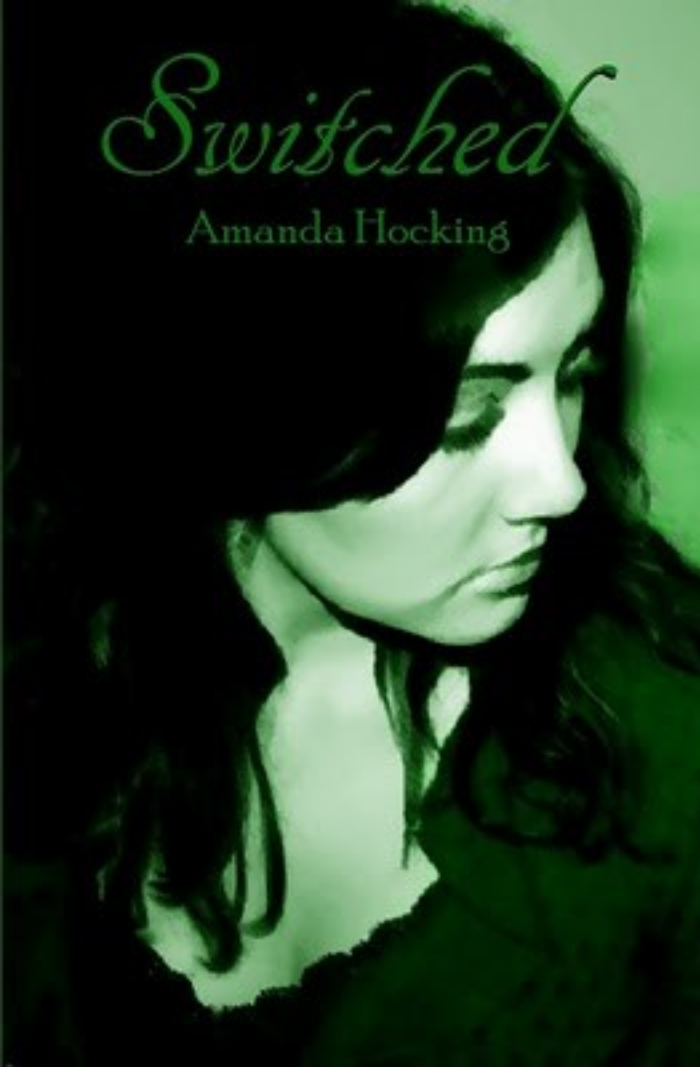


Switched

Amanda Hocking



switched

a novel

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Prologue: Eleven Years Ago

A few things made that day stand out more than any other: it was my sixth birthday, and my mother was wielding a knife. Not a tiny steak knife, but some kind of massive butcher that glinted in the light like a bad horror movie. In fairness, maybe the knife didn't glint. Maybe my memory added it in like some silly CGI effect. I can't say for sure. What I do know is that Mom definitely wanted to kill me.

I've tried to think of the days and years that lead up to that one, to see if there was something that I should've noticed about my mom. Unfortunately, everything before it is pretty hazy. When I ask my older brother Matt about it, he always answers vaguely with things like, "She's batshit, Wendy. That's what happened." He's seven years older than me, so I know he has a better idea about the things that happened, about what Mom was really like, but he never wants to talk about it.

The horrible truth is that I actually have no memory of Mom before that day. Not a one. I can remember doing Christmases and birthdays, and I can even remember my dad, who died when I was five, but not her. Psychologists have insisted that it's just my way of processing trauma, but I just wish I could remember. Even if it was all bad things. *Especially* if it was all bad things.

I'll be the first to admit that I was a brat growing up. My aunt Maggie attests to this, but in a very light fashion and always follows it up with a hug and some reassuring sentiment about loving me no matter what. Matt won't even joke about it. Whenever anyone makes a comment about me misbehaving as a child, he just purses his lips and insists that I was a normal, curious little girl. I definitely wasn't, but I'm not the only one suppressing things, I guess.

We lived in the Hamptons at the time, and my mother was a lady of leisure. Celia wasn't there that day, and in retrospect, I'd say that was the big trigger. Celia was the third nanny I had, which is further evidence of my unruliness as a child. Matt had the same nanny his whole life until I was born and I proved to be too much for her. Celia and I got on rather well, but she had

an emergency and left the night before. That meant my mother was in charge of me, for one of the few times in her life, and there was a party going on that day.

Okay, I lied when I said I had no memory of my mother. I very distinctly remember her yelling for my brother, or my father, or the nanny, or my aunt, or anyone anywhere every time she was forced to interact with me. It was as if she couldn't stand the sight of me. As it turns out, she probably couldn't.

