guest of honor.

"This is Naomi. She's an EP who spends most of her time in Cleveland, and this is her husband Theo."

Naomi and Theo looked like two bronze statues, their bodies chiseled with muscles that

gave me pause as I tried to imagine why they would need to be so physically fit, their hair cut extremely close to the scalp, their eyes deep brown and curious as they smiled and said their hellos. I liked them immediately.

Robert led me to an older looking woman with strawberry blonde hair, her face sprinkled with tan freckles that set off her peridot eyes. "This is Linda. She's a close friend of the family."

When Robert didn't include what Linda was exactly, I took it upon myself to ask. She smiled and patted my cheek, answering with a fairly pronounced drawl, "Nothing special, hun. Just a family friend, that's all."

"You remember Hannah from the wedding, right?"

Hannah--the dark haired beauty who had married her prince charming in front of angels, electus patronus, and one lowly human--stood up to shake my hand.

"Hello, Grace," she said with a friendly smile. "I'm sorry we didn't get to speak at the wedding but

things were just so crazy--it's good to finally be able to see you and thank you for helping make my wedding and my grandmother's last day a very special one."

"Hannah is accompanying Sera and Lem," Ameila explained as a man who stood taller than anyone I had ever seen approached me. My eyes ran over him in intense inspection, unable to look away until I had taken in every single inch.

His hair looked like swaths of silk had been stained with deep red wine. It was clipped short by his ears, with longer patches that curled up front. It resembled Robert's hair in every way except color, and I grimaced when I realized that my fingers itched to play with the errant lock that hung above a far too handsome face.

His jaw was stubbornly set, strong and square and smooth like polished stone. His generous mouth was pulled up on one side in a crooked smile that caused my stomach to do a little somersault, surprising me and burning my cheeks with guilt. I quickly raised my eyes to admire the proud nose and finally the eyes that stared at me

with equal interest.

And it was his eyes that finally made me gasp in wonder, for I had seen them before. One was a pale, icy silver, while the other glistened in warm, dripping gold. This was the angel from the nightmares, the one who had ordered the execution of Sam's wing-bringer and soul mate. He was the "Lem" that had remained a mystery to me, now standing before me in the flesh.

I took his hand and heard a swift intake of breath--did it come from me?--before I quickly removed my own from his strong grip, letting it fall to my side only to be filled once more by Robert's cool one.

"Everything I've heard about you is true. You're quite acceptable--for a human."

Sera found this comment to be highly amusing for she broke into laughter that floated over everything, blocking out my ability to feel anything but amusement.

I didn't like it.

"Lem, you're so particular. She's more than

acceptable. She's exceptional, and why shouldn't she be? Ma petit-fils is a very bright boy with exquisite taste."

When Lem replied, his voice was much stronger and deeper in my waking mind than it had been while I was asleep. He spoke with authority, though there was a slight wavering that clued me in to a sort of deference to Sera that was curious and something that I wished I had time to investigate.

"You're right, Sera. She is a delectable choice. I can find no fault with young N'Uriel's decision to select her as his mate."

I tried to hide my annoyance at being discussed like I were some entree they were mulling over but it was very difficult, especially when in the background I could hear the chiming of the clock--two strong peals--and I was instantly reminded that this wasn't a meet-and-greet for nothing.

"I'm sorry if I'm being rude, but could someone explain to me what's going on, why are all of you here?"

Every eye became fixed on me, the room quiet once more as no one had the nerve to speak up--all of their opinions saved for their thoughts that mingled amongst each other, leaving me completely out of the loop...

"I asked them to come so that we can discuss what's going on with Samael," Ameila finally spoke up.

"What's there to discuss?"

"The fact that what he's doing is wrong," Linda said with venom.

"Or that he's acting out of revenge, rather than duty," came Hannah's acerbic reply.

"But more importantly because he's killed an innocent and has now taken another with little intent on returning him unharmed," Lem said with finality.

"How do you know that?" My question came on the heels of a gasp that was not my own. I felt an immense wave of relief wash over me at the sight of Lark standing in the doorway, a grief torn expression slashed across her face.

"Answer her," she insisted as she stepped towards us, her hands pulled up in front of her, clamped into desperate fists that looked so deceptively delicate.

"We have seen it," Sera replied in a grim tone. "This trade with Grace will not bring the outcome you two desire. He is no longer out for just Grace's life, but also for her suffering."

"But why?" I cried, feeling what little hope there had been left inside of me for the safe return of Graham wither away into ash. "Why is my death so damn important that he'd do this? He's the goddamned archangel of death; why doesn't he just kill me already?"

A hiss filled the room and I fell to my knees as the familiar sharp pain stabbed inside of my head, each cut an echo of each other, fading after each slice until slowly the pain subsided, but not before blood spurted from my mouth and nose onto my clothes and the floor beneath me.

Had this happened in a human home, a great commotion would have erupted and there'd be nervous calls for help being thrown about. But



this wasn't a human home, and so the reactions ranged from bored to curious as Robert pressed a hand to my head, easing the residual throbbing that always occurred after these attacks.

I looked up at him and saw the worried haze that covered his eyes and felt incredibly stupid and guilty all at the same time. It only grew worse when I heard Robert's groan of disapproval. "Grace, just watch the language," he whispered to me.

"Oh stop," I argued, shoving him away as I waved my arm to our captive audience, not caring that I probably looked like an extra on some B horror flick. "They can hear you whispering. And I'm sorry if I wasn't raised to know what the proper etiquette around angels is but I'm only human, and while all of you stand here and talk about calls and duty, my best friend's life is in danger.

"I know that he's not an angel, or an EP, or-" I looked over at Linda "-whatever the hell you are, but he's my best friend, and he's also married to Lark, which means that he's as much a part of your family as he is mine. I've already offered my life up for his. What else do I have to give in order to help bring

him back safe?"

All around me eyes began to drop, gazes unwilling to give me the answers that I sought, and I growled in frustration.

"You don't care about saving his life, do you?" Lark accused.

"That's not it at all, Larkahd," Sera insisted, calling Lark a name I had never heard uttered before.

"Do not use that name!"

It was such a shock, hearing Lark's angelic name for the first time, and then seeing her reaction to its use. It was almost enough to make me forget why it had been said.

"If that's not it then what is?" I asked, intent on keeping the dialogue focused on Graham and not on old family disagreements that could be argued amongst themselves.

Sera's eyes twinkled at my diversion, pleased that I could see the need for familial privacy and filling it. "Graham's life is important--of course it

is--but the danger that he is in does not compare to the potential consequences of what Samael has done. He threatens to cut the thread that keeps humanity and divinity connected yet separate, and that cannot happen."

"I get that. Humans can't know about angels and blah-blah-blah. What I want to know is why is Sam doing this?"

Sera's voice lowered, her tone somber. "Can you imagine, centuries of joyless existence? Of a self-induced prison that you cannot break out of? Sam's guilt over Miki's death has plagued him for centuries, but he could accept his fate so long as he knew that his decision was one that all angels would make. Duty before love, and love only for duty.

"So imagine how upset he became when he learned that he was wrong, that an angel would defy his very purpose and sacrifice his life for love; love for a human; a particular human."

I blanched at her words as my mind began to reconcile the truth. Sam didn't just want to fix a mistake. This was personal. The centuries that Sam had lived without loving, without feeling, without

caring--all of it had become pointless, nothing more than a lie...and all because of me.

"Don't think that Sera is blaming you for this, Grace," Ameila spoke up, rushing to contain the damage that she knew her mother had caused, already too late.

I stepped away from her. "No. No one needs to make excuses for me anymore. I understand what's going on. It's not my fault that Sam screwed up all those years ago, I get that. I didn't know then what had happened; I was completely innocent.

"But I know now what should have happened but I still fought against him. I demanded my right to live when I had none to begin with. What happened to Graham and Stacy, to Katie and anyone else who's been hurt by Sam *is* my fault and the only way this is going to end is if I end it."

I turned to look at Robert and Lark, their faces stricken by what they saw in my eyes, and I knew I couldn't stay there any longer. There was no point. They were only going to keep postponing the inevitable. Lark couldn't help it, it was her call, but

Robert wanted me to leave him about as much I wanted to leave him, and I couldn't let it go on for another minute more.

Thankful that my thoughts were safely locked away, I walked slowly towards the front door, knowing that every eye in the room was on me, every thought focused on what my motives were and why none of them could hear what I was thinking about.

"Grace..." Robert started.

I shook my head. "It has to be this way, Robert. I'm sorry."

I left them all standing there, watching me as I left. I felt ridiculous as I walked down the driveway towards the gate, realizing that I wasn't wearing any shoes, my shirt was torn at the hem, my jeans were full of holes, and my hair still tangled and slightly damp from my shower. All in all, I realized, I had just acted like...

An impetuous, headstrong teenager.

Whatever.

There was no point left in staying in that house, filled with...people who were more concerned with their angelic reputations than they were with my friends' lives. I needed to go.

"You're not going, alone."

Lark stood behind me with her arms crossed over her chest, the defiant expression on her face daring me to contradict her.

"My place is with you," Robert added, moving in front of me and gently placing his hands atop my shoulders. "If you don't know that by now, let me prove it to you."

Those hands, those loving, wonderful hands of his moved from my shoulders to just beneath my arms as he lifted me up, our faces level. He looked at me with his intense, mercury eyes, the light inside them filled with promise that I did not want to accept and yet couldn't help to do anything but.

"You're my life, Grace. Where you go, I go."

The flash of heat that made my very bones melt away, turning me into jelly in his arms came only an instant before his mouth closed over mine,

and then I burst into a ball of white flame when I felt his lips urge mine to open. In that moment, in that blissful, serene and altogether wonderful moment of desire and fulfillment, I felt every emotion ever meant to coincide with love bury itself into my chest with every pounding beat of my heart, tattooing it with their permanence, and I knew that I didn't want to give up this angel of mine. But I would. I had to, because of how I felt, because of how much he meant to me. Where I was going, what I knew was my end, that wouldn't be his. That couldn't be his.

Robert pulled away, a deeply satisfied smile crossing his face, oblivious to the conviction in my thoughts. "So, you're in charge now, Boss. What now?"

I didn't know what we were going to do next--I had no plans--but of one thing, I was certain.

I was going to give Sam what he wanted, but it was going to be on my terms.





## THANK YOU, GOOD DOCTOR

There was little going on outside of Stacy's hospital room, the hallway empty of visitors due to the late hour. Robert, Lark, and I stood there in the cold, clinical quiet as I tried to figure out what was our next step in my planless plan.

Robert had filled Lark in on Dr. Ambrose's idea as we traveled, and though Robert had made it quite clear that he was still against the whole thing, Lark was as much for it as Ameila had been; perhaps even more so. But there was still the issue of Stacy's parents, who both slept on the opposite side of the door, guarding their only daughter like the precious object she was.

My mind--thankfully closed during the entire encounter at Robert's house--was now open to the thoughts that flowed between the brother and sister. I listened as they discussed how to get Lark alone with Stacy for as long as she needed in order to find out if Dr. Ambrose was right, that Stacy did indeed have a "safe" inside of her mind that still held enough of Stacy's memories to bring her back from

this non-existence that she had been sentenced to.

*The Kims would do whatever we wanted them to do, but I don't want to charm them into leaving Stacy alone with me. They're going through enough without having me use my abilities against them.*

"I've got it," I said out loud.

"Got what?"

"I know how to get you in there. I'll try to get inside to see Stacy. That'll cause enough of a commotion to get them out of the room--they hate me, blame me for all of this, so why not use that to our advantage?"

Lark's grin was wide and brilliant. "Excellent idea, Grace."

Robert bobbed his head once in agreement and then disappeared with Lark into a haze of black and white smoke, the dark wisps curling around my legs and ankles before trailing down onto the ground, hanging like a thin fog just outside of the doorway. I inhaled deeply, preparing myself for the

onslaught that was about to come, and then knocked quietly on Stacy's door.

After a few minutes I knocked again, this time a bit more insistently. I heard the shuffling of feet and then the door pulled open, revealing a haggard Mr. Kim, his sparse hair lying in straggled threads across his scalp, dark bags hanging beneath bloodshot eyes. Had he had any sleep in the past two days?

"What are you doing here?" he grumbled to me in an exhausted voice that wanted to sound more menacing than it did.

"I came to see Stacy," I replied, trying to hide the pity I was feeling at seeing this strong man so brought down.

"You came to see her at three in the morning? Visitors aren't allowed up here past eight. How'd you get up here?"

"I snuck past security. I want to see Stacy; she's one of my best friends and I care about how she's doing."

From behind him, a deceptively diminutive

woman appeared, her hair neatly braided and tucked into a bun at the top of her head, her eyes wide and bright with the renewed energy that only anger and indignation could give you. She started into me in a tirade of foreign words, words that I could not understand because they were in Korean, but words that I knew weren't meant to be friendly in any way.

Without a rebuke from her husband, Mrs. Kim continued on with her barrage of insults as slowly, the two of them pushed me away from the door with their voices alone. I backed up slowly, wanting to give Lark as much time as possible. Mrs. Kim took my hesitation as defiance and launched into an even louder rant, causing several doors along the hallway to open, patients and their family members coming outside to see the source of the screaming.

With my back pressed up against the wall that ended my retreat, I had no choice but to listen as Mr. Kim translated what it was that Mrs. Kim had spat at me with more venom than I thought possible for a human being.

"My daughter took pity on you and became your friend because she always had a good heart. She knew what those kids at your school were doing to you, what they were saying to you and she didn't like it. She's always been that way--too kind for her own good--but this time you brought your troubles onto her.

"All the darkness that follows you, you brought it down on our daughter and now she will never wake up because of that, because of you. You are not welcome here. You are not wanted here. Leave, now. Go before I call security and have you thrown out."

I knew that they were right. Stacy's friendship with me was the reason her parents were now stuck facing the decision to pull her off of life support, and why Lark was now in her room, trying to find some reason to help turn her into a monster.

"I'm sorry," was all I could say. "I'm sorry," over and over again. My head fell into my hands, and I wept like a child being reprimanded. And I was. The only difference was that my guilt went beyond what the Kims could even fathom.

And just like that, I was being embraced by Stacy's parents, their woeful tears and forgiving sobs joining mine, and I couldn't accept it. I stood there, unable to show them the gratitude I should have felt because I knew, even as they felt the immense weight of their own sorrow lift, that I didn't deserve a single ounce of absolution.

My eyes traveled around the hallway, too uncomfortable to close or look down at the two distraught parents who clung to me with their hearts pinned to their sleeves. I saw the crowds that had gathered outside of their doorways slowly disperse, making way for the burly security guard who stomped towards us with a conviction that belied his lengthy delay.

He was followed by two nurses who nervously clutched the stethoscopes hanging over their necks, worried expressions permanently staining their faces with downturned eyes and mouths. As they neared us, I coughed in that awkward way that hints that something had changed, and not for the better. The Kims immediately released me and straightened up,

turning to see where the trouble was coming from.

"Do you belong here?" the gruff voiced security guard asked me, his hand resting precariously on his...radio.

"Um," I looked at the door to Stacy's room, and then to the Kims. "I..."

Mr. Kim nodded his head stiffly, as though that would be answer enough for the guard. Unfortunately, it wasn't.

"Well, I don't care if you do or not. It's past visiting hours--this is a hospital, not a night club." He grabbed my arm and yanked it roughly, forcing me to tumble forward, my face colliding into his chest and slicing my cheek on the metal tag that listed him as hospital security guard number four-hundred and eighty-six.

The guard pushed me away, even as I pressed my hand against my wound, and cursed at me when he saw my blood on his white shirt, the red blotches spreading quickly on the absorbent material. "You stupid, clumsy b-"

There wasn't time for him to finish that last

word. A strong, smooth hand was pressed against his throat, pinning him to the wall behind him while his feet dangled several inches off of the ground, one black shoe falling off to reveal a stained and hole-ridden sock.

"What were you going to say?"

The guard's eyes bugged in his face as he looked at me and then at his captor, too afraid to speak.

"I asked you a question."

The guard's mouth opened just wide enough to spit out a quick "nothing" before he was released, falling to the ground like a sack of dirty laundry.

"Y-y-you can't do that. Th-th-that's assault," he coughed as his hands rubbed his aching throat with a plump hand.

"I don't really care what you call it. You were about to insult this young woman for daring to bleed after you injured her for simply standing here. Your job is to keep the staff and patients safe; does she look like she's capable of causing any harm to



anyone?"

The guard's eyes flicked to mine for a brief second and I watched as his head twitched ever so slightly, affirming what he'd been asked.

"Good. Now, I want you to leave. Don't come back to this floor unless it's an emergency, and even then, only if you've been personally invited. If I see your face anywhere near this young lady or these parents, I'll personally see to it that you're fired."

"Yes, Dr. Ambrose," the guard grumbled before picking himself up and stumbling back down the corridor, passing by a few straggling witnesses.

With a heavy sigh, the doctor turned tired eyes to face us, the Kims having remained silent and observant this entire time.

"I'm sorry about that, Grace, Mr. and Mrs. Kim. Sometimes our security can get a little overzealous and forget that they need to assess a situation before choosing a course of action. Unfortunately I think that that young man would have probably made the same decision no matter what."

Mr. Kim held out his hand and shook Dr.

Ambrose's offered hand. "Thank you, Doctor Bro, for helping us. I cannot say how much my wife and I appreciate your help, in all things."

Dr. Ambrose shook his head and sighed. "I only wish I could do more."

"We understand. My wife and I know that you tried everything you could to help our daughter. I could teach her how to fight those who would pick on her because of who she is, but I couldn't teach her how to fight against the cancer. You helped her to do that. It's just a shame that she did not have enough time to master that, too."

"So you've come to a decision then?" The doctor's face was subdued, but I could see the worry in his eyes as he sent a quick glance my way.

This was one of those moments where being able to read minds would've come in handy. But then, I knew what he was thinking. I didn't have to read his mind to know that he was wondering if Lark had found some sign of life in Stacy. He wasn't asking the Kims if they'd made a decision because he genuinely wanted to know. He was asking to give Lark more time.

"We will talk to our sons tomorrow, but yes, we have made a decision. We cannot watch our daughter--once so healthy and strong--grow weak and thin in her bed like a plucked flower. She wouldn't want to live like that." Oddly, Mr. Kim's voice was filled with pride as his wife nodded her agreement. "She fought very hard, but now it's time for her to rest. She deserves to rest."

"We will make the arrangements after you've discussed this with your sons then," Dr. Ambrose said to them, but I knew that his words were meant for me.

Was he saying this because Lark had gotten word to him from inside the room? Did she find what she'd been looking for? I looked at him with imploring eyes, wanting him to be able to see my thoughts written on my face as clearly as I could see them on his.

And then there it was: A small twitch at the corner of his mouth, the slightest of movements that went completely unnoticed by the Kims as they discussed their plans for Stacy's body and the

funeral arrangements to follow.

I felt a surge of hope flood my heart and I struggled to keep a smile from forming. Fearing failure, I clamped my hand over my mouth, relaxing my clenching cheeks and allowing the ecstatic grin that stretched my mouth wide to reveal itself beneath my fingers.

"Well, it's late, Grace. I suggest we leave the Kims to spend this last night with Stacy alone."

I nodded my agreement, tucking my smile away and pulling my hand down to offer it in condolence to Stacy's parents, who looked at me with what I surprisingly realized was remorse.

"We are sorry, Grace, that you could not spend the last of Stacy's days awake with her. We will regret that for the rest of our lives. She always defended you as a loyal, caring, and humble friend. I'm sorry that we did not see that until it was too late," Mr. Kim said to me, rejecting my hand and instead pulling me into a hug that felt so familiar in its strength. I was flooded with my first memories of Stacy, how she hugged me without a care to what I or anyone else thought.

When Mrs. Kim's arms also encircled me in that same, strangely strong and yet endearing manner, I laughed. "You hug just like Stacy," I said to them in explanation when they both pulled away, shocked at my tiny outburst.

"Oh. Well, we might not look like friendly people, but we are," Mr. Kim said with an understanding smile.

Mrs. Kim patted my hand and said to me in rough English, "You're a good girl. Stacy has good friends."

"Thank you," I said to her softly, ignoring the sting of guilt and doubt that contradicted her words in my chest. With a small wave, I followed Dr. Ambrose down the hall towards the elevators. He pushed a button--I don't think he really noticed which one he was pressing--and remained silent as we waited for the doors to open, stepping in together when they did. Once inside, he pressed the button that would take us to the highest accessible floor, never saying a word until the doors opened and we exited.

"This way," he said in a low voice, walking with determined steps down a dimly lit hallway, leading towards a wall of windows with one solitary door that stood in the middle, already partially open to the darkness that shrouded the city outside.

I followed him onto a large, cement balcony. It was littered with cigarette butts and ashes, and smelled foully of urine and mildew. I held my nose and waited for Dr. Ambrose to speak again as we walked towards a far corner where a round, plastic table stood.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a white cloth, handing it to me. "You should clean up your face before Robert arrives."

"I thought you were, how did you put it again, 'sober'. Does even a little blood make you uncomfortable?" I asked as I dabbed at my cheek, wincing at the sting that I received despite the soft cloth.

"Your blood doesn't bother me, Grace. My kind aren't ravenous creatures who go crazy at the smell of blood. We're not vampires. The smell of blood, the sight of it, it's all inconsequential to us.

Besides, we prefer the flesh of humans. We can survive on blood, yes, but it isn't desirable. Unfortunately, many don't have the same opportunities as I do at procuring bagged blood, and so they feed on animals. If you think we are ugly in our natural form when we feed on human flesh, you should see us after feeding on wild dogs or rats."

I looked at him and tried to swallow my disgust at the idea of consuming rats. "Will Stacy..."

"Stacy will be fine. I'll prepare a supply of blood for her so that we can stave off the hunger long enough for her to complete her transformation, and my wife and I will then work on helping her to recognize the signs-"

"Wait. She needs to...eat when she's changing from human to-to..."

"Erlking? Yes, unfortunately. The human body doesn't do much of anything wisely or efficiently, to be honest with you. Dying is one of those things that never happens without the body expending far too much energy as it shuts down. Because of that,

when a human is transforming from a mortal into anything else, it needs an alternative energy source.

"Some horror writers might have had a clue about this small fact because they included descriptions of their vampire victims feeding off of their makers, but the truth is, Grace, that neither vampires nor my kind have blood in our veins, only venom. We're walking infections. If I were to feed pure venom into a human, they wouldn't just die, they'd self-destruct. It isn't a pretty picture, so I'll spare you the details."

"Oh sure, spare me the details now," I said, rolling my eyes.

He chuckled, an odd sound, one that felt as though it had been fermenting inside of him after being locked up for so long. "You know, the last time I had to explain any of this was to my wife, Vanessa. She was more accepting of my descriptions than you are."

I stared out at the street lights that glowed like orange fireflies all over the town, amused at the fact that I was having a conversation with an erlking about his wife. "Did you explain this to her before



you changed her, too?"

"Oh, I didn't change her."

I turned to stare at him, wondering how it was possible for him to be married at all, much less to someone who wasn't even one of his own. He seemed to know what exactly it was that I was thinking and grinned smugly.

"We've a mixed marriage, you see. She's neither erlking nor human. I'd tell you what she is but truth be told, I'm more afraid of her than I am of your Robert."

Laughter burst from my mouth and traveled over the balcony into the night as I shook my head at the innocent look that crossed over his face. "Oh, Dr. Ambrose, I'm going to need to meet your wife, if only so that I can form my own opinion because I've seen Robert angry and I'm very doubtful that any wife of yours could be as frightening as he is."

"So says the human child who's never seen Death do what he was meant to," he said in return, though his voice was less jovial, a dark edge tingeing it. His smile disappeared suddenly.

"They're coming."

The two statuesque figures that headed towards us were an incredible sight to behold. The white-gold halo of light that encircled them filled up the dark corridor as they approached and as always, I felt awed by how fluidly they moved, as though their feet never touched the ground and the air itself just floated them towards us.

The door opened on its own, willed into its position by the power of a single thought. In the span of one blink, Robert was standing in front of me, a soothing hand gently caressing the cut on my face while the other held the small of my back securely, pulling me in as close as he dared.

"I wanted to kill that bastard for what he did, what he was going to say-" Robert said in a fierce tone before he lifted my face and pressed soft lips against the tender skin around my wound. "I'm not leaving you alone again. Even in a hospital, you're not safe."

"Thank you, Ambrose, for coming so quickly," Lark said, taking the doctor's hands into her own. "You gave me the time to find what it was

that I was looking for."

This was what I had been waiting to hear. I turned my eyes to Lark, Robert still holding my head in his hands. "So you did find her, you found Stacy."

She gave me an impish smile and nodded. "Yes. She's there and she's whole."

"Did you tell her about your mother's plan?"

She bobbed her head down once more in confirmation and I nearly clapped with excitement until I realized that one of us wasn't as thrilled as the rest of us were.

"Robert--I know you don't approve--"

He pressed two fingers against my mouth, quieting my argument. "Shh. I know why you want this. I don't like it, I don't agree with it for my own reasons, but they're my own. I will not let them keep Stacy from making her own decisions."

His eyes held nothing but truth, his mouth, though set in a thin line, still hinted at a soft smile that wanted to feel the same joy that I did, and so it did for its own reasons. I lifted myself onto the tips

of my toes, removing my mouth from beneath his gentle fingertips, and let my lips fall onto that hint of a smile, kissing the tiny spark of joy that I knew he felt because of me.

"You're too good. Even for an angel," I breathed against the rising curve of his mouth as the smile finally took shape.

"I've got reason to be," he allowed before pulling my face back to his, completing the connection between our lips and sending waves of raw feeling bubbling through my veins and directly into my heart, causing it to dip down and then rise back up sharply, as though it were riding its own rollercoaster within my chest.

"Okay, you two. You're not exactly alone here so could you put the face sucking away so that we can get back to why we're here in the first place?"

I found it odd then at just how annoying Lark's voice had suddenly become. No longer musical, it instead had taken on an almost grating tone, similar to that of nails on a chalkboard set up in front of a feedback riddled microphone. Robert's eyes widened in shock and then narrowed in

amusement, the shimmering silver irises reflecting the yellow street lights back in a more muted yet brilliant sparkle as my thoughts became clear to him once again.

"I agree with you wholeheartedly," he whispered to me between soft bursts of laughter.

An irritated cough and the tapping of feet unused to creating so much noise on the ground sobered Robert and I just long enough to hear what she and Dr. Ambrose had agreed to, their plan laid out in full now that Stacy's thoughts and memories were confirmed to still exist.

"Once the paperwork is signed, Stacy's parents will probably be removing her off of life support sometime tomorrow evening," Dr. Ambrose explained, looking directly at me and avoiding Robert's hard gaze with a marked determination that pushed an almost impossible vein out on his marble-like forehead.

"Lark will remove the tabs from her wires, disconnecting her from the machine and fooling it into thinking that she is physically dead four minutes

after the process has begun. During this time, Stacy is at her most vulnerable. While Lark is capable of reaching Stacy within the locked confines of her inner mind, bringing her out is a different story altogether. If she doesn't remember how to exist, she won't be able to breathe on her own."

Lark spoke up then, taking up where Dr. Ambrose left off. "Stacy needs someone to help her imprint her memories back into her mind. I can help free them, but if I try to help her replace the memories that she's lost, I might flood her mind with my own and that would undoubtedly kill her."

"So who's going to do that?" I asked, turning to look at Robert and seeing that he wasn't about to volunteer either. Of course he wasn't, not after discovering what had happened to me.

"Dr. Ambrose?"

"I can't, Grace. While I have helped her at home, I'm afraid that I'm not an oncologist. Stacy's doctor will be the one in the room with her. Besides, I've got to prepare the morgue to receive her body."

"But won't they notice that Stacy's not exactly

dead?"

A conspiratorial smile crossed his lips and he nodded. "Of course, but they'll be expecting that."

"Oh."

Lark placed a reassuring hand atop my shoulder and beamed a remarkably calm smile at me. "Everything's going to be fine, Grace. You're going to be in that room with Stacy tomorrow. You're the one who's going to help her imprint her memories and keep her alive long enough for Ambrose to do what he needs to do."

"Me?" I asked incredulously.

The idea that Lark somehow thought that I was capable of doing such a thing was overshadowed by the fact that I was going to have to pretend that Stacy was dying in front of her parents. I looked at Robert with doubt clearly written on my face. He'd seen me in theater class--he knew that I was about as good at acting as I was at lying.

"I don't know if I can do that. Any of that," I said to the three of them with panic clear in my

voice. "What if they realize that I'm not exactly grieving? And how will I be able to pretend that I'm upset when I'm supposed to be helping Stacy out--how exactly am I supposed to do that anyway?"

Robert and Lark both looked at each other and shared a conspiratorial smile. Robert's intent gaze then shifted to mine and the smile faded slightly, making room for one of concern. "I'll help you. I'll act as your proxy, allowing you to enter Stacy's mind and help her to reform her memories. You survived being exposed to the full extent of an angel's mind, which makes you the only person capable of doing this. You can block out other's thoughts, and protect your own. You can protect Stacy's as well. There is no one more suited to save Stacy than you."

That was a lot to take in. Sure, I might have survived Robert's thoughts bombarding my mind, but I didn't do it all on my own--Robert's ability to heal had played a role in that--and I didn't come out of it unscathed. To intentionally put myself through that again wasn't exactly something that I was looking forward to, but the thought of losing Stacy



was too great a factor to let my dread sway me.

"So tomorrow then," I heard myself say before Lark's arms wound themselves around me.

"You didn't have to agree, you know," she huffed into my ear, too overwhelmed with gratitude to control the tremor in her voice. "You could have said no. You could've said no to everything and we all would have understood. But you didn't, and I can't believe that you didn't. Stupid, selfless human. Thank you."

I was in shock. A state of absolute, mind-blowing, speech-preventing shock. Lark had always kept herself distant from me in some form or another. Oh sure, she appeared as friendly and as concerned as Stacy and Graham had been, our friendship undeniable and unshakeable. But that didn't erase the fact that I had yet to prove myself to her. As upset as she had been at Robert for his deception, she was also upset that I had left him, doubly so because she had seen it happen beforehand.

The fact that she was now standing here, expressing her appreciation in a way that went

beyond words...

"I just remembered. We have school in a few hours," she said, lifting her head from my shoulder. "How are you going to handle that?"

Robert removed me from Lark's embrace and swept me off of my feet, into his own arms. "She's not going to school. There's a lot to do and not a lot of time to do it."

Thankful for my reprieve, I gifted Robert with a smile that defied the sudden onset of exhaustion that overcame me; I knew more than anyone else that there was far too much left to do before my final confrontation with Sam.



## GREEN ISN'T EASY

When I was a kid, I didn't dream. I didn't dream at all until Robert. But for one brief week after my mother died, I couldn't escape the strange visions that burrowed into my mind shortly after I'd fall asleep. A white rabbit, the same one that tormented Alice as she traveled through that strange little land she had followed him in, would come into my room and ask me for directions to the post office; he wanted to mail a letter and didn't have any stamps. I showed him the way, pointing out Heath's landmarks as we passed each of them by. He said nothing to me until we reached the post office, and frowned when he saw that post office was closed.

With a twitch of his pinkish-white nose, he would turn to me and say, "Thank you for your assistance. In payment for your help, I know of a really great recipe for carrot cake that I'd like to try. If you're ever in the area, look me up and I'll bake it for you."

I never understood what that meant, and

never really thought of it again until I closed my eyes shortly after leaving Dr. Ambrose on that hospital balcony.

It was as it had been all those years ago, though I was naturally older, and the streets had changed some since then. The rabbit, still pristine white with curious eyes, waited as we stood at the crosswalk, the red hand signal blinking at us like a mad eye.

I asked question after question, the topics varying from the mundane to the obscure--for a rabbit, anyway--yet the rabbit remained silent, simply clutching onto his letter with a focused paw while his ears twittered left and right, taking in the sounds of traffic and activity around us.

This time, however, the post office was open and bustling with people. We stood in line and waited patiently until a counter was free. The rabbit purchased his stamp with coins that he pulled from a coin purse that I had never noticed before, images of fruits and flowers embossed into the shiny exterior, and then affixed the stamp to the white square envelope before sending it on its way

into the mail slot.

I caught a quick glimpse of what was written on the envelope but saw that there were no words, no letters, just crude shapes and drawings. I don't know why that surprised me--this was a rabbit, after all.

Finished with his task, he turned to me and grinned, two large, white top teeth hooking over both the two smaller bottom ones and a tiny bottom lip.

"Thank you for your assistance. In payment for your help, I know of a really great recipe for carrot cake that I'd like to try. If you're ever in the area, look me up and I'll bake it for you"

Nothing had changed; everything had gone exactly as it had before, with the exception of the post office being open. I expected the rest of the routine to follow in the same vein as it always had. He'd invite me for cake and then disappear, after which I'd wake up feeling an odd hunger for carrot cake.

But this time, the rabbit shook his small white

head, dissatisfied with what he'd just said. He looked at me with pale yellow eyes, and smiled.

"You know, I don't know why I said that. I don't even like carrots. Nevermind."

With a hop, he vanished, leaving me to wake to the bright light of midday shining on my face as it broke through the spaces between the leaves that hovered over my head. A cool, soothing hand rested on my forehead while the other held a wandering finger that ran a course up and down my arm as it lay draped across my chest.

*Did you sleep well?*

A pair of sterling eyes peered over my head through a curtain of black silk, a warm smile accompanying them on the most perfect face I knew I'd ever see.

"I think so. I mean, I suppose. I had a strange dream, though."

"About...?"

"A rabbit." At his perplexed expression, I allowed him to see for himself what it was that I had

seen in my subconscious, the amusement in his face once he had gone through the dreams, both childhood and present obviously quite humorous to him.

"With everything that you have to worry about, I'm glad that you've found the ability to dream about anything but."

"I suppose."

"Are you hungry?"

I thought about that for a bit but my stomach answered before I could, the muffled growl that erupted from beneath my shirt eliciting a chuckle from Robert and a mortified gasp from me.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said as he helped me up. "Let's see about getting you fed, shall we?"

When we were in a more upright position, only then did I realize that we had been resting against Bala's tree, its roots forming a rough chaise that allowed for Robert to lean back and afford me some comfort in my sleep. The lake that provided the nutrients that Bala needed was calm, the evidence of the events that had disturbed it less



than twenty-four hours ago now gone.

"Why are we here?"

"Would you have rather we gone back to the house and listen to my mother and grandmere discuss the topic of Sam to death?"

I shook my head with distaste at that idea, but wanting to know what exactly their purpose for meeting truly was.

"The Seraphim are grouping, separately at first, but they'll come together soon to discuss the troubles that have been caused by Sam's actions."

"As well as yours," I added.

"Yes, as well as mine."

"So your mother, your grandmother, and your...grandfather are meeting to discuss what to do?"

Robert swept aside a mound of leaves and exposed a small cooler as he answered my question. "My mother and grandmere are at the house with Lem--who is *not* my grandfather--to discuss what punishment, if any, Sam will receive

for killing Katie instead of you. His mistakes are atypical of one of my kind, which makes my mother believe that he's intentionally failing. If that is the case, then that begs the question as to why. Lem is in disagreement with this and I'm inclined to agree with him. He knows Sam far better than anyone else."

"Why? Were they friends or something?"

"Worse. Lem is Sam's father."

"His f-father?"