My aunt Maggie came over a little bit later to help get ready for the party, and she eventually managed to rouse my mother. I was still in my pajamas with chocolate soy milk stains on my face, and she offered to get me ready. To this day, I have no idea how Mom ended up taking that over. It was so unlike her, and nobody can remember why she decided to actually take charge of me.

The bath was a horrendous ordeal. I was an unnaturally filthy child, and she had to scrub at my skin, which only made me wail petulantly. My hair was the worst. It was a constant state of snarled mess, no matter how hard she combed at it, but that wouldn't stop her from trying. I sat on the stool in front of her vanity, her hands holding me down tightly so I wouldn't squirm away. She had let me wear her oversized plush robe when I got out of the bath, and it made me feel grand somehow. My hair was still damp as she raked the brush through it, and I screamed bloody murder and tears ran down my cheeks.

She had a tri-mirror on her vanity, so I could see her from three different angles as she brushed my hair. Her cheeks were red from straining, and she was out of breath. Her own hair had been pulled back in some kind of ratty bun, so I don't know how she could complain about my hair. She was still wearing my father's red silk robe, the same way she had been every day since he died.

Mom finally managed to get my hair to her liking, putting in clips with little pink bows on them. She chose some frilly pink dress to go with it, and I remember protesting like mad about it. I *hated* dresses, but she tackled me and

forced me into it. Finally, she put on little lacy socks with shiny white shoes, and let me go so she could get ready herself.

The thing is that I didn't even want this party. I liked gifts and all that, but I didn't have any friends. The people coming to the party, they were my mother's friends and their snobby little kids. She had planned some kind of princess tea party thing, that Maggie and Matt and our maid had very dutifully spent all morning setting up. I did not want a princess party. I wanted dinosaurs, and I wanted to be outside running around. By the time the guests had started to arrive, I had already ripped off my shoes and socks and plucked the bows from my hair.

Mom came down in the middle of opening gifts, looking almost the same as she did before I left. Her hair had been smoothed out, and she had put on bright red lipstick that only made her look paler. She was still wearing my father's robe, but she had added a necklace and black heels with it, as if that would suddenly make the outfit appropriate. Nobody commented on it, but they were probably too busy staring at me with absolute horror. I had complained about every single gift I had gotten, and I had broken or thrown away a portion of them. They were all stupid dolls or ponies or some other thing I would never play with.

When Mom came into the room, stealthy gliding through the guests to where I sat at the end of a long table, I had just torn through a box wrapped in pink teddy bears. It contained yet another porcelain doll, and before I could even finish my diatribe about it, I felt a hand slap me sharply across the face.

"You are not my daughter," Mom said, her voice her cold and emotionless. My cheek stung painfully from where she had hit me, and I just gaped at her.

Maggie quickly redirected the festivities, but the idea must've been percolating in my mother's mind the rest of the afternoon. I think when she said it, she meant it that way every parent does when their child does something they don't understand. But the more she thought about it, the more it must've made sense to her.

After an afternoon of similar tantrums on my part, and many scenes involving me or another child crying, someone decided that it was time to have cake. Mom seemed to be taking forever in the kitchen, and for some reason, Maggie let me go check on her. I don't even know why Mom was the one getting the cake, instead of Maggie or the maid, who were both far more maternal.

On the center of the island in the kitchen, there was a massive chocolate cake covered in pink flowers with a big wax number six in the middle. Mom stood on the other side, holding a gigantic knife she used to cut and serve the cake onto tiny saucers. Bobby pins were starting to come loose from her hair, and she had gotten a frantic look.

"Chocolate?" I wrinkled my nose as Mom very carefully tried to set perfect pieces onto the saucers.

"Yes, Wendy, you like chocolate," Mom informed me.

"No, I don't!" I protested, crossing my arms over my chest. "I hate chocolate! I'm not going to eat it and you can't make me!" While I did love chocolate soy milk, I generally despised all other chocolate, and most candy and sweets for that matter. Mom might have known that, but it might have been a simple oversight on her part.

"Wendy!" Mom closed her eyes as if she had a terrible migraine.

The knife just happened to be pointed in my direction, some frosting sticking on the tip. At the moment, I didn't feel afraid. If I had, maybe everything would've gone different. Instead I just felt like having another one of my tantrums.

"No, no, *no*! It's my birthday and I don't want chocolate!" I shouted and stomped my foot on the floor as hard as I could.