"Yes," Robert replied, pulling a container of fruit and another of sandwiches out of the cooler, followed by a bottle of water.

"But he looks so...young!"

"Grace," he laughed softly. "I'm over fifteen centuries old. He's nearly three times that. If he looks young then I must resemble an infant in your eyes."

I choked on the grape I had placed in my mouth, coughing it back up and spitting it out into the napkin he offered. "You should know that that's

not true!"

"Of course I do, but I also can't ignore how your heart sped up when you met him. I know that you found him to be...attractive," he remarked, that last word sounding almost strangled.

I said nothing for a while, needing time to eat and digest what his words meant, the emotion that lay behind them. He was jealous. I knew that he could be, but I didn't think it was possible to be jealous of another angel. I reached for another grape and paused, looking at him with my intent clear in my eyes as I bit into the crisp skin and soft flesh, the juice dripping onto my fingers and running down the side of my mouth.

He leaned in and licked the juice off of my skin, a sly smile replacing the irritated expression that had marred his face just moments earlier. "Mmm. Much better than anything bottled."

"Do you hear my heart now?" I asked, breathless.

His eyes dilated and his lids lowered and I knew that he did. He could hear the hiccup of my

racing heart as it skipped with each jolt to my nerves that his touch--even the memory of his touch--instigated.

"I might have found Lem attractive, Robert," I said to him in a breath that was barely a whisper. "But only you've ever made me feel this way. My heart beats this way because of you."

I grabbed his hand and brought it to my chest, wanting him to feel just how much he affected me, not just hear it. His hand hesitated mere millimeters above the fabric of my shirt before it finally rested against me with conviction. The normally cool hand was like a red hot poker against my skin, the thin t-shirt doing nothing to prevent the sparks that ignited between us.

To my dismay, he removed his hand far too soon, though only from touching me--he held above my heart, hovering as though frozen in place. But I still felt it there, pressed against me, and I closed my eyes, biting my lip at the memory of the unexpected feeling from what I had thought was an innocent attempt to prove to him how I felt.

"I think we should get going, Grace," he said

with a shudder as his fingers flexed, floating over my shirt like a searching shadow.

I groaned in acknowledgement. We were treading in dangerous waters with each touch, and it was growing more and more difficult to remember what it was that we were fighting against when we both tamped down the desire that was threatening to overwhelm the both of us.

"What time is it anyway?"

"Nearly three. Stacy's parents will be calling the house soon to speak to Lark. She'll inform them that you're with her and that the two of you will hurry to the hospital so that you can be there before they say their goodbyes to Stacy."

"How do you know all of this?"

"I told you that some of us have the ability to foresee the future. It just so happens that my grandmere's ability is just that."

"So your grandmother told you."

"You don't have to make it sound so cheesy."

A snort escaped me as I rolled my eyes at

him. "I can't believe you just said the word 'cheesy'."

He stopped moving and looked at me with pleased grin on his face. "I can't either."

Robert got up and held his hand out to help me to stand, the snaps and pops that came as I stretched the stiffness out of my joints only more noticeable since there had been no such sound when he stood. "Getting old there, aren't you?"

I gasped in mock indignation, exaggerating the effect with over-wide eyes and a low-hung jaw. "How. Dare. You!"

I tried to hold my expression for as long as I could, but Robert's immediately contrite face destroyed my will power and I began to giggle. "Oh, Robert. You should know by now that the last thing I'm concerned about is my age."

With a smile that hinted at some form of retaliation to go along with relief, he pressed a quick kiss to my forehead before scooping me up into his arms and setting off through the trees, his footsteps disappearing behind him as something disturbed the leaves, covering them up. Before the

bright shock of sunlight blocked my view, I saw the green face of Bala peek from around a tree, a hopeful smile on her face.

She closed one jet eye in an oddly slow wink, only to be lost by the sharp sting of the sun's rays. I closed my eyes before tucking my head into Robert's shoulder.

"Okay, get in," I heard him command when we stopped moving. He lowered my feet to the ground and I stared at the black car that sat in front of me.

"How did it get here?"

"Linda, the woman you met at the house--she drove it here before returning."

Linda was also the one who had somehow been able to keep from me the truth about what she was. She was neither human nor angel, so what was she? She wasn't a vampire, that was for sure, and I knew for a fact that she wasn't a nymph or an Erlking.

"Don't even think about asking," Robert said as he held the door open for me.

"Why?" I climbed in, pulling my legs in just before he shut the door on me.

I waited until he reached the driver's side door, and then pressed the lock button.

He lifted the handle and I nearly choked when I saw it tear off in his hand.

"Oh!"

Quickly, I reached over and pressed the lock button on his side. Hearing the familiar click, I saw his hand reach into where the handle had been and saw him pull once more, this time taking the door out instead.

"Oh, dear bananas!"

He bent his head down and glared at me. *Is this how you plan on getting me to tell you what Linda is? By making me destroy my car piece by piece?*

"I'm sorry!"

He shook his head at me, and I hung my own down in embarrassment and shame. How could I



have been so stupid? Didn't I know he would do something like that if the door didn't unlock? Of course I did.

But I didn't really care.

I raised my head to look at him and nearly fell over at the bemused expression that radiated nothing but humor and enjoyment at my sudden guilt.

*You're cute when you're wallowing.*

"What are we going to do now?"

He flung the door behind him and offered his hand to me, grinning like a madman as he replied. "We fly."

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"I don't understand why you couldn't just fix the stupid thing," Lark grumbled.

"With what tools? I'm an angel, Lark, not a mechanic."

"Oh sure. You'd think that with all of those books you've read over the past, oh, I don't know,

thousand years or so, you'd have at least read *one* book on car repair."

Robert turned around and shot his sister a venomous look. "Why would I need to know how to repair a vehicle when the only time I've ever owned one was when we moved back here?"

"Because you're the one who wanted to blend in. Guys know how to fix cars."

"Yeah, guys who can't fly."

Lark harrumphed and slunk into her seat. The seat that I had spent many a bored afternoon sitting in, staring out the window and eating nothing but junk food.

"So how'd you get this hunk of junk working anyway?"

Robert patted the dash of Graham's Buick and grinned. "We had a talk."

"Wh-what?" I sputtered, my body jerking around in surprise, nearly strangling my midsection with the seatbelt in the process.

"No, seriously. How?"

Lark's head popped back from between the seats, completely cutting off any view from where I sat of her brother. She stared at Robert, her long hair acting like a screen and shielding both of their expressions as she repeated my question.

Robert didn't hold back the guffaw that came out, low and deep in his throat at his sister's demand. The sound of it made me smile--there had been far too little of either smiling or laughing these past few days, and I had to appreciate them whenever I could.

"I was having it repaired and restored. It's sort of like a gift to Graham for being brave--or crazy--enough to agree to spend forever with you. Fortunately for me, the mechanical repairs were completed when I showed up. They hadn't shipped it off for the interior and exterior work yet, hence the current condition of the seats."

I pushed Lark's hair out of the way and marveled at Robert's thoughtfulness. "You knew just what he wanted; this car is probably the only thing of real significance that his father's ever given him. He's going to love it when it's done, Robert. Thank

you."

"I certainly hope he does. With the amount of work that's gone into repairing the engine alone, it would have been cheaper to have just purchased a brand new car for him."

"Like you've ever cared about saving money," Lark quipped, suddenly showing far more appreciation towards her brother than she had when, through my eyes, she first caught sight of the car as it had pulled up to the front door of their home.

Robert had dropped me off before picking the car up, insisting that I needed to be there when the Kims called. He had been right, but that didn't alter how I felt about being left behind. When he pulled up in Graham's car, I knew that Lark's heart felt the exact same burn as mine did at simply seeing the dented passenger-side door, and the rust patches all over the side and hood. It served as a reminder that Graham's life was still hanging precariously on the edge of a deranged angel's whim.



## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

Let me tell you something. The way a hospital smells, the way it permeates with the odor of floral-laced sick, with a dab of bandages and bland food is wrong. Especially when you're in a room filled with people who are in different stages of mourning, the acrid scent of tears and body heat making for an even more unpleasant and uncomfortable situation.

Stacy's parents, grief stricken at the impending death of their only daughter, had barely acknowledged our arrival. Robert, Lark, and I found room in an unoccupied corner and I tried my hardest to not let my nervousness overcome the faux face of sadness I had somehow managed to attach to myself.

The five Kim sons hovered around the foot of the bed, each one with their heads bowed in solemn obedience as their parents prayed beside her, one on each side, their hands gently yet possessively cradling hers. It was a scene that immediately erased the false grief within me and

replaced it with genuine pain because I knew that whatever happened, whether we were successful or not, the reality was that they were losing a daughter and a sister today. Nothing we did would prevent that from happening.

The door to the room opened and a doctor walked in, a purposeful line digging across his forehead running parallel to the one that made up his mouth. He was followed by a nurse who held in her hands a clipboard with several forms needing to be signed, a pen clutched between her fingers as she took in the amount of people that filled the room.

Mr. Kim stood up, a brave face masking the hurt that I had just witnessed seconds earlier, and quickly marked the signature lines with a swipe of the proffered pen. The grim task of signing away his daughter's life caused this once strong man's knees to buckle, and without the aid of his sons he would have fallen to the ground, succumbing to the woe that spread through the room like a rabid infection.

Lark's eyes pooled with liquid crystal, while Robert pressed determined fingers into the lids of

his eyes to hold back what the emotions of the room were causing to build behind them. Empathic though they might be, these were their emotions as well, and they were very difficult to suppress. My hand, firmly clasped in Robert's strong grip, squeezed his reassuringly. His fingers lifted from his shadowed eyes and he graced me with a tender smile.

"Thank you," he mouthed to me before turning his attention towards Lark, who blinked once before her eyes became flat, anticipation and focus erasing the dour look that she had adopted upon entering the room.

And then it was time.

Mrs. Kim's sobbing, soft and contained within her petite self, now burst forth from her in pitiful wails as, with a simple, curt nod by the doctor, the machines that kept Stacy's body artificially alive were turned off, one by one.

I watched as the pupils in Lark's eyes shrank, turning to pinpoints lost in the pale mercury irises that stared out, sightless and yet with far greater vision than anyone could ever imagine.



Robert's eyes also began to lose their darkness and he gave me a short nod before squeezing my hand. I let down the defenses that blocked his thoughts from reaching my own and instantly, as though I had fallen into a forest filled with bells, my mind was filled with a thousand different voices.

Before I could be overwhelmed by the chaos of the noise, one by one, they dropped away, and I closed my eyes to focus on the one that mattered, the one that I needed to find before it was too late.

*This way, Grace.*

Robert's voice in my head acted like a beacon that pulled me through the different waves of thought, passing by voices that were strange, and others that were gravely familiar. As the seconds disappeared forever, my sense of urgency grew, and I felt my mind rush by voices that I knew did not matter--none of them mattered.

Hundreds of voices, thousands of them, droned on and on in my head, memories that weren't mine flashing by in bursts of light and emotion--it was difficult to keep focused on what it

was that I needed to do. I didn't know what I was looking for. No one did. Each voice was like a doorway that led to someone else's mind, someone else's secrets, and I had to be the mind reader now.

I could hear the dour thoughts of Stacy's eldest brother, the angry regrets of her twin, Sean. I passed these voices by as I listened more intently now, hearing the macabre thoughts of nurses passing by, and the sympathetic notions of someone in another room who had learned of a young girl's parents' decision to end her suffering rather than prolong it.

Each individual thought was like another stone added to a cobblestone street that kept going, no end in sight. I was beginning to feel wearied, my mind filled with far more than it could handle, and though my eyes were shut, I could see the black and white speckled dots that always preceded me blacking out start to dance behind my lids.

And then from some corner of the dark, I heard it. Her voice was singing to me, each note slowly drowning out the cacophony of words and

images that had flooded my mind. I followed the sound wordlessly, eager steps drawing me forward as the musical pull grew louder and stronger. The song, which had started out merely as a melody, now had words, words that spoke of the unknown and its wondrous splendor upon discovery.

I held on to each note, using them to guide my way to the doorway that would lead me into her sheltered mind. I didn't know what I needed to do once I got there, only that I had little time left to do it, and so I ran. In my mind, I raced through my thoughts, through my fears and doubts and flew towards the darkening window of opportunity before it shut on me, for as soon as I knew what it was I was looking for, the music, the melodious sound that was Stacy's singing was beginning to fade away.

*Stacy!*

My mind reached out to her, a mental hand to the song that had led me to her.

*Stacy, don't go. Don't leave us yet!*

My head began to throb, the ache an almost

unbearable and unyielding threat to what I needed to do. The dark spots were beginning to overtake the white one behind my lids and I could see the red glow of light behind them as I began to lose my hold on the world of thought and memory that Robert had opened up for me, Stacy's life slowly fading away and leaving me behind.

*No!*

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I opened my eyes, and found myself standing in a long hallway, a series of five doors running alongside me at both ends. The walls themselves bowed outwards in some areas, as though there were large bubbles just urging to burst open behind them. Its surface was painted in a mish-mash of colors, no discernable pattern being created as each one blended into the other, never quite going together and yet, never really separate from each other, like a rainbow that had been hit by a tornado of color.

The doors, however, were something else entirely. Each one was not content to be an ordinary

rectangle set in an oddly shaped and painted wall. No, these doors all appeared to have been cut into the walls themselves, their shapes seemingly random, with equally random images and patterns painted on them, contrasting greatly with the variegated walls that surrounded them.

Even their handles varied, from the mundane round knobs that usually graced the most ordinary of doors, to what looked like upside down teapots, their spouts and handles looking like mismatched ears on an equally lopsided head. There seemed to be no real method to the pairings of handles to doors, the shapes of each never matching up, no matter what the twisted little architect of this whimsical hallway intended.

Directly behind me stood a lotus shaped door, its handle missing, a red ribbon hanging in the opening it left behind. Ahead of me I could make out the shape of a large, circular door at the end of the hall, though I couldn't quite make out the color save for a smaller darker circle that sat directly in its center. It was the only spot of color that didn't seem to belong there amongst the sea of paint that

surrounded it. Despite the loud colors that screamed at me from the walls, the hall itself was eerily silent.

"Hello?" I called out, hearing my voice return to me in an echo that had somehow aged it, a perverse hint of what I'd never sound like. "Hell-oh," I shouted this time, exaggerating each syllable and waiting for them to bounce back to me in that same foreign voice.

"Grace?" Stacy called out.

This wasn't what I had expected.

"Stacy? Stacy, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me! Where are you, Grace?"

Her voice sounded strained and muffled behind the solid wooden core of one of the numerous doors.

"I'm coming, Stacy. Just keep talking so that I can find you!" I awaited her reply and upon hearing it, I opened a leaf-shaped door immediately to my left, biting back a scream at what I found lying behind it.

It was a windowless room, dull and institutional with flat gray walls that contrasted dramatically from the vivid world that lay just beyond the doorway. I had to cover my mouth and remind myself to breathe, albeit far more slowly than possible at the scene that stood before me. A steel slab table--one that was remarkably similar to those that the school had in the cafeteria's kitchen--stood in the middle of the room like a grisly display case, showcasing countless sets of white wings that had been torn from their owners, splayed out like plumed, ornate tiles against the cold metal surface.

Bloodied feathers were scattered all over the concrete floor like macabre confetti, while tufts of down floated in the overheated room that exaggerated the smell of blood and permeated air with its noxious odor, causing me to gag. The bloody scene of decay and death was laid out before me like a work of grotesque art on a canvas that encased everything in the room.

Hanging up on the walls to either side of me were the various corpses of the wings' original owners, their heads dangling limply to the side, their

deflated and bloodied torsos nailed quite violently to the slate colored surface while trails of scarlet flowed down beneath them. The wall that faced me was bare, save for one, lone, black wing that still twitched as the last ounce of life left it, dripping to the floor in grotesque heart-shaped puddle.

I quickly shut the door, wiping my hands on the front of my shirt and grimacing when I saw the smear of blood that now covered me like a stroke of paint. I looked at the door handle and cringed when I noticed that it was dripping with the same crimson that now stained my shirt. Why hadn't I realized that my hands were covered in blood?

Stacy's frantic cry pulled my attention away from the horror of what I had seen. "Grace, hurry. I can't find my way out!"

"Hold on, Stacy!" I took one last look at the door, my body trembling at the sight of the opaque red fluid that began to ooze from beneath it, and then ran down the corridor, passing first a bird shaped door, followed by one that looked like a lopsided heart, the sounds of screams and violence that erupted from each one driving me further and



further away. "Hang on, Stacy. I'm going to find you!"

A soft thumping sound began to drum in my ear. I knew it was because I was overly excited, the fear of what I had seen taking a strong hold of my heart, clamping down on it and exaggerating each frightened beat.

"Grace? Where are you?" Stacy's voice cried out, the sound almost hysterical.

"I'm coming, Stacy--talk to me, tell me where you are. Which door, Stacy--which door are you behind?"

The pounding in my head grew louder. Each step I took sounded like a thunderbolt hitting the side of a mountain, a roaring burst of noise that engulfed everything around me, and I had to hold on to the wall and door handles for support as the rhythm grew stronger and more frenetic with each beat.

I reached for the handle of heart-shaped door to my right and nearly fell against it; the door, the handle, it was all an illusion that had had been painted to mirror the opposite wall, the real door

staring at me, mocking me as I struggled to maintain my balance. Upon closer inspection I came to determine that every single door on my right side was nothing but a painted fabrication, striving for some sort of balance to the already off-kilter hallway.

Everything was a match, even down to the painted blood pools on the floor. With a disturbed shake of my head, I continued on down the corridor, this time opting to remain as dead-center as possible.

My feet grew heavy, dragging on the tiles beneath them, as though my bones were made of heavy steel rods and the floor was one gigantic magnet, holding me down and preventing me from moving forward. I struggled with each step before finally realizing that I'd be able to move more easily if I slid my feet rather than lift them, but each miniscule inch fatigued me, sweat was beading and falling into my eyes, partially blinding me as my lids grew heavy from exhaustion.

"Grace," Stacy's weakening voice called out, somehow penetrating the storm inside of my head.

"Grace, it's too late. It's too late, go back..."

There was a desperation in her voice that spurred me on, despite the feeling that my feet were about ready to drop off at the ankles and my brain felt like it was only seconds away from turning into jelly.

"Stacy," I groaned. "Don't give up on me, Stacy. I'm not giving up on you so don't you dare give up on me, you hear me?"

With one last ounce of effort, I reached the final door. The dark spot in the center that I had spied from the opposite end of the hallway stuck out like a target against the golden circle that surrounded it. The color was as dark a black as I had ever seen, flat and deep and endless. I lifted a hand to touch it and pulled it back when the shock of a freezing cold wave of air hit my palm like it had been stabbed. I clutched my hand to my chest and cocked my head to the side, confused.

"Grace?"

The weakened voice was coming from the dark circle, slightly echoing as though it had

originated from the bottom of a tunnel or well.

"Stacy?" I waited, holding my breath and gritting my teeth at the head-splitting thundering that continued to rattle inside of my head.

The voice grew louder. "Open the door, Grace! Open the door!"

I looked down at the handle and reached for it, my sore hand eager in its mission to release Stacy from her prison. "Hold on, Stacy. I'm going to get you out of there!"

"Grab the handle and open it, Grace. Hurry!"

There was a renewed sense of energy behind the voice, and I felt both relieved and alarmed by it. My hand stilled just above the door handle as I listened to the pleas that came from behind the circular door.

"Grace, what are you waiting for? Open the door, Grace! Open the door and get me out of here!"

That's when I heard it. The change.

Stacy's voice had always sounded like an

odd mixture of roughness and sweetness all rolled into one. I'd recognize it in any shape, any form, dripping with any emotion.

This voice, however, was different. It was still Stacy, but in a way that wasn't normal, wasn't...human. Call it me being paranoid, call it simply knowing my friend, but my hand jerked away from the handle and I stepped backwards as the voice behind the door continued demanding that I open it.

My eyes took in everything about this door, from its golden outer ring to the tight, pitch colored one in its center that held some sort of mystery inside it. And then my eyes caught sight of the handle. I hadn't noticed it previously because it had lain in my hand, covered by my anxious fingers, but now that I could see it, see what it was, I felt my jaw grow lax, my mouth gaping at the sight.

"It's a...carrot," I breathed, surprised.

A brass, cartoon-like carrot jutted out from the door, the leaves poking up at the top while the triangular root pointed to the floor. There was no pool of blood here, whether real or painted; just the

bare concrete.

"Stacy?" I called out softly, and shivered with the cold chill of comprehension that crawled down my spine, apprehension pushing the chill to the very tips of my fingers and toes.

A violent shout came from behind the gold and black wood, startling me and forcing me to take a step back. "Open the door, NOW!"

I stared at the carrot doorknob once more and it was as though I could see the white rabbit standing there beside me, its cheerful white face smiling, its pink nose twitching in both agitation and curiosity as it hurried along to mail out its important letter.

The rabbit had always been focused on its task, and though I knew what its intentions were, I had still followed it, still asked it the same questions over and over again until it finally spoke to me. Each time it had replied, it had spoken of making that carrot cake should we ever meet again, but each time we did, the same scene would replay itself...until that last time. Something had changed,

and it had affected everything around me, including my plans.

I looked at the door and gasped when finally I saw the door for what it was. It wasn't a door at all. It was an eye. A large, pale yellow, almost golden eye that had watched me--and was still watching me--as I had hesitated and struggled to find Stacy before her body finally gave out and she could no longer be saved.

Seeing this intent eye staring back at me, realizing that it had been watching me caused my anger to take over.

The voice that had ordered me to release it was not Stacy's. I knew, with every cell in my now boiling blood, that while Stacy was close, *she* wasn't behind that door.

And then it all began to make sense to me, that strange dream that never did. The letter was a message that could never be delivered, never mailed because it was trapped in the mind of a seven year-old girl. Whatever the message was, it had waited all these years to finally be sent out. The

recipient: Whoever it was that lay behind that door that demanded I open it and let it out. And the rabbit wasn't a rabbit at all--it was a warning. I had only to figure out for what, and why.

But Stacy ~~was~~ here. There was no reason for her not to be, and I simply needed to find her. It was with silent understanding that I turned around and knew that I wasn't alone. The red ribbon, still dangling from the lotus-shaped door's vacant doorknob, waved to me like a flag and I began to race to it. I covered my ears with my hands and, remarkably, the pounding that hadn't let me out of its vise-like grip suddenly ceased. It felt like the entire world had lifted off of me, and my feet were light and quick moving, spurred on by the revelations that had begun to spin their web in my thoughts.

It took me mere seconds to get to the door and I removed one hand to reach for the flying red streamer, unleashing the ceaseless battering into my mind once more. But this time my purpose was far too clear to be muddled with bright colors and fancy shaped doors and knobs, or the pounding of a heart that I now knew wasn't mine. I grabbed the



ribbon with my free hand and pulled it, trailing it behind me as I ran back towards that golden door. It remained wide, though I could see the dark spot that lay in its center begin to narrow.

"I'm coming, Stacy!" I shouted at the blackness as I leapt, the ribbon still clutched in my hand, my other hand reaching out towards the darkness as it enveloped me in its chilling emptiness.

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"There are better ways to make an entrance."

Her voice was like a cold splash of water after traversing the desert for days. I opened my eyes to greet her with a warm smile.

Stacy.

Or what looked like Stacy.

"Is that you?" I asked her, confused. It was like looking at her reflection through a cracked mirror fogged over with a thick haze of bluish smoke. She was incomplete and broken apart by

everything that her mind had been through, the damage so profound, I bit my lip to keep from exclaiming my shock and dismay.

The prism that was her face held facets that moved independently of each other, never in sync. I was knocked off balance as she smiled at me, her fragmented eyes lighting up at different times. Her mouth--split into four different panes of mirrored glass--lifted into a smile like a segmented wave that was out of sync.

It didn't help that we were in what felt like the inside of a large, cracked mirror, reflections of the two of us bouncing off at sharp angles, distorting and exaggerating who we were, what we were. This was the fragmented inner shell of her mind, and it was here that I would have to find a way to bring her home.

"Stacy?"

"Who else would it be?"

I shook my head and laughed, a nervous sound that startled me. As it had done before when Sam had taken control of my subconscious, it

sounded different, so unlike my own voice--too musical, melodic, effortless. I questioned it; questioned my surroundings and who it was that stood before me, broken and rearranged like some twisted and perverted version of Humpty Dumpty. Until I saw the incredible sadness behind the dark brown eyes of Stacy's shattered face that no amount of fracturing could hide and knew that angel or not, Sam did not possess within him the ability to feel such genuine melancholy. That was a human trait.

"We have to go, Stacy," I said to her in an urgent manner. "We have to go before it's too late."

"I don't know if I want to. What if I choose to stay right here? I'm safe here. I wasn't safe out there. It's dangerous out there."

The child-like quality of Stacy's behavior was shocking. Lark had said that her memories had to be reformed, she was starting from scratch almost, and though I didn't quite understand at the time, I knew now that Stacy's mind was like an infant. Without the thoughts and memories that aged one's mind, she was as timid and frightened as a

newborn, defenseless against the fears that now invaded her subconscious. The Stacy that I knew was never frightened, never defenseless.

How was I going to turn this fractured shell that stood before me into a whole person? I didn't even know how I was going to get back...if we *could* get back.

There was a tugging at my hand and I looked down. The red ribbon--still held securely in my hand--was pulling, urgent and insistent. I followed its red length and saw that it was taut, the other end taking up its slack and encouraging me to follow its lead. I understood its intent and I quickly grabbed Stacy's hand.

"We don't have time to discuss whether or not you want to stay, Stacy. If you're coming, we have to go now."

"But what if I don't like it out there? It's so safe here. There's nothing here that can harm me."

My head shook in disagreement. "You're safe here only until it's too late, Stacy. You're dying. If we don't get back, this place won't exist anymore

because you won't exist anymore. And if I don't get back-" I realized with a shudder "-I won't exist anymore."

"Do you mean that you'll be stuck here with me?" she asked innocently.

"No. There won't be any 'here' to be stuck in, Stacy. Your mind will stop functioning. This place, it exists only because you're still alive, but there's not much time left. Your body is dying, your brain is being starved of oxygen and blood. I don't know how much longer we have but it's not long."

The tugging at my hand grew frantic, my iron tight grip causing me to skid across the floor. "Stacy, please."

"You go, Grace."

I shook my head, my mind made up. "I'm not leaving without you, Stacy. It's my fault that this is happening. The cancer returning, Erica, the coma; all of this is my fault. If you don't come, I'm staying. I won't let Sam win; I won't let him feel my grief at losing you. I'm not leaving you here to die alone."

Her head lifted, her face turning to mine and I

watched, fascinated as the off-center planes that made up her eyes shifted, the lines blending together until I could see the two deep brown orbs blink in unison, the light behind them now familiar. She was coming back!

"You can't stay here, Grace. You're not done yet."

I nodded enthusiastically. "I know I'm not done yet. That's why I came to bring you back. You have to come back, Stacy. You have to help me finish this."

Slowly, line by prismatic line, Stacy's face began to reform itself, the blue, foggy haze that diffused who Stacy was began slowly fading away, revealing the warm and familiar smile of my friend, a singular smile, soft and pliant and oozing warmth.

The ribbon in my hand was now reeling me towards a darkened spot in the crystal walls that surrounded us, and I reached my hand out to Stacy, who gave me a curt nod and took hold of me, her grip strong and healthy, determined. We had won this battle.

Sensing that I had finally given up resisting, the red silk in my hand drew Stacy and I through the darkness with a jolting speed, the shattering glass engulfing the two of us in a hailstorm of sound and razor sharp edges. I felt the sting as one by one, the tiny shards tore through my skin, slicing through my clothing to feed upon my arms and legs, my hands and my face.

Stacy, on the other hand, was left unscathed and it dawned on me in that moment that of course she would--this was her mind, her memories, her thoughts that were raining down on us. If we didn't hurry, I knew that it would soon overwhelm me and I wouldn't be able to bring Stacy back.

With a crashing thud, Stacy and I landed on the cold concrete floor of the brilliantly painted hallway, the door behind no longer golden with its darkened center, but now a large, burgeoning black hole that was spreading further outward, quickly swallowing up the vivid hues on the walls. The red binding that pulled taut in my hand stretched across the corridor, painting a direct path towards the lotus door directly in front of us.

"This way," I panted as I gathered my feet beneath me and stood up, pulling Stacy along with me.

As we passed each door, they shook, their handles twisting and turning in a desperate bid to open, rattling with cold, brassy ferocity when each one failed. I glanced at them quickly, an apple shaped door, then a crescent one, their frames bowing and bending towards the darkness that crept behind us, hungry in its need to devour what didn't belong here.

The floor began to quake beneath our feet, and my footing was lost as I slipped on the blood that now slicked the surface. Stacy didn't flinch as she landed quite solidly on the concrete beside me, and I silently thanked God for that--a fear or aversion to blood was the last thing that she needed to have with the future she was facing.

Together, side-by-side, Stacy and I reached the last door, the red ribbon now hanging slack outside of the void where the knob no longer existed.

"What now?" Stacy asked me, and I looked



at her and frowned. I did not know.

I pulled at the loose material, winding it up until it was taut. I yanked at it, wanting whatever was on the other side to pull it once more, to pull us through.

Instead, the ribbon snapped. And I fell back, landing on the floor, the red silk now stained a deep burgundy as it sank into the blood that pooled around me.

"No!" I cried. "No, no, no! What do I do now? I don't know what to do!" I flung myself at the door, pounded on it as the whistling and rattling behind me alerted me to the growing danger of being swallowed up by Stacy's thoughts.

"Robert!" I knew he could hear me. I knew he could.

"Grace, what's going on? How do we get out of here?"

My hands flew to my head, the sting of the cuts on my face and my hands, and the sound of falling glass and splintering wood scattering my own thoughts and leaving me dazed as I struggled to

gather them up, to isolate the thoughts that mattered. I looked at Stacy, her face and body splitting into two before blending back into one again--I was losing it and I didn't have enough time to find whatever it was that was disappearing.

"Grace, are you okay?"

I shook my head at Stacy's question, knowing that I was as far from okay as possible. I was so close. We were so close and yet we couldn't get out. This was not what was supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to die this way, not trapped in the mind of one of my best friends. I looked at her face and I saw the faith she held in me, despite the reality that I wasn't so sure that we had succeeded in bringing her safely out of the prison of her own mind.

I closed my eyes to the dizzying image of Stacy's splitting face and I imagined what Robert looked like--was he fearful, too? Did he hear my thoughts as they mingled along with Stacy's?

I saw his face, his smile so gloriously beautiful, his wings, majestic and dark, like an

inverse moon. I saw his tears; the crystal droplets that fell from his eyes were no longer shimmering little diamond jewels, but dark, ruby-like droplets that fell down his face, dangling from them by tiny strands of crimson thread. His wings fluttered in misery and it looked as though they, too, dripped with the dark drops as his sadness caused him a grief so overwhelming, his entire body seemed to quake in agony.

My eyes snapped open. "His wings!"

Stacy looked at me with confusion burning in her eyes. "What? What about whose wings?"

I grabbed her hand and pulled her towards that leaf shaped door, flinging it open and returning myself to the horror of the room.

"Oh my, God!" Stacy moaned, covering her mouth with her hand in shock. "What the hell is this place? Is this all in my head? What kind of freaky crap have I been watching to have this here?"

Ignoring her question, I ran to the wall that stood directly in front of us and grabbed the black wing that had been nailed there, the soft feathers

still warm, the nail that had pinned it to the matte gray surface clattering down at my feet before the blood that drenched the ground silenced it forever. Instantly, the room began to shake, the strong vibrations sending everything around us toppling down. The metal table skidded across the floor, its macabre display spilling onto the floor and landing atop the carcasses that now littered it.

"It's going to be okay, Stacy," I said to her in an amazingly calm voice. "We're going home."

"How do you know?" she asked, panicked as she held my hand and moved close beside me. "How the hell do you know that? We're in a freaking morgue for birds. How is this the way home?"

"Because this room, that hallway outside, it's all Sam's vision, everything here is what Sam sees in his mind, what he's turned your mind into. These dead birds, they represent him and others just like him. Their wings have been torn from them, their freedoms clipped.

"He sees himself as the victim here; they're all victims. Except this one-" I held the black, plumed appendage up "-he kept this one separate

because it represents Robert. Sam doesn't see Robert as belonging amongst his kind. He's different. It's not just the color of his wings, but who he is, the choices he's made and what they represent."

Stacy swung her arm around, motioning towards the ground with her outstretched hand. "So what does this all mean? Are we stuck in my mind or Sam's? You said that if I came out, that I'd be okay. Now I'm trapped in a room filled with dead birds and you're telling me that this is all the sick vision inside that Sam guy's mind. Are we going to be okay, Grace? Really?"

I could tell that the darkness had begun to surround us, having finally entered the room, devouring the last bit of color left on the walls, the gray disappearing into the black void that crept closer and closer to where Stacy and I stood. With a reassuring smile, I nodded, answering her question with a surety that I felt so strongly, it beat out a rhythm that soon became a chant, repeating over and over the name of hope, of escape.

"I was able to come into your mind through

Robert, but there's no memory of him here that belongs to you, only Sam. Sam's vision of Robert was meant to frighten me, to keep me away from here. He's been in my mind, led me to believe in things that weren't true. He thinks of me as some pathetic human, too stupid to put the pieces together, but I'm starting to figure things out. He's not going to win, Stacy. We're going to make it out of here and you're going to be okay."

"And this is how it's going to happen?"

I nodded, and squeezed her hand. "Yes. I know it doesn't make sense right now, but it will."

She squeezed mine in return and together we felt the dark surround begin to cover us, pull at us and drown us as it took over everything; feeling, sound, sight were all swallowed up as we floated in this sea of blackness. For a brief moment in time, we were weightless, free from problems or fears. And then the torrent of thoughts that had once filled Stacy's mind began to emerge, filling up the void that Sam had created. Piece by piece, memory by fragmented memory, the light was coming back.

"I did it, Robert," I whispered when I felt his

warm thoughts infiltrate mine, separating themselves from Stacy's.

*Come home, Grace.*

*I'm coming.*

I sighed when the pain began to dull; the cuts and lacerations had lost their edge, their sting now replaced by a pair of strong arms that held me tightly against a solid chest.

My eyes opened to see a pair of bright, liquid eyes the color of pure silver staring back at me.

"Welcome back," he said softly.





## **COLD DAY IN HELL**

We were still in Stacy's hospital room, now filled with a priest and several other members of Stacy's family. To my surprise, I also saw my dad standing near the doorway, several knuckles pressed to his mouth as he took in the scene before him. My eyes darted over to a man who stood beside Stacy's father, his eyes staring at a clock, his fingers pressed against Stacy's wrist.

With a curt nod, another person in a white jacket began to scribble furiously on a clipboard. This was the silent signal that unleashed the tidal wave of bitter grief as it overflowed from Stacy's mother and father, who both threw themselves onto her body, unable to accept the fact that their daughter was gone.

Stacy's oldest brother, too overcome with the display, took off, shoving his way through the cluster of people that had gathered near the door. Two more brothers soon followed, and finally, the second to the last son left, leaving just Sean.

He was Stacy's twin, conceived with her,

born with her, and now left to live without her. It wasn't something that he could accept, but he wasn't showing it in the same manner as his parents or his siblings. He remained stoic, though the lines of tension could be seen on his face, and the rigidity that forced his back into an impossible line would bend the strongest steel pole were anyone to attempt to cut him down right then.