"You don't want chocolate?" Mom looked at me, her blue eyes wide and incredulous. There was also a whole new type of crazy glinting in her eyes, and that's when my fear belatedly started to kick in. "What is wrong with you, Wendy? What kind of child are you? Are you even a child?" I just stared at her as she slowly walked around the island, coming towards me. The knife was still

in her hand, pointed up at the ceiling, but it looked far more menacing than it had a few seconds ago. “You’re certainly not my child. What are you, Wendy?” She bent down and gripped my shoulders tightly, digging her fingers into me like talons. When she started to shake me, she shouted and spittle splashed out on my face. “What are you really? What do you want? *What do you want from me?!*”

I managed to wriggle away from her and took several steps back. I should’ve screamed or run away, but I didn’t understand what was going on. My mother looked completely maniacal. Her robe had fallen open, revealing her thin collarbones and the black slip she wore underneath. She took a step towards me, this time with the knife purposely pointed at me.

“I was pregnant, Wendy! Where is my child? What are you and what did you do with my child?” Tears were forming in her eyes, and I just shook my head. “You probably killed him, didn’t you? That is just like you, Wendy. That is just like *you!*”

She lunged at me, screaming at me to tell her what I was and what I did with her real baby. I darted out of the way just in time, but she was backing me into a corner. Once I was pressed up against the kitchen cupboards, I had nowhere to go, and she wasn’t about to give up.

“Mom!” Matt yelled at her from the other side of the room. Her eyes flickered with some recognition, the sound of the son she actually loved, but she didn’t back away from her stance. In fact, she realized that she was running out of time, so she raised her knife.

Matt dove at her, but not before the blade of her knife tore through my dress and slashed across my stomach. My cut wasn’t much worse than a flesh wound, but bled profusely and I sobbed hysterically. Mom was still fighting hard against Matt, refusing to let go of the knife.

“She killed your brother, Mathew!” Mom insisted, looking at him with frantic eyes. “She’s a monster! She has to be stopped, Mathew! She has to be *stopped!*”

A pool of drool unceremoniously spilled out across my desk, and I had opened my eyes just in time to hear Mr. Meade slam a dictionary down on the table. I had only been here a month, but I had already ascertained that this was his way of waking me up from my daily naps during his History lecture. I knew he got some kind of kick out of startling students awake, so I refused to let myself be jarred or react in anyway. Lately, I had been managing to wake up a second before he tried to wake me, which made it easier to ignore. This time, I didn't do anything at all. In fact, I closed my eyes again and pretended to keep sleeping.

"Miss Everly?" Mr. Meade snapped, clearly not happy with my reaction, and I had to fight to keep the smile back. "Miss Everly?"

"Hmm?" I murmured.

I lifted my head and tried to wipe away the drool as discreetly as possible. Surreptitiously, I glanced around to see if anyone had noticed, and that bitch Tegan Lively was looking at me with a devilish smile, so I had a feeling she'd seen it. She pushed her golden locks out of her face and winked at me in a strangely seductive manner, and I had no response to that.

Most of the class seemed pretty oblivious, except for Finn Holmes. He'd been here a week, so he was the only kid in school newer than me. There was something oddly still and quiet about him, and I was fairly certain that I had yet to hear him speak, even though he was in four of my classes. His black hair was smoothed back, and his eyes were so dark they were almost black. Whenever I looked at him, he always seemed to be staring at me in a completely unabashed way, like it was perfectly natural to just sit in class and look at me all the time. With his rather striking looks, he was attractive, but there was nothing flattering about the way he looked at me. He just stared, the way I stare at the TV when something boring's on. I feel compelled to look, but I don't really care or even notice what's happening.

“Sorry to disturb your sleep,” Mr. Meade cleared his throat so I would look up at him, and I purposely yawned loudly.

“It’s okay,” I said.

“Go easy on her, Mr. Meade,” Tegan chimed in, her voice deceptively sweet. “Wendy was just getting her beauty sleep, and she needs all the help she can get.”

The class snickered at that, and I turned back to glare at her. Unfortunately, that Finn kid sat behind her. He wasn’t laughing at her joke, but he didn’t disapprove either. For a change of pace, he was looking down at his book, and a strand of hair fell across his forehead.

“Then you must be about due for a coma,” I told Tegan, and her plastic smile grew harder. Finn almost seemed to smirk at that, but I was probably imagining things. He never had expressions.

“Miss Everly, why don’t you go down to the principal’s office?” Mr. Meade suggested tiredly, and I groaned. “Since you seem to be making a habit of sleeping in my class, maybe he can come up with some ideas to help you stay awake.”

“I’m awake,” I insisted hopefully.

“Miss Everly, now.” Mr. Meade pointed to the door, as if I had forgotten how to leave and that’s what was holding me back.

“Fine,” I huffed and shoved my books into my bookbag. I don’t know why I even took my books out, since I had designated History as my afternoon nap time.

“She’s just lucky she didn’t drown in her own drool,” Tegan sneered as I made my way towards the door.

Restraint had never been my strong suit, but I was really working on it. I gripped the strap of my bookbag tightly and gritted my teeth as I walked out of the class, but I didn’t pause or look back. *You cannot punch Tegan in the face, you cannot punch Tegan in the face*, I kept repeating over and over in my head. It had basically been my mantra since I started here, but it was getting harder and harder to uphold.

I walked slowly down the hall towards the principal's office, admiring the battered lockers. There were bright colored fliers posted everywhere, telling everyone to join the Debate team, try out for the school play, and not to miss the fall semi-formal this Friday. I wondered what a "semi-formal" consisted of at a public school, but I hadn't bothered to ask anyone. Besides that, since I had never been to a dance of any kind, I had nothing to compare it to.

The principal's secretary was a pudgy woman with dark curly hair, and she gave me the same severe look over her glasses that she did every time I came in the office. It was neither disappointed nor disapproving, but rather just as she expected. I could almost imagine her pleading with the principal not to accept me before I started. "No, no, not this one. She's a bad egg," she'd say until she was red in the face.

Without saying a word, she picked up the phone to let the principal know I was here. The principal had yet to yell at me, but he always looked at me with that same mixture of concern and pity that everyone gave me. Well, everyone that knew about my mother at least. As if every misdeed in my entire life could be explained away and forgiven because of a single day in my childhood.

"The principal is in meetings all afternoon," his secretary told me after she set down the receiver. "He said to go see the counselor."

"Right," I sighed. That had been his go-to lately, meaning he was giving up hope.

Seeing the counselor was definitely worse than seeing the principal, but I guess that made it a more fitting punishment. Her office was two doors down from him, and it was always physically open, to represent her open-door policy. Tentatively, I knocked on her partially open door, hoping that she too was locked in meetings all afternoon.

"Come in!" Ms. Page called, and I grimaced inwardly and stepped inside her office. She had been doing something in one of her drawers, but she looked up when I walked in, and her expression fell. "Wendy."

"Hey," I gave her a half-wave and immediately felt stupid after I did it.

“Have a seat,” Ms. Page smiled grimly at me and straightened a loose strand of her strawberry blond curls. The flashy diamond on her finger assured me that she was engaged, which explained her irrational happiness and optimism. I could tell that I was starting to wear down on that. Somehow that made me feel an odd blend of pride and guilt.

I closed the door behind me, then sat down in the semi-padded chair across from her and dropped my bookbag by my feet with a heavy thud. Ms. Page crossed her hands on her desk and waited for me to talk, which was a silly move on her part.

“So...” Ms. Page said at length, when the silence had dragged on too long for her. “What brings you here this time?”

“I fell asleep in Mr. Meade’s class,” I answered.

I wasn’t nervous, but I felt I should play the part, so I looked down at my hands and started twisting the platinum ring I always wore on my thumb. Fashion had always seemed like a totally alien concept to me, so I tended to just load up on whatever seemed like a good idea. Today that meant jean skirt to my knees and a long-sleeved curve-hugging sweater. I had kicked off my skimmers almost as soon as I sat down out of my massive hatred of shoes.

“Again?” Her voice rang with that familiar tone, and I exhaled loudly. “Wendy, why do you keep doing this? I know you’re bright. Your tests show your IQ is above 140, but you’re not on track for graduation. You’re failing most of your classes, and you only transferred here a month ago.”

“I know, I know.” I twisted around my thumb ring and slumped lower in the seat.

“Do you want to graduate, Wendy?” Ms. Page asked pointedly. “I know you don’t want to be here, but you don’t seem to be in a hurry to get out of here. Do you have any plans after high school?”

“Backpacking in Europe,” I replied flippantly, even though I had no intention to travel. As if Matt would let me go anywhere anyway.

“Is that why you’re not applying yourself? Because you’re afraid of what comes after?” She was desperately trying to delve into the many layers of

me, but there really weren't that many layers. People were often under the mistaken impression that I was far more complicated than I really was.

"I'm not afraid of anything," I muttered. I had cut my legs shaving last night, and I absently picked at the giant Transformers Band-Aid that covered my wound.

"Wendy, we both know that's not true," Ms. Page admonished me gently.

"How do you know it's not true? You barely know me. You just met me!" I hadn't meant to snap at her, but I was growing irritated. A headache was lurking just behind my eyes and I rubbed my temples tiredly.

"Everyone is afraid of something," Ms. Page insisted, trying not to let on that my outburst had bothered her. "I'm deathly afraid of spiders."

"I'm not." It sounded glib, but I really wasn't. I wasn't afraid of any of the normal things kids were. "And even if I were, that seems like an awfully shallow examination. Like 90% of the population is afraid of spiders. What's that prove?"