Lark walked towards him and placed a gentle hand onto his shoulder. I braced myself for his reaction, expecting him to lash out violently in some manner, in the manner that I was used to seeing from him. Instead, he sighed, and his shoulders dipped a little. But he wouldn't let himself fall completely. He had too much pride for that. He was too much like his sister.

Instead, he turned to look at Lark. At first, like most humans, he was too overcome with her beauty to say anything. He blinked and swallowed a few times, unable to gather his wits about him and form a coherent thought, much less a sentence. But grief and denial are both strong emotions and after several moments, Sean's face appeared to clear of

its confusion and amazement, allowing him to take in a deep breath and then exhale slowly, his words flowing out loosely as he did.

"You helped her, loved her. I'll never forget that."

She gifted him with a dazzling smile that brought on several more rapid blinks before he turned his head to once again gaze upon his sister, who lay motionless on the bed.

*How long until they come to take her body away?*

I looked at Robert as I thought the question, and he gave an almost imperceptible shrug. *That depends solely on how long the Kims want to remain here with her. They've requested her remains be cremated, which leaves little for Ambrose's people to cover up. Lark has Stacy in a deep, relaxed state. Her heart won't beat unless it needs to, and her mind is at rest so there's no strain to it or her body. She can remain this way quite comfortably for a few hours, although she is aware of everything that is going on.*

I frowned at that. Stacy didn't need to hear her family grieve for her. Did she?

*She needs it, Grace. She needs to have that closure, otherwise her transformation and transition will be a failure, and everything that you risked will be for nothing.*

I didn't agree with it, and I could tell by the seriousness on Robert's face that he didn't either, but this was what he knew. He understood the complexities of death and grief far more than I ever could. I hadn't been allowed into that part of his life, but with each passing moment of time, I was becoming more and more drawn into it. Soon, he wouldn't be able to keep anything from me, and the stark look on his face told me that he knew it.

We said nothing to each other after that until Stacy's body was finally removed. The instructions that were given to the two men who came with a gurney and piles of sheets to wrap her body in were simple. She was to be transported to the Licking Mortuary where her body would be cremated. This was received with stiff nods, and then Stacy was wheeled away, her parents remaining in the room,

mindlessly occupying themselves by cleaning things up, rearranging things around and packing up Stacy's belongings.

Sean shook his head at his parents behavior, and turned to give Lark one last nod before leaving, most likely to join his older brothers. Lark sighed and then walked over to the Stacy's parents. Her low voice didn't mask her words, and I heard her give her heartfelt condolences for their loss. She was telling the truth, but she emphasized the fact that this was, indeed, their loss. *We* hadn't lost Stacy. Not yet, anyway.

Dad came up to me, his face holding back a somber smile. "I'm sorry, Grace. I didn't know things had gotten so bad so quickly. Graham told us what was going on and I knew you'd be here. I just didn't want you to go through it alone."

He looked at Robert and gave him an awkward smile. "I mean, I know you wouldn't be alone, but I thought it would be easier for you if I were here."

I wrapped my arms around him, noting how

thin he'd gotten these past couple of days. "Dad, I'm always glad when you're around. And you're right, you've made it easier. Thank you for coming, and for being there for me when I needed you."

"Anything for you, kiddo," he said, returning my hug. "I only wish that death didn't have such a hold on you. This is too much for someone so young to have to deal with."

I sputtered at that last bit, and he patted my back, apparently thinking that I had suffered from a sudden coughing fit. "I'm fine now, Dad. Really. This doesn't frighten me." I loosened my arms and he took this as a signal to release me in kind.

"How's Janice doing?"

He gave me a sad smile, his eyes saying much more than he probably could have explained with mere words, though he did try. "She's trying her best to keep a brave face, but it's hard. Katie was her only real family member left, besides Matthew. This came on so suddenly; the coroner won't know what caused Katie's death for at least a week, but he thinks she suffered from some kind of embolism. Now Janice is worried that it might be genetic and

she's paranoid that the same thing could happen to her."

My eyes darted away from his; I was afraid that he'd be able to see the guilt in them, almost as much as I feared he'd see what I was planning on doing to prevent Janice's fears from coming true.

"So," he said, coughing as he looked between Robert and me. "I probably shouldn't ask, but I know that your prom's tomorrow--I wasn't sure if you were still planning on going or not, given the circumstances..."

"I haven't thought about it, to be honest with you," I answered.

"Well, you know that Stacy would have wanted you to go. She wanted a normal life for you almost as much as you did. I think it would have made her happy."

"I don't think I could, Dad. It'd feel wrong to go without her."

"Are you going to be staying with Lark tonight? She looks like she's taking this quite hard." I followed his gaze towards where Lark was

standing beside Stacy's mom. She looked as though she had aged several years in just seconds, and I had to blink to convince my eyes that I wasn't seeing an illusion.

"I think so. I can't bring my grief over to the house now, not after what happened to Katie. It wouldn't be fair to Janice."

"Alright then; Love you, kiddo."

My voice cracked. "I love you too, Dad."

With a sigh, he gave me a relenting shrug of his shoulders before turning to offer his condolences to Stacy's parents. I waited until he was done before stepping forward to offer my own.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Kim," I said to them, though my apology was for far more than their loss. I simply couldn't tell them that I was sorry that they were right, that my friendship with Stacy had cost them their daughter. I couldn't tell them that if everything went according to plan, Stacy would be alive, though not in the sense that they were used to.

"You stayed for everything. You stayed when my sons could not. You are a true friend, Grace."



Stacy was very blessed to have you in her life," Mr. Kim said to me while his wife held my hands in hers, patting them with one hand intermittently, sniffing as she did so.

"I'm the one who was blessed to have her friendship, Mr. Kim. And I couldn't leave even if I'd wanted to," I replied honestly.

The two of them both nodded and then turned to leave, leaning on each other in support. I wanted to tell them the truth, that Stacy was going to be fine, just different. But I knew that as much as they wanted their daughter to still be alive, they wanted it with conditions--one of them being that she still be human.

*She's not out of the woods yet, Grace. There's a lot left that has to be done, and I don't trust Ambrose to be alone with Stacy. We need to go.*

I nodded and allowed him to pull me out of the room. We walked quickly through the hallway towards the fire exit. "Where are we going?"

"We don't have time to wait for an elevator,

Grace."

With a swift turn of the handle, Robert had the fire door open; his arm swooped beneath my knees and lifted me off of the ground, and then he was flying down the stairs, traveling down several flights of stairs in a fraction of a second.

"Whoa," I groaned, dizzy by the unnatural speed at which we had traveled.

"I'm sorry, but that was necessary."

"I understand, I do, but my stomach doesn't. That just adds another complication to things."

He chuckled. "Here's one more," he said with an amused smile.

"Grace! Robert!"

We both turned around to see Shawn walking towards us, a cellophane wrapped bouquet of flowers in his hands.

"Shawn! What are you doing here?"

"I'm coming to visit my sister. She just had a baby girl--my first niece--what are you two doing

here?" he asked, his eyes darting back and forth at the two of us, taking note of our hands clasped together.

"Stacy...Stacy died today," I replied, my eyes unable to remain on his face, afraid that he'd see the lie behind them.

Shawn's smile collapsed, his arm dropping to his side in shock. "Are you serious? But I thought she was doing okay!"

Robert patted Shawn's shoulder, a friendly gesture that was meant to both comfort and distract Shawn. "It happened rather suddenly. She fell into a coma and her parents decided to remove her from life support, rather than keep her on until the cancer finally killed her."

Shawn moved towards me and wrapped his arms around my shoulders in a rather awkward hug, his body arched sideways to keep a distance between us. "I'm so sorry, Grace. The two of you were so tight..."

"Thanks, Shawn," I murmured. "Listen, I was going to call you later and tell you-"

He lifted his head and pulled away from me, holding his hand up to stop me from finishing. "I know what you're going to say and I completely understand. You want to go to prom with Robert. Losing someone you care about can totally change how you look at things, and I don't blame you for wanting to go with him rather than with me. Heck, I'd go with him if I could."

I couldn't help it. I smiled at that comment. "Actually, Shawn, I was going to tell you that I don't think I can go to prom. With everything that's happened lately, the last thing I want to do is get dressed up for a dance."

This seemed to cheer him up a bit and he nodded in agreement. "That's totally understandable. Besides, I don't think that there's going to be a prom."

"What? Why not?"

"Oh crap, you weren't in school today, were you? Of course not, so you don't know. Erica Hamilton attacked Mr. Branke today."

I heard my jaw drop, heard the hollow pop it

made as it snapped open in shock. "What?"

"Yeah. It happened during third period. Erica just went ballistic. Some of the kids think that the two of them probably had some side thing going--which is kind of gross; okay, really gross--and Erica heard about Mr. Branke's date with that new teacher, Miss Violent, and--"

I cut him off. "Wait, Mr. Branke is dating Miss Deovolente?"

"Yeah, I guess. They had a date the other night--everyone saw them together. Mr. Branke was holding onto Miss Violent's hand and--"

"Deovolente. Her last name is Deovolente."

"Yeah, well, after what happened today, she'll be known as Miss Violent forever."

"What happened?"

"Everything was cool, you know, copacetic, and then Erica comes into the classroom and starts wailing on Mr. Branke in the middle of class. And he just kind of stood there, like a robot. He's been acting pretty weird lately, I'm sure you've noticed, but

these past couple of days, it's like he's not even there. Not really. And Erica just launched herself at him, screaming and hissing like some kind of rabid cat or something. She must have been jealous because she kept saying crap about how he's in her head, she can't get him out of her mind, and junk like that.

"Anyway, Miss Viol--erm, Miss Deovolente came in and pulled Erica off of Mr. Branke, and then Erica went all batshit-insane and started wailing on her. Mr. Branke kind of just stood there and watched, didn't do anything. Hell, I probably wouldn't have done anything either; two chicks fighting over me? That's hot!

"Anyway, all of the noise must have alerted security or something because Mr. Kenner came in with Mrs. Mayhew and they pulled Erica off of Miss Deovolente who then attacked Mr. Branke. It was, like, the coolest chick fight ever. And Mr. Branke didn't do anything! He didn't even crack a smile that the two of them were fighting over him. Like I said, the guy's a robot."

"Did Erica say anything?" I asked.

"Grace, we have to go." Robert tugged at my hand. "I'm sorry, Shawn. I wish we had more time to talk, but maybe you can tell us all about this on Monday."

"Um. Okay, yeah."

"I'm sorry about prom, Shawn," I said to him as Robert dragged me away. "Believe it or not, I was actually looking forward to it. I hope you find a date in time, if there's a prom to go to!"

"I'll figure out something. You take care, okay?" he called out after me, waving before we turned a corner.

"That was rude," I chastised.

"That was necessary."

"We could have learned more about what happened."

He tapped a finger against his temple and smiled. "I already did."

"Oh."

When we were outside, Robert turned to

face me. "I need you to climb onto my back and hang on."

"Why? What about your wings?"

"We'll be able to travel faster this way. And don't worry about my wings. I won't be opening them while we're flying."

"Why do we need to travel faster? Where are we going?"

"Home."

"But why? We have to be with Stacy, we have to make sure that she's okay."

"Grace, there are three Seraphim at my home right now, and more are gathering as I speak. Though they've most likely tried to keep this gathering as secretive as possible, there will be interest in where they have all disappeared to, and if Sam learns of this then Graham's life will be in even more danger than it already is.

"There's nothing more that we can do for Stacy now other than wait. As much as I detest this choice that you have made for her, I know that



Ambrose will take care of her. Lark will remain with her until the worst is over. You do not have to worry about her anymore."

"I didn't make this choice for Stacy, she made it for herself," I argued before sighing resignedly at what now lay ahead of her. "How long will it take?"

Robert looped my arms around his neck and hoisted me atop his back, leaping into the evening sky before answering.

*She's very ill, her body already willing to die. The infection that Ambrose will give her will spread through her body in less than twenty minutes, pumped through her blood by her heart. Once it has reached every cell in her body, it will begin to change them. That could take anywhere from a few hours to a few days, depending on the strength of the virus in Ambrose's body.*

*During this time, she will be in incredible pain, and her body will need to feed in order to maintain the energy necessary to allow for the transformation to complete. What concerns*

*Ambrose is how her cancerous cells will react to his virus.*

"So, Stacy's cancer could cause something to go wrong...?"

His head moved once in a grim nod. *But there's little chance that it would be anything that Stacy wouldn't live through. The virus is far too intelligent for that.*

"Intelligent? It's a virus--how can a virus have intelligence?"

*Grace, you forget that this isn't a human disease. Granted, it exists in former humans, but it didn't start out that way. This is solely the creation of divinity gone wrong. The virus is like any other human one in that it can become resistant to factors that seek to weaken or destroy it, but it goes further than that. It adapts itself to the environment it exists in.*

*Why do you think you have never seen Ambrose's true form? Why have you never seen him behave like some flesh-starved animal? The*

virus, it learned, adapted itself to each new environment. The first erlkings and vampires that were created by Miki were filled with bloodlust, unable to control their urges because the virus attacked that part of the brain, leaving them unable to think, only capable of acting out of hunger.

The great majority of early infections were caused by this during the transformation stage alone. Miki's children were too anxious to feed to care about finishing the kill. All it took was the scent of warm blood, or the beating of a live heart and the hunt would begin again. These first children were...children in every act.

But, with each subsequent victim that they in turn created, the weaknesses that had plagued the first and second generations soon depleted until you have what you see in Ambrose. Highly intelligent, able to exist among humankind without being detected, and able to control his urges so much so that he can exist simply by feeding raw meat and packaged blood.

*When my mother and Lem came into contact with Miki and her children, they had already gone through several generations. Ambrose is the result of several thousand years of adaptation due to the intelligence of this virus. It knows how to survive, Grace.*

I didn't know what to say to that. The idea that something could go wrong was now stuck in my mind, itself a tumor that would grow until I knew for certain that Stacy was going to be alright.

*Grace, trust me. Please. It'll be a cold day in Hell before I let that monster harm Stacy. She's my friend, too, remember that. I have as much at stake here as you do. Besides, Ambrose knows the consequences if he fails to keep her safe.*

"Consequences? Did you threaten him?"

*I did more than that. I promised him that I'd personally see to it that his kind are wiped out if anything happened to Stacy.*

I heard my gasp, felt it as my chest rose up with the sudden intake of air. "Robert! How could

you do that? He's done nothing but help us! If anything goes wrong, it wouldn't be because he wanted it to. It'd be an accident. You cannot punish him for that."

*Grace, he shouldn't exist to begin with. Don't you see that? The fact that he's allowed to live is something that he doesn't take for granted, and neither do we. He's made it clear that he has no interest in hurting any more humans, but there are others who do not share the same ideals, yet we've let them be because they're not the monsters their predecessors were. But there is no law amongst my kind that states that we have to.*

*I know that you don't understand the viciousness that their kind is capable of because you've never truly seen their savageness. The erlking you met in the woods was nothing. He was mad at me, and took out his anger on you. Very rarely will an erlking act out of emotion.*

*And now that you know Ambrose, you use him as the basis for your opinions. But trust me when I say that they and those like them deserve*

*their reputation, Grace. Lem and my mother saw firsthand what they are capable of. He would like nothing better than to rid this entire world of every single one of them, but we cannot continue to punish the offspring for their parents' mistake, no matter how much we would want to.*

*"I think that you're being ridiculous."*

*And I think you're being naive.*

I huffed at that, but could say nothing as we landed in the side yard near the back door to Robert's home. He didn't stop moving as his feet touched the ground. With the swift, fluid movement that I had grown accustomed to, he pulled me around him, never stopping once, and carried me through the door as it opened completely on its own.

*I'm going to put you in my room and when I leave, I want you to stay there until I get back. Can you do this for me?*

He entered his bedroom with the stealth of a prowling cat, and carefully laid me on his bed before flitting about the room in a mad blur, rifling

through his closet and trunk before stopping in front of me and placing his arms on either side of me, forcing me to recline onto my elbows as he leaned in.

*Well, can you?*

"I don't-"

He placed an insisted finger on my lips, quieting me before tapping his temple with that same finger.

Sighing, I let my eyelids fall halfway and stared at him. *I don't understand why I have to stay in here. It's not like the people out there won't know where I am. They can hear our thoughts, can't they?*

He chuckled. *They can, and they can't. You let them hear what you want, which confuses and frustrates them. I know because I feel the same way. But, they can't hear what you're saying to me because all of my thoughts are in your head. Nowhere else.*

With wide eyes, I pushed forward. *How is*

*that possible?*

*It has a lot to do with us being mentally tied to each other, as well as you being able to close out your mind to everyone else. You only allow the thoughts you want in, and nothing else. When I'm in your mind, my thoughts are there as well. No one else can hear us when we're like this. You once referred to it as mental intimacy. I agree. It is rather 'intimate'.*

The heat of a flush crept up on my face and I quickly fought to contain it as I tried to steer the conversation back on track. *Why do I have to wait here?*

*You know why, Grace. There are those who share the same beliefs as Sam. I've ignored my call to keep you safe, and I've interfered with the call of another angel to do so. It has been to my benefit that my mother and grandmere are both Seraphim, but that won't be enough to keep the others from wanting to harm you themselves.*

A cold jolt of fear ran through me at his statement. *They want to see me dead just as much*



as Sam does.

He nodded once, the motion stiff and jerky, defiant. *But I won't let them hurt you, Grace, I swear it. You've made a decision that I can't force you to reconsider, but I won't let anyone else try to either. You have to be allowed to follow your own path.*

I raised myself up on my hands and kissed him, feeling everything inside of me vanish in a burst of flame and heat as he pressed in, my hands lifting to his hair, my fingers winding the soft, silky strands between them. I fell against the soft coverlet and felt his body's weight on mine, felt his hands hold my head still as his mouth moved from mine to my jaw, kissing and nibbling the line as it traveled down to my chin and my throat.

*You're my grace and my torment.* The words in my mind repeated themselves over and over as I felt his roaming lips and hands against my shoulders, my arms, my face. I heard a soft sigh escape me when I felt his mouth press gently against the rapid beating of my heart, just beneath the fabric of my shirt. *You are my life and my love.*

He lifted his head to mine and hovered above me, the liquid heat that came through his silver eyes holding my gaze, locking it in place as he graced me with an almost heart wrenching smile. I wanted to say something but my mind had gone blank. Instead, I was content to remain trapped in his arms, frozen in time for just this brief moment.

And then he was gone.



## GIVING IN

I waited for Robert for what felt like hours, pacing in his room and sifting through his CDs and books in between pressing my ear against the door in the hopes that I'd hear something, anything that would indicate what was going on just a few yards beyond it. Of course I heard nothing. They had the advantage of being able to argue in silence, leaving those without the ability to hear the thoughts of others to watch with avid curiosity at the comical silent picture the angels were forming.

One thing I was certain of though was that they were definitely arguing about the fate of Graham, as well as me. Graham was innocent, as innocent as Katie had been, and his life was now in danger. Whatever the ties he had to me, his union with Lark should be reason enough for them to want to help rescue him.

I didn't doubt for a second that they'd spare Robert from what he thought were punishable crimes. He was too good, too much the epitome of what an angel was supposed to be to reprimand.

He'd lived for fifteen-hundred years as the perfect son, the perfect angel. I didn't see how it was possible to erase all of that within a matter of months.

Of course, that was when it hit me that it had only been a few months since Robert had entered into my life. And yet he had changed it so profoundly that I knew no amount of living could have altered me as much as he had since that first moment I saw him. How could I have ever thought that my life was incomplete without the normalcy that I had once craved so badly? Normal in that sense did not include him, and I didn't want to know a life like that.

Of course, how could I have foreseen all of this happening to begin with? If I looked at it rationally, it simply didn't make any sense that someone like Robert would love me, but it didn't erase the fact that he did. Love wasn't meant to be rational. It was meant to be experienced and felt.

How was I going to be able to leave him? It was a question I hadn't dared ask myself because I knew that doing so would mean accepting that the time to do so was almost here. And though the

signs were all pointing to the fact that the seconds were ticking down, I couldn't see myself giving up on Robert, on us.

"Oh God, you've gotten yourself into a fine mess, Grace Anne," I groaned to myself as I walked over to the large windows that took up the majority of one wall in the room.

I placed a hand upon the pane of glass in front of me and sighed. The cool, clear surface beneath my palm was poor comfort to the pain that seemed to resonate deep within me as I thought about what it was that I'd miss once I'd given myself up to Sam and he finally finished what he'd started all those years ago.

I was already missing prom, though I had never intended to go prior to Shawn asking. Yet the idea of not wearing Stacy's dress after all of her hard work felt disappointing in a way. I thumped my head against the glass. "Did I really just admit to being disappointed in not wearing a dress?"

I laughed at my own foolishness. Of course it would be disappointing. I had been honest with Shawn when I told him that I had been looking

forward to going to the prom with him. The idea of doing something as normal as attending my senior prom had given me something to look forward to, something that I hadn't planned on.

Then there were the other milestones that I'd miss. Graduating from high school; going to college. It didn't matter now what it would cost to attend college--any college; I wasn't going. Finals didn't matter, nothing mattered.

I turned my head and looked at the ring that sat on my right hand, the deep blue stone that rested on my ring finger looking up at me like an inquisitive eye. A smile formed on my lips when I remembered how shocked Janice had been when she had seen it, and how Dad hadn't noticed it at all. I suppose it was a testament to just how well Dad knew me, knew what I would and wouldn't accept.

And yet, with all this time to think, I felt the aching pang of regret descend on me as I acknowledged with great surprise that I wanted him to make the same assumption as Janice. I wanted him to think that Robert wanted to marry me, to think

that I was worth that level of commitment because deep down, I had some stupid, fairytale-like hope that Robert did, too.

"Stupid is right," I mumbled to myself before wiping away the stray tear that I hadn't realized had escaped me. It didn't matter what any of us wanted.

With a resounding sigh, I pushed myself away from the window, knowing that moping wasn't going to do me any good. I glanced at the wall above Robert's bed and smiled. He'd added more photos since I had last been in here.

I sat down and brought my feet up, turning to face the door and await Robert's return when I realized that the closet door was open. I had never seen the inside of his closet before, and curiosity pulled me towards it like a magnet.

It wasn't a large closet, average in size, but the clothes that it held were far from average. Though I knew that Robert's clothes were expensive, I'd never realized just how much. There were labels in there that would have cost dad's entire annual salary to have purchased. The colors varied, though his staple black and gray were



prominent among the occasional blues and greens, and the styles ranged from classic to modern and trendy. He favored a particular button down style and I immediately recognized the shirt that he'd worn when we first met.

I pulled it off of its hanger and brought it with me into Robert's bathroom. I needed to take a shower badly. The smell of the hospital clung to me like smoke, the clinical odor almost unbearable on my skin now that I was away from the sterile environment and able to compare it to the clean and sweet smell of something other than bleach and disinfectant.

Strangely enough, I had never been in Robert's bathroom before, and was surprised by what I saw. Far from the masculine room I had expected, it was a very calm, soothing place, with tan and chocolate colored walls and ice blue glass tiles filling up an entire wall that I soon realized was one large shower, each end surrounded by large glass panels partially obscured by etchings of what looked like waterfalls.

I quickly removed my clothes and walked into

the large space, turning the square dials and sighing when the hot, steamy liquid flowed from the wall through several square-shaped nozzles that lined one end of the shower. Above me, a torrent of water began to fall, engulfing me and drenching my head rather quickly. I grabbed for one of the knobs and turned it, shrieking when the water turned a bitter cold before turning it back and selecting another one. This time, the water above me slowed down, lessening even more as I continued to turn the dial.

"That's better," I grumbled before reaching for a bottle of shampoo that I spied resting on a glass shelf hidden against the far wall. I recognized the scent right away--it was the same shampoo that I used. I felt a tickling sensation begin to flicker inside of me and I smiled.

Not wanting to put too much thought into his reasons for using such a feminine smelling shampoo, I began to wash my hair, rubbing the pink goo into my tangled mass of strands and building up the lather until I felt my hair was clean enough to rinse.

Sensing that I was taking too long, I quickly finished my shower and turned off all of the showerheads. I stepped out of the large glass enclosure and reached for a tan towel, wrapping it around me and then grabbing another for my hair. I noticed that the clothes that I had left on the floor were now gone, and a warm rush of blood filled my cheeks as I took in the neatly folded pile of clean clothes that sat on the vanity that fronted the door. Had he been the one to bring my clothes once again, or was it Ameila?

Not wanting to know the answer just in case I made myself too nervous to step foot out of the bathroom, I began to get dressed. I put on my underwear and bra, but rather than putting on the t-shirt and sweats that had been included, I opted instead to wear the shirt that I had taken from Robert's closet.

I closed up the front, unbuttoning them and re-buttoning them several times, rolling up the sleeves to just above my elbows. The bottom edge was torn yet hung well below my waist, just grazing the top of my knee. It was odd, but simply being in

something that belonged to him, something that tied the two of us together gave me a strength that I didn't realize I needed. I felt a confidence build within me and I was glad for it.

There was a knock at the door. "Are you decent?"

"Kinda," I replied, not a hint of nervousness in my voice.

The door opened and Robert walked in, a hairbrush in one hand. He stopped just short of the doorway when he saw what I was wearing, the hairbrush clattering to the ground.

"I-I don't think you should be wearing that," he stuttered, his eyes dropping lower and lower, taking in my bare legs and feet.

"Why? I wear less at home--a tank top and boxers covers far less than this shirt does."

"You don't understand, Grace..."

I walked up to him and stroked his jaw with an errant finger. "Then help me to understand, Robert."

Walking past him, I could almost hear the wheels in his head turning as he tried to find a way to explain what it was that he meant, and I let out a sly smile before turning around and sitting on the bed, tucking my lips beneath my teeth in a poor effort to hide my amusement.

"With all of these angels underneath one roof, it's difficult not to feel empathic."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that my wearing one of your shirts was going to get you so...upset."

I held my hand out for the brush, watching as he bent down to retrieve it before walking over to me slowly, ignoring my outstretched hand and instead sitting behind me on the bed. He took my hair in his hands and touched it gently. I instantly felt the knots loosen, the wild tangles free themselves.

I turned around to face him, unable to contain my smile any longer. "You cheat."

"So do you."

It was like a sudden wave of motion had hit me when I found myself lying on the bed, my legs splayed out, my hair flung behind my head. Robert's

hands were holding mine above my head, his lips curled up into an almost diabolical grin. "Now, let's get one thing clear: I'm not upset. I'm as far from upset as I can be, although there is some unrest brewing within me."

He pressed his body into mine, the weight of it feeling deliciously unnatural. I bit back a moan and fought to free my hands so that I could pull his face closer to mine. He clicked his tongue in disapproval, his smile only increasing as he tickled my chin with his nose.

"Did you think you could get away that easily?"

"Am I being held down for a reason?"

His breath was hot against my throat as he spoke. "Don't you like being mine?"

"Of course...but...could you let go of my hands, please?"

"Why?"

"I need them."

"For what?"

"Well, I need to change this shirt."

"You're going to change?"

I nodded.

His answer was slow in coming. "Okay."

He removed his hands from mine and rolled onto his side, propping himself up on a lazy elbow, a satisfied look on his face.

I sat up and rubbed my wrists as I looked at his expression. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He waited for me to stand, to head on over to the bathroom and put on those baggy sweats. But I had other plans. My hands rose to the buttons on the shirt, my fingers quick with them after having practiced in the bathroom.

I had managed to get four buttons undone before Robert's shaky hands stilled mine. "Don't-"

"Don't what? Change your shirt? But I thought that's what you wanted."

"Grace," he groaned. "Please. You know this

is not what I meant."

"I'm sorry, I don't quite understand. You said you wanted me to change this shirt, so I'm going to change this shirt. There are several more in your closet I could put on. I saw a really nice blue one..."

His eyes closed and I saw that he was taking measured breaths in an attempt to calm himself before saying anything more.

I struggled to pull my hands free, frustrated that he was so much stronger than I was. "Robert, let go."

"No."

"No?"

"No. I'm sorry, Grace. I've tried to be strong, I've tried to keep you safe, from Sam...from me, but I'm not as strong as I thought I was. I-I can't do this anymore. I can't fight it, Grace."

Alarmed, I pushed myself up, using his hold on me as leverage. "Robert, what are you talking about?"

Robert's head bent down and I felt his kiss



push through me, landing straight into that part of my heart that didn't know whether or not it wanted to beat or fly through my chest. He forced me down, and I landed with an ungentle flop on the coverlet, Robert's hands no longer pinning mine down.

Instead, they were exploring, roaming down my arms and landing on my hips, his thumbs pushing into them when they lifted in some reflexive motion that caught us both by surprise and he lifted his face away. I raised my arms to wrap around his neck, needing him to stay close to me, not wanting him to flee like all of the other times before. I looked into his eyes and my breath caught as I took in the scorching hunger that caused them to turn into silver flames beneath their glassy dome.

My lips parted, a moan desperate to escape from them slipping through just before his mouth once again crashed down onto mine with an almost desperate need, and the world began to spin away as the air around me grew thin...or was it because I had simply stopped breathing? Robert's touch was growing lighter and lighter. I tried to focus on his eyes, but they, too, seemed to fade away while

growing darker at the same time, his pupils dilated to maximum.

"Robert?" I breathed, feeling my arms fall to my chest as his body disappeared, replaced with the filmy haze of black mist that floated over me. It covered me, rolling over my skin like sweet smelling smoke.

I arched my back as I felt the soft, silky trails run beneath the fabric of the shirt that had been the catalyst to all of this. I saw the hem rise, lifting and adjusting to the strange interloper as it pushed up towards my chest. Trails of the semi-transparent mist escaped through the slits between the buttons that I had not been able to release from their holes, little puffs of smoke that hinted at the fire that was slowly building up inside of me.

"Robert what are you doing?" I said in a half-groan, half-gasp before another burst of nerves stole my breath from me. Like a teasing feather trailing up and down my sensitive skin, the curls and wisps of the dark haze traveled over me, under me, and God help me, it felt like through me.

The silky fog wound around me, caressing

my face with the delicate brush of a warm breeze, tickling my lips that felt puffy from the urgent kiss that had preceded such unimaginable bliss. If I concentrated, I could taste it, taste him, and the knowledge of this forced a rush of blood to feed every nerve ending in my body, turning my already sensitive skin into a map of sensation and feeling.

I bit my lip to keep from moaning again, but I couldn't stop the whimper that came out of me as the continuous sliding of the sensual smoke ignited an inferno deep within me, causing things to burn that shouldn't, sending sparks to singe the outer reaches of my sanity, to which I clung to desperately.

I could hear the music from some unknown song play in my head, Robert's name the only lyric that carried me through each beat, each measure until I finally let go, unable to hang on to the ceaseless rhythm any longer. My hands grabbed fistfuls of fabric, even as tiny strands of smoky wonder trailed through the gaps between my fingers. Through the chaos of sensation and feeling I heard my scream spilling out from my lips as I turned to my side, unable to remain still, unable to

contain what it was that had created itself inside of me. My hand reached over and grabbed the edge of the bed, needing its support as my body felt lifted, weightless, boneless.

I gasped for air, the sensation that there simply wasn't enough of it causing my chest to expand with my greedy breaths. Over and over, the dark haze wound about me, coiling around my body like a python embracing its prey. It grew tighter and tighter until it was an almost tangible feeling, strong yet vulnerable as the transparent mist soon gave way to what I imagined was the heated skin of arms that shook with the enormity of everything that was happening, that had happened, that would happen. The rise and fall of hectic breathing I felt was startling.

Was it mine? It had to have been mine-- Robert didn't need to breathe. So why did I hear his ragged breath, feel the overheated warmth of it wash over my ear?

And surely that was my heart that was thundering so loud in my ears that it blocked out sense and reason. I hadn't even realized it was still

there, having somehow managed to remain pinned inside of my chest despite the feeling that it escaped through the hole it had drummed through me. My eyes refused to focus, so I simply closed them, content to stare at the back of my lids and imagine Robert's face filled with the same wonder that had taken over me at that moment.

What had just happened? It was wondrous and marvelous, and it left me feeling like I had taken on wings of my own and soared into an endless flight of sensation and reason. But what exactly was that? All through me, my nerve endings sparked as their own individual memories ticked with the residual feelings.

I took several deep breaths in an attempt to calm myself down, to slow the rapid thrumming inside of me, to give myself the strength to say something.

*You don't need to say anything.*

The shaky arms that I imagined were around me were, in fact, real, solid and strong, yet they still vibrated with the vulnerability of what had just

occurred between us.

"Robert..."

*Please, Grace. Don't say anything.*

And so I didn't. I wouldn't have known what to say, anyway. This was as intimate a moment as we'd ever shared, an experience that I had never expected, never dreamed of. How could I? I didn't understand what had happened between us, what it was that had just occurred, but it went beyond words. Even the silence seemed too intrusive. With a resigned sigh, I pushed myself against him and let him hold me until our breathing had slowed and the beating of my heart could no longer be heard from within me.

The room had become dark as night settled over Heath. It should have been a perfect moment. It would have been a perfect moment, were it not for the heavy burdens that hung over the both of us, the truth that waited for us to emerge from this little sanctuary of our own making and face it.

*We'll need to leave soon.*

I nodded in agreement. "I know."

Grace...

"Can you tell me? Can you tell me what that was?"

I...

I turned my body around, my head lifting up to look at him and seeing the tears that glistened just out of reach of falling. "Robert, please."

*Grace, I couldn't give you what you wanted. I couldn't give either of us what we wanted, but I could give you that.*

"Give me what? What was that because I know that wasn't what I expected--that definitely wasn't what I learned about in health class either.... It was better!"

He laughed softly, the sound filled with more sadness than humor. *In Latin it's called noster nostri, two hearts beating as one.*

My hand rose to rest against his bare chest, the shirt he had been wearing having long been discarded somewhere. "What a funny way to

describe what I live every single waking second. But that's not what happened between us, Robert. That was...that was...too good to be...good," I panted before a terrifying thought crashed into my head.

Oh dear God, did I just betray Ameila? I had promised her that I wouldn't break the laws of the Nephilim; I wouldn't become intimate with Robert. What was that if not becoming intimate with him?

*Grace, stop worrying, please. What we did, it wasn't wrong. There are no laws that say an angel cannot share the noster nostri with humans. I only wish it could have been more.*

"How could there be more than that?" I wondered aloud.

With gentle hands, Robert brought my face to his and placed a delicate kiss on my lips. My skin was so sensitive that every ounce of contact was like a mini explosion of memory and feeling. How *could* there more when I had already experienced more than a lifetime's worth of pleasure in one unbelievable moment?

*Oh Grace, believe me, there's more. So*



*much more.*

"Am I your..." I couldn't say it. I wanted to know if he had ever shared this noster nostri with anyone else, but I could not find the courage to voice it. How anyone could was unfathomable to me--the idea of not being the first to share such a private moment with someone you loved was altogether heartbreaking. Robert was the first of everything for me.

*Grace, you're the first of everything for me, too. Surely you know that by now Every feeling, every emotion, every touch I've shared with you was because of you, and no one has ever, or will ever make me feel that way. Only you.*

He brought me close against him and our legs wound around each other, his hand gently stroking my back with slow, languid strokes that only increased the fury of feeling that had begun to take over my body.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it," I said meekly, looking down at his chin. "You can see that I'm about as ignorant as it gets when it comes to these

things, and the fact that you have your own...ways of doing things makes my ignorance more noticeable. But I don't know what you've done, or how far you've gone with anyone else. I only know what you've told me, and all things considered, that's not much."