"It doesn't prove anything," Ms. Page allowed. "But you make an interesting point. Nearly everyone is afraid of spiders. Except you." She paused to let that sink in, as if I would go, oh boy, you got me there. "You make a point of trying to stand out, to be different than everyone else."

"Nope, I don't," I shook my head. "I just am different. I don't try. It's just the way it is. And it doesn't really bother me."

"It doesn't?" She raised an eyebrow. "Is that why you've gotten suspended from every school you've gone to for having altercations with fellow students?"

"*They* don't like me. Doesn't mean I'm gonna put up with their attitude," I shrugged.

As soon as I said it, I knew I sounded like a paranoid psycho who thought everyone was out to get me, but I didn't bother to correct it. Nobody was out to get me. Well, maybe that bitch Tegan would revel in something bad happening to me, but there wasn't a conspiracy ruining my life. I just didn't put

up with people, and that's why I'd gotten kicked out of every private school on the East coast.

"We have a really diversified student body here, and I think it would be really good for you to try and make the best of it." She was practically reciting the same speech she'd given me the first time we met, but I just nodded like it was new information. "And even if you can't get along with your classmates, you can at least focus on your studies. If you played your cards right, you could be graduating in six months, and I know how much you want out of here." She was playing to my weakness, and that was pretty smart of her, so I nodded more seriously.

"Okay. I will. I'll at least try to stay awake in class," I amended with a smile.

Finally, she let me go. I scooped up my bag, slipped on my shoes, and dashed out into the hall.

When the final bell finally rang at three o'clock, I was always the first one out I pushed through the doors going outside, I heard someone calling my name, but I didn't look back. Against my better judgment, I decided to slow down, though, and Patrick quickly jogged up to me.

"Hey, Wendy!" Patrick gave me his goofy grin as he matched my pace. He was about a foot taller than me with thick, auburn hair that he was always pushing out of his face. While he wasn't unattractive exactly, there was something too clumsy about him to be sexy. For some reason, he seemed to fancy us as friends, and he was harmless enough, so I decided to try it out.

"Hey." I readjusted the straps on my bag and looked up at him as he brushed his heavy bangs from his eyes.

"I heard you got sent to the principal's office," Patrick sounded apologetic.

"Word travels fast," I grumbled.

We had reached the parking lot at the end of the lawn, so I stopped. I hadn't looked around, but I knew that Matt was waiting somewhere nearby to

pick me up. It would've been an honest enough excuse that I had to meet him, but I decided to try and finish the conversation with Patrick.

"Tegan has a huge mouth," Patrick agreed with a knowing smile.

"That she does." A rebellious curl had escaped from the messy bun I had my hair in, and I tucked it behind my ears. "It was no big deal really. I just fell asleep in Meade's class."

"That guy is a douche," Patrick said.

"Yeah, he kind of is." I glanced around, just meaning to see if I could see Matt, but I got distracted before I could give it a serious look.

Even though it was pushing seventy degrees, Finn Holmes had on a fitted leather jacket, that looked better on him than I was willing to admit. He was sitting on the hood of his silver Cadillac, shimmering too brightly in a parking lot full of beat up second-hand cars. When he pushed his dark hair back, he looked like he was trying to channel James Dean. That would've been all well and good if he wasn't looking at me again. There was something unnerving about the way his dark eyes settled on me, and I decided that Patrick and I had chatted enough.

"But I gotta get going," I cut Patrick off in mid-sentence. He'd been saying something about history that I hadn't even been listening to anyway. "My brother is waiting for me."

"Oh, alright, okay." Patrick nodded and smiled brightly, so I smiled back. "I'll see you tomorrow."

I didn't even know where Matt was and I was already hurrying away from Patrick into the parking lot. Scanning quickly for Matt's light blue Prius, I absently started to chew my thumb nail. When I looked back at Finn, he and his Cadillac had magically disappeared, and for some reason, that only bothered me more. I was still staring at the empty spot where Finn had been when a loud honk startled me, so I jumped. Matt was sitting a few cars down, looking at me over the top of his sunglasses.

"Sorry," I opened the car door and hopped in, but he just stared at me for a moment. "What?"

“You were biting your nails and looking around. Did something happen?” Matt asked seriously, and I sighed. He took his whole big brother thing way too seriously.

“No, nothing happened. School sucks,” I brushed him off. “Let’s go home.”

“Seatbelt,” Matt commanded, and I did as I was told.