He sighed and brought a hand beneath my chin, pushing it up and encouraging me to face my fears head on. *You know that I've never been with anyone physically, Grace. That includes this way. I've held many hands, I've kissed many cheeks, but you have been the only one I've ever felt, let alone felt attracted to. You're the only one who makes me wish I were a human man who could give you everything you want and need.*

"I don't want a human to be everything I want and need. No human ever could. You are everything I've ever wanted, everything I've ever needed." My hands went up to his face and they traced the outline of his jaw, his sharp nose, the curved peak of his lips. He began to do the same, the two of us burning these lines into our memories, each for our own separate reasons: he to keep for long after I had gone, while I did it to have something to give

me the strength and courage I would need when Sam finally won.

Robert's body stiffened as he heard my thoughts, a tremor of anger rolling through him that quickly destroyed any and all of the blissful feelings that we had just shared. *Sam will not win, Grace. He may eventually get what he wants, but he will not win.*

He rolled over and sat up, his naked back to me; the tree like markings that crawled along the strong, lean lines of his shoulders and spine would have been a forbidding image to take in for most people, but to me, they were beautiful, majestic with the promise of what they would become. I crawled onto my knees and placed my hands on the two apexes that turned branches to wings, feeling his muscles tense for just a moment before relaxing beneath my palms.

"What do we do now?"

*We wait until we know what the elders have decided. It's why I came back in, what I wanted to tell you. They've ordered you to remain here until*

*their decision has been made.*

"But that could be forever! You told me about how long it takes for them to make a decision--I don't have that long! Graham doesn't have that long!" I was panicked; the idea that I'd be prevented from doing what it was that I knew must be done in order to save Graham's life, as well as Robert's soul causing me to run to the bathroom.

"Grace-" Robert called out after me.

I grabbed the pair of sweats that were still sitting on the bathroom counter and pulled them on. My fingers fumbled with the buttons on Robert's shirt, but I managed to undo them and threw on the t-shirt that had been laid out for me as well.

"What are you doing?"

I reached into the shower and grabbed the rubber band that had held my hair up and turned to face him. "I'm leaving."

"You can't!"

I looked at him with defiance written plainly on my face. "Robert, I don't care who they are, what

their rules are, or what their intentions for Sam might be. I'm not an angel. They can't tell me to sit here and wait for them to make up their minds. What if whatever it is that they decide causes Sam to hurt Graham, or worse? What if they decide to kill Sam? Then what?"

His mouth opened to say something but I cut him off.

"No. I've had it with all of your kind picking and choosing what happens to me and my friends. They've taken away every important decision I could have made with their rules and their laws; they're not going to take this decision away from me, too. Graham is my friend, and he's your...brother-in-law--don't make that face, it's true!"

I pulled my hair into a messy ponytail and tried to walk around him, but he would not budge. I shoved against his chest but I'd probably have had better luck trying to move a mountain. "Let me go, Robert."

"No, Grace. You don't understand what you're dealing with. Yes, you're not an angel, but when has that ever stopped my kind from holding

dominion over yours? Many of our laws hold consequences directed towards humans should they be broken. You know that!"

"Is there a law that says I have to remain cooped up in my boyfriend's room just because an angel said so?" I asked, my toe tapping in agitation.

"No, but-"

"Then please, move out of my way."

"Grace..."

"Robert, either you're going to help me or not, but if the answer is that you're not, at least let me go and do this on my own. You have to understand that I cannot sit here and wait knowing that whatever it is they're deciding is putting my best friend's life in jeopardy." It was a plea, one that hurt me to make because I knew that whatever his answer, he'd suffer for it, but I had no choice.

Graham was out there being tortured by Sam, and I was the only one that could stop this all from continuing. It seemed ludicrous to think it, but that's how I saw it. The Seraphim weren't going to punish Sam any time soon, but even if they did, it'd

be a slap on the wrist compared to what he'd done to innocent people, people I cared about, the people I loved.

Robert looked at me with such sadness in his eyes that I nearly took everything back.

Nearly.

"If you're leaving then I'm coming with you, Grace."

Another round of arguing, I had been prepared for. Physically fighting my way out...Well, that, too. But this? To have him give up so easily?

"Really?"

He nodded and took a hold of my shoulders with strong, determined hands and then squeezed them gently. *I told you, wherever you go, I go. I'm not about to prove otherwise.*

"So let's go."

"Where?"

My gaze moved to the collage of photographs that framed the head of his bed. I

looked at a photograph of Robert and I that took center stage amongst all of the others that surrounded it. We were sitting on a bench, smiling happily at each other during a time when the rest of the world didn't matter--we were the only two people in it. "There," I pointed.

Robert's gaze followed my hand and gave a grim nod of his head. "Okay."

In a fraction of a second, I was in his arms again, and we were out of the house and into the sky.





## OFFER

When Robert's feet landed roughly and uncharacteristically on the gravel that covered the parking lot of his family's retreat, the crunching sound they made startled me. It was a disturbing noise, one that I was far too intimate with, and the memories of that alone sent chills running up and down my spine.

"Are you okay?" Robert asked me as he let me down gently.

I was careful not to tread too roughly as I bobbed my head in response. With my hand held in his, we walked towards the bench where we'd had our first conversation, where I'd learned more about him than I'd ever imagined possible. I sat down and placed my head in my hands, staring at the ground and my boots while Robert paced in front of me.

"So you never told me," I started, wanting to hear something other than the sound of my breathing.

"Told you what?"

"What you learned from Chad, about what happened with Mr. Branke and Erica and Mrs. Deovolente."

"Oh, that. Well, there's really not much to tell to be quite honest with you. Erica was taken to the Vice-Principal's office while Mrs. Deovolente pulled Mr. Branke into the classroom. Chad didn't see much after that, although he did hear that Erica was suspended indefinitely and wouldn't be allowed to graduate with the rest of our class."

This was surprising. "So Mr. Kenner actually punished Erica? How unusual. It must be a full moon or something," I mumbled.

Robert's pacing ceased. "Grace, that's uncharitable."

I ignored the tone in his voice. "He tried to blackmail me, Robert. He took Erica's side in everything, even after she sent Stacy to the hospital. I'm done with charity. I don't have time for it."

"But that's just it. It's what you do during your final moments of life that matter the most. Do you leave your last mark on this world with bitterness

and spite? Or, do you ensure that when others remember you, they remember that you were the loving, kind, and generous person that I love?" He sat down beside me and took my hands into his, his head lowering beneath mine so that I could see his face.

"That's not fair," I grumbled. "I've spent the past how many years dealing with insults and teasing without once saying an unkind thing to any of them. I've helped them with their homework, their tests, even when I knew that as soon as they'd received their passing grades, I'd return to being Grace the Freak, so don't talk to me about being charitable, Robert.

"You don't know what it's like to have people treat you differently because of something that happened to you that you had absolutely no control over. You don't know what it's like to have everyone tease you and make fun of you for years for reasons that have nothing to do with you, but rather their own prejudices.

"I dealt with it, I accepted it, and I did it without a single complaint, so excuse me if just

once I'd like to feel a little uncharitable to someone who was more concerned with saving the scholastic career of some vapid twit than keeping Stacy or me safe!"

My chest rose and fell angrily as my breathing grew agitated by the memories that I had tried so hard to forget. I looked at Robert's shocked face and knew that I'd gone too far. It wasn't his fault—he was an angel, and charity and forgiveness was supposed to be part of his nature.

"Humility should be as well, Grace. I'm sorry; I forget sometimes that you're human, with human faults. You're right. I don't know how it feels to be made fun of for the majority of my life. I've always been accepted because of what I am and what that entails. And yes, you are entitled to your feelings.

"But I do know what it feels like to be the odd man out, Grace. Every time you're with Graham, that's who I become. I can't ever have that kind of connection with you because I'm not a human, and because I wasn't there to protect you and support you during those moments in your life when it mattered the most.

"And I held it against him, I admit it. It was wrong of me, Grace. I used his past actions, both good and bad, to judge him when the only person whose opinion should have mattered was yours. I was wrong, and I'm sorry. But you can't let what happened in the past change who you are."

"And who is that person? The Grace who never spoke up about the treatment I received? The Grace who ran away from you and Graham and everything else because I couldn't handle the stares or the snide comments anymore?"

"No. You're the Grace who loves so deeply and wholly that you'd go against the wishes of the person who loves you the most to save him. None of those people who hurt you could ever be so generous or selfless."

"But what if that person isn't the person I'm meant to be?"

Robert's puzzled expression told me that he didn't understand.

"When I was going through the things in the attic for Matthew's room, I found a photo album that

my mom had made for me. It had pictures of family members and photos of me and my parents when I was a baby. On the last page, my mom wrote down something that didn't make sense. At least, it didn't at the time.

"She'd left the place for the photo empty, but underneath it she had written 'Grace and Maia: Mother and Daughter'. My mother's hopes for me were written down in one line. She wanted me to have a child, a little girl. I was supposed to be that person. I was supposed to be the mother holding that little girl, but I'm not, and I won't ever be."

"Grace..."

"Robert, there's no point in trying to pretend. You and I both know that it all ends here. My future, our future, it's all going to be over after tonight. I just...I never thought I'd want any of the things. But I now realize what I'm going to be missing, what I'll never have, what we'll never have."

Robert's arm wrapped around me as he pulled me in, pressing my head against his chest. "I wish I could give all of those things to you, Grace. I do."

A half-hearted laugh slipped past me when I heard that. "Even if all of this weren't happening, we'd never be able to have kids. Not legally by your laws, anyway. And I'm not exactly sure I'd want to give birth to a giant or some bat-like creature."

"No. That's not possible at all, no matter how much we want it. But...I can do one thing for you."

"What?"

Robert's arm slipped from around me and he slid from the bench, landing on bended knee in front of me, my left hand held securely in his.

My heart seemed to forget its rhythm, and stumbled in my chest at the sight. "Robert-"

"Don't interrupt me, Grace. I won't get another chance at this, and I only plan on doing this once...ever, so please, let me say this while there's still time."

I tucked my lips between my teeth, clamping them shut as he bent down and plucked several blades of grass from the ground, quickly braiding them into a green circlet. I stifled a giggle as his



fingers uncharacteristically fumbled the ring, allowing it to spend a few microseconds an animated suspension before he caught it with a more determined grip.

"Grace Anne Shelley, within you beats my heart. Its life gives me life, its strength strengthens me, its love is what I live for. I cannot imagine life without you in it. Every second of being before I met you has become insignificant, unimportant.

"Please, if only for a moment, give me something to look forward to and say that you'll share your life with me. Love me, not just as your friend, or your lover, but also as your husband. Marry me, Grace."

Thick tears blurred my vision as I tried to focus on his face, seeing that his eyes were obscured by tears of their own. I wanted to leap into his arms and scream yes. I wanted to turn away and run as fast as my legs could carry me. I wanted to call up Stacy and Lark and shout to the heavens what had just happened.

Instead, my head bobbed once in demure acceptance as Robert slipped the braided band on

the fourth finger of my left hand. With a whoop of joy, he scooped me into his arms and spun around, causing a yelp to escape me as I clung to his neck, trying very hard to keep from giggling at the unbridled glee that poured out of him.

"Oh, Grace, you've made me the happiest person on Earth right now," he shouted as we continued to spin, my heart racing in my chest at the dizzying speed with which he was making each turn.

He littered my face with kisses, and I laughed as his eyelashes tickled my skin when his kisses lowered to my jaw. The slow burning fire that was ever present inside of me began to flare up again but I tamped it down for the last time and sighed as his lips finally met mine in their own embrace. I closed my eyes, thankful that we had at least this moment together.

When Robert finally stopped turning, opting instead to sit back down on the bench with me cradled in his lap, I opened my eyes and took the opportunity to inspect the organic circle that was now wrapped around my finger snugly.

"I'm sorry I wasn't better prepared. You deserve something better than grass."

I laughed. "It doesn't matter to me what it's made of. It's the thought that counts, remember?"

Robert placed my left hand in his and held it out. "You know, you truly are something unique. Most girls would have complained about it not being gold or having some huge diamond on it, but you accept it."

I held up my other hand and grinned, admiring the sapphire ring that sat there on my ring finger. "Well, I already have a ring with a huge rock on it."

Robert's thumb caressed the deep blue stone that reflected the soft light above us and sighed. "I only wish I knew why the star disappeared."

"It's alright. I'm fine with the ring just the way it is. Both of them."

"Are you certain?"

I shrugged and pulled my hand away from

his, tucking it into my lap before sighing and turning to stare out into the dark forest ahead. "I love them just the way they are. I couldn't have imagined anything better than this."

My change in mood did not go unnoticed, and he brought a determined hand to my face, turning it so that I could see the care and concern that filled his eyes, turning the silver to a dark pewter.

"I know when you're not telling me the truth, Grace."

"I am telling you the truth. I do love them; I wouldn't change them at all."

*But...*

I weighed the pros and cons of telling him the truth. How could I tell him that it didn't matter whether I liked the rings the way they were or not because I couldn't look forward to seeing them on my finger for much longer? How could I look into his eyes and tell him that he needed to take the rings--both of them--back so that if one day he found someone whom he could love just as much as he did me--if

not more--then he'd be able to give them to her. I didn't want to face the idea that Robert could be with someone else, so how could I voice it?

"But nothing. Let's not spoil this moment with doubt, okay? For right now, I'm content. Can we just leave it at that?"

Beneath the darkness in his eyes, I could see the struggle that was going on in his ever turning mind. He was trying to figure out why I had blocked him from my thoughts, and what it was that I was keeping from him. He wanted to demand the truth from me, I could tell, but he wasn't going to. He wouldn't go so far as to call me out on my lie. Not when there were so many other important things to be said and done.

"Okay," he capitulated. I sighed with relief and relaxed against him.

"Will you tell your mom? Lark?"

"About me asking you to marry me?" He waited for my nod before chuckling. "They already know. I'm certain that they began planning a wedding the moment they knew about you."

A grimace formed on my lips. "Do angels even have weddings?"

"No. We don't have the same requirements that humans do--you already know that. Human ceremonies aren't necessary to bind two angels together. They join and separate like clouds in the sky, free of obligation of devotion and affection. It's very rare to find unions amongst my kind that are more than a simple need to either procreate or satisfy some of our more baser needs."

I frowned at this; the idea that angels had such a capacity for empathy and love, yet they couldn't find it in themselves to vow to love another was completely contradictory to the human instinct that burned inside of me that love should be forever. "So when Lark and Luca were together, that was an exception rather than the rule."

I felt his head move in acknowledgement. "Lark is a very passionate person, much like our mother. Love, anger--she is incapable of feeling something halfway, especially the most passionate of emotions. But what she felt for Luca, as powerful as it was, cannot compare to what she feels for

Graham. Luca's black heart kept Lark in a state of perpetual night, unable to see the hope that can come from loving someone else. Graham is, to her, the light that was eclipsed by Luca's dark intentions."

His words were like an assault on my conscience. Lark had turned into a cold and bitter angel when she had lost Luca, who had neither loved nor cared for her, vowing to never love anyone else again. Graham had changed that, changed her. What would happen to her if I were to fail and she lost Graham as well? What would that do to Ameila and Robert?

Their family had nearly lost her once--I realized at that moment that giving myself over to Sam wasn't just saving Graham's life, or even Robert's. By finally allowing Sam to finish what it was that he'd started, my death would in turn save three lives: Robert's, Graham's, and Lark's.

It was all the reason I needed to push aside any doubts or second thoughts. There was no point in longing for anything anymore when I wasn't entitled to them.

I removed myself from the safe enclave of Robert's embrace and stood up, rubbing my now chilled arms as I stared out into the dark woods that stood ahead of me.

"Call Sam," I whispered. "Let's be done with this, Robert. This can't go on any longer."

"There's still time..." His voice trailed off as I tossed my head from side to side in vehement rejection.

"No. There's no more time left. There's never been any time left. The longer I stall, the more people get hurt, and I can't live with myself knowing that. Call Sam, Robert. It's time. It's time I give up and stop this."

Robert stood. "Grace-"

I clamped my hand over his mouth. "Robert, please. I've made my decision; I can't live knowing that doing so means you and Graham will die, or that Lark's happiness will be destroyed.

"Just...just promise me that you'll watch over my dad and Janice and Matthew when this is all done. Keep them safe for me. And...I don't want you



here when it happens. I don't want you here when I die. I accept dying, I accept it and I can deal with it, but not if you're near me, not if you're here. I don't want you to see that, Robert. Please."

His eyes dilated, the pupils growing to twice their size, the irises darkening to an almost storm cloud gray. He pulled his hand from mine roughly; he was angry that there would be no more stalling, no more excuses. He gave me a curt nod, the jerk of his head carrying with it such finality that I could almost hear the doors of our life together shutting behind us. And then he turned away, his back to me, stiff and struggling with what it was that I had asked of him. And then he was gone. And it hurt.

Oh God, did it hurt. There was no loving goodbye, no last kiss. This was as cold and sterile a farewell as it got, and I wanted to curl into myself, grief and guilt bearing heavily upon my heart.

But there was no time to feel sorry for myself. It was better this way. I understood his pain. I felt it, too, far more deeply than he knew. Humans could be empathic, too.

I inhaled deeply, thankful for him making the decision for me. Despite my yearning, I knew that it would be easier to walk away from him, from the faint promise of a future that had never been mine to want in the first place if he wasn't watching me do it. I looked at the wilting band that sat on my finger and, with somber resolution, removed it and placed it on the bench.

It had served its purpose--for a brief moment, I was the proud bride-to-be, basking in the glow of love from the one who wanted to spend forever with me--and now it deserved to die quietly. Robert would know where it was, and he'd understand why I couldn't take it with me to die. Robert deserved more than just memories of what was. He deserved a chance at what could be, even if it was with someone else. Another stinging slash to my heart and I couldn't take it anymore; I said one final and silent farewell.

A faint rustle of wind forced my gaze away from the ring and raised it towards the sky. The pale white slice of wings through the dark drew a gasp from my lips and I took a faltering step back before

gathering up my courage and walking forward.

"No turning back now," I murmured to myself.



## THE BREAKDOWN OF REASON

Sam's voice should have sounded like music to me. Instead, the hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my fingers curled inwards, my hands turning into fists as he spoke. "Where's the coward? Is he hiding somewhere, waiting until my back is turned to attack me?"

"Robert's gone," I hissed, wary of him as he walked towards me with slow, calculated steps.

"Didn't want to stick around and watch his little human pet die, eh? I'm not surprised. He always was too sensitive."

"I asked him to leave," I corrected, unable to tolerate hearing him badmouth Robert when I knew how hard he had struggled just to do as I asked. "He left because I didn't want him here to see this, to see you do this. You were once his friend, someone he cared about very much. I didn't want him to see you as you truly are."

His eyes darted about--he doubted me, I could see it in his face--while his wings fluttered

behind him, outstretched and ready for whatever it was that he feared. His golden hair was as it had always been, loose and flowing down his back, the color mirroring the gold in his eyes that sparkled with satisfaction.

He wore no shirt, and I could see that though his youth had been restored to his face, the aging that had occurred to his body had remained, his skin wrinkled and transparent, almost paper thin with unnatural wear. He held his arms out in display, as though to show me the consequences that came as a result of trying to hurt me.

"Where's Graham?"

"Around," was his dubious reply, confident now that we were alone.

"I want to see him."

The demand caught him off guard and his movements ceased, his feet stilling on the grass beneath his bare feet, the legs of the loose fitting pants growing damp from the dew that had begun to cling to the evergreen blades.

"You *want*? This isn't about what *you* want

anymore, or didn't you realize that when I killed your aunt? Or took your best friend?"

He smiled and it was my turn to be caught off guard. How could I forget how beautiful and unnervingly captivating his smile was? It was such a paradox; an almost unbearable beauty, ethereal and pure shined through the glitter in his eyes and the curve of his perfect lips, completely betraying the dark and evil hatred that lay behind them. My mind did battles against itself, wanting to admire him and run away all at the same time, the confusion causing a slight throbbing at my temples.

"Where's Graham?" I asked again, pressing against the pulsing beneath my skin.

"He'll be here, soon. He's a little...indisposed at the moment. But I assure you that he'll be well enough to go back to his *wife*," he sneered, looking down at me from amber eyes.

"What did you do to him? If you've hurt him, Sam, if you've done anything to him-"

"You'll what?" he laughed darkly, a cutting sound that stopped my words cold. "Hurt me? Blind

me again? I think we've established that no matter what you do, I'm not going away. You might have had the help of a guardian the last time we met, but this time no one is going to come to help you, Grace. You're fated to die--every angel knows this now and none of them will do a single thing to stop me."

My chin lifted defiantly, and I stared down my nose at him, scowling at the truth in his words. "You'll get what you want, but you won't receive any satisfaction from it, I guarantee you that."

"Oh? And what makes you think you know what I want?"

He began to circle me, walking around in wide swaths, the tips of his wings dragging on the ground and leaving dark rings in the silvery surface of the wet grass. I raised my gaze from them; they reminded me too much of Robert's eyes.

"I know that your obsession has caused you to screw up. You made stupid mistakes that prove just how inferior you are compared to Robert."

"What do you know about your Robert? Did



he finally tell you the truth? Did he tell you how it's his responsibility to kill you? How every day he refuses to do so, he gets closer and closer to dying himself?"

I nodded stiffly and grit my teeth as he grinned at me, amused that was willing to admit to it. "He's told me everything. It's one of the main reasons why I'm here. I won't let him die because of me. I love him too much to do that to him."

I expected some snide reply to come flying back in stinging retort, but instead Sam's face grew distorted--for one microscopic blip in time, I saw something that looked almost like regret, even guilt. And then a snarl forced itself from his lips, pulling them up in angry curls over his teeth that gnashed at the emotions that were running through him, turning the glow that surrounded him from an almost honey-like color to a deep burgundy.

"You stupid humans and your idyllic notions of love and devotion--you do this thing for him because you think he deserves it, because you think he loves you enough to do the same thing. You believe he'd sacrifice himself for you, yet where is

he?"

"What does it matter?" I demanded to know, slowly growing wary of the blackening mood that was overcoming him, turning his golden eyes darker. "Just get it over with already. I'm tired of having to deal with your screw-ups-"

There wasn't enough time for me to finish that last word before a cold hand wrapped long, agile fingers around my throat, squeezing it. And yet I could feel the resistance, the slight trembling that existed beneath his skin. My eyes--wide with shock at the sudden attack--grew wider upon this realization.

*Why do you hesitate?* The question that I allowed him to hear, the words that flowed into his mind caused his grip to loosen, his hand to drop at his side as he stared at me mutely.

"Why did you stop?" I asked him again as I rubbed my throat, my voice raspy. "I'm here. Let Graham go, let him go back to Lark and Robert and just kill me already so that we can end this."

He looked at me and I nearly screamed

when I saw that his eyes were now completely blackened, much as they had been all those months ago. "Sam? What's wrong with you, what's going on?"

I couldn't explain where the concern for him came from--it disgusted me as much as it surprised me--but I raised a hand to his face, the look of fear that began to form there unlike anything I'd ever seen before.

"Sam...?"

"I can't. I can't do it."

My shoulders fell in defeat, my jaw dropping in anger. "What the hell do you mean you can't do it? After all this time, after everything that you've put me through, everything that you've done--killing Katie, kidnapping Graham, erasing Stacy's memory--you're going to tell me that now that you've got what you want, you can't do it? Is this some kind of angelic performance anxiety or something? Is there a pill you can take for that?"

His head cocked to the side and he looked at me quizzically. "What do you mean, erase Stacy's

memory?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about, Sam," I muttered. "You caused Stacy's cancer to come back and you put her into a coma by messing with her mind somehow."

The beautifully evil smile returned as his finger tapped a corner of his mouth thoughtfully. "As much as I'd like to take credit for that, I'm afraid that I can't. You see, as gifted as I like to think I am, I can only affect someone's dreams, and even then only as an illusion, a figment of one's imagination. I can't affect their waking conscience so I couldn't have done anything to hurt her--mores the pity."

"You're lying!" I accused.

"Oh, no, this time I'm telling you the truth. I had nothing to do with your little friend's...problem, although I do have to say that it was very well played."

I didn't want to believe him. He gave me such a smug grin; it was hard to believe him, nearly impossible. I'd seen the horrible thoughts that had taken over Stacy's mind. Only Sam despised

Robert that much. Only Sam could have felt the raw hatred that it took to create such a horrible vision. "If it wasn't you, then who was it? Who did that to Stacy?"

"Oh, you'd like me to tell you that, wouldn't you? Unfortunately, your poor human mind wouldn't be able to understand it. It's inconsequential now, anyway. You're part of a plan, Grace--a very intricate plan that has had to adapt to the changes your free will has caused--and now I have you. Everything has been set in place, you're the final piece."

His hand lashed out and struck my face hard. It sent me stumbling off to the side, landing roughly on my chest, my shoulder digging into the soft earth, the soil cradling me and cushioning the fall. This was a familiar scene, but I hadn't been prepared for it the last time. Fear had taken over then.

This time, there was a need for me to remain calm.

"What, no screaming? No crying out in poor, pathetic human agony?" He stood over me, as though I had never moved at all, and his sneer was as lovely as it was foul.

I pushed myself up onto my knees before returning to a standing position, dusting the dirt off of my shirt and shaking my head. "I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of hearing me scream."

"Too bad. It'll just make things worse for you, then."

Again, he raised his hand and I was able to catch a brief glimpse of the wrinkled, crepe-like skin before it landed solidly against my cheek, the stinging force of it causing a grunt of pain to slip by me as I tumbled to the ground once more. I had clenched my teeth before the impact, and had spared my inner cheeks from the painful bite wounds that had occurred the last time we'd met this way.

"Is that the best you can do?" I spat, turning my head to glare at him. "You'd think that with all the times you've screwed this up, you'd want to get it over with as quickly as possible."

"Stupid girl!" he snarled as his hands dug into my hair and pulled, lifting me up by the base of my ponytail. "You don't know the hell I've been

through because of you!"

My feet dangled beneath me as he raised me above the ground, the pain from every single strand of my hair supporting my weight forcing my eyes to shut, to block out the searing that stretched from my scalp to my neck. "Your inability to die has caused me nothing but suffering. I should just kill you now."

"Then do it!" I challenged through clenched teeth. "Do it, already!"

When I fell to the ground, it was a surprised "Oomph" that escaped me. Sam had let me go. Again.

"What's wrong with you?" I shouted, kicking at him when he simply stood there, mute and unmoving. "Why can't you do this?"

His blackened eyes looked down at me and I paled. The skin surrounding the dark orbs had begun to darken themselves, the color pulsing as it stretched and the pulled back, black blood pumping through translucent skin. "Sam...what's going on with your eyes?"

He didn't answer me. He simply knelt down and reached for my face with a frighteningly gentle hand. He stroked the side of my face almost lovingly, clicking his tongue at the red welt that lay there, beneath his silken fingers.

"Sam-"

He pushed two fingers against my lips to quiet me, and I shuddered at the touch. He moved in closer and I bit back a scream when I saw that the tiny capillaries beneath his skin had turned black, creating a web of hexagonal shapes across his face. With the large, onyx-colored globes that peered out at me, it felt like I was being smothered by some large, golden-haired insect when, to my horror, he replaced his fingers with lips that were uncommonly cold, hard, and rough, unlike the smooth velvet that were Robert's.

I clamped my lips shut, and struggled to push him away as he leaned in even closer. I could feel the weight of him forcing me back, and I scrambled to get away from him, but he was too quick and too strong. My head landed on the wet grass with enough force to cause the dew that clung to the



blades to splash upwards and land on me like rain. I tried to turn my face away, but strong hands forced my head to remain still.

My feet kicked beneath Sam's body, my hands--balled up into angry fists--pounded into his arms, his back, and causing more harm to me than to him. The throbbing in my hands began almost immediately, and I tried to ignore it, push past the pain and the fear that was multiplying rapidly--especially when I spied that my right hand now resembled the inside of a purple beehive. The on-again, off-again pain that came every time I struck an angel had turned on, and it had brought some friends with it.

What was Sam doing? Why was he on top of me, kissing me when just moments earlier he was preparing to kill me? The questions bounced around my head like fleas, each one hungry for a bite at an answer and I didn't have anything to give them. I only knew that Sam's mouth was growing more and more insistent.

I felt a hand release my face and travel down the length of my side, mercilessly taking a hold of

my hip and lifting it upwards. I heard the groan deep within him, the sound sending tremors of pure, unadulterated fear to bubble just beneath my skin, forcing the hairs on my arms and neck to stand upright in abject terror.

Immediately I plotted my next course of action--hitting him wasn't going to work, and talking would only open my mouth to him--setting in motion something that I knew I'd have no way of stopping, but anything was better than where I knew doing nothing would lead me.

*Is this how you prove yourself to Miki?*

The kissing ceased immediately, the weight of his body instantly gone as he leapt back, landing in an animal-like crouch, staring at me with those black, glassy eyes, his darkening face growing more and more terrifying as the minutes passed.

"How dare you speak her name!" he hissed.

"How dare you touch me like that!" I shouted back as I wiped my mouth with a muddy sleeve. I winced at the contact, my arms now purple pulps that were nothing but pain and sensitivity in fleshy

packaging.

"Don't pretend you didn't like it."

I jumped to my feet and spat on the ground. "I didn't like it. It was like kissing a corpse, and you suck at it. What the hell possessed you to do something like that anyway? This isn't why I'm here."

"You're wrong. That's precisely why you're here!"

My gaze narrowed as he began to laugh, the sound almost maniacal if it weren't so damned beautiful. "What do you mean?"

"I can't kill you--not yet, anyway. Oh, you didn't expect that, did you?" he asked when he saw my shocked expression. "Up until a few weeks ago, I would have been more than satisfied to simply destroy you as quickly as possible and be done with you and this whole affair. But the plans that you're a part of--they've changed, the strategy has shifted. You're no longer good to us dead."

"*Us*? What do you mean *us*?" I asked as I backed away from him.

"That's none of your concern right now; you'll learn soon enough. What's important is that I keep you alive as long as it takes." A sinister smile stretched across his face, a gleaming white line of teeth marking the pitch of his skin as he held out his hand to me, palm up, his fingers curling inward, motioning me to come to him.

"No. As long as what takes? Tell me what you're planning," I demanded as I backed away even further.

"And why would I do that?" he asked while gesturing with a flippant hand.

"Because you want to--you want to tell me because you know that telling me will hurt me, and hurting me is something you enjoy."

"So true. How strange that you'd figure me out so quickly. So, should I tell you then? And let the truth fester within you like an infected wound? Or do I keep it to myself and let you squirm with the unknowingness of it all? Decisions, decisions."

He stood and only then did I realize that the creeping darkness that had taken over his face had

begun to stain the rest of him, his shirtless chest now a muted gray that was being pulled down his body like ink dropped into a glass of water.

"I think I'll tell you. It'll only make the eventual suffering that much more enjoyable, I think."

He walked towards me with slow, measured steps. For a fleeting second, I considered running, retreating into the woods behind me, but I knew that he'd catch me before I'd taken a single step. Instead I squared my shoulders and raised my chin. "I'm not afraid of you."

He laughed at that, his head thrown back and his mouth open wide as the throaty sound flowed through him and into the quiet around us. It was like a symphony of mocking. And I felt nothing.

"You see, as important as you may think you are, you're nothing. While I might have erred in missing you when I killed your mother, it turns out that it was all for the best. Without you escaping me, N'Uriel would have never heard his call, and would have never chosen to become an Innominate.

"It seems failing was the best thing that could

have happened to me. Killing you would have released him from his call and he'd never have been so easily removed."

He moved away from me and I saw that the inky stain of his skin had begun to creep up his wings. Instead of turning the pale feathers black, however, it seemed to be causing them to fall out. On the ground beneath them, the tips of his wings dragged in piles of discarded plumes.

I heard my voice ask, "You seem too happy for someone who tried so hard to kill me just a few months ago--why?"

His head turned to face me, the golden halo of hair that surrounded it reminding me that no matter what he looked like he was still an angel, still powerful. "Oh, believe me. I wasn't pleased that every attempt I made to kill you failed. Whether by human hand or not, nothing seemed to work. I even tried to get you to break the rules with him. You know that now, don't you?"

I nodded grimly. "You infected my dreams, pretended to be my mother and told me to get Robert to break the laws of the Nephilim."

"Yes. It would have been perfect; you would've been executed and he'd be turned mortal, thus making it that much simpler to kill him. But you couldn't even do that, could you? You couldn't make him desire you enough," he laughed mockingly.

I wanted to tell him that he was wrong, that Robert had desired me far too much for either of our good and that it had been me that had put a stop to it, but there was no point in trying to argue. His madness was too far gone.

Madness--that's what it was! I looked at him, at the way his entire body shook from the crazed laughter that poured out from him, the darkness that had taken over and turned him into a monstrous creature that no longer resembled the beautiful angel that had stood before me just moments earlier. I knew that this was the fate that awaited Robert if I lived.

"You're Innominate, too," I whispered.

"Finally, she gets it," he muttered sarcastically. "How ironic that my protege and I would receive the exact same call and neither of us

can seem to answer it. You end up becoming his wing-bringer; he becomes the gatekeeper to Heaven and Hell; I lose my honor, my place amongst my kind. He gets everything for defying who he is and what he's supposed to do, while I get nothing!

"I gave up everything, everything that ever mattered to me in order to be what I was told I was meant to be. I made the sacrifices that N'Uriel was unable to make. Why should he profit from his failure?"

He was seething, saliva slipping back and forth between the tight spaces of his teeth, the hot, angry red glow that surrounded him giving him an almost devilish appearance that did nothing to help boost my courage as I shrunk back in mute fear.

He noticed this and a cackle broke the silence that I had been unable to fill with a reply. One hand grabbed my face, squeezing my cheeks and forcing my mouth into a moue as he stared at me with his horrifically empty face.

"I want you to know that all of that will change. N'Uriel's death is guaranteed now. He will die by his



own hand, and it will be because of you. And you will watch it happen. Consider it a going away present."

"You're sick and wrong," I said in fierce denial. "He's going to live, no matter what you do."

"That's where you're wrong."

He clicked his tongue in disapproval before laughter began to pour out of him, his pitch colored eyes seemingly growing darker as he made his intentions clear. "Oh, Grace. The plan is to keep you alive and torture you--mentally and physically--until your pain and suffering causes Robert's rage to consume him.

"He will be unable to do anything to stop me from doing whatever it is I want to you." He trailed a finger down my face, running over my mouth, his sharp nail slicing my bottom lip and trailing the blood that seeped from it down my chin. He let his finger fall negligently off my jaw and onto my chest where it glided downwards...

"And I *will* do whatever I want."

"You can't do that," I gasped, struggling to pull away from his vise-like grip. "You can't!"

Another crazed laugh burst forth from him, shaking his entire body, the vibrations traveling into me and causing my arms to rattle against my side, my hands painfully slamming into me with each tiny quiver.

"Who's going to stop me? You? You'll be helping me; seeing this through your eyes, feeling the pain and humiliation that you've gone through will be enough to finish him.

"He'll be too overcome with rage and the darkness inside of him will prevent anyone from being able to reason with him--including you. Heaven help whoever is around him when that happens. Just think; what if he's surrounded by his family, his new brother-in-law, perhaps even your family. Oh, the carnage that he will cause..."

"Why?" I sobbed, unable to fight the fear and anger any longer. "Why are you doing this?"

He smiled triumphantly. "Well now, finally you show some genuine emotion." He released my face

and held his palm up to my chin, catching the tears that fell, hot and heavy, down my face.

"I think I'll save a few of them and give them to N'Uriel when he arrives--if he even left, of course. But if he didn't, that makes for an interesting question, doesn't it? How can he just stand there and watch as I hit you, kiss you, and touch you?"

"Shut-up, just shut-up!" I shouted. He would not make me doubt Robert again. I'd spent too much time doing that and I would not let his venomous words infect me like they had the last time. I wouldn't do that to Robert. I fully believed that he'd left like I asked him to, that he hadn't seen anything.

Sam let me go and sighed when I fell to the ground, my legs too weak from sorrow to carry my weight. "I'm sorry that things have to be this way. You truly are unique, Grace--one of a kind, really--and if there was a way to keep you around and still get rid of N'Uriel, I might think about it--you look like you could be a great way to pass the time--but I'm afraid that that's simply not possible. Not with what you know and what you are."

"What I am? Do you hate humans that much?" My voice was scratchy, the words coming out in fitful coughs.

"No. I adore humans. They make wonderful pets. My Miki had the right idea. No, Grace. I don't hate humans. I hate half-breeds."

"That's it? Good God, you sanctimonious jerk!" I spat. "You hate me for something I had no control over? I didn't get to choose my parents anymore than your father was able to choose you for a son-"

"Oh, so you've met my father. I'll bet he just fell head over heels in love with you, didn't he?"

"I feel sorry for you, Sam. You've tried so hard to be something that you simply aren't cut out to be and failed miserably."

"And what exactly is that?"

"An angel," I replied smugly, tilting my head up so that he could see my defiance.

"Oh, was that supposed to hurt my feelings?" he laughed before reaching down to grab a hold of

my head, his fingers spanning out to my temples, and pull me up to my feet. "Enough with the pleasantries. Our audience has arrived." He turned me around to face the parking lot as two pairs of headlights swerved in.

"What's going on?"

"The show is starting, Grace. Put your game face on, it's time to catch ourselves a king."



## CHECK

Two cars pulled into gravel filled stalls and I recognized them instantly, the small, white SUV especially causing my heart to drop and my feet propelling me forward to try and tell them to turn around, to go back. I tried to scream a warning, but a strong hand clamped over my mouth, the clucking of disapproval taking up where my voice should have carried.

"Now, now; we can't be rude to our guests. They've come at my invitation. It wouldn't do for our hostess to tell them to turn around and go home now, would it?"

I struggled against him, but he dragged me back, my feet kicking against him, my useless hands trying to pry his fingers from around my face, but my own were too stiff and numb to be anything but useless lumps of flesh. Finally bored with my feeble attempts at escape, Sam grabbed an arm and mercilessly pinned it behind me, causing my back to arch painfully and my body to still.

"That's a good girl. Now, smile for Daddy."

I shook my head and sealed my eyes shut, not wanting to see who approached us but unable to keep the knowledge of who it was from tearing a hole within me. Sam's ominous words were repeating themselves in my head.

*"He'll be too overcome with rage, and the darkness inside of him will prevent anyone from being able to reason with him—including you. Heaven help whoever is around him when that happens. Just think; what if he's surrounded by his family, his new brother-in-law, perhaps even your family. Oh, the carnage that he will cause..."*

A silent sob; it was all that I allowed as I heard the footsteps approaching, the crunching of gravel before the collapse of soggy grass beneath several pairs of heavy, intent feet.

"Oh my God! Grace!"

Dad's voice floated to me and carried with it his panic at seeing me in such a state. I wanted to tell him that everything was going to be okay, I wanted him to believe me and then leave, but I knew that wasn't going to happen. He'd already seen too



much.

Sam removed his hand from my mouth and his voice drifted from him in soft waves of pleasure as he spoke. "Welcome, James. It's so nice to see you again after all this time."

My eyes flew open to stare at my father, whose eyes suddenly lit up with recognition at the dark figure that stood before him. "You know each other?"

Dad's gaze returned to me and he nodded with hesitation, "Y-yes."

"How?"

Sam's deep laugh shook behind me as he tightened his grip on my arm. "Oh, I think James should explain that to you, shouldn't you, James?"

There. I saw it there: the flash of guilt behind my dad's eyes. Seeing it, and recognizing it for what it was--that startled me. And he knew that I saw it, that I caught it, and that only brought the guilt forward, turning his mouth slack. His shoulders sank, his entire posture changing from concerned and defensive to defeated and remorseful in as

much time as it took for my own face to fall.

"Dad?"

"Grace, I...I don't know what to say."

Behind him, Janice's face was pale. She looked about as clueless as I felt, and the worry that lined her brows was proof enough that whatever secret it was that Dad was keeping, it had been his alone.

My eyes bulged as I caught a movement beside her, what I saw a frightening vision that turned everything inside of me cold. Graham stood there, his face badly beaten, his body wobbling on weak legs. But seeing him that way--I had not expected so much damage, not when being turned had given him the ability to heal himself--was not what shocked me. I stared in disbelief as his arm was held in the white-knuckled grip of Erica Hamilton, her face bearing a blank smile, her eyes vacantly staring out in front of her.

And beside her, wearing that same unaffected expression as that of Erica was Mr. Branke, his hands hanging loosely at his side, as

though he didn't know what to do with them.

"What. Is. Going. On?" My breath was staggered, the staccato rhythm throwing everything inside of me off kilter. My eyes whipped back to Dad's, his expression mirroring the same shock I felt.

"Graham said that you needed us, that it was an emergency. We left him at the house with Matthew. Who's watching Matthew, Graham? Where's the baby?"

Graham's head hung in silence.

"Wait," I heard my own voice call out. "*Graham* told you to come here?"

He turned around, incredulity now mingling with the pained look that marred his face. "Yes. Yes, he did, but I swear, he was still there when we left. We left him with the baby... Grace, I don't know what's going on here, but I can only assume that it's my fault-"

"Dad," I began, pulling against Sam's grip and stifling a scream as he pulled back. I felt the burning in my shoulder, knew that it was threatening

to dislocate at any moment, and bit my lip to keep from crying out. "Dad, this isn't your fault."

"Yes it is, Grace. It is. I should've told you, I should've told you when your mom died but I couldn't--you'd lost so much, been through so much I didn't think it was fair to you to put such a burden on you," he explained, his voice wavering with emotion. He looked at Janice and tried to ease her confusion with a comforting hand, but she simply stared at him with wide eyes.

"Before we moved here, long before I met your mother, I was a very different person. There are things in this world that you can't possibly imagine, Grace, things that cannot be explained. There are secrets that could destroy everything that humanity stands for, destroy humanity itself. And--I have to tell you that I grew up in a family that kept those secrets."

I could see his mouth moving, see his hands gesturing as he continued his explanation but the only thing that registered with me was that my father was admitting to me that he knew far more about Robert's world than either of us were aware of.

"You're a-" I started, but Sam jerked my arm up higher against my back and my accusation was silenced with the swift sharpness of pain, allowing my father to continue--unaware that I already knew what he was going to say.

He inhaled deeply, and exhaled slowly, as if the gravity of what he would reveal could somehow be alleviated with such a simple gesture. His eyes were heavy and dark with the guilt that I had spied there earlier, and the circles that formed beneath them seemed to appear as if by magic, aging him markedly.

"My family is responsible for protecting the darkest of secrets, but I couldn't. I simply couldn't do it, so I chose to leave the family, to give up the life that I knew and this pissed them off. Shortly after, I met your mother and she was like a breath of fresh air compared to the hell I'd seen. And then Sam showed up.

"I knew immediately what he was, and why he had come. He's one of the dark angels who deals in nothing but evil. He told me he wasn't going to kill me, but only if I did something for him. As long

as he allowed me my freedom, let me live, I was willing to do whatever it was that he wanted.

"I had escaped my family's evil and couldn't give up the life of light and goodness that I'd tasted--it would have been like giving up breathing. But I didn't realize the price that I'd eventually have to pay until it was too late. Whatever my regrets, it was done. I gave Sam my vow--I owed him my life."

"Did you hear that, Grace?" Sam whispered into my ear. "Your father keeps secrets, too. And one of them is that I own him."

"No," I shouted. "No, it's not true."

"Oh, but it is," Sam said softly, his voice a gentle caress against my ear. "Now, ask your father what it cost him to keep his miserable human life. Ask him what other secrets he's kept."

My eyes focused on my dad's, and I didn't want to know. I didn't want to know any of it. I knew that whatever it was that he would tell me, it was going to change the way that I saw him, the father that I had always known, and I didn't want that. "No."

"Ask him!" Sam growled suddenly, yanking

my arm up once more, the sickening crunch and pop of my shoulder as it dislocated drowned out by my dad's shouting at Sam to stop.

"No," I whimpered once more as my useless arm was released and I sank to the ground. My head fell softly into the grass, the tall, unkempt blades cutting off my view.

"Well then, we'll just make him tell you, won't we?" Sam said with contemptuous amusement.

"James, no!"

"Mr. Shelley!"

Graham and Janice's cries caused my head to rise, and I watched in horror as Mr. Branke forced my father to the ground. A foot was pressed firmly at his back, while a rough hand held onto Dad's hair, forcing his head back, his neck straining at the unnatural angle.

"Now then, tell your daughter what you promised me in exchange for me sparing your life, James," Sam commanded in a strangely relaxed tone.

"Grace, I..." his eyes looked at me and then closed, unable to face me as his confession spilled forth. "I promised him that he could take your mother's life."

"No!"

I heard the cry of denial, but did it come from me? I couldn't say. There was so much that his confession did to me just then. My chest felt raw, as though it had been dragged through the gravel and dust, and left open to fester with the truth. My eyes were fixed on Dad's face as the emotions that always run in packs when your life has been forever altered by the gory honesty of deceit tore through me at a rapid pace. And I saw what it did to my father's composure as he began to weep, the guilt too much to accept anymore.

His head shook and he began to blubber out things that made no sense to me. Nothing would make sense to me anymore--not after this.

"It's depressing to hear that he exchanged his life for your mother's, isn't it? And look at what he's done with that life; he's now the manager of one of the crappiest grocery store franchises in



Ohio. Makes you proud, doesn't it, Grace?" Sam laughed evilly.

Dad's raised voice burst through the laughter. "No, Grace. You don't understand. Your mother knew! She knew everything; she always did- it was impossible to keep a secret from her. I begged her to forgive me, to forgive my weakness, and she asked me to forgive her. Can you believe that? She actually asked for *my* forgiveness. I asked her why and she told me-

"James, STOP!"

A rush of wind swirled all around us like a miniature tornado, whistling as though it itself was the strong voice that halted my father's words like a knife slitting a throat. The air grew cold and I saw my breath begin to fog as it escaped my lips.

From where I lay, I saw Mr. Branke's grip loosen, and Dad's head fall forward at the sudden slack. Erica, too, let go of Graham, who now looked completely unscathed, his bruises gone. He rushed over to help Janice, who seemed frozen in place, not by the sudden drop in temperature, but by

everything that she had just heard.

Like the moon suddenly appearing from behind a dark cloud, Ameila was there, standing between us. Her wings were outstretched, like snowy curtains, her dark hair floating around her head like a carbon halo. She didn't touch the ground and instead hovered above the grass, her bare feet just barely kissing the unkempt blades.

"James, you foolish, impetuous human; you should have kept your silence and said nothing. You know what Sam is, what he's capable of, and yet you fell into his trap so easily. This was not what I intended to happen when I sent you here," she scolded.

"Why?" I questioned.

Her face turned to me, her eyes small and full of remorse. "You may feel that with all of the emotions boiling inside of you that you're capable of taking on the world, but you aren't ready for this, Grace."

"I'm ready to die. I'm ready to die to keep the people I love safe, so don't tell me that I'm not ready

for whatever the hell *this* is." I snapped.

"Grace," she said to me, her tone disapproving. "You don't understand. Sacrificing yourself for love takes courage of the heart and the mind--something that I've always known you had in abundance--but hearing the truth about something you never wanted to know can kill your very soul. Trust me when I tell you that you're not ready to hear the entire truth."

Somewhere deep inside of me, I could hear the doors inside of my chest locking, the clanging of solid metal shutting out forgiveness and understanding and leaving room for only the truth and the resentment that I could feel building within me.

"You've known this whole time. About my dad, my mom...Sam," I accused.

"Yes, Grace. I know everything."

The air around me felt incredibly warm as a cold chill ran through my veins when a suspicion began to form inside of me. "And Robert? Does he know? Does he know about this, too?"

She shook her head in fervent denial. "No. He doesn't know anything."

"Grace, I know that this is a lot to deal with, but there's so much you don't know--about Robert, and Ameila," I heard Dad try to explain, but Graham's biting reply prevented me from responding.

"She already knows about them being angels, Mr. Shelley. Unlike you, Robert at least trusted Grace enough to tell her the truth. I can't believe you'd sell out your own wife like that and leave Grace to grow up without a mom, especially to bad dude like Sam.

"Man, I thought my dad was bad, but he's only like that when he's on the bottle. You've got no excuse." He turned his back to my father, his arms crossed in front of him as he shook his head in disgust.

"Is this all true?"

The small voice that finally spoke up was timid, the obvious disbelief at what was being revealed, mixed with the tacit offense was like a

firecracker going off in the middle of a funeral.

"Janice, I'm sorry that you've been dragged into the middle of all of this. I vowed to leave this life behind me after Abigail's death and raise Grace the way she deserved." Dad crawled on his hands and knees to reach his wife, who stood shivering in the chilly night air. He raised his hands to her in supplication but she pulled hers behind her, unwilling to accept him.

"You're telling me that there are angels, real, live angels living in Heath--and that your daughter is dating one of them--and that you...you let one of them kill your wife?"

She was angry. And that anger was turning the wheels in her head as she looked over the players that stood before her, seeing that she was the only one there who had been completely ignorant of everything. "Is this why Katie died? Did her death have something to do with this?"

"No!" came Dad's denial.

"Yes," Sam confirmed.

Janice's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a

dismayed cry. "Why?"

I pushed myself up and struggled to my feet, my good arm unable to support my weight due to my wounded hand. Instead, I relied on the strength of my legs and stubbornness alone.

"He thought that it was me. He meant to kill me, not Katie. Her death was a mistake," I answered her softly.

Dad's head whipped around, a garbled response lodged in his throat. Janice's other hand came to meet its twin at the shock of this new truth.

"You bastard!" Dad shouted before scrambling to his feet and lunging towards us. Ameila's hand stopped him cold, his chest bouncing off of her still upraised hand, sending him flying backwards.

Recovering quickly, his hand flew up, pointing an accusatory finger at Sam and looking at Ameila with anger and shock forming a torrent of emotions within him. "He tried to kill my daughter--"

"Oh, I've done more than that," Sam said casually, staring at the jet black nails on his equally

dark hand as though the entire affair was simply too dull to pay attention to.

This only further infuriated my father. "This wasn't part of the deal--this wasn't part of the damn deal! He broke the laws of your kind, Ameila--you know what that means!"

"Shut up, James," Ameila silenced him. "Despite being electus, you do not know everything about us, and you lost the privilege of that knowledge when you abandoned your family, when you broke *your* rules."

"How can you defend him? Your son is in love with Grace--how can you defend this monster who tried to take her away, who tried to kill my daughter?"

A low, mocking laugh rang out, and Sam doubled over, his blackened hands on his knees, completely amused by what was taking place before him.

"She does it because she knows that there's nothing she can do to prevent me from taking Grace's life right here, right now--isn't that right,

Ameila?"

When Ameila gave a stiff, defiant nod, Sam rewarded her with a sickeningly gleeful grin. "You see James, Ameila can't do anything about any of this because Grace shouldn't exist."

He rose above the ground several inches and floated towards Ameila, who looked at him with utter disgust written plainly on her face. He ignored this and moved past her towards my father. He circled my dad, and taunted him with his melodic words.

"I should have taken your wife as I had planned that night. It would have prevented all of this, but I made a foolish error in judgment and the consequences now stand before me. That all ends tonight, however, and then you can go on and live your life with your new wife and child. How convenient, don't you think, that everything that I've taken--and will take--from you, you've somehow managed to replace?"

His smile grew as he floated away, returning to me like a lion guarding its prey. The sinister curl of his lips left no doubt in my mind that Graham's



words were true: Sam was a bad dude. He had no intention of letting Dad and Janice go. He had no intention of letting any of us go--I was just the only one besides him who knew it.

From the corner of my eye, I witnessed that Sam's pleasure at the way things were unfolding had triggered mirroring smiles to form on Erica and Mr. Branke's faces, as though someone had pulled some invisible string. And yet despite this, they showed no other emotion; their eyes were flat and nearly colorless, their bodies shivering in reaction to the outside influences of the cold, but nothing else.

"What did you do to them," I wanted to know as I looked at their blank faces with those zombie-like smiles plastered on their mouths, counterfeits of the genuine smiles I had seen them form before.

"You're not a very good listener, are you?" Sam clucked. "I told you, I can't mess with a conscious mind. But, now that you mention it, the one who did probably has no further use for them seeing as how things are falling into place so nicely. The blonde girl was an easy choice--you naturally disliked her and her dislike for you had already

been proven. And the teacher, well...he also provided a great distraction, didn't he?

"Well, now that we've gotten all of that out of the way, it's quite clear that they've outlived their purpose." As his words hung in the air, I looked at his face, saw the forbidding gleam in his eye ...

"No!" I ran towards my former nemesis, knowing that I would be too late. For a fraction of a second, recognition passed over her face, and then I watched the blonde beauty with the crystal blue eyes fall to the ground, limp and lifeless beside my former teacher.

"Why?" I heard myself sob as I pressed a swollen hand against the warm face of Erica Hamilton--her eyes were still open, unseeing and without the peace that they should have held.

"Oh, don't worry--they weren't really alive to begin with. But you already knew that, didn't you?"

My mind flashed back to the parking garage at the hospital--seeing Mr. Branke, dead in his car, and then not. And even further back, when Robert had peered into Erica's mind and had seen nothing;

we were left confused by that, thrown off by the fact that she had not been in a comatose state like Stacy, but animated and hell bent on destroying any sense of normalcy I'd managed to scrape up for myself.

I looked at their bodies, their faces blank, even in death, and realized that my anger towards Erica had been misplaced. She might not have liked me, she might have even deserved her reputation at school, but she did not deserve to be used as a puppet for the sick schemes of two mad angels.

"Why did you use them? They were innocent people who did nothing to deserve this--any of this." I looked at my dad and, no matter how angry I was with him for what he did, how betrayed I felt at him keeping all of this from me, I knew that I didn't want this for him. Hadn't all of this been so that he would be safe, so that they'd all be safe? I shook my head at the hopelessness of it all.

"I told you, Grace; this isn't about you. This is about N'Uriel," Sam said with an almost insolent air before turning his head to the sky and licking his

teeth, his lips curling over them in a vicious snarl. "And speaking of which, it's about time you showed up, brother. Now the pieces are all set. Let's play."



## GRIEVANCES

"Robert!" I cried out as his feet landed before me. He held his arms out to me and I rushed into them, throwing my only working arm around him and feeling thankful for his presence, yet angry that he had returned.

"I'm sorry," he murmured into my hair as he lifted me against him in a painful embrace, my thoughts open to him, everything open to him. "I couldn't leave you here to die. Not without me. I told you, Grace. You're my life. Without you, there's no purpose for me anymore."

"You should have stayed away," I sobbed into the curve of his jaw. "You should have stayed away and saved yourself. He doesn't plan on letting any of us live."

"There is no life without you." He brushed his lips against my ear, and moved them along my jaw until he finally molded them against my own. The simple contact between them was like a burst of energy that renewed the vigor and strength that I didn't know had been drained from me.

There was a slow clapping behind us, the lazy rhythm almost luxurious in the tense air that surrounded us. Robert lifted his face from mine as his hand covered the back of my head and held it against his chest as he turned to face his former friend. I felt the anger within him, the way it made his body shake with the fire of it, the pure, raw rage that merely rippled, the simmer having not yet started as he glared at Sam.

"Such a joyous and yet bittersweet reunion between two lovers; how touching. Hello, brother. Thank you for coming at last--we were beginning to wonder if you'd even show," Sam commented. "A lot has happened in the short time you've been away. Shall I show you?"

I felt Robert's body stiffen, but I could not move my head--Robert's hand held it firmly in place--to see his face. I heard a sharp intake of breath--Ameila's as well as Robert's--and I gasped when I realized what was going on.

"Don't! Stop it, Sam!"

Secrets. Dark, painful secrets were being

exposed in the silence that surrounded all of us, and for my father, Graham, Janice, and I, we were incapable of realizing the true depth of the thoughts that passed between the three angels with wordless abandon.

But we felt it. The temperature in the air lowering degree by degree as the confessions and accusations were thrown, thought by merciless thought. Robert's hand at the back of my head began to clench, his fingers digging into my skull and eliciting a cry of pain from my lips.

"Grace?!" He pulled away from me, stunned and ashamed by what he had just done.

I winced as the pain subsided, and only then did he realize the extent of the damage that had been done to me by Sam's assault. He grabbed my hands and brought them to his mouth. I closed my eyes in anticipation of the relief that he'd provide with such a simple gesture but found they were jerked mercilessly open when Roberts's hands were torn from mine.

"Don't!"



Robert stared at me, and then turned to stare at his mother, who now stood between us.

"What?"

"Don't, son. Don't heal her. It won't do her any good."

"You speak of good? You, who kept the truth about who she is, what she is from me? From her?" he snarled, and shoved her aside.

"R-Robert?"

My voice was shaky. He was angry, angrier than I had ever seen him before. "Robert, what's going on?"

"You've been deceived, Grace. We both have," he replied stiffly as he stood in front of me protectively.

"I know what she did, Robert. I know she kept the truth about my father from me, from you, but she's still your mother. She-"

"No!" he growled. "No, you don't know what she did, Grace!"

"Yes, she doesn't know what your mother did, does she? But I know. And now so do you. How does it feel, N'Uriel, to be betrayed by a parent, too? Does it sting?"

"What did she do?" I whispered, unable to fathom the actions that Ameila had taken to cause such a reaction from him.

Robert shook his head, unwilling to accept what he'd just learned. He loved his mother--whatever it was that she did, he couldn't believe it possible, and yet couldn't prevent his anger that came as a result of its knowledge.

Sam seized the opportunity to expand Robert's pain. "Who do you think led me to your father, Grace?"

"I don't believe you."

"It's true," Ameila said. She was so matter-of-fact about it, almost clinical that I didn't recognize her voice for a second. But then the emotions came, one after the other. They all rolled over me, crushing my will to comprehend any of it as she explained.

"I know you cannot appreciate why, but there are paths that you cannot walk down without them being laid out for you first. You had to make your deal with Sam; it's how things had to be, James."

I was angry. No. I was enraged.

"How things had to be? How things had to be? He's a human being! You forced him to choose between himself and my mother! Why? Is it the free will thing again?" I yelled at her, walking around Robert, who stood mute, the betrayal striking him to the heart as deeply as it had me.

"Grace, that's not it. Please--"

"No! All this time, all this time you've gone on and on about how angels are supposed to help humans, how you're here to save us, but all I've learned so far is that your kind like to use us as puppets! We're here for your amusement--watch what I can do to this human's life, look at how I can make this stupid human trust me. If not for you, my mother would still be alive!"

I was beside myself with hurt and anger and rage and fire and...it didn't matter what else. I only

knew that for the first time, I felt no fear when looking at Ameila. I felt no awe, no envy. I only saw the ugliness of what she had done to me, to my family.

"Bravo, Grace!" Sam applauded.

"Shut-up!" I spat at him. "You're guiltier than she is. Why *my* mother? Why her? What did she do to you that could make you hate her so much? Why did you have to choose her?"

"Don't!" Ameila shouted, but Sam merely laughed and gave her a mocking bow before looking at me with such a deep satisfaction that I knew whatever he told me, it could very well be the last words I heard.

"Because your mother is the bitch that killed the only person I ever loved!"

I stopped breathing. Everything inside of me stopped. Everything except my heart, which tumbled inside of my chest with confusion and disruption. "It's not true," I breathed. The person who'd killed Miki had been Avi, an angel. My mother was Abigail Shelley. Human.

"It is," Sam contradicted. "Doubt me if you

will, but Ameila can confirm that what I say is true. Over time, I admit that my anger towards her cooled, but I never truly stopped desiring that she suffer for what she did.

"And then she fell in love with a human, and married him. And, because she did not turn him, they violated the laws of the Nephilim. I personally asked to mete out their punishment. Only one elder sided with me--can you guess who?"

He laughed when my eyes as well as Robert's turned to stare at Ameila, who continued to hold her head stubbornly high. Sam sneered.

"Your father's human nature made it too easy. When faced with living or dying, a human will always choose life, no matter what it costs them. And your father made his decision so quickly, I almost felt sorry for Avi.

"But not enough to keep from killing her. Unfortunately I couldn't do it. Only Thrones or Seraphim can punish an angel. For ten years I believed that she had been stripped of her divinity and both of them executed. And then I learned that

in that time not only had neither of them been punished, but that their union had also produced a child. No, not a child; an abomination."

Half-breed.

The word spun around in my head like the arrow of a compass desperate to find North in a world without it. I'd lived with the term my whole life; I'd accepted that that was what I was, what I'd been born. But this was different. This was something I'd never believed. Something I refused to believe.

"It's not true. I'm not one of them, I'm not a Nephilim," I argued shakily.

"She's not. I'd have known," Robert agreed. He came to stand beside me and I raised my eyes to cast a quick glance at him, biting back a sob when I saw that his pupils had dilated so greatly that there was only a thin strip of silver left surrounding the dark centers.

"You're too consumed by your lust for her to see the truth that's been staring you in the face," Sam guffawed. "If you don't believe me, here's your proof."

Sam's hand raised and he tossed something small and glittery towards Robert, who caught it in his hand with ease. His fingers opened and he stared into his palm at its contents. His silence was unnerving.

"What is it?" I asked, looking into his hand and seeing two tiny crystal droplets resting in his palm.

Sam's cackle grew louder as Robert held them to me so that I could see them better. "They're your tears."

"My...what?"

"Your tears; I told you I was saving them to give to him." He gazed at Robert triumphantly, the corona of light that glimmered around him a deep sapphire that glittered with gold as his happiness and satisfaction combined, the light casting an eerie greenish haze across the tar colored gloss of his eyes. "Do you believe me now?"

"Stop this, Samael!"

Ameila's commanding voice was so strong, so physically and audibly powerful, it forced me onto

the ground by sheer sound alone. I rolled to my side, grunting at the pain in my shoulder and arm, and saw that Graham, Janice, and Dad had also been affected by it and were all equally stunned by what had just happened, their heads held up while their bodies lay prone on the ground in shock.

"You call humans puppets, but you fail to see that you're more of a puppet than they are. You think that the Thrones prevented you from killing Avi because of protocol? They did so on *my* orders, you arrogant child." She blazed, literally blazed with fury as she threw a dagger-like gaze at Sam. The air around her was superheated, the color white hot as it whipped her hair and her gown up into spiraling, swirling masses of white and black wisps.

"Why would you do something like that?" Sam looked puzzled, and for once, I empathized with him.

"Yes. Why?"

Ameila turned her head towards me, my question one that she had not anticipated, and a raw sadness crossed her face as she answered,



"Because I had to, but more so because she asked me to."



# HEARTSONG

"That's ridiculous!" Sam raged.

I shuddered at the sight of the featherless spines that were all that remained of his wings. They stuck out like sharp and grotesque antlers, a mottled gray against the necrotic darkness of his skin.

"Perhaps it is to you, but this isn't about you, Samael. It never was," Ameila said to him snidely. She drifted towards me and held her hands out. "Your mother wanted you to know the truth, Grace, but not like this. It was never her intention for you to find out this way."

"Find out the truth? What truth? What the hell is truth when my entire life has been a complete and total lie? My father lied to me, my mother lied to me, Robert lied to me... Even you lied to me. Sam's right, everyone was right. I shouldn't even exist. I'm a freak of nature."

I backed away from her. "You said my mom asked you to do this. Why?"

"Because that was her path. That's what she had to do."

"That's utter bullshit and you know it!" I accused. I heard the rush of footsteps behind me and I turned just in time to see my father come up beside me. He gave me a quick glance and cast his gaze at Sam, shuddering at what he saw. His eyes returned to Ameila and his voice became a plea.

"Ameila, you said it yourself, she's not ready for this," he began, obviously now uncomfortable with the truth that he had been ready to reveal just minutes earlier. "Please, she's been through so much..."

"No, James. It's time she learned the truth. It's too late to keep her in the dark, and pointless to try any longer."

With a defeated sinking of his shoulders, he nodded and took several retreating steps, stopping only when he realized he couldn't stand beside Janice, whose face bore visibly the emotions that tore at me from the inside. When he stopped, I stared at him, incredulous that he'd simply bow

down and shy away like...a puppet.

"That's not it at all, Grace," Ameila assured. "I just understand now what I couldn't before, and what your mother did. She knew what was expected of her, what her path demanded she follow. She *didn't* expect to fall in love with your father. She didn't expect for him to be the one to make everything suddenly make sense.

"But that's what happens when you fall in love, whether you're human or angel or something else. It's why James couldn't figure out what she was, and why she couldn't tell him until later. It's also why she didn't question what she had to do.

"It was at her insistence that I revealed to the Seraphim what she had done, that she'd married a human. Unsurprisingly, most of them were unconcerned, reasoning that there were no consequences to be had because what could happen with a female angel and a human male?"

"She happened!" Sam cursed, his finger thrown out, pointing at me like a weapon.

Ameila laughed. My eyes blinked at the

sound, unable to comprehend why she would do such a thing.

"Had you been born during the time of the Grigori, you'd know that the Nephilim are born only from the human womb. A human male cannot produce a child with a female angel; we do not procreate that way.

"Had you chosen to find a mate and move on, you'd have witnessed this for yourself. Instead, you spent thousands of years holding onto the memories of a monster that would have sooner turned this earth into an ocean of zombies and feed you to them than love you."

"Then...how?" I asked. I didn't understand; Ameila was right about that. I looked Dad and saw the look on his face, saw the way this revelation changed the way he looked at me. It was like I had suddenly become a stranger to him, much as he was now to me.

"While Sam was finalizing his plans for your father, your mother had her sentence carried out."

"Sentence? But-"

She raised one hand, a request to halt the question that hung on the tip of my tongue. "Please. Wait until I am done." She held her pause until she was sure I wouldn't interrupt anymore and then sighed, her hand lowering--both of them lowering in acceptance of the fact that I wasn't feeling charitable at all towards her.

"Your father's life was spared because Death saw no violation; James knew nothing of what your mother was at the time. But your mother received the harshest of punishments; she had her immortality stripped from her,

Ameila walked over to my father and I saw her face grow pleading. "Avi--I'm sorry, I keep referring to her by the name I've known to be hers since as far as my memory takes me, but she wasn't Avi when she died was she? No. She was Abigail, to you and I must remember and respect that.

"Abigail did not intend to cause you such guilt over your decision, James. It was painful for her, even after she became human, to keep such a deception from you. But even though she eventually

told you what she had been, she couldn't tell you everything. She couldn't tell you that the reason she knew about Sam's offer was because she had set it up. She needed you to say yes, needed you to be human and not electus."

"But why? Why couldn't she let me know beforehand? Why did she need for me to go into it so ignorant of everything and then make such a decision?" Dad asked, his face pained by so many lies; his as well as mom's.

"Because you needed to make the decision on your own, as a simple man fighting for his life."

"Did she have that little faith in me?"

"No. She had every faith in you, James. That's why she did what she did."

I stretched my hand towards Robert, needing his support as Ameila went on, but he seemed to be lost in his thoughts, consumed by them as he listened to the words and heard the whispered secrets in the minds around him. I wanted to comfort him; I wanted him to tell me what he was thinking to ease the burdens that weighed on him,



but something Ameila said forced my head to whip around.

"And Samael knows that I speak the truth because she knew him better than anyone, didn't she? Your mother knew far more about you than you care to admit, far more about yourself than even you are aware."

My...

"Mom?"

Dad's outraged cry, Sam's mocking laughter, and Graham's exclamation of shock all did nothing to drown out the pounding of denial inside of me. There was no way, no possible way that I could be related to Sam.

"You're lying."

Ameila's somber eyes flicked over to mine. "I'm not, Grace. I may have kept many things from you, but I never lied about them and I never will. You and Samael share the same mother, but your mother stopped being an angel long before you were conceived."

"Then that means-"

"Yes, that means that you're not Nephilim."

"That's a lie!" Sam's shouted as he flew towards me, his black, claw-like hand open, reaching for my throat.

Robert stepped into his path, a black veil of protection before me, and blocked him from reaching his goal. "Back off," Robert growled. He had taken on a defensive stance, his hands balled up into iron fists at his sides as he held his arms out protectively, keeping a safe distance between Sam and me.

"You overstep your bounds, brother. She's mine!" Sam hissed over Robert's shoulder. "You have no claim to her; you gave up that right when you chose to turn your back on your call. Besides-" he glanced at me and smirked as he returned to the same relaxed, unaffected state he'd been in just moments before his outburst "-she prefers my touch over yours."

My eyes widened in shock at the lie as I realized what he was doing. He looked at Robert

and the thoughts once again flowed between them, a stream of hated innuendo and insinuations, and I knew that Robert was seeing Sam with his hands on me, his mouth forced onto mine.

I wanted to close my eyes, shut out the visions that I knew were staining Robert's mind with their foulness, but I could no sooner remove them from my mind. They had been burned into my memory just as much as any other event had.

Robert's wings--kept calmly gathered behind him--began to unfold and stretch out. The dark feathers gave off a rainbow sheen in the pale light, and I watched as they shimmered and shook with the angry vibrations that seemed to come from deep within him, touching whatever was near him with its own rattling.

The skin on my arms began to tingle, and I gasped as my eyes took in the deepening purple bruises on my hands, the intricate geometrical pattern having worked its way up my forearm and now encroaching beyond my elbows. "Robert?"

I eased myself around the feathered wall that he had created between Sam and me, and stood in

front of him. I looked into his face and my heart lurched within the walls of my chest as I saw the same dark, honeycombed webbing cross over the smooth skin of his forehead, the silver in his eyes gone now, everything absorbed by the darkness that was creeping through him, consuming him.

"Robert, stop," I whispered, and pressed a swollen hand against him. I blocked out the pain as I shoved against him, trying desperately to get him to realize what Sam was doing.

*He put his hands on you, his mouth on you—your brother.* The thought stabbed at my mind, red-hot with its anger, and I fell to my knees at the searing and sudden pain.

"Grace!"

The sounds of feet rushing towards me, the feeling of arms reaching to lift me and pull me back up were drowned out by the continuing barrage of thoughts that attacked my mind with their burning sting.

*You let him touch you—you let him do those things to you. You should have stopped him!*

My voice rang out, shrill and desperate as each painful word stabbed at me. The arms that were dragging me away suddenly stopped their relentless pulling. "I did! I did stop him! Nothing happened! Don't let him do this to you, Robert. Don't let him destroy your faith in me--it's what he wants!"