Matt had always been quiet and reserved, thinking everything over carefully before making a decision. I rarely argued with him because there wasn’t a point in it, even though I tended to argue with everyone about everything. He was a stark contrast to me in every way, except that we were both relatively short. I was barely over 5’4, and he was 5’9. He had sandy blond hair that he always kept short and neat, and his eyes were the same shade of blue as our mother’s. My hair was an unruly dark brown mass of curls, and my eyes matched it perfectly. Since Matt was a pretty intellectual guy, he was shockingly muscular. I think he had some kind sense of duty, like he had to make sure he was strong enough to defend us against anything, so he spent a lot of time working out.

“How is school going?” Matt asked carefully.

“Great. Fantastic. Amazing,” I lied.

“Are you even going to graduate this year?” Matt had long since stopped judging my school record. A large part of him didn’t even care if I graduated high school. In fact, he probably preferred it. The thought of me going off to college had to terrify him.

“Who knows?” I shrugged and started rummaging through my bag for my iPod.

“Just to warn you, we got a call today,” Matt said. “About you sleeping in class.”

“Delightful,” I sighed. Matt could care less about my schooling, but my aunt Maggie was an entirely different story. And since she was my actual legal guardian, her opinion mattered more than I would’ve liked. “What’s her plan?”

“Maggie’s thinking bedtimes,” Matt informed with a dry smirk. He had been privy to all my failed attempts at bedtimes over the years.

“I’m almost eighteen!” I groaned. “What is she thinking?”

“You’ve got four more months until you’re eighteen,” Matt corrected me shortly, and his hand tightened reflexively on the steering wheel. He was suffering from serious delusions that I was going to run away as soon as I turned eighteen, and nothing I could say would convince him otherwise.

“Yeah, whatever,” I waved it off. “Did you tell her she’s insane?”

“I figured she’d hear it enough from you,” Matt grinned at me.

“You told her it wouldn’t work, though? And if she tries to make me go to bed then... I don’t know. I’ll take sleeping pills in the morning so I sleep through all my classes!” I announced triumphantly, as if it were a perfectly brilliant, logical idea. Matt laughed, the same way he laughed at all my ridiculous posturing.

“I told her it wouldn’t work,” Matt assured me. “But I thought it would be best if you let her tell you the rules, and then you yelled about not obeying them. Then you both agreed to some kind of compromise where you pretty much do whatever you want.”

“Yeah, that is usually what happens,” I yawned and looked out the window. We were rapidly approaching our new house, buried on an average suburban street amongst a slew of maples and elms. “I hate this town.”

“It’s a beautiful town!” Matt sounded shocked at my complaint.

“I guess.” I shrugged, and the scenery did look pretty. Overall, it was an okay town, but I just hated moving. Maggie and Matt probably hated it just as much as I did, and they only ever did it for me, so really, I was the one that had the least to be pissy about.

“You promised you were really gonna try here,” Matt reminded me, almost pleading with me. We had pulled up in the driveway next to the butter colored Victorian that Maggie had completely fallen in love with.

“I am!” I insisted. I disappointed people constantly, but I could never stomach disappointing Matt. “Did you see me talking to that kid? His name is Patrick. And he’s kind of a friend.”

“Look at you. Making your very first friend at the ripe old age of seventeen.” Matt shut off the car and looked at me with veiled amusement.

“Yeah, well, how many friends do you have?” I countered evenly, and he just shook his head and got out of the car, so I quickly followed after him. “That’s what I thought.”

“I’ve had friends before. Gone to parties. Kissed a girl. The whole nine yards,” Matt said as he went through the side door into the house.

“So you say.” I kicked off my shoes as soon as we walked in the kitchen, which was still in various stages of unpacking. After as many times as we’d moved, everyone had gotten tired of the whole unpacking/packing process, so we tended to live mostly out of boxes. “I’ve only seen one of these alleged girls.”

“Yeah, cause when I brought her home, you set her dress on fire! While she was wearing it!” Matt had pulled off his sunglasses and looked at me severely with his deep blue eyes.

“Oh come on! That was an accident and you know it!” I protested.

“So you say,” Matt countered and opened the fridge.

“Anything good in there?” I asked hopefully and hopped onto the kitchen island. “I’m famished.”

“Probably nothing you’d like.” Matt started sifting through the contents of the fridge, but he was probably right. I was a notoriously picky eater. While I had never purposely sought out the life of a vegan, I seemed to hate most things that either had meat in them or man-made synthetics. It was odd, and incredibly irritating for the people who tried to feed me. “Oh. We have plain yogurt.”

“Oh yum!” I clapped my hands together. It was one of the big generic tubs of it, and he tossed at me. I opened the drawer next to my legs and pulled

out a spoon. I'd probably eat the full tub in one sitting, and I'd still be starving afterwards. It was maddening.

Maggie appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, flecks of paint stuck in her blond curls. Her ratty overalls were covered in layers of multi-colored paint, proof of all the rooms she had redecorated over the years. She had her hands on her hips, and she didn't look too happy to see either of us, so Matt cautiously shut the fridge door.