Robert's hands went to his head, cradling it as though my words were causing him the same untold pain that his had done mine. I struggled with the hands that held me, tearing myself away from them to return to his side, needing him to believe me, needing him to not let the evil seed that Sam had planted take hold in his fertile mind.

But I was too late.

And Sam knowingly laughed behind me, the bitter laugh of a joyless win.

"You see, brother? You're not safe from betrayal...from anyone. Of course, that's not all of it, is it Ameila?"

From where I stood, I could see that Ameila's face, though it had paled, grew even more defiant.

More secrets, more deceit, and there was little I could do to keep them from being revealed.

"No."

Sam began to do a sort of dance as he floated above the ground, unusually blissful as he rolled his hand, indicating that Ameila should continue.

I didn't want her to.

She didn't want to.

But the truth wouldn't be kept from Robert any longer. He turned to face her and she closed her eyes at what she saw, the disappointment and hurt that only a mother could feel quite evident by the lines that chiseled themselves into her fine skin. Ameila's composure was difficult to take in.

She was always so stoic, so statuesque in everything that she did, and yet she suddenly appeared vulnerable. I didn't like it. She remained still for what felt like an eternity, I assumed because she was taking a moment to compose herself. When she finally opened her eyes, it was to send an icy, silver glare in Sam's direction, neutralizing his

gleeful expression and painting on his face one that resembled something akin to fear.

"Samael, do you think you've won? Do you think the stolen thoughts of those who better you in every way have somehow given you the edge here? You want to know the truth? You want to hear what your mother kept from you? Fine.

"Avi didn't want you; you were a duty for her, an obligation that she had to meet because of who she was. She only joined with your father so that our numbers could increase, and always looked at you as her only regret. She gave life to the most pathetic angel in our entire history. You couldn't love properly and you can't hate properly. She was the best of us and she gave birth to the worst.

With a dismissive wave of her hand, she removed her gaze from him and focused her attention on me, giving me a woeful smile as she did so. "Grace, your name, your soul sang in her heart just as loudly as any call. She knew that you had to be born. You were as much her destiny as her own death was, and she could not escape it. She didn't want to. She wanted you more than

anything. More than immortality, more than life, more than divinity.

"But she needed me to help her. She might have been mortal, but she still wasn't human, and just as I helped Hanina to conceive Robert, I helped your mother conceive you."

I stood there on shaky on my feet, staring into the grey abyss of Ameila's eyes. How odd that a few words could turn even the strongest foundation to rubble simply by uttering them in specific combinations. In the shortest of time spans, the relationship I had formed with the memory of my mother was reduced to nothing but a fairytale.

Ameila's fingers closed over mine in a painful reminder that she still held on to me. "No, no Grace. Your mother loved you! From the moment she felt your life within her, there could be no bond as close or as pure. She didn't tell you any of this because she wanted to keep you safe.

"Your life was in jeopardy the moment your name became more than just a thought. Samael still wanted to kill her. If you knew about what she'd been, what your father had been, it would have



compromised everything that she sacrificed to have you."

I couldn't focus on what she was saying as a question began to form in my mind. "If I was conceived the same way Robert was, then that means-"

"This is preposterous!" Sam bit out, cutting me off. He already knew what I was thinking, the idea abhorrent to him. "That half-breed is no angel."

"No. You're right, Samael. Grace may have been conceived in the same manner as N'Uriel, but she is not an angel, just as she is not Nephilim. Her birth was as natural as any human birth could be."

"Then explain, if she's not Nephilim, why she must die," Robert demanded, his voice sounding strange, as though he were far away from us though he was standing right beside me.

Sam grunted in satisfaction as Ameila's eyes grew pained, and it wasn't from what she saw in Robert's face. It was from what she was about to tell him.

"It's because though she was conceived to

be born, she wasn't born to live."

This sent Robert into a silent fury; he bristled as a rumbling began within him. Ameila tried to ease his frustration, her calm voice acting like a dampener on the fire that flared inside of him.

"Robert, please understand me when I say this to you, I did this for you. I did this for the both of you. Grace's birth was wanted--she was wanted very much--but it's her destiny to die. Abigail knew that Grace would be your wing-bringer. She knew what Grace would be to you. It's why we came back here when we did, why I insisted you put on this high school charade. She is your path, your destiny."

"My destiny? Did you know that my destiny would be to kill her? Did you know that as well?" Robert's gruff voice did nothing to shake Ameila, who slowly nodded her head in confirmation.

A roar of pain filled the field. Robert's wings began to rise and fall, while Sam's malicious cackling filled in the void that the mournful cry left behind as it faded into the night.

"Oh this is better than I expected. Mothers

suck, don't they?"

Robert turned around and this time, I couldn't prevent a pained sob from escaping me when I saw that his face and his torso had been swallowed by blackness. He looked at me as though I were a stranger, the rage within him, fed by this final betrayal, finally taking hold.

"No, Robert, don't," I whimpered when he walked past me, his goal clear, his target patiently waiting as he stalked his prey.

"That's right, brother," Sam taunted. "You know where this is going." He took several slow steps backwards, smiling in anticipation.

I turned to face Ameila. "You did this. You could have told him the truth before any of this ever happened. You could have prevented all of this!"

"And then he'd have refused to come back to Heath, and everything your mother sacrificed to ensure that you were born and that you survived that car accident would have been in vain."

"What did my mother sacrifice to keep me alive? She knew she was going to die before I was

even born--she planned it for crying out loud--she sacrificed nothing but me!"

Ameila sighed and looked at me with undiluted pity in her eyes. "Your judgment is being clouded by your anger, so much so that you can't see what's right in front of you. Why do you think you survived that accident, Grace?"

My eyes opened, and my mind flashed through every memory I had of that night, both the ones that were my own and those that had been shared with me through Robert. I scrutinized Ameila's face, the pale, gold glow that surrounded her, and then it clicked. "You. You were there. You were the reason I ended up outside of the car."

Her head bobbed down once in confirmation. "Yes, I was there, but I did not save you, Grace. I couldn't interfere without it being known and my path did not allow me to do so. How you ended up outside of the car cannot be explained, but why Samael did not kill you outside of the car can."

I looked at her, perplexed as she looked past me, her eyes darting between Sam and Robert and

finally my father. "Why do you think Samael let you live all those years ago when he's proven that he'd stop at nothing to hurt you?"

"Because he's a serial screw-up," I replied, as though the answer were the most obvious thing in the world.

"No. No, Grace. He's been fulfilling his call for thousands of years. He would have known if he'd only taken one life. Samael took two lives in that car that night, Grace. *Two lives*. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I shook my head. There was too much information swimming in my head to accept anything else. Especially this.

"Your mother was pregnant when she died, Grace. Somehow, for some inexplicable reason, her body changed, allowing her to conceive a human child, one whose beating heart was wholly indistinguishable from your own, one that Samael would not have expected, could not have expected. He did take two lives that day. He was not wrong in that, but the lives that he took were those of your

mother and your little sister."

My mind blanked. I had no words, no thoughts. Just empty air.

"Why'd you tell her?" I heard Dad demand as he pushed his way towards us. Graham followed close behind, his entire demeanor protective as he approached, quickly taking me into his arms and holding me against him while I looked between my father and Ameila, mortified by the avalanche of secrets that seemed to be never ending. "She didn't need to know that," my father shouted angrily.

"I won't keep the truth from her anymore, James," Ameila said in a defeated tone. "She needs to know while there's still time."

"Time for what?" Graham demanded.

"Time to save Robert," I answered.

We all turned to look at him; he had his back to us, its sinuous lines now just as dark as his wings. He leaned forward, his body tensing, tightening like a spring just before release as Samael waited with an almost merry sort of eagerness that surely looked out of place to

everyone else, but to me, I knew exactly where it was coming from, and why.

"This has to happen, Grace. You see that now. When I first spoke to you about being with N'Uriel, I told you that I feared you'd be hurt. I wasn't lying."

"I know," I said softly.

"Grace," Dad interjected, but I shook my head.

"Ameila's right, Dad. I came here so that Sam could finish what he started. If you're really an EP, then you know what's wrong with Robert. If I don't die, he will, and Sam's going to make sure that he takes everyone I care about with him."

I turned away, disgusted by own explanation. The words acted like bile in my throat, and my stomach churned at the vision that formed in my mind if Sam got what he wanted.

"Grace, please. There's got to be another way. There's always another way," Dad pleaded, but I couldn't let the strings that tugged at my heart pull me away from what I had come here to do.

"I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry that I had to keep all of this a secret from you--it's what I thought was the best thing for everyone, what I thought--" it was like a rubber band snapped inside of me, a sharp sting of realization. "Holy crap."

"What?" Graham asked.

I turned to face Dad.

"You didn't tell me about you and mom because you wanted to keep me safe. Robert did the same thing when he kept the truth about Sam from me. And then I did it to you. I thought not telling you anything would keep you safe. God, I'm so stupid!"

"I don't understand what's going on, but I know that you don't have to do this," Janice said out loud, her voice a blending of a half-sob, half-choking sound.

Graham's head bobbed in agreement. "Yeah, Grace. We can figure something out. Your dad was right; there's always another way."

My head twisted from the doubt that I knew



could never be wiped away with word-laced embraces from those I loved the most, no matter how much I wished it could.

"I have to do this," I said firmly. "Dad, you know I do."

My eyes flicked over to Sam's, and though they were practically lost in the black void that was his face, I could almost see a slight glimmer of satisfaction there that confirmed for me what I knew I simply couldn't let happen. Robert had been right. He would not win.

Quickly, I took in Robert's movements and knew that my time was up. He could no longer hear the thoughts of anyone else, and this quiet allowed for the darkness inside of him to scream the loudest. He was darkness.

He lowered himself into a full crouch, one hand, fingers stretched out, touched the ground. The other rested on a bent knee. A low rumbling sound was flowing out of him, like an engine hungry for a taste of its own power.

I threw my arms around Graham and kissed

his cheek. The salt of his tears stung the cut on my lip, but I didn't care. "Take care of Lark. I love you, Frank," I whispered against his cheek.

"I love you, too, Rocky," he answered me in kind, his voice hoarse.

I pulled away from his with as much speed as I could manage and turned to face my father. "I'm sorry, Dad," I managed to get out before he pulled me into a suffocating embrace, his wet face pressed against mine.

"Don't apologize to me, kiddo. Not after everything that's happened, after everything that I've done." I could hear his ragged breathing, the silent sobs that shook his body too painful for me to endure any longer.

"You're going to have to let me go, Dad," I whispered as I eased away from him.

"I love you, Grace." His voice was weighted down with so much he couldn't say that it cracked. My own was on the verge of doing the same when he finally let me go.

"I love you, Dad," I managed to say before I

turned and gave Janice a rueful smile. She had been thrown headfirst into something she hadn't signed up for, and the shock of it all could be seen in the deep lines that framed her mouth. "Take care of him," I whispered.

I looked at Ameila, saw the turmoil she was in, but I felt no sympathy for her right then. "Get them out of here," was all I could say before the sound I had been dreading filled my ears.

It had begun. Robert could handle the call's taunting no longer, and he'd launched himself at his former friend, the target closest to him, the target that beckoned and mocked him all at the same time. They were equal balls of darkness that gravitated towards each other, each fighting to consume the other.

I had no choice. I knew where my fate would take me, I had accepted it. I gave my family one last look, one last gaze before telling them to run.

And then I ran after Robert.



## MATE

"Robert, no!" my terrified voice cried out as he threw himself at Sam's laughing form. My feet couldn't push me fast enough, my useless arm acting like an anchor that held me back as my other arm pumped alongside me.

I turned to throw out a final warning while I still could in case no one had heard my first one. "Go! Get out of here--Ameila, please get them out of here!" I didn't stop to see if any of them heeded what I said. I had to trust that Ameila wouldn't let them linger, wouldn't let Sam get what he wanted after all.

The sound of metal striking each other, the solid, iron clang filled the night as Robert's fist collided into the side of Sam's face. Sam's head was thrown to the side by the blow, but unlike any movie scene, there was no blood, no lost teeth. Instead, Sam's hand rubbed his jaw and smiled, the white teeth shining like tiny tiles against his dark skin.

"Is that it? You hit like a girl. A *human* girl."

Sam's hand swung back, the motion slow and lazy, before lurching forward and landing solidly beneath Robert's chin, forcing him off his feet and soaring into the air. It was a graceful display, despite the macabre image it made, this dark, black-winged angel reeling from such a powerful strike. He flipped back, his wings slowing his descent before landing firmly on the ground.

With negligent flicks of his feet, he kicked off his shoes, sending them flying somewhere, probably never to be seen again. "And was that your demonstration of how one should properly throw a punch? If so, I think I'd rather take lessons from the human," he sniped before kicking off of the ground, his bare toes leaving deep gouges in the grass.

He collided into Sam's chest, his hands on Sam's shoulders as he shoved him into the ground. Sam's hands flung back in a feeble attempt to stop himself from being forced deeper into the soil. Robert's fist raised and then lowered quickly, once, twice, over and over, each blow sending Sam sinking into the earth, taking Robert with him.

A muffled growl preceded Robert being kicked backwards. The act caught him by surprise and this time, he barely caught himself in time before landing on the ground, one knee delving into the soil, his feet, pushing the grass behind them into waves of silvery green. Sam emerged from the ground covered in deep brown soil.

"Trying to bury me so soon? I think you forgot how this is supposed to end, brother," he snarled before bolting towards Robert like a rocket, the force lifting him off of the ground and sending their two bodies soaring through the air several dozen yards, landing in a ball of feathers and spines.

My fear for Robert's safety pushed aside any fear I felt for myself as I continued to run towards them. I fought the urge to call out to him again, knowing that if I distracted him it might give Sam the edge he needed to overtake Robert. As it was, they were evenly matched, though the rage that crept through Robert, coupled with the darkness that had completely taken him over was slowly making him stronger, faster, focused.

And this is what urged me on. Ameila's

words of destruction, Sam's desire to see it, Robert's vow to not live without me; I couldn't let any of that happen. I fought against the burning in my side to reach them, one completely oblivious to my approach, the other gleefully awaiting it.

"I think-" I heard Sam say as I reached them, his head turning to me "-I'll try something different."

And then he was gone. Robert's gaze traveled upwards, and mine followed, but the sky was dark, and Sam was lost in it. My eyes could see nothing though I knew he was there. Robert, however, knew exactly where he was and with a rumbling sound that seemed to pour out of him, amplified by the quiet darkness, threw himself into the black sky above us.

The sound of feet landing behind me startled me, and a hand clamped over my mouth to muffle my cry of surprise. I tried but could not turn around as the feeling of something sharp buried itself into my sides, locking me in place. I bit out a scream, and the hand pressed even harder against my face, a sharp thumb pressing into the side of my nose, the heel of the hand nearly crushing my jaw as the



pain in my sides grew.

"Such sweet, soft flesh, sister," a dark whisper brushed across my ear. And then the hand was gone, he was gone.

I collapsed to the ground and looked at my thighs, horrified by the sight of blood that began to seep through two holes that had been torn in my sweatpants. I rubbed my hand against them and breathed a sigh of relief when I realized they were only superficial, though they burned as though the skin itself had been singed.

But they weren't the only injuries that Sam had inflicted; I felt the trickle of something warm and wet run down my sides. With my swollen hand, I eased the hem of my shirt up and saw that there were three more holes, these much larger and deeper, pierced into my hip and side of my abdomen. I didn't have to look to know that there was a matching set on my other side, and I lowered my shirt, knowing that there was no point in trying to stop the bleeding.

This was going to end somehow, but I was damned if I was going to let it end the way Sam

wanted it. With a grunt, I somehow forced myself up, holding myself steady against the ground with my enlarged hand, biting away the scream that built up inside of me at the pain.

"You're going to have to do better than that, you bastard," I cursed as I stumbled forward on unsteady feet.

Like a drop of black rain, Robert fell from the sky, landing in front of me with his wings flared out behind him, a black cloak that caused me to step back before I shook my head and forced myself towards him. I was not going to fear him.

"Robert," I said in as steady a voice as I could manage, the pain in my sides impeding the rise and fall of my chest as I breathed. "Robert, don't listen to Sam. Don't listen to what he tells you. Listen to me, listen to my voice. Listen to me tell you that I love you. I love you. Don't let anything else get in the way of that."

He looked at me but I couldn't make out his emotions, everything about him was so dark and lost to me. Even his voice was tainted with the

hopelessness of the rage that festered inside of him like a raw wound. I felt his gaze on me like a brand, and I knew what he was looking at, knew that he was seeing the growing red stains that stretched down the length of me, knew that I was in pain and fighting it because of him, because I needed to be with him, to keep him safe.

"You're hurt." It was a rough observation, one that was more cut and dry than concerned.

"It's okay," I reassured him. "It's minor."

"You're lying to me. I can hear your heart; it's stressed."

"I'm not lying, Robert. I checked them, they're not that deep. And of course it's stressed--we're not exactly having a party here," I cracked, hoping that the sarcasm would cover the strain in my voice that could not hide the lie.

There was a flicker of something in those dark eyes, and he raised his hand and placed it against my side, squeezing it gently.

"Aaah," I cried out before tumbling into his arms.

"These aren't minor," he said to me in a reproachful tone.

"I'll live," I quipped, knowing that this time, I was lying openly and hating myself for it.

"Let me heal you." He pressed his hand against the bloody stain but I shook my head.

"There's no time."

"Isn't that the truth," Sam laughed as he dropped down from above us like a black cloud of bubbling hatred, pulling Robert away from me and flinging him into the air. "She's going to die, N'Uriel," he shouted. "The question isn't a matter of when anymore, but rather how will that happen? Will she bleed to death while we're playing our little game of cat and mouse, or will I strangle her? Perhaps I'll simply snap her neck like a twig and be rid of her. What say you, brother? I so want it to be a physical death, though I know you prefer the more instantaneous sort. You always were too soft for your own good."

He reached down and grabbed me by my throat, lifting me up, the sickly grin of his having

never left his face. "It is a shame that she's only a human after all. We could have shared her. Or I could have at least spent some time getting to know her as well as you have. She does taste sweet, though, I'll give you that much. Perhaps it's because she's forbidden fruit, but those are always the most succulent kind to pl-"

A blur of black melting into more darkness silenced Sam's disgusting taunts as he was torn away from me, the violent separation sending me sprawling onto the ground, landing on my dislocated shoulder. A half-scream, half-grunt of pain rushed out of my mouth as the force pushed everything back into place with a sickening pop.

I lay there for a minute, taking deep breaths in order to cope with shooting a pain that stretched from my neck to the tips of my fingers. Gingerly, I sat up and raised my arm to inspect it, pleased that, despite the throbbing, I could at least move it; the pain could be ignored, I told myself, so long as it worked.

What I saw left me in a state of shock. The purple-black bruising that had begun in my hands

now engulfed my entire arm. I looked at my other arm and saw the same necrotic colored flesh stretching past my elbows and up to my shoulders. I couldn't bring myself to lift up my shirt to see how far the blackness had traveled, and instead focused on the tumbling of bodies in front of me.

"Robert," I said in a breathless whisper as I pushed myself off of the ground and rushed towards them, not knowing how I would be able to stop this madness but knowing that I had to try something, anything.

*Robert, Robert, Robert.*

I stilled.

The voice in my head was my own and yet, it wasn't.

*Robert.*

I shook my head, as though the thought would fall out like water from plugged ears, but instead the voice continued. I began to run again, faster this time.

*Robert, Robert, Robert. Over and over,*

Robert's name filled my mind, the sound of it, every syllable, every nuance to his name becoming its own individual thought. Each thought took on an almost musical like quality, a note on a scale that I soon realized was its own song, and it was playing to the rhythm of the trampling beat of my heart as it raced along with my feet in a desperate need to reach him, help him.

*Save him. Save him. Robert.*

I saw the look of glee, the sickly smile that stretched across Sam's face, nearly reaching his ears as he had Robert's face in a blackened grip and was releasing an unending stream of blows with his head, fist, and swipes with the claws that had once been his wings.

I gathered up what strength I could and threw myself towards him, not caring about the stabbing pain in my sides, or the charred looking limbs that swung beside me as they pumped, pushing me forward. I landed hard against him, my arms wrapping themselves around his chest, the force of my intrusion having no affect on him, but it was enough to cause Sam to hold off on his assault.

"What are you doing?" he bellowed before tearing me away and flinging me to the side as though I were an insignificant speck of dirt. "Learn to play the game right or don't play at all!"

I stumbled, but did not fall as my feet found sure footing in the soft grass thanks to my boots. With dogged determination, I ran forward and insinuated myself between them once again, this time alerting Robert to my presence the only way I knew how.

My mouth pressed on his and I wanted to cry out from the contact. It felt like his lips were on fire but I fought against the need to pull away, fighting instead for the need to keep them there, to keep him with me. I tried to reach him with my thoughts, but the voice in my head refused to let anything out or in, trapping me inside of myself.

"Robert," I breathed, my breath remarkably cool against his lips. "Robert, don't leave me. Don't leave me, please."

"It's not going to work," Sam sneered as he grabbed me by my hair with uncaring fingers, pulling



out clumps as he yanked me away. "He's too far gone; just say goodbye."

"No, there's still time," I argued, grabbing at his hand to try to get him to let go though I struggled with my own hands that were too stiff and swollen to be of much use.

"Just accept it; you're too late little sister. You've failed, just like our mother. The only thing you can do is pray that I'm more merciful with you." His hand squeezed down on my skull, the pain nearly unendurable as he threw me back. I felt the impact of my body hitting the ground, but all I heard was the roar of anger and rage as Robert hurled himself at Sam, a battering ram of blackness and fury, crashing into the welcoming evil that was Sam's laughter.

I shook off the feeling of dizziness that assaulted me and stood on unsteady feet just in time to see Sam throw Robert off of him with a careless toss of his hands. Robert was too consumed by his rage to focus on his attack strategy--he was just attacking for the sake of doing so--and the consequences were obvious.

"No, Robert!" I screamed when I saw him take a blow to the chest that looked as though his entire torso would cave in.

*Shut up, you meddlesome whore!*

Sam's thoughts were a bullet that shot straight to the core of my mind, and I felt the ground against my cheek before I felt my knees giving out and sending me crashing down. My eyes remained open as I watched in fascinated horror as Robert, seeing me lying there, seeing the pain and anguish that littered my eyes and my face, slowed down his attack and stood for a brief moment, his wings sinking, pulling in, his face slack with misery as he took in what it was that Sam had done with a single thought.

My mind reached out to him, like a hand reaching to a falling star. The song that played in my head seemed to travel the distance between us, a bridge between our minds as what little claim I had left on his heart reached into him.

Without warning, Robert was behind a mocking Sam, his hands at the base of Sam's

wings, and with an unceremonious shout of despair and guilt, he pulled.

I saw the look in Sam's face falter--no longer was he grinning like someone crazed. For a split second, I saw the fear, the genuine, palpable fear take a hold of him before the realization that he had lost set in. Robert's hands separated, and like a curtain being split to let in the bright glow of morning, Sam's back was torn open, releasing a blinding burst of light.

"You will still die..." Sam cried out in a distorted, almost metallic voice before the crack spread to his face, halving him.

With one final roar of anguish, Robert's hands wrenched Sam in two, the resulting blast of unimaginable brightness sending him sailing into the sky and disappearing from my sight. I closed my eyes, but the golden ghost of what I had seen remained; there was no haven for me behind my closed lids as the halo that formed behind them haunted me. I struggled to focus when my eyes opened but even half blind, I could still see quite clearly that Robert was gone and that all that

remained of Sam was the spiny frame that had once held his pristine, white wings.

"Grace, are you okay?" I turned my head to see Lark kneeling beside me, her hand resting gently on my shoulder as she bit back a gasp when she saw my dark limbs. "It's too soon," I heard her mumble before her eyes rose to meet my own.

"Too soon for what?"

"Nothing," she said quickly before falling over and clutching at her abdomen, a harsh, shrieking sound slipping past her clenched teeth. It was a cry of pain. Pain that only came from one source.

"You're lying to me," I remarked.

"Grace, please..." she moaned while shaking her head.

"What's wrong with her?" Stacy asked, appearing so suddenly, I scrambled back and away from them.

"How'd you get here? How long have you been here?"

"How else do you think?" she replied, bending down to offer Lark a smooth hand for comfort. "What's going on with her? Why is she like this?"

"She's lying to me about something. If she doesn't tell the truth soon, the lie will kill her, and I don't think that she's going to be given a second chance like Robert."

"What are you keeping from Grace, Lark?" Stacy asked as she brushed a lock of hair out of the tormented angel's face.

"I can't say it," she groaned, and began to writhe on the ground in sheer agony. I had seen it before, watched it happen to her brother just before his heart stopped beating forever.

I didn't understand why anyone would willingly go through that all for a lie. "Tell me the truth, Lark. You know what will happen if you don't, and what that will mean to Graham."

She looked at me with such anguish in her eyes, the pale silver nearly swallowing up their dark centers. "You'll hate me," came her whispered reply.

"When has how I felt ever stopped you from telling me anything?" I laughed coldly as my sides ached and burned, and my hands throbbed with unyielding pain.

"Please, Lark," Stacy pleaded. "We're your friends. Don't do this to yourself. I can't believe I'm saying this but, don't do this to Graham."

My head turned towards where I had said my goodbyes to my family, and I sighed with the immense feeling of relief that took over me when I saw that the parking lot now only contained one car. Mr. Branke's vehicle was still there, as were two lumps that, from where I lay, looked like two sleeping forms ready to wake at any moment and question why they were there. I had to fight off the grief and guilt I felt at the sight to appreciate the knowledge that at least Graham and my family were safe.

My gaze returned to Lark's and she could see my thoughts, know them and be as glad for them as I was. "After everything he's been through, he deserves to be happy," I murmured. "He deserves to have the life he wants. Tell me the truth

so that you can do that for him. He didn't go through all of this just to have you die because you didn't want to hurt my feelings."

Her mouth opened, her eyes glazed over, but her lips closed and I saw the defeat in her take hold and she began to speak. "It's your call, Grace. It's the reason why you were born. You were born to die, because dying saves Robert. Every second spent ignoring your call pushes you closer and closer to the very same darkness that is destroying him. You are, for all intents and purposes, an Innominate, too."

"Wait, so Grace is part angel? Where the hell have I been? Oh yeah, that's right. Dying."

Lark's face was crunched in an anguished expression. "In a sense, yes."

"And you knew this, you knew all it this entire time and didn't tell her?"

Lark looked away, ashamed by the accusatory tone that stained Stacy's voice. "Yes."

In a move that was characteristically Stacy, she grunted and raised her hand, curling her fingers

and pulling them into a ball against her palm. Stacy's fist slammed into the ground, sinking in as though she had dipped it into water, stopping at her elbow and causing her to fall forward and land on her chin, the sharp point carving its own niche into the soft grass and soil.

"Dammit," she cursed as she pulled herself up, dusting the dirt and stringy roots off of her arm and face. "I'm going to need to learn how to control this if I'm going to get mad."

She glared at Lark, and the hurt and anger that built up inside of her began to tug at her brows, pulling them in, the frown on her face one that I had never seen before. She looked betrayed.

"I cannot believe that you'd do this. The whole time you were hating on Robert for what he knew about Sam, you were keeping this from Grace. Did Robert know about this, too?"

Lark shook her head, too full of guilt to speak. Stacy did it for her. "You knew and you kept it from both of them. My God, all the lives you risked, even Graham's! The guilt you put on Grace, the strain you put on your brother...I don't think I even



know you. How could you do that to them? To the people you claim to care about?"

"You don't understand. This had to happen, I had no choice but to keep it from her. Grace had to do this, go through this and make these decisions on her own. My kind has no choice; we have no say in our own destiny. We simply do what we must because that's the path that we must follow. Robert went against his path, which will lead him to his death and Grace's sole purpose for being born was to prevent that from happening.

"If Robert knew, he'd have never come back here, never have met Grace, but his call was going to come no matter what, as would hers because they both existed, and destiny doesn't care where you are, or what you're doing. Its demands can't be avoided, and Robert and Grace would have both died for nothing."

"But I saw Robert's vision, the one your grandmother put into his mind about my life had we never met. Why would she see that if we were both going to die?" I asked, indignant all of a sudden.

"She didn't see it; it was a false vision. He asked to see what would happen if he didn't return; she showed him a lie. It was benign, and didn't hurt anyone."

"It hurt me! How could you do this to me, to Robert?" I was nearly hysterical as the sound of my voice carried out into the emptiness and quiet around us though the loss of blood was starting to get to me.

"I did it to save him," she shouted back, angry and defensive. She stood, her dark hair slung over her shoulder in a thick braid, her clothes impeccably trendy and neat, not a single wrinkle or thread out of place. In effect, she was perfect.

And I tried to hate her, wanted to hate her, but I couldn't because as horrible as I thought she was for what she did, her reasons were justified. I had justified them myself when I had chosen to give myself up to Sam.

"So now what? Sam's dead. What do I do now?"

"I don't know," Lark murmured, her shoulders

suddenly drooping as hopelessness crept over her. "Why didn't he kill you when he had the chance?"

"He said that the plans had changed. His partner-"

"Partner?" Lark's face of despair was instantly overshadowed now with concern and fear. "If Sam had a partner then that means that there's still a danger to your family no matter what happens to you. And Robert's still raging. He won't know what he's doing. He's a danger to everyone."

Her head whipped up and then back down in a flurry of silver and black, her face filled with panic. "Grace, run!" she shouted as she lunged forward, only to be knocked out of the way by a ball of gleaming ebony.

"R-Robert?" I heard my shaky voice ask as I stared at the creature hunched over Lark's body.

"Run, Grace," the muffled voice said again as Lark pushed herself off the ground, sending Robert sailing towards Stacy's terrified frame. Stacy lunged out of the way with an impossible speed, letting out an awed exclamation of

"righteous" at her actions before turning to look at me with wide eyes. "Don't just stand there staring! Run, Grace!"

I fought a mini war within me as I stared at the prone figure that glared at me through blackened eyes. I didn't care that for the first time he looked like Death. I loved him. I was willing to die for him if it meant that it would save him.

"But not this way, Grace!" Lark shouted before she slammed into her brother, pinning him down onto the grass. "If he kills you, he kills himself. You can't want that for him."

I didn't. I didn't want that for him. I gave one last look at him. My life. My love. And then I turned around and ran. There was only one place I could go, only one place I knew my life was forfeit without Robert beside me. Sam was gone, but there were other options. I ran as hard as I could, my sides and my legs aching, my strength sapping as my blood continued to leak out of me. My mouth opened once to cry out a name. It was my last chance to save Robert, and I knew of only one other person who wanted to help his much as I did.

"Bala!"

And I rushed towards the dark woods as it began to grow alive, my call heard, my desire welcomed.



## LEAVING COURSE

It was as if my feet couldn't push forward fast enough. The first sign of trees and shrubbery was like a welcoming screen, their dark, evergreen boughs opening for me to enter and lose myself behind them. I was more than willing to do just that.

Without the aid of the parking lot lamps, or even the moon, the darkness in my wooded retreat was nearly suffocating, and it amplified the noises that erupted upon my intrusion of this black infested world. Shaking off the creeping foreboding within me, I pressed forward, allowing my feet to lead the way as fast as they could move. The stinging slashes of branches that hung down low, their greedy ends marking my arms and face, kept me alert to the danger that threatened me from where I'd entered. Though it did not distract me from the eerily swaying branches that rattled their leaves above and around me, the sound like thousands of little bones clanking together was a warning that I refused to heed.

I did not know how much time I had left

before Robert overpowered his sister and came after me, but it wouldn't be long. He was stronger than Lark without the rage coursing through his veins; having such anger and energy boiling deep within him was like adding jet fuel to a forest fire and I feared that he might hurt her or worse. I needed to find Bala, needed her to help me end this before Robert did something he'd regret.

I ran. I ran as fast as I could, but the lack of light acted like a fog that clouded my vision, preventing me from adjusting my eyesight to my surroundings and its obstacles. I stumbled several times on the uneven surface of the forest floor, catching myself before I could tumble to the ground, thankful that, if nothing else, I at least wasn't as clumsy as I sometimes felt. I could feel the burning in my legs and arms as they expended and borrowed energy and strength that I did not possess in order to keep me moving, heading deeper and deeper into the dark unknown that lay endlessly ahead of me.

My sides burned as though fire was shooting out of the wounds that Sam had inflicted. But I could



tell that the bleeding had slowed down some. My shirt clung to me, sticky and cold, and the smell of my blood, the rusty, metallic tang of it, seemed exaggerated in the chilly air, the scent acting like a siren call to the excited, the anxious, the hungry, and the curious as it traveled beyond the path I was leaving behind.

I shook off the concern I felt and pushed on. With each pounding thrust of my agitated and overspent heart, Robert's name echoed within my head, flowed through my veins, and singed my skin with memories that I had hoped would have made this part easier.

Instead it was worse. I could sense the greed inside of me grow, fighting the urge to do what I had been born to do. I didn't want to run away from Robert. I wanted to run towards him. I wanted to be with him. He was everything to me, and the song that played in my head was like some cruel joke, a slap in the face of everything that I felt, everything that I wanted.

Over the din of forest chaos, a chuckle burst from the shadows that were somehow darker than

even this lightless world, and its malevolent sound forced me to clear my head. There was no time, no place for selfishness in this fight. I wasn't going to let the distraction of it steer me from what it was I had vowed to do. To keep Graham and my family safe, and to save Robert, I had to stay focused.

"Bala!" I cried out, but hearing nothing as the sound of my voice was quickly consumed by the growing excitement that reverberated around me. My hands reached out in front of me for reasons unknown and then I felt my foot catch in something, my body still propelling forward by my sprint.

The unmistakable snapping of both bone and branch echoed through the sudden silence that filled these dark woods as I fell to the ground, my outstretched hands catching me and preventing me from knocking myself out against the hard, rough surface of what felt like an upturned root. Of course, I landed with such tremendous speed that the force of it caused me to roll over, my back slamming against the knobby base of some ancient tree, its bark raining down on me in musty flakes.

"Ow," I groaned as I gingerly pushed myself

up to a sitting position, using the tree that had acted as my brake to help keep me supported. The strange quiet that surrounded me was eerie. Not a single sound could be heard save for my rough breathing, and yet the lack of noise was itself almost deafening.

The mocking silence acted much like the chuckle that had startled me earlier and shook me from my roaming thoughts. I brushed aside the fear that began to crawl inside of me, not wanting it to take a hold of my heart. I knew it would only further hinder me if it did.

"Bala?" I called out,

My ankle felt like it was lost between freezing cold and scorching hot, and though I couldn't see much, I could make out the faint white tip of something protruding from the side of my foot as it peeked out from the prison that two thin roots had formed around my quickly swelling ankle. "Please," I cried out into the darkness, my lungs starting to constrict in my chest. "Don't let him find me. I don't care about me. I don't care about what happens to me, but he can't be the one to end it."

A soft rumbling began beneath me and I felt the leaves and bark that had fallen atop of me begin to dance with the vibrations that shook the soil we sat upon. The roots that surrounded me began to unfurl, and I soon found my foot released, though I quickly regretted it when the slicing pain shot through my leg.

"Oh, dear bananas," I groaned, grabbing onto my shin and gritting my teeth.

The rumbling ceased, and the quiet was once again far more terrifying than anything I had ever imagined. It was a deadly sound, this silence.

A tightening began in my abdomen, and I looked down just in time to see the black-brown layer of a mud covered root encircle my waist before it began dragging me through the woods with blinding speed. I kept from screaming by clamping down on my lips through my teeth, every bump and dip forcing whimpers through me as my foot jostled against the ground and my sides were jabbed by protruding branches that jutted out from the bushes and young trees that lined my escape route.

I caught glimpses of the sky through the few openings beneath the canopy above me, but there was no light there to offer me hope. Even the stars didn't want to witness what would happen here tonight. I felt my last glimmer of hope begin to fade just as the dragging slowed, and I found myself lying beside the large Willow tree that was Bala's home.

The root that had pulled me through the maze of the forest slunk away and I did my best to stand, fighting off the pain from my foot and the dizziness that I had begun to feel. My hand went to my side and I sighed when I realized that it was warm; the bleeding had started again, and this time, it didn't look like it was going to stop.

"You need my help?"

Bala's dark eyes emerged from around the wide trunk, and clicked her tongue when she saw me. "You need someone else's help."

"No," I told her. I reached for the tree to steady myself and felt it shudder when my black and bloodied skin touched it. "I don't need anyone's help but yours. I need you to help me die."

"Die? I'm not sure I understand."

"Robert's trying to kill me-"

She smiled and cut me off. "Well, surely you can't expect me to get in his way."

"No. No, you don't understand. If he kills me, he kills himself."

"That's insane. Angels don't die."

I pounded the tree with my fist in frustration. "You're not listening to me. My mother's dead. I just saw an angel being torn in half. Angels die, Bala, and if you don't help me, Robert's going to be next. He's going to kill himself if he hurts me, and if he does that, he'll kill his soul."

"You think too much of yourself, human Grace. Why would he kill himself over your death? Can he not simply find another to replace you? Are you so special?"

My heart lurched in my chest at her suggestion. I had thought it. I thought I had accepted it. But hearing it from someone else, hearing how obvious it was to someone else, it was like having

my heart placed in a vice grip and having it squeezed until it exploded.

"I hope that one day he does find someone else," I said slowly, the words burning as they came out of my mouth, the lie too disgusting to tolerate. "I hope that he does. But he won't be able to if he kills me. Please, help me."

"I am not a killer," she said as she shook her head and disappeared behind the tree once more.

"No! Bala, please. I'm already dying," I coughed, my chest moving mere millimeters now. I took a shallow breath and soon doubled over in a fit of hacking coughs that felt like a million needles were trying to bore their way out of me.

"You don't have to do anything but keep Robert away from me. Just keep him away long enough," I whispered when I could as my lone leg gave out and I collapsed onto the ground. "It won't be long."

My eyes stared up, and I could hear the leaves shiver above me, though there was no wind. Two dark orbs appeared and a smile formed on the

olive face that belonged to Bala, her hair swirling around her head in a mass of activity.

"Okay."

"Thank you."

I felt her hands gently touch my face and she cooed. "So soft. I used to have skin like yours. Freckled like yours, too. N'Uriel never complimented my freckles, though."

"You heard him?" I remarked, my voice so soft, I wondered if she even heard me.

"Yes. I always watch. I'm always watching. I see everything. I love him, too, you know. I love him almost as much as I hate the angel who turned me into what I am. N'Uriel has only shown me kindness, tenderness. I could not accept him dying. It would hurt."

Listening to her speak about him with such reverence, I felt sorry for her. She didn't just love Robert. She was in love with him, and I knew better than anyone just what that could do to the human spirit. And, while I knew it had been a long time since she'd been human, I was also certain that that



part of us never died, no matter what we became.

"Will you watch over him, Bala?" I wheezed, knowing that the task, while simple, was something that she would readily agree to.

"With every leaf and branch at my command," she replied with an emphatic nod of her head.

"Thank you."

She smiled at me once more, and then my body rose, lifted by leaves and branches that had somehow managed to delve beneath me undetected. They brought me closer to the mossy bark that covered the trunk of Bala's tree. A fissure began to form in one of the cracks, soon growing longer and wider until it was large enough to hold a small person. The flowers that dotted the tree opened and closed rapidly at this activity, and with a gentle push, I was placed into the wide opening, a bed of moss cradling me in its softness.

"You will be safe in here. I'm sorry that you're dying, Grace. We could have been great friends."

A weak half-smile formed on my lips and I

noded. "I think we already are."

"Be at peace," she said before the opening began to narrow and the world disappeared behind a mossy wall.

I took several slow, deep breaths as I tried to accustom myself to the cramped confines of where it was that I would die. I had to admit that it was a much better option than letting Sam do as he wished with me.

The smell that permeated everything around me was far different than I had expected--had I expected a smell?--and I tried to place the different scents while my mind still could; it was a welcome distraction. Rather than dank and musty, the space was filled with a light, floral fragrance, and each breath that I took was filled with it, the air moist and almost sticky. The muted whooshing that I could hear fill up the void of sound was followed by more sweet air, the sugary scent of it acting like a sedative to my jittery nerves.

I raised a hand to touch the walls and was surprised at how soft they felt. Of course, I could be all wrong and it was indeed rough and flaky like

bark and I just couldn't tell because my skin was dying. But I wanted to believe that it was soft, wanted to believe that perhaps that softness that Bala missed so much was still a part of her.

I began to cough and the pain started to crush down on me with each violent quake. The fresh flow of blood that escaped the wounds at my side was warm as it trickled down and pooled beneath me, soaking my bed. Each drop that drained out of me took with it my fears, my worries, my hope.

"Robert," I said, the name floating off of my lips as my breathing became pained and labored. "Soon..."

I closed my eyes and smiled, content to see the silver eyes of my heart fill the face that took shape on the back of my lids. I envisioned his smile, the smile he gave only to me, and my lips parted as I imagined for the last time his kiss. There would be no more kisses, no more smiles, and as my coughing took away the last bit of oxygen I had left in my deflated lungs, I sighed with bittersweet content.

He'd be fine soon. I could feel it, the surety within me growing as my consciousness waned. I let the thought carry me through the darkness. I said my goodbyes.



# HEAR YOU ME

*Robert. Robert. Robert.*

Ugh. Even in death, the voice inside of my head didn't cease. Maybe if I just waited it out a bit, it would stop. Perhaps it was just an echo of a thought in my head, something that would soon die out and let me alone in my grief and loss.

*Robert.*

Okay, so apparently not. I waited for the name to continue, and sure enough it did, quickening its pace, like the sound of a rapid heartbeat, one that I knew I no longer possessed. I tried to focus on something else then, and that's when I felt the vibrations. I couldn't tell if my eyes were open or not; everything around me was pitch black. I tried to sit up and felt the top of my head collide with the...ceiling?

"Ow! What the...?" With my head hunched down, I reached up and placed my hand on what felt like a soft, almost velvet surface. My hand moved down and roamed, hand over hand as I turned

around in a complete circle, tracing a circular wall. I patted the cushion beneath me and felt its sticky and stringy texture. "Moss? Why would there be moss here?"

I knew instantly where I was. But things had changed. It was no longer quiet; a harsh thumping could be heard coming in from the outside, followed by a grating screech, the pattern repeating itself over and over. I pressed my ear to the soft wall and listened, hearing the rapid intake of a breath that wasn't my own, followed by a crashing sound that seemed to be directly on the other side of me. I jerked back and slammed into the wall behind me, my head crashing into it and causing spangles to appear before my eyes.

"Bala?" I called out as I rubbed the back of my head, my voice strong, my body feeling strangely...well. "Bala, is everything okay?"

The response that came to me was a frantic growling that grew louder with each ticking second. The shaking began again, and I braced myself against the curved wall behind me as the rocking seemed to come from everywhere. There were

grunts and roars and all sorts of noises that forced a panicked scream to form within me, but I held it at bay, unwilling to add to the fear that was so palpable, I could smell it, even touch it as it sunk in from the outside.

"Grace."

A voice from above me whispered my name and my eyes flew up, unable to see anything but knowing that at least my sense of direction wasn't wrong.

"Grace, he's here. He knows you're here. Are you dead yet?"

"Bala?"

"Yes. Are you dead yet?"

"I don't think so. At least, I couldn't be talking to you if I were, right?"

"Oh, this isn't good; this isn't good at all. He's trying to break into the tree. He's destroying my roots, tearing my branches to try to get to you. I don't know how much longer I can keep him away before he destroys me, Grace. He's angry, very angry and I



don't know how much longer I can take this. Please hurry up and die."

Her voice was pained, each word exhausting her judging by the pauses and the airy quality of them. My hand lifted and I felt the curved lines of her jaw, the sharp point of her nose and I knew that I couldn't let her continue to risk her life this way. I didn't want anyone else dying, not for me.

"Let me out, Bala."

"But...he'll kill you."

I thought about that, the statement that was so sure, so final. I thought about the fear that I saw in Lark's face just before I left her, the shock that had embedded itself onto Stacy's normally agile frame, turning it tense and pessimistic, and I could hear the raging rumbling that came from outside as Robert tried desperately to get at me.

What had he done with them? Were they hurt? Or worse? Could I live for even a minute longer knowing that he had hurt them? Shaking my head, I knew that I couldn't.

"Let me out, Bala. It's either me or you, and I

know my odds of survival, but do you know yours?"

Another grating screech was soon followed by an unbearable grinding sound, and the swaying turned into a violent shaking as the events that were occurring outside forced the large tree that held me to shudder from the attack.

With no warning, a pinhole of light appeared. The tiny beam of bluish-gray that shot through was almost blinding after sitting in darkness for who knows how long, and as it grew larger, I held my hand up to shield my eyes from the stinging sight. With my eyes half closed, I became aware of my arm.

The black, honeycombed pattern that had covered it was now gone. There was no pain; there was no stiffness or numbness. With little care to the burning light that grew over me, I brought my other arm in front of me and stared, amazed at the normal looking flesh that replaced the battered and bruised skin.

I looked down at my feet and saw that my foot was no longer bent at an awkward angle, the bone that had torn through my flesh now gone, the

skin smooth and undamaged. I wiggled my toes, giggling when they moved, and gasping in surprise when my foot turned and twisted without any pain.

This moment of awe was short-lived, however, when two dark hands reached in to grab a hold of me and yanked me out of my hole. Robert. He was glowing, the color alternating from a harsh, midnight flame to the red, almost blood tinged corona that surrounded him as he stood before me. His hands clamped around my throat in a vise-like grip that threatened to extinguish my life in an instant, but the way his fingers alternately tightened and loosened made no promises that it would be quick.

He was a menacing sight: death personified, death in the flesh, death in a rage that had consumed him to the point where he was not only unrecognizable, but he also could not recognize anything save what would make the voice in his head stop its incessant screaming. I could almost hear it as he stared at me, a strange sort of hesitation that I hadn't expected.

Inside of my head, the voice that repeated

Robert's name only grew louder with its insistence, and soon it began dueling with the echoing call inside of Robert's mind. He cocked his head to the side, confused by what he heard.

A part of me wanted to tell him to do what he needed to save himself, to believe that what we had wasn't enough to cause him to die of grief and guilt. But as the fingers that clamped down on my pulse burned with a heat that sank through me, turning my blood into a roaring river of emotions and memories that stained the rest of me with every moment we'd ever shared, every touch, every kiss, every promise of love and faith, I knew that I would be wrong.

He could hear his own name, hear it spoken in my blood with relentless need, and he knew what it meant. Even with the blackness that blinded him to everything else, he knew that there was a reason for us being here, knew that we were inexplicably tied to each other, an irrevocable bond that could not be severed by anyone, not even us.

I raised my hands to his and gently pried them apart. To my surprise--perhaps not even that,

because I suppose I knew he would--he let go. I stumbled backwards as he paced, angry, frustrated, his wings ruffling, his head shaking back and forth.

"Robert?" I said softly, trying to keep my tone as passive as possible.

His head whipped up and his black eyes swallowed me whole in their emptiness. He didn't answer me. Just stared at me...through me. "Robert, where's Lark? Where's Stacy?"

He grunted, and flicked a hand away, as though he were shooing me, but I knew what the gesture meant; they had left, whether by their own choice or out of necessity. I breathed a sigh of relief at that, glad that at least they were safe.

The glow that reflected off of him illuminated the tree behind him, Bala's tree, and I heard my gasp of shock and dismay at the damage he had caused to it in his attempt to get to me. The lower half of the wide, oval trunk was stripped of its bark, which now carpeted the ground and floated on the surface of the lake, disturbing the still surface. The small flowers that had clung to the mossy covering of Bala's tree were no longer open, their petals

brown and withered.

There were deep gouges from where Robert's fists had dug through the exposed and soft core, and branches hung down, splintered from their bases, dangling atop the corpses of those that hadn't managed to hang on. The hollow that I had hid in was still visible, but the entrance to it was rough and torn, the edges jagged and sharp and not smooth as it had been when Bala had opened it for me.

"Where's Bala?" I asked, trying to remain calm as my eyes darted around for any sign that she was still okay. "Robert, where's Bala?"

"I'm here," a soft whisper came to me from above. I glanced up and saw the dark eyes appear from an untouched branch that hung overhead.

"Stay there," I told her, and watched as she blinked and then disappeared, the branch waving up and down in what I could only hope was an acknowledgement.

"You're supposed to be dead," a growling accusation broke in, and my eyes lowered to look at

Robert who had stopped pacing and was now hunched down, his hands on the ground, his knees bent in a pose that made him seem ready to launch at me at any moment.

"I know," I answered. "I had rather hoped that I would be."

"Why aren't you?"

I reveled slightly in this rather coherent conversation that we were having, but knew that it wouldn't last long, and so I answered him as quickly and as honestly as I could. "I don't know. My hands have healed, and-" I raised my stiff, blood-stained shirt up and heard my swift intake of breath as my fingers searched for the wounds that Sam had caused and instead finding smooth flesh, my eyes darting down to confirm my discovery "-I'm not bleeding anymore. I don't know why or how, but my wounds are gone."

"I don't want to kill you."

It was as clear and defined a statement as anyone could make, and my heart ached as his head hung down at these words, the cracking in his

voice so noticeable it was a wonder I didn't rush towards him to comfort him and plead with him, convince him that he didn't have to.

My reply was simple. "I don't want you to kill me, either."

The sound that came out of him then was startling. I nearly fell over in shock from it, barely holding on to my balance as little by little, the sound of laughter began to flow out of his mouth. "You always were different."

"Do we have to get into that again? Isn't it obvious that different doesn't even begin to describe it anymore?" I was trying to be sarcastic, trying to hold on to this strange sense of humor he'd released, but there was no hope in that as a sobering growl came out of him.

"Okay. Alright, so we both agree that neither of us want you to kill me. That doesn't solve our problem, though. You can't last much longer this way, and I've already lived longer than I was meant to. I'd ask if you had a gun on you so that I could just shoot myself but something tells me that your answer is going to be no."



His voice was haunting as it floated around me. "You would kill yourself? You would sacrifice your soul so that you could save mine?"

Without hesitation, I nodded. "Was there ever a doubt? Was there ever a moment where you thought that you were the only one capable of sacrifice?"

"You sacrificed yourself for your friends..."

"And you. I love my friends, I love my family, but my life doesn't begin and end with them. It does with you. It always has." Now I was crying; my tears fell, landing with tiny clicking sounds against the leaves and bark that lay scattered around my feet.

He launched himself forward and before I could even blink, his hands were on my face, his own mere millimeters from mine. Our noses touched, and again, the heat from his skin scorched mine in ways that went beyond the physical. Despite his appearance, despite the fear that seeing him this way involuntarily formed inside of me, he was still Robert, and he still affected me in ways no one else ever had.

"Is this how it ends then? With me taking your life?" His hot breath washed over me and I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply, focusing on the scent that hinted of leather and smoke and sweetness. I didn't get a chance to answer. His lips pushed down forcefully on mine, the act desperate and consuming, but I didn't care. I was desperate, too.

My arms lifted and wrapped themselves around him. I brought him close against me, as close as I could, and he let me. He allowed me to bring him into the embrace, and he kissed me with a need that was beyond description. I knew it, I felt it; I breathed it in because I needed it, too.

My heart was racing against time itself inside of my chest, and the voice inside of my head, the name that signified everything that mattered to me right then and there, blurred into peaceful hum that harmonized with the song that sang in my blood as I tasted the fire and everything it touched.

It was with a ragged and tortured cry that Robert pulled himself away, thought his hands still held on to me, his thumbs gently tracing my cheeks,

rubbing the tracks my tears had left as they fell.

I opened my eyes and saw, even in the endless blackness that consumed his eyes, that there was sadness there. A quick flash of silver seemed to appear, ringing his irises with their light, before disappearing and leaving him, leaving me with the bleakness that I had hoped we could conquer together.

"I love you, Grace."

"I love you, too, Robert," I said to him, a half sob tearing through me before his hands left my face.

"I'm sorry," he lamented.

"I know."

I felt his hands trail down my face, his fingers trace the throbbing vein in my throat. One hand wrapped around my neck, while the other pressed against my heart, feeling the dual rhythms as they beat in defiance of everything that had tried to stop them. My hands went over his, pushing them in, forcing them to wrap tighter, press deeper.

I could no longer swallow, and felt the coughing struggle to come up, the constriction pushing them down and filling my lungs with the pressure. My face turned hot as the blood pooled in my cheeks, and my tongue grew stiff, rising to the roof of my mouth before being pulled back, back towards the entrance to my throat. I gagged, but nothing was going to come of it, and so I gagged again.

I could hear a buzzing sound in my ears as it mingled with the slowing thud of my heartbeat. Soon my ears began to burn, and my mouth turned dry. Every instinct in my body was screaming at me to fight against this, but instead my hands on Robert's grew more determined as I encouraged him to squeeze, to stop hesitating.

Robert's eyes were closed. I don't know how I knew that, but I did. He couldn't watch, and I didn't want him to. I didn't want him to see, and so I closed my eyes, too. I fought through the terror that was conceived inside of me as my chest began to ache and my head began to pound from the lack of oxygen so that I could form in my mind an image of

Robert and me together. I wanted Robert to see this as my last memory. I wanted him to know that I did not blame him. I would die gladly to save him, even if he was the one to kill me.

*I'm sorry. Forgive me.*

My lungs suddenly filled with air as I gulped greedily with a breath I had never intended to take, and I fell to the ground as my legs collapsed beneath me, too weak and too oxygen deprived to support me anymore. I was coughing, a hacking, body shaking cough that forced the blood that had collected in my head to remain trapped there until the coughing had subsided.

And Robert was gone.

"No. No-no-no! No, Robert, no!" I tried to scream, but the coughing returned, my throat feeling as though it were on fire. I struggled to my feet, one hand at my burning throat and the other holding my head as the pounding grew worse. "Robert, come back. Robert, come back, please!"

Suddenly my body grew stiff. My arms were forced away from my head, and my back arched

painfully. The ground began to sink away from my feet. Or...did my feet begin to rise away from the ground?

I turned my head to see my arms were now jutting straight out at my sides, my hands and fingers splayed open. A breeze began to blow, calm at first, bringing with it the fresh scent wet moss, dewy leaves, and damp soil. But then, as though the setting of a fan had been raised, the breeze turned angry, forceful. My hair, which had long since escaped the confines of my rubber band, whipped out all around me, and my shirt rippled as the hem was blown up and down.

I had been here before, in this position. I felt the glowing warmth inside of me this time, sensed it before it began to turn my skin a soft amber, before the tiny shards of light began to shoot from my fingertips and out towards the dark confines of the woods, illuminating them.

My head was thrown back, and above me, where the trees had given way to sky, I saw the black form of Robert, who floated just out of reach. He was looking down at me, his wings gently

flapping as he saw what was happening. My mouth opened to call his name, but my words turned into light, and struck him.

*No!*

My thoughts...they could still be heard, and they were thrown out in a flurry as Robert came tumbling down towards me, his descent slowed by the light that held him trapped. A grating, metallic sound flowed from his mouth, and he jerked and twitched as the light surrounded him, capturing him in bubble of viscous light.

*Robert, get away. Get away. This is what happened to Sam. Please...*

In the golden halo of light, Robert's eyes began to lighten. He looked at me and smiled, and even with the forceful glow that surrounded him, his smile shined brighter, happiness beaming through him.

*This is how it has to be. You shouldn't be the one to die, Grace. You shouldn't. It should have always been me...*

I couldn't shake my head, but I could cry. My tears fell in rapid succession while I watched the darkness recede from him, leaving his hair and his wings and taking with it his youth, aging him before my eyes.

*I can't make it stop, Robert. I can't make it stop and let you go. Please, please try to fight it. Please. I can't lose you like this. You can't leave me here to live without you. I'm not the strong one. I don't know how to be strong without you.*

His smile grew and he reached a hand out to me. *You've always been the stronger one, Grace. You're the one who helped me to live, remember? You're the one who's strong enough to live, and that's exactly what you'll do.*

I tried to take his hand, but the light held me prisoner. *Robert, don't leave me. My heart can't exist without you here. I can't be alone. You promised never to leave me. You promised you'd always be with me.*

A sparkle in his eyes glittered down to me. *I'll always be with you, Grace. I promised you that*



*and I meant it. You'll never be alone. You're my heart. Wherever it is, that's where I'll be. Live, Grace. Live and be happy. Live and love again, love the way we were never able to. I love you.*

*Robert, no. Don't go!*

*Goodbye, Grace.*

A pinging sound preceded the explosion of light that sent me flying, hurtling backwards and tumbling through branches and leaves, until I fell onto the ground, my face landing against the hard knob of an exposed root. My eyes focused on the soil as sparks fell down around me, landing in front of me like tiny stars, glowing for seconds before their light became extinguished.

And as the buzzing in my ears died down, I realized that my mind was empty. There was no sound now, no voice calling out a name, no urgency, no demands being made upon me. It was quiet. Painfully, distractingly, and heartbreakingly quiet.

Slowly, very slowly my mouth began to move, and as each breath escaped me, a sob went with it. They grew in volume and intensity until I was

shaking on the ground. My heart felt as though it hadn't just shattered, but rather disintegrated into nothing as my chest ached from my loss. I dug my hands into the soil, gripping onto leaves and twigs and crushing them in a desperate need to destroy whatever it was that I could reach, to inflict pain in the same way that I hurt.

I was angry, I was heartbroken. I was inconsolable. Why? Why was it that I had been born to die so that Robert could live, and yet he had died instead? Why had my wounds healed when they should have brought Robert the relief he needed and taken my life as they should have?

Why was I given such a brief moment to experience love with someone who had been born for me just as much as I had been born for him, only to have it all be taken away, and by who? I hadn't called for help, I didn't want help. Who had interfered where they were not wanted? Who would have done such a thing?

I screamed in agony at the intrusion that had wreaked so much damage. They had taken from me the most precious thing in my life, the most

important part, the only part that had ever been true and honest. I pushed myself up and dusted the dirt off of me as my body was wracked with the venom of hate that spread through me.

"Grace?"

A pair of nervous eyes peeked out from behind a small tree. "Grace, are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine."

"I'm sure I don't."

She approached me cautiously, her hair swirling around her body in chaotic waves, and I saw that the damage to her tree reflected also on her flesh. She had open sores, and her skin, which had once contained various shades of green, now had a grayish tinge to it.

"You...you are alive? And Robert is not?"

My head dipped down once in confirmation, and she slithered back in shock. "But that's not how it was supposed to be. You were supposed to die."

"Don't you think I know that?" I snapped, my voice sounding strange with such a fiery, vengeful tone to it. "Don't you think I wanted it to be the other way around?"

"But how could you...how did you kill him?"

"It wasn't me! I don't know who did it, but it wasn't me!"

But I wasn't so sure about that, and Bala could see it, hear the uncertainty in my voice. She looked at me with skepticism written plainly on her face, her eyes glassy with apprehension and doubt.

"If Robert is gone, if he is truly dead, then you need to leave," she said firmly, her tone suddenly cold.

"What? Why?"

"He is the only reason why I've kept the forest from hurting you. He is the only reason they had to care. If he is gone, Ameila will leave, and Lark with her. There will be no more angels to protect us, and we will have to defend ourselves against what will now come. You are human-"

"That's just it, I don't know what I am, I-"

A slick vine wrapped itself around my mouth, preventing me from speaking, from finishing my statement.

"You are *human*, do you understand? *You are a human*. You are not safe here any longer." The vine was soon joined by others, countless green, leafy ribbons that curled around and around me, bringing my arms tightly into my body, wrapping around my legs and trapping me.

"I will take you out of here, but I don't want to ever see you again. You're marked now. You've killed an angel and those who despise your kind as well as mine will not take kindly to that. You will stay away from here, stay away from me and my forest. Don't let my trees see you again, Grace. I'm sorry."

I was sorry, too. I had lost so much today. To lose Bala's friendship now was just the icing on the cake, and I couldn't argue with her points. If Robert's death was because of me, it was only a matter of time before someone decided to do something about it. They could lay the blame of Robert's death

and Sam's death at my feet, and they'd be right.

Bala turned away and the vines that held me tugged at my back, pulling me down and dragging me through the trees. The sounds that surrounded me began to grow louder, angrier, almost frantic with disappointment, grief, and a thirst for something that I knew could only be for blood. I didn't blame them. I only wish they had acted sooner.

Over bumps and rocks, knotted roots and dips in the soil, my body traveled until I was rolled unceremoniously out of the edge of the woods, deposited onto the moist grass that lined the field where Sam's death had singed the surface, the black flare of charred grass a testament to the crime that had been committed there.

I stood up and ran towards the lights that still shined brightly in the parking lot. I searched for the bodies of Erica and Mr. Branke, but they were gone, as was Mr. Branke's car. The lot was empty, and I was alone. My boots soon crunched against gravel and I made the turn onto the road that would lead me home.

But which home? What was home now? The place where my father and mother had lived in a house of lies? Or the place where Robert and I had spent our last, blissful moments together before we had taken fate into our own hands?

I sank to the ground as I realized that neither was home, not so long as Robert didn't exist anymore. Again my tears fell, and I buried my face in my hands, sobbing into them every memory laced, and agony induced teardrop. What would I say to Ameila when I saw her again? How would I tell her that her son had died instead of me; that all the plans that she and my mother had made had been for nothing?

And Lark... As angry as I was at her for knowing so much and not telling me anything, how could I face her? She already knew, and she would blame me, just as Bala did.

What would that mean for her and Graham? Graham would stand up for me. I knew that as surely as I knew my own name, and that would only create trouble between the two of them. Living was only going to complicate things more.

"Grace?"

My head rose, and I bit back another sob as I took in the sight of Stacy's lithe frame. She looked beautiful, healthy, and yet so sad.

"You...why are you here?" I asked her in a hiccup.

"I'm your friend, that's why. Do I need another reason?"

"No, but..."

"No buts. What happened? Where's Robert? Why are you sitting on the side of the road?"

I tried my best to answer her without breaking down, but my words came out in broken sobs. "Robert's gone. I tried to hide, I tried to get away but he found me and...he couldn't do it. He couldn't. He left me, but something happened and I...I think I killed him, and now I don't know where to go. If I go home, I'll have to deal with my father's guilt. If I go to Rob...if I go back to Lark's house, I'll have to face her, Ameila.... I have nowhere to go. I don't know where I belong anymore, Stacy."



"You're being ridiculous, Grace. It's not as if your family watched you die and now you're homeless. You have a father who loves you and a step-mother who cares about you. You have a best friend who would move heaven and earth to keep you safe, and you have me. You saved me, Grace. You risked your life to save me, and if I can't help you out here, then what good was that risk for?"

I wanted to argue with her, but I was too tired. My body was exhausted. I just didn't know if it was emotionally or physically. I didn't care.

"I'm going to take you home, to your Dad's."

I nodded and said nothing as she gently picked me up in an icy embrace, her strength surprising, her swiftness even more so. She ran, down the road, keeping to the darkness, saying nothing as she neared my street. Only when the street lights became visible did she lower me to the ground.

"I can't go any further, Grace. Your father still thinks I'm dead--well...I am, but you know what I mean--so I'm going to leave you here. I'll watch you until you get inside to make sure that you're safe."

"So it's true then? Sam does have a partner?" I asked, knowing that she couldn't know about the consequences that Robert's death would have on me.

"I don't know, but Lark believes it now." The way she said Lark's name made it sound like a curse word.

Realizing that she was waiting for a response, I nodded. "It's true. He never could get to me any other way..."

She motioned her head towards my home. "Go on. Your father is in mourning, Grace. He thinks you're dead. Give him the gift of knowing that you're not. Do for him what I can't do for my own."

"Will I see you again?"

"Of course. You don't think you'll be able to get rid of me that easily, do you? I'm dead, not gone."

I hugged her, ignoring the icy chill that rushed through me. "Thank you, Stacy."

"Anytime, Grace."

I turned away and jogged the last few meters home, taking a deep breath before turning the knob on my door and stepping inside.



## PROMISES KEPT

"I don't think you need to do this, Grace."

"It's not that important."

"You're not going to hurt him by not going."

"It's too soon."

My head whipped around and I glared at the people who stood in my room. Dad, Janice, Graham, and Lark all stared at me with concerned expressions on their faces, their mouths all poised to continue speaking.

"Could you all just stop? Just stop it."

It had been less than ten hours since Robert had died. Ten hours since I had arrived home to find my father being consoled by my best friend and my step-mother. Ten hours since I had been begged for forgiveness before collapsing onto my bed.

All my life I had strived to be normal, and instead I lived a life that was utterly abnormal. Every decision I made pushed me further and further away from the idyllic life that I had pictured, and I never

realized that it was because that was how my life was meant to be. I had tried to have a boyfriend in my best friend, and that didn't work out. I had tried to be the resistant daughter to a father who was on the verge of starting over, and I couldn't. I had tried to be the vengeful step-daughter to a woman who only wanted to be my friend, and I couldn't do that either.

The only part that ever seemed to run along the same lines that I had pictured as the way things were supposed to be was my relationship with Robert, and even that would never come close to being normal by the standards that I had set. He was beyond what I had expected in a friend, in a boyfriend, and perhaps in a lover. I could hug close to me the knowledge that he loved me so much that he had sacrificed himself to keep from hurting me, even as it stabbed at the empty cavity within me that once held my heart.

No. My twisted and delusional sense of normalcy couldn't ever be realized because it wasn't meant for me. Robert had said I was different, and he was right. I just didn't know how so until last night, and now, ten hours...perhaps ten years later, I was

finally beginning to accept it.

I cried. I cried rivers and streams, and buckets of tears, tears that I collected and tossed into the trash because I couldn't stand to see those little reminders of the one difference that I couldn't--wouldn't accept.

And when I was done crying, when there was nothing left within me to seep out and wick the sorrow that would forever have its claws in me, I took a shower. I tried to wash away the dirt and the leaves and the layers upon layers of hurt that I hadn't been able to cry away. I scrubbed at my skin until it was raw, and I washed my hair until it no longer felt like my own. I couldn't use the pink shampoo that I had been using since I could remember, and instead borrowed the shampoo that had been in there for my baby brother.

I stepped out of the shower and ignored the bruises that surrounded my throat; I brushed my teeth and combed my hair. I went into my room and pulled the drawer out from the little nightstand and removed the phone that hid inside.

I went to my bag, which Lark had brought

over in the morning, and pulled out my binder, flipping through the pages before finding a jumble of scribbled notes on the corner of a blank sheet of paper. I dialed the numbers that were there and waited for the ringing to begin.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Shawn?"

"Uh...yeah? Who's this?"

"Shawn, this is Grace."

"Grace! Hey, how are you? How are you holding up?"

My throat closed as I thought about it, and realized that he had meant how I was holding up about Stacy. I swallowed down the bile that had begun to pool and burn the back of my throat and answered him.

"I'm doing okay, I guess."

"That's great. I mean, that's not great. It's not great like woo-hoo and stuff, but you know, it's great that you're doing okay because you know, it's hard to lose someone you care about and things like



that."

"Yeah. You're right," I replied, fighting back a whole new round of tears that seemed to spring up out of nowhere.

"So what's up?"

"Shawn, I wanted to know...do you still want to go to prom?"

A silence followed my question, which was then followed by the sound of the phone falling and hitting something hard. I winced as I heard that sound eclipsed by what I could only guess was him falling down after the phone.

"Shawn? Are you there?"

I heard him scramble for the phone, the clawing sound of his hand against what was probably a wooden floor reaching through the phone and causing me to pull the receiver away from my ear.

"Grace? Grace, gee, look I'm sorry-"

"Oh. Well, I guess it was kind of rude of me to cancel and then call you up just a couple of hours

before to see if you were still interested. I'm sure you found a replacement already, so never mind."

"No, Grace, wait! I'm sorry about dropping the phone! And falling down, too. I guess I was just surprised that you'd call me, much less ask me to go with you to prom."

"You asked first, remember?"

He chuckled and I could almost picture him nodding widely. "True that. So yeah, I've got no problem going if you don't, but are you sure you're up to it? I mean, I totally understood why you canceled, so if you're only going because you don't want to disappoint me..."

"No, I want to go, Shawn. And besides, I don't think Stacy would've approved of me not going after all the hard work she put into finding my dress."

"Well, okay then. I'll pick you up at...six?"

"Sure."

"Okay. Sah-weet! See you soon!"

The phone clicked several times as he

struggled to hang up, and I couldn't help but chuckle. It sounded half-strangled.

As soon as I got off of the phone with him, I saw Lark standing in front of the window. She looked stricken, and her eyes were unusually puffy. She didn't say a word to me, just dropped two bags onto my bed and left, vanishing into a cloud of smoke before I could even think of saying anything to her.

I looked at the bags and knew that they contained the two dresses that Stacy had chosen for me to wear to prom. I hung them up and began to get ready. The noise that I made as I did so caught the attention of both Dad and Janice, who came into my room, shock on their faces, and questioned what it was that I was doing before vocalizing their immediate disapproval.

"It hasn't even been half a day, Grace. This isn't normal," Dad said, worry and fatherly concern oozing out of him in a way that had never happened before.

"You need time to grieve, Grace. Going out so soon isn't good for your mental state. You haven't

truly mourned the loss of Stacy yet, and then to lose Robert so soon? Add that to everything you've gone through, all of the secrets you've had to deal with... You need to rest," Janice insisted, but I ignored this.

I opened the top drawer of my dresser and found a stash of makeup there that I could only assume had belonged to Katie. I began to pull out the pans and bottles and a tray of brushes, placing all of them unceremoniously onto my dresser.

"Grace, Janice is right. You need to grieve. You spent weeks crying over Graham, and I know that as much as you care about him, it doesn't compare to what you felt for Robert, so you not...moping and throwing things and increasing my water damage premiums isn't a good sign to me."

"You need to call Graham," Janice whispered to Dad. "Call him and get him over here. Maybe he'll be able to talk some sense into her."

I saw my father's head nod and he sat on my bed and used the same phone that I had used to call Shawn. When no one answered, he hung up, frustrated by the lack of response. "He's not there."

"Maybe he's with Lark," Janice replied. "Call her up."

"I don't have Ameila's phone number."

"I do. It's downstairs in the kitchen."

Janice disappeared and Dad turned to watch me as I examined the different containers that sat before me, trying to figure out what was what and how exactly they were to be applied to my face.

"Grace. Grace, I'd prefer if you didn't go out tonight and stayed home so that we can talk. We need to talk about everything that happened last night."