"I thought I told you to tell me when you got home," Maggie glared at him.

"We're home?" Matt offered sheepishly.

"I can see that," Maggie rolled her eyes, and then turned her attention to me. "I got a call today from Ms. Page."

"Sorry," I said gulping down a spoonful of yogurt. "Isn't it nice that you don't have a job so you can get calls during the day?" She narrowed her eyes at me.

"You know that I don't work because I can't work. You are a full-time job." Maggie crossed her arms over her chest.

The thing is, I don't think she's exaggerating. All the time she's had to spend getting me in and out of school, cleaning up my messes, and moving us around, I don't know how she would've had time to establish a career. Luckily, my loony mom and dead dad left us with enough money so she didn't need to work.

"Sorry," I repeated and looked down at my yogurt, stirring it slowly. "I talked to Ms. Page and I promised I would try harder."

"We've heard that before," Maggie said wearily.

"Well, yeah... but I am really trying," I insisted and looked to Matt for help. "I mean, I actually promised Matt this time. And I'm making a friend." Maggie tried not to let on how much that simple fact delighted her. She wanted to hang on to her anger so she could punish me, but she looked to Matt to corroborate my story.

“She was actually talking to a guy. They were smiling and everything,” Matt admitted.

“Like a *guy* guy?” Her smile was growing and I could tell she was on the brink of gushing. The idea of this guy being a romantic prospect hadn’t crossed Matt’s mind before, and he suddenly tensed up, looking over at me with a new scrutiny. Fortunately for him, that idea hadn’t crossed my mind either.

“No, nothing like that,” I shook my head. “He’s just a guy. He’s kind of goofy, I guess. I don’t know. He seems nice enough.”

“Nice? Goofy?” Maggie really wanted to hug me. “That’s a start! And much better than that anarchist with the tattoo on his face.”

“We weren’t friends,” I corrected her. “I just stole his motorcycle. While he happened to be on it.”

Nobody had ever really believed that story, but it was true. To this day I couldn’t really explain how I had done it. I had just been thinking that I really wanted his bike, and then I was looking at him and he was listening to me. I don’t know. At any rate, that story is exactly how I lost my driver’s license. Theoretically, Maggie could’ve gotten a lawyer and fought it, but she thought I deserved it. Besides that, I think both she and Matt felt safer knowing I couldn’t drive.

“So this really is gonna be a new start for us?” Maggie couldn’t hold back her excitement any longer. Her blue eyes had started to well with happy tears, and I did my best to try not to look irritated by her obvious joy. “Wendy, this is just so wonderful! We can really make a home here!”

With that, she literally squealed and dashed over to me. She hugged me so tightly and so suddenly she almost knocked the yogurt from my hands, but I don’t think she would’ve cared. For the most part, I tended to barely tolerate hugs. I looked reproachfully at Matt over Maggie’s shoulder as she squeezed me to her, but his eyes were warning me not to say anything. I had a habit of ruining moments like this for Maggie, but I had promised to work on accepting them.

“I’m so proud of you!” Maggie gushed into my shoulder. Then she realized she was leaving out Matt, so she loosened her grip on me just enough so she could extend an arm back to him. “I’m so proud of you both! Come on, Matt! Group hug!”

“Yeah, Matt, group hug,” I added dryly and forced a smile.

Matt tended to be just slightly fonder of physical contact than I was, but he smiled and did as he was told. Maggie pulled him in close and we made an awkward tri-hug. Somewhere in the middle of the discomfort, I had actually managed to enjoy myself.

They had given me a study hall fourth period in an attempt to help me catch up on my work, but I had been using it for napping. At one end of the library, buried amongst the reference books and an out dated card catalogue, they had a few round tables scattered about. That's where study hall was held. The librarian was at the other side of the room, and she would occasionally come check on us, but she didn't really care what we were doing. The room was massive with insanely high ceilings topped with sky lights, and there was this constant sound of white noise, so she couldn't hear anything we were saying anyway.

Unfortunately, I had promised to crack down on my studies, so I felt obligated to actually do that. I had briefly considered sitting at a table by myself, but Patrick was already down there, sitting alone, so I thought I had better join him. It was all part of my initiative to fit in and act like a normal teenager. Since I spent most of the time or somewhere else napping, I hadn't really noticed any of the kids that had study hall with me. That meant that I hadn't noticed Finn, either, who slunk in a few minutes after I did and took a seat at the table behind me.

"So what are you working on?" Patrick asked me jovially, as if schoolwork were an amusing topic. He had his English book open to *The Lottery* by Shirley Jackson, a short story I had also been assigned to read. It was like five pages long, but I hadn't gotten past the title.