I lifted a bottle that I assumed was foundation and set it aside. A pot of some black goo, a tube of something that said mascara, a black pencil, a flat container that contained several tins of eye shadow, and a tube of flesh colored lipstick were also separated for later use.

"Grace, are you listening to me? We need to talk. You've got a month left before you graduate and leave to begin your life as an adult--we can't spend all that time together without talking about

this."

Janice returned then, followed by Graham and Lark. "They...they just appeared. I picked up the phone and...then they were there, in the kitchen," she stuttered, her face pale as she pointed over her shoulder with her thumb.

"I already knew about Grace going to prom," Lark said in a tone that sounded a lot like disappointment. "I brought Graham here because he knows her better than any of us and might be able to talk her out of this insane idea."

"Well, talk some sense in to her, man. She's not thinking straight," Dad said to Graham with as much authority as he could muster, and I tried not to laugh at the feeble attempt.

Graham opened his mouth to say something, and soon, whatever it was he had planned on saying was joined by the voices of everyone else in my tiny room, their disapproval plain.

"Could you all just stop it? Just stop it," I yelled. "I get it. You guys don't think I'm ready, but could you at least trust my judgment to know for

myself when I'm ready or not? I told Shawn that I would go with him to prom. I backed out because of what happened with Stacy, but now that Robert's gone, too, I realize that life is too short, even for those who can live forever, to sit at home and cry and be upset by something that I can't change. I'm going to prom. I'm going to put on that dress that Stacy picked out for me and I'm going to try and have a good time like Robert wanted, both for me as well as for Shawn. If you don't approve, then so be it, but could you leave me alone so that I can focus on trying to figure out how to do this makeup thing?"

Graham's face dropped, as did Dad's jaw. Janice looked confused, and Lark was...well, she just stared at me with her unseeing eyes, taking in the different perspectives that came to her through the eyes of everyone else in the room, including my own. I looked up and saw the sticky residue of tape on my mirror and felt a slight pang inside of me as I remembered what it was that had been taped there.

"Do you need help with your hair? Makeup?"

Janice's voice was like a warm candle to the

cold darkness that had sneaked up on me, and I nodded, glad for her change of heart.

"I'll get the wrinkles out of your dress," Lark sighed, and picked the two bags up before heading downstairs.

Graham shook his head and grabbed my dad by his arm, dragging him downstairs as well. "Come on, Mr. S. Your daughter's more stubborn than an ink stain."

Dad took one last look at me before being disappearing. I closed my eyes and thanked Graham silently for doing that.

"Okay, so let's see what we've got here," Janice said as she sifted through her sister's supplies. I saw how difficult this was for her and tried several times to get her to simply tell me what was what and how to apply it, but she shook her head and insisted that she do this part for me.

"She kept the foundation that's closest to your skin tone. What color is your dress?"

"It's black--black and silver," I answered.



She nodded and pulled out a large, rectangular looking object from my drawer and opened it. It was filled with several small circles of eye shadows in varying shades of purple, silver, and black. "This will work," she said before she began to change my face into someone unrecognizable.

I watched as she covered the purple circles that had formed beneath my eyes, and made the red splotches that covered my face disappear. Her hands shook as she brought a sponge to my neck, dabbing gently at the dark spots that circled my throat and gave evidence to just how close I had come to not being here.

She shook her head and took several deep breaths before she added a pinkish brown streak of color to my cheeks, buffing it out with a fat, fluffy brush. "Close your eyes," she said before approaching me with a brush, the palette of colors in her other hand.

A few minutes later, Lark appeared with the two garment bags in one hand, a small bag and box in the other. "I've brought your dresses, and something else, too."

"Thank you," I whispered, but she was gone again. "I don't think she's ever going to forgive me."

"Forgive you? For what?"

I looked at Janice and realized that despite what she knew, despite what she had been told about the world my father had lived in his entire life, and the life that I had accepted as a part of my own, she could not know the truth about Robert's death. All she knew was that he was gone.

"Nothing," I said quickly, and winced as the bristles of the brush stabbed me in my eye.

"Oh, oh, I'm sorry!" Janice apologized, dabbing at my eye with a wadded up piece of tissue she grabbed from my nightstand. "Dammit, that wasn't supposed to happen."

"It's okay," I told her, and tried to block out the pain as my blurry vision began to clear. "It's no worse than what I would have done."

She quickly brushed my hair and began tugging at it, clipping it up with things she pulled out from the small bag that Lark had brought with her.

"There. Now all you need is mascara and you can get dressed," she said with a wry smile before handing me a red tube. "You remember how to put it on, right?"

I grabbed the tube and shrugged. "Sure. It's just like riding a bike."

She left me to remove the dresses from their bags and I took a quick glance at myself in the mirror, not recognizing who it was that I saw. I rationalized it as me simply seeing myself with so much makeup, but I knew that it was because the person in the mirror was only half of one, the other half having died in a forest at the hands of the person who loved him the most.

"Well, I do have to hand it to Stacy; she sure knew how to pick a dress. These are beautiful, Grace." Janice held the silver dress out to me and I took it with an appreciative smile.

Sighing, I agreed. "Yes. Yes she did." I removed my shirt and pulled the slip of fabric over my head, the slinky material sliding down my body and I imagined it was the silver gaze of someone else...

"So, this black webbed thing goes over that?"

"Yeah. Stacy found that in an antique shop and she said she knew that this was supposed to be my prom dress. It's vintage, over a hundred years old." I held back the part about Robert being the one to purchase the dress, and stepped into it carefully, allowing Janice to ease the black creation over my hips and up to my chest where she held it out so that my arms could fit through the sleeves. She pulled everything back and then began the laborious process of attaching all of the hooks that closed up the back of the dress.

"This is why progress with women's rights took so long--we were taking far too long to get dressed," she quipped when she finished the last hook. "Okay, so turn around and let's see the finished product."

I looked at myself in the mirror, again, watching as she put something around my neck. My hand reached up to touch it; it was the wing pendant and necklace she and Dad had given to me for my

birthday. I hadn't worn it since Christmas. "I thought now would be a good time to wear this," she said as she handed me a pair of silver earrings. "I suppose when I gave it to you, it had a lot more significance than I originally thought."

I nodded as my fingers gently traced the engraved feathers. "Thank you." I looked at my feet and realized that I had no shoes. Janice saw this and grabbed the box that sat on the bed.

"Here."

I pulled off the lid and saw the pair of shoes that Stacy and I had bought after we'd purchased the silver dress. I slipped on the strappy sandals and tried my best to remain upright on the slightly high heels, teetering just a bit before regaining my balance and then seeing my reflection for the last time.

"I guess I'll do," I commented before heading downstairs.

Graham and Dad both stood up, Graham now wearing a tuxedo--the same one that Robert had helped him pick out--and Dad wearing a tearful

expression on his face.

"Grace, you look beautiful," he managed to say before dabbing at his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Thanks," I said to him, my mouth twitching to the side at the awkwardness that I felt at that moment. I didn't care if I was beautiful or not. The person who mattered the most wasn't there to see it.

"Why are you wearing a tux?" I asked Graham as he began tugging at the dark, almost blood red bowtie at his neck.

"I was forced to go."

"By who?"

"By me." Lark stepped in from the kitchen wearing a dark red dress that was slit in the front just high enough to cause a scandal, while the front was actually cut far more demurely, the hem resting just below her collarbone, with sleeves that capped at her shoulders. Her hair was done half up, curled and looped in lazy piles at the top, with loose curls that ran down her back. She wore no jewelry, but her

face was immaculate with lips that matched her dress. "You're not going to that dance alone, Grace."

"I wasn't planning on going alone," I retorted before the doorbell rang.

"That's not what I meant and you know it," came Lark's biting reply before she put on a smile as Shawn walked in, a clear box in his hand that held some generic corsage.

"W.O.W." Shawn said before whistling, enunciating each letter with the typical Salsa flair. "You look...hot. Burning hot. Scorching hot."

"Could you not describe my daughter as hot?" Dad commented, a slight growl of disapproval in his voice.

"Oh. Um, sorry Mr. Shelley," Shawn quickly apologized, his face turning red from embarrassment.

"Thank you. So, where are you taking my daughter Mr..."

"Bing. It's Shawn Bing, Mr. Shelley. And I'm

taking her to the prom, sir. Just to prom. Nothing else. And definitely not to have sex."

Shawn's forehead beaded up, his jaw hanging down in shock at his words, and I moved forward to grab his arm and drag him towards the door. "Okay, I think that's enough for one night; let's get going. I'll see you later, Dad. Thank you Janice," I called out before my heeled feet began their click-clack staccato on the pavement outside.

"Wow. That was intense. I'm sorry about what I said; your dad is kinda...strict. I didn't peg him for that kind of guy, you know?"

"He's not. Things have just been a bit...difficult around here," I said as he led me to a newer model car that sat at the curb where Graham's car used to park.

"Well, I totally understand why he's like that. I mean, here I am, some dorky stranger coming to take his daughter out to prom instead of her perfect boyfriend. Of course, if he knew me, he'd know that there's no chance in hell that you and I would ever hook up. This is just totally platonic and stuff, two friends going to prom and having a good time."



He held out the box to me and grinned. "Here. I had canceled my order when you canceled our date, so when I went to the florist there was nothing pre-packaged left. I saw this flower sitting in the vase that the lady had on her counter and asked if she could make you a corsage out of it. He opened the lid and I bit my lip as he pulled out the same type of pink and white speckled flower that Robert had given to me the morning of our first date.

I held my wrist out as he tied the ribbon around it and then thanked him softly, too overcome with memories to say anything too significant. He opened the car door and held it for me as I climbed in. I pulled my dress in and waited while he closed the door and ran around to the driver's side, getting in and starting the car up with a quiet whirr. "This is my sister's car. She's not exactly going to be using it for the next day or two, so I thought I'd borrow it for the night. You ready?"

I nodded and then we were off, leaving a worried Dad to wave goodbye in the doorway. I was glad that Shawn hadn't spotted the shadow that

seemed to follow us from above as we headed towards the school gym where the prom was being held.

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"You want me to bet you a flask of drums?"

"What?"

"I said, 'do you want me to get you a glass of punch'?"

Shawn held his mouth to my ear, his voice as loud as he dared and yet it was barely loud enough to be heard about the slamming bass that boomed all through the Mylar and crepe paper filled gymnasium.

"Oh, sure," I answered, and nodded just in case he didn't hear me.

"Okay!" He disappeared into the crowded dance floor in front of us, and I sighed with relief, turning to rest my head on the table that we had been assigned and wondering why I had bothered coming to an event like this.

As soon as we'd arrived, the crowd of kids

swarmed in, questions and gossip spilling off their lips. No one knew where Mr. Branke was--he was supposed to chaperone but was a no-show. Erica's parents reported her missing that morning, and the rumors that Erica and Mr. Branke had run off together spread like wildfire throughout the prom.

Then came the questions about me. No one wanted to accept that I was at prom with Shawn because he had asked, even when he swore up and down that it was true. And most annoying of all, everyone wanted to know what Stacy looked like dead.

I let Shawn drag me to the floor a couple of times before faking a sore ankle. He was gracious about it, and soon went off to dance with a few girls who had come stag. Lark and Graham were on the dance floor as well, their bodies moving to a song that only they could hear, their eyes locked on each other, their thoughts attuned to only each other's. I took a small joy in that before allowing a sort of bitterness to tease me with its bile, and then sent it away when Shawn returned, my smile back on my face.

"Here you go," he shouted, handing me a plastic cup filled with watered down red liquid. "I think it's been spiked."

"How do you know?" I shouted before taking a careful sip.

"Because I saw Chad pouring something into the punch bowl before I got there."

"What would he pour in it?"

"I don't know, but I would drink it slowly if I were you."

"Aren't you going to have some?" I asked, seeing that he had no cup in front of him.

"Nah. I'm DD, remember?"

I nodded and grinned. "Are you DD a lot?"

"Yeah. I'm also the only one who has regular access to a car, so being designated driver is pretty much a guarantee for me. I don't mind, though. I kinda like being the responsible one. Chad and Dwayne, they're meant to be crazy and stuff."

I smiled and nodded once more and slowly

sipped the spiked drink, hoping that whatever it was that Chad had put into it would help numb me on the inside as much as I felt numb on the outside.

A voice boomed in over the loudspeakers and interrupted whatever it was that Shawn was about to shriek into my ear. "Okay, Heath Bulldogs. It's time for the last dance, so grab your partners and get on the floor as we say goodbye to another year of memories."

"You want to get up there? One last hurrah?" Shawn asked, his eyes hopeful.

"Sure," I replied, and allowed him to pull me up to the floor. I rested my hands on his shoulders as the music started, and my feet froze into place.

"What's wrong?"

I looked over my shoulder and saw the DJ with the headphones over his ears, obviously listening to something other than what he was playing because the song that I heard in my head was something completely different. It was a song meant for lovers, for people destined to be together, not for two friends having "one last hurrah".

"This song," I stumbled, my lip quivering as I fought to contain my grief. "This song..."

"Hey, look, if this song isn't what you want to dance to, let's get off of the floor," Shawn insisted and began to pull me away.

He continued to pull me until we were out of the gym and I was once again in his car, staring out of the window as the street lamps passed by in blurs of amber light that brought a chill to me. Shawn took this as me being cold and cranked up the heat, though he looked to be sweltering in his tux jacket. I reached over and turned it down, giving him a smile of thanks but unable to say anything--I worried that opening my mouth would signal my brain to just unleash my thoughts, as though he would understand and appreciate them.

We pulled up to my house and I saw that the front door light was on, but nothing else; the rest of the house was dark. "I guess they decided not to wait up for me," I said with a half-laugh.

"That's because they have nothing to worry about, remember?" Shawn replied, his laughter equally heartless.

"Listen, Shawn, I want to thank you for tonight. I know that I wasn't exactly the best prom date ever, but you helped to make this night, at least for me, something that I'll always remember. It was exactly how I had hoped it would be."

I leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek. He flushed instantly, and I felt the warmth hit his face before I pulled away. "Aw now you've gone and made me feel all chivalrous and crap," he said with a slight stutter.

"You know, you're wrong, Grace. You were the best prom date ever. And I'm not just saying that because you're the only prom date I've had. Not many girls would be okay with their dates looking the way I do, or dancing with other girls and being silly on the dance floor, or having friends who spiked the punch and all that jazz. If you hadn't called, I probably would have been spending another night at the hospital watching my older sister change diapers and listening to my brother-in-law talk about how the Browns have got a chance this year.

"So I gotta thank you, Grace, for being a

good friend to me and giving me one of the best nights of my life. I don't think that there'll be another night like this for me for a while. Maybe two, three days tops."

This time, when I laughed, it was filled with warmth. "Thank you, Shawn. Don't worry about walking me to the door. I'll be okay. I'll see you on Monday."

I opened the car door and closed it behind me, making sure to wave as I headed towards the front door. With gentle hands, I turned the knob, glad that Dad hadn't locked it since I had not taken my key with me. I took my shoes off and padded up the stairs towards Matthew's room.

I peeked in on him and saw his sleeping form in his crib. Not wanting to disturb him, I closed his door and walked to my room. I turned the light on and looked at my bed, seeing it neat and made, the bags that had held my dress now hanging in my closet, the shoebox sitting in front of the closet door, waiting for the strappy sandals to be returned.

I lifted the hem of the two dresses and pulled them up over my head, too tired to even bother



fighting with those carpal-tunnel-creating hooks at the moment, and lay the inside-out bundle on the dresser to be dealt with in the morning.

I pulled out a t-shirt from the top drawer that didn't have all of Katie's makeup in it and put it on. I tugged the earrings out of my ears and walked towards my window, lifting it up and jumping back with a start.

"Is everything alright here?"

Lark's face floated above my window sill, and I nodded. "Yes. Everything is fine."

"Okay. Good-night."

I tried to say it back, but she was gone again. She hadn't shown up out of concern, but duty. That's all that that was left between us now that Robert was dead.

"I'm sorry," I whispered out into the night, hoping that it would be carried to her, to anyone who felt the same bitter resentment. I didn't blame them one bit. I resented myself.

I sat down on my bed and leaned back,

resting my head on a bent arm as I stared at the ceiling. I stayed that way for what felt like hours before getting up and turning off the light.

"I'll get my makeup in the morning," I mumbled before slamming my face into a pillow and closing my eyes.

The breeze outside began to pick up and the curtains began to blow out towards me, tickling my arm and annoying me enough to drag my head out from the confines of my pillow and open my eyes. The billowing fabric was blowing wildly and I sat up, frustrated as I groggily padded towards the window, sticking my head outside to view the activity going on beyond the confines of my room. The wind was whistling as it blew down the street, leaves and errant trash that had escaped its bins riding the currents towards the next block.

"Stupid wind." I shut my window and felt the rattle of the pressure that doing so created, and then I felt just the lightest glance of something touching my foot. I looked down and saw whatever it was roll beneath the bed. I bent down and lifted the bed skirt and saw the shadow of something small

as I reached towards it and pulled it out.

It was the braided grass ring that had found its home on my finger for a brief period of time before everything happened. Lark must have found it and returned it. The fact that it had survived was a miracle. Through the corner of my eyes, I caught the movement of a shadow and squeaked.

"Stupid shadows," I grumbled when I realized that the shadow of a person I saw reflected against my wall was merely my own head blocking out what light came in through the window.

I gently rolled the ring between my fingers and wondered whether or not it would be right to put it on, and if I did, which finger should it sit on? I sat down on my bed and examined the band in the moonlight before my eyes began to grow heavy. I sank down and lowered my head to my pillow, the ring tucked into the pocket of my palm, and decided to figure things out in the morning.

I closed my eyes once more and prayed that I would dream about Robert. It wouldn't be fair to have him in my dreams, but nowhere else. I had survived for one day without him thanks to the

distractions I had forced upon myself, but tomorrow held nothing for me. There would be no normal routine, there would be no anticipation, no longing, no anything.

Sighing, I let my body relax and drift off into a mercifully dreamless sleep, but the feeling of something scratching at my face soon disturbed the quiet respite. I slapped away the annoying attacker, and tried to return to the peacefulness of an empty mind but again, the rubbing became too much to ignore and I sat up once more, irritated by this unwelcomed intrusion.

I drowsily left my bed and headed towards the bathroom, flipping on the light and staring half-asleep at my face, half-expecting to see deep gouges in my cheeks, and instead finding that my makeup had rubbed off on the pillow. Well great, now I'd have to do laundry in the morning.

"Fabulous," I grumbled before flipping the bathroom light off and returning to my room, shutting the door behind me and climbing back into my bed with far less patience and much more bitterness than when I had left it.

Only the bed wasn't empty.

"I told you, I love your freckles."

I scrambled out of the bed, landing on the floor with a loud thud, a grunt slipping past my lips. I pushed myself backwards with my feet until my back was pressed against the wall beneath the window. My hands flew up to my mouth to hold in a scream as I stared at the figure on my bed who was propping himself up on his elbow, two silver-ringed irises acting as spotlights directed on me while his lips moved to speak once more.

"So we meet again."



## **EPILOGUE: WHAT CAN WAIT FOR TOMORROW WILL**

"Two weeks left until graduation."

The flyers that were emblazoned with the reminder were everywhere, shouting the announcement in bright colors as seniors prepared to move on to the next chapter of their lives, and juniors prepared to finally take over the school.

"So, did you get your confirmation letter yet?"

Graham looked at me from over the cafeteria table, his hand holding onto Lark's fiercely, his eyes filled with excitement.

"Yes, I did," I answered before burying my nose even further into my book.

"Well? Are you excited to be going?"

I raised my head and looked at his anticipatory expression with a bit of ruefulness. "I'm not going."

"What?"

This question came from Shawn who, along with the rest of the Chips and Dip, now sat with us at our table.

"I said I'm not going anywhere," I repeated while he looked at me as though I had just sprouted a third eye and several horns had appeared from the tip of my nose.

"But you're smart! You're not genius smart, but you're still pretty damn smart. You're smarter than me, at least!"

"Madame Hidani's hula hoop is smarter than you are," Chad laughed before ducking a flying French fry tossed at him from Shawn's direction.

"I've decided to put off college for a year," I said to settle the questions before they grew in number. "My step-mom just lost her sister a few weeks ago and she needs my help with the baby. Also, I don't want to spend the majority of my freshman year working just so I can spend whatever time I have left studying. So I'm just going to work for a year at my dad's grocery store and save up some money and go to junior college."



The chorus of disapproval was astounding, but two voices remained absent as they looked at me through storm colored eyes.

*When will I be able to tell Graham the real reason you won't be going to school?*

Lark's question startled me. It was the most she had spoken to me since she had learned that Robert was alive. They had waged a silent argument in my room when she appeared minutes after I discovered him on my bed, and then she stormed off, leaving Robert to apologize to me for things that I hadn't heard but knew she had said before he himself left to finish their argument and clarify things that only he had heard.

*I don't know*

Robert, who had yet to explain to me what happened that night in the woods, shook his head. *You cannot tell him. The fewer people who know the better. Graham's too close to Grace and those that know this are bound to use it against the both of them.*

Lark's eyes narrowed, her mouth turning

down into a beautiful frown. *He is my husband, Robert. I cannot keep this from him for long.*

Robert's eyes narrowed as well, matching malice for malice as he stared at his sister. *You will be in Florida. He will be too busy with school there to know which questions to ask, and you will keep the rest of his free time occupied so he doesn't have time to wonder.*

I saw Lark's hands grip onto the table, saw her fingers begin to dig into the laminate surface and cave it in like it were simple play-dough. *You act as though that is all that we do.*

Robert shrugged. *I don't care what the two of you do, as long as it keeps him from asking questions. Grace and her family's safety are paramount. Whoever it was that Samael had been working with is still out there, and still wants to see Grace dead. The Seraphim have yet to hand down a sentence to me for Sam's death, and it will most certainly include stipulations regarding her life, which you know can mean only one thing.*

*Knowing this, you also have to*

*acknowledge that she will soon begin to receive the call again, as will I. Through some miracle, we have been given a second chance at doing things right, and I do not care if it insults you to hear that your role in all of this is to keep your husband from having a spare thought for anyone save you. Especially if it means that we can prevent more innocent people from dying*

Innocent people. Erica and Mr. Branke had truly been innocent, despite their reputations. The school had made an announcement the Monday after prom that Mr. Branke had taken an early leave of absence, and wouldn't be returning the following year. Erica's parents began to post flyers up all over town, even handing out a reward for whomever it was that could help them locate her, but nothing ever came of it.

I never thought to ask what happened to their bodies, or what had happened to Mr. Branke's car, and I doubt I ever would. Some things were simply better left unknown. I only hoped that someone could bring their families a little peace.

Lark stood up, her chair flying back and slamming into the wall with such force, a chip of concrete fell onto the ground from where the back had struck. One leg was bent beneath it, and there was a visible crack in the seat. "Come on, Graham. We're leaving."

Graham was in mid-joke with Dwayne when he saw the look on her face and stood up. "Uh, I'll catch you guys later." He grabbed his jacket and left, but not before giving me an apologetic look that hurt for me to see.

"Dude, that boy is whipped," Chad said, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Like you wouldn't jump up and start licking your own boots if Lark Bellegarde was your girlfriend," Dwayne countered.

"Oh, I would. I would do whatever she wanted to. And even I would say that I was whipped," Chad returned, and the two of them began to snort.

Shawn rolled his eyes and then shrugged his shoulders as he caught the expression on my face. "Sometimes I wonder why I'm friends with those

guys."

I smiled at him. "Because without them, you'd never get to be the responsible one."

"That's true," he laughed before grabbing his things and standing up. "Speaking of responsible, come on guys, we've got to get the audio visual equipment ready for cap and gown pick up."

"Damn, that's today?"

The other two stood up and said their goodbyes before rushing off. Alone, Robert pulled me out of my seat and into his lap. "Two more weeks until you're officially free."

"And then I disappear," I murmured as the reality of it sank in. "Is that really necessary? I mean, my Dad and Janice get to stay here, but I don't? Why?"

"Because you're the one that Sam's partner wants, Grace. If you're with your family, even in hiding, you put them in danger; we've been over this already."

Yes. We had been over it. Several times in

fact.

After graduation, Graham would move to Florida with Lark as they had originally intended. Robert and I would remain in Heath while Dad, Janice, and Matthew would be moved somewhere safe.

The plan had received instant disapproval from Dad, who insisted that such a thing was improper, both for a young woman and an angel. His objection didn't lessen when Sera, Llehmai, and Ameila appeared and casually announced that prior to the incident on the field, Robert had proposed to me and I had accepted.

"You did what?" Dad's voice boomed.

"Dad--Dad please, he did it because he thought I was dying, and I only accepted because I thought I was going to die. It's non-binding!" I argued, but when the room turned cold, with ice forming on the windows from Robert's chilly reaction to my response, Dad pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"You! I trusted you with her. I trusted that

you'd keep her safe and you go and ask her to marry you? She's human!"

"She's part-human," Sera interjected, but Dad wouldn't hear it.

"She's human. She was born from a human woman and raised as a human child. Her mother was an angel--~~was~~.

"Angels only marry humans for one reason, and I refuse to let you do it. She will not become one of those, those monsters out there. You're not going to turn my daughter!"

"How do you know that I haven't been turned already?" I demanded to know.

"Because I'm your father; I know the signs, Grace. You can't be turned. I won't allow it."

"She will be turned," Robert vowed, but I shook my head, not appreciating his interruption.

"Dad, please, you're making a scene. Look, I'm an adult now and I've been given the chance to do this; I plan on doing so after graduation. It won't make me invincible, but it will at least help keep me

alive long enough to finish this. Me being alive right now is a complete fluke, Dad. You gotta know that."

A fluke. That was the only way I could describe it. It was unexplainable, what had happened to me that night. No one could tell me why I had not died in Bala's tree, or why the curse of the Innominate had disappeared from my body.

Robert's memory of what had happened was fragmented at best, and it was taking him a while to piece them back together again. He refused to speak about this to anyone else, but I believe that it's because he didn't want to discuss what I was with anyone for fear that the thought alone would be justification enough to kill me. Instead, he tried his best to figure out the answer to this mystery on his own.

I was human in every way save one, he said, and that was not enough to heal my wounds, wounds that were so terrible, Robert remembered feeling the fear of losing me burn inside of him despite the rage he felt boiling over. He could only tell me that when the time came to kill me, when his hand was around my throat, and my heart literally



sat in his hand, he knew that he could not do it.

He could not accept my death, even in the blackness of his own agony, and so he left me there to die alone, and had only lingered around long enough to see that I was safe. Every step that we had taken to try to keep me safe, keep me alive had led up to that moment, and the fact that I hadn't died was not to be taken lightly...by anyone.

I felt my eyes water as my father nodded to what I had just told him. "I know better than you what these angels are capable of and what they aren't--mistakes are not something that they do. It's why I'm so angry that you agree with this. I thought...I thought when you came home that night, when you walked in that door instead of Robert I thought that I had been given a gift, a second chance and that you had been spared and that you'd get to live a normal life."

"But that's just it, Dad. When will you realize that I'm not meant for a normal life?"

"I'm sorry, Grace. I tried to keep you from this world of theirs but I failed, and now everything that your mother and I did, everything that we did wrong

is affecting you, and you're paying the price. But that doesn't mean that you have to marry Robert. He's a billion years older than you are, with far more experience in life and in...life! And how do you know that he loves you enough to deserve you?"

"I know that Robert loves me because if he didn't, I wouldn't be here right now, arguing with you about this, Dad. None of us would be here. You'd be standing beside another grave--*my* grave. Besides, I just told you that I'm not going to marry Robert! Don't you see how ridiculous it would be for me to marry him now? I'm eighteen!"

*And you won't live to see nineteen.* Lem's voice invaded my thoughts ominously from his corner of our cramped living room, looking like an homage to everything that was perfect in the male form.

*The call that demands you sacrifice yourself for Robert has, for some reason, been muted. What happened to N'Uriel has also muted his call, but it will return, and when it does it will be angrier, needier, and there will be nothing either of*

*you can do to stop it or postpone it. If you are married, you will be able to enjoy your last days, weeks, perhaps even months together. But, if you are not, you will simply remain as you are, together but not, and bound by the laws that keep your society as well as mine from turning into chaos.*

"That isn't fair!" I sounded like a whiny three year-old, but it was exactly how I felt. "I'm going to die, to save his life, and I can't get a pass?"

*You might, but N'Uriel won't. You speak of fairness, but how fair is it that you, a silly human girl would be spared while one of our own, one whose calling is of the highest nature, would not? You say you love N'Uriel, and you are willing to sacrifice your life to save him, but you balk at a marriage being offered to you by him, someone who risked his soul to keep you alive? Is that not also unfair?*

I was left incapable of arguing. Everything that Lem said was the truth.

And so it was decided that after graduation

and before everyone left, a small civil ceremony would be held, and Robert and I would get married.

What no one had discussed, however, was where Stacy fit into all of this. Only a few of us knew what had truly happened to her, and I was the only person she was willing to talk to. She had completely written Lark off after that night, and if Lark wasn't a part of her life than neither was Graham. He still had no idea that she was alive--telling him that she was dead had fallen onto me and I hated myself for lying to him.

As for Robert, Stacy knew the animosity he felt for those of her kind--her kind, how strange it was to think such a thing about Stacy. So, we met in private as often as we could, which wasn't as often as either of us liked, but we managed. After a while it began to feel normal...which neither of us particularly enjoyed.

"So you're getting married, huh?" she asked one night while Robert was away.

I groaned into my hands. "Yeah. It's supposed to happen a couple of days after graduation. It's gonna be really private. I don't think

anyone's gonna be there but us. What do you think, Stacy? Is this bad? Do you think I'm rushing into this? Because if you do then--"

"No, Grace. No, I don't think it's bad. You don't have the same options that I had to live. You *have* to die; there's no coming back from where you're going so you have to take what you can get now, before your time runs out. And you love Robert, right? Isn't that the best reason *to* get married? Besides, if you were willing to risk your life for him, I don't see how you can think that you're rushing into anything by getting married to him. What--are you having second thoughts?"

I shook my head. "Not really. I guess I do sometimes, and then other times I think about what being married means for the two of us, the freedom it'll allow us that we'd never been able to have before. And anyway, it's not like he's not getting any younger."

"That's true. It's about time you made an honest angel out of him--a dozen centuries is too long to be running around all single and stuff," she laughed, the sound of her voice a strange echo of

what it used to be. It was now tainted greatly by a deeper, almost soulful hint of the darkness that had prevented her death--her true death.

She left shortly after that conversation and that was the last time I saw her. She said she'd be back for the wedding, but I didn't know how to tell her that there really wasn't going to be one, or that neither Graham, nor Dad or Janice knew that she wasn't dead. Well, dead in the not walking around and talking sense.

And now, sitting in the cafeteria before fourth period, I knew that I was having more than second thoughts. I was having third, fourth, and even fifth thoughts.

"I still don't think we have to get married," I grumbled. "That smoky noster nostri stuff isn't against your laws, and that was very...satisfying."

Robert's hand covered mine and I shivered from the contact. He had returned to me whole, not a single hair or feather out of place, but believing that he had died for the second time had only doubled my reaction to him, every single touch feeling like a firestorm had gone off inside of me.

*It might be satisfying, but it doesn't begin to describe what can be between us, Grace.*

My eyes grew wide as the intrigue of what he was saying sunk their hooks in to me. "Like what?"

*Give your wildest fantasy wings, Grace. Give it wings and let it fly.*

I snorted. "All of them have wings, Robert. All. Of. Them."

His voice was low, so low that I knew only I could hear it, and it turned my skin bumpy, every nerve within me sparking as he promised, "Well then, marry me and I'll make your fantasies come true."

I glanced down at my left hand and saw that he was twirling the little grass band that sat on my ring finger with casual ease. "I thought we had already agreed that that was the plan."

"We agreed because that was what was forced upon us. I'm *asking* you, Grace. I'm asking you now, with neither of us dying now or tomorrow, to marry me and bless me with your love and your

heart. I know that I neither deserve them nor warrant them, but if you give them to me freely, if you grace me with an answer of yes, I promise you that I will spend the rest of our days together doing everything in my power to make you happy."

I watched as he slipped the ring off my finger and then return it. No, not it, but something like it. A silver, braided band with two small, teardrop-shaped stones sitting side by side, embedded into the metal, their pointed ends meeting together as the wider ends fanned out, forming a tiny, glimmering heart. I looked around us to see if anyone was watching, and then my head dipped down to get a closer inspection.

"Where'd you get this? These aren't diamonds, are they?" I asked, panicked.

"I've had the ring for a while, actually. It was a gift, a sort of commemoration gift for receiving my wings. I didn't think about it because I had a far better gift in you, but now that this is real, it seemed fitting that the person who gave me my wings wear it.

"And no, they're not diamonds. They're



crystals, tears actually; one from you, and the other from me that I embedded after softening the metal a bit."

My eyes watered at the sentiment and thought that he had put into this minor change. My fingers brushed the stones and I smiled as one felt cool while the other was warm to the touch.

"So, does this mean yes?"

My eyes rose to meet his and I nodded once, the motion so minute I was afraid that he had missed it and that he'd ask again. But I should have known better when he brought his lips to mine in the most light of kisses.

"Thank you."

Again I nodded and then tucked my hand into my pocket, turning around to finish my lunch before anyone else noticed.

"It doesn't matter if anyone noticed, Grace. What matters is that you're happy, and that you look forward to a future with me, however short of one it might be."

*I looked at him with shock. Robert, I thought you were dead. For the second time in my life, I saw you die, and the repercussions of that have not fully sunk in yet, but I can tell you now that knowing that I even have just one more hour with you is more than I could have hoped or dreamed for. You came back to me. Twice. And I don't plan on wasting any time with you on the off chance that there might be a third.*

He grinned and pulled my hand out of my pocket, kissing my knuckles and laughing at the beet red blush that crept up to my face. "Promise me one thing, Grace."

Cautiously, I nodded. His hand reached out to rub my cheek, his thumb gently going across the plain beneath my eye. "Don't ever wear makeup that covers your freckles again."

My laughter rang out in the crowded cafeteria as I nodded gleefully. "That I can promise!"

And this time, when he kissed me, it wasn't a gentle kiss. It wasn't even a moderately serious kiss that he saved for public places. This kiss was one

that you only gave to someone you were in love with. Someone you were intimate with. Someone you were going to spend the rest of your life with--however short it might be. Someone you were going to marry.

Hoots and cat calls followed as the crowded cafeteria took in our little display and Robert pulled away, but I could sense the hesitation and reluctance there and I reveled in that. Perhaps being married wasn't going to be so bad after all. My fingers touched the hot and cold stones on my ring once more and I smiled as Robert's hand covered mine, keeping our secret just that: our secret.

"It's not going to be bad at all."

"I love you," I mouthed.

"I love you, more."



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

S.L. Naeole has always loved the smell of books, the feel of books, and the destination that a book is guaranteed to take you. She knew from an early age that she was meant to write, to create those very same books she loved so much and vowed that one day, she would.

Now, after getting married and starting a family, she has finally made her dream come true. As the author of *Falling From Grace*, she's found a venue with which to allow her dreams to become the reader's, and transport them to worlds and lives where fantasy and reality blend seamlessly. With several more books in the works, including two sequels to *Falling From Grace*, she's hoping to give to her fans the same desire and affection for the written word that she had as a child.

S.L. Naeole writes from her home in Hawai'i, with her husband, four children, and cat by her side cheering her on and providing endless amounts of inspiration.