"Um, English," I decided. I needed to read it anyway, and since that's what he was working on, maybe he could help me. "I have to read that too."

"It's pretty weird," Patrick assured me with wide eyed seriousness. There was something tremendously innocent about him, and despite myself, I found that kind of endearing. "I'm gonna warn you. I'm a little shocked we read this in school."

“What do you mean?” I bent over to dig my English text book out of my bag, and I just happened to glance back at the table behind us.

Finn sat by himself, his slender fingers absently straightening out his black hair. He had his head bowed, looking at his biology book, but only for a second. He must’ve sensed me looking at him, because he almost instantly lifted his eyes to meet mine. I wanted to keep looking at him and beat him at his little staring contest, but I failed immediately. Quickly grabbing my textbook, I turned to look at Patrick, who had launched into an explanation of *The Lottery*.

“It’s just so disturbing,” Patrick shook his head. “I know it’s mostly an allegory, but... I just can’t believe that people would ever be like that. I don’t know. Maybe I’m just naïve.”

“People are pretty disturbing,” I shrugged. I was trying to keep my mannerisms and my conversations nonchalant, but it was hard to act natural when I knew I had an audience, in the form of Finn staring at the back of me.

“You think so?” Patrick’s forehead creased in confusion and concern. Something about my tone of voice had given away too much. Plus, I think I had that face that kind of screamed “emotionally damaged.”

“Yeah, I’d say so.” My hand instinctively went to my stomach, where the foot long scar was safely hidden underneath my shirt. As soon as I realized what I was doing, I pulled it away and busied my hand with twirling a stray hair around my fingers.

“Is that why you transferred here?” Patrick asked.

“Cause people are disturbing?” I smiled, purposely hedging his question.

“No, I don’t know,” Patrick laughed and ran a hand through his thick hair. “That’s probably too personal, anyway. Sorry.”

“No, it’s not that personal,” I lied.

Truthfully, it wasn’t actually that personal. I planned on answering him, but for some reason, I just knew that Finn was listening, even more intently than he had been before. He wanted to know my answer, maybe more than Patrick did, and I shifted uncomfortably. I wanted to steal a look at him out of

the corner of my eye, but I couldn't without it being incredibly obvious that I was trying to spy on him spying on me.

"No, it's making you uncomfortable! I'm sorry," Patrick looked pained and his cheeks showed a hint of blush. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, no," I shook my head again. "I just... I got kicked out." Instead of hiding things, I decided to go the other route, and I raised my voice. Not so I was yelling or anything, but just loud and clear enough so Finn could hear everything perfectly. That would show him... something. That I wasn't afraid and I wouldn't be intimidated.

"For what?" Patrick had already forgotten his unease about prying and leaned in closer to me.

"Same thing I always get kicked out for," I shrugged like it was no big deal. "Fighting. This last time I broke a girl's nose and the family threatened legal action." I waved it away like it wasn't anything, but Patrick eyed me up skeptically.

My appearance was deceiving. I was short and small, and I had a decidedly pretty, feminine face. My brown hair was a constant untamed mess of curls that I did my best to keep up in a loose buns or pulled back in some way so it wouldn't completely take over my face. I had a rather tragic fashion sense with a penchant for skirts, which I think subconscious attempt at spiting my mother. She always tried to force me to wear them, and I refused. So now I wear them when she can't see them. I'm sure I came across as a frazzled mess, but I was anything but.

"You? Got in a fight?" Patrick cocked an eyebrow, grinning suspiciously at me.

"Hey, I'm tough!" I protested. I thought about flexing my arms to demonstrate, but I was still acutely aware of Finn watching behind us. "I'm a lot tougher than I look."

"I bet you are," Patrick nodded earnestly, and at least he believed that.

"So anyway... what's the deal with the story?" I tapped his open book, meaning to actually work on something.

“Have you read any of it?” Patrick asked.

“Just the title,” I admitted sheepishly.

“You should read it. It’s good... but really twisted,” Patrick turned his book towards me so I could look at his instead of opening mine and scooted his chair closer to me.

Patrick offered helpful asides as I read the story, and even though I didn’t necessarily need them, I enjoyed them. Or at least I would’ve, if I hadn’t become incessantly preoccupied. The back of my neck had started itching from Finn staring at it. That sounds totally paranoid and insane, and it probably was somatic, but I couldn’t help it. I kept self-consciously scratching it and rubbing it, hoping to ease the sensation, but it was useless. I had to read the same sentence four times and still didn’t understand it. On top of that, Patrick kept talking to me, and I couldn’t even concentrate on what he was saying.

“Excuse me,” I said abruptly and stood up. It was stupid for me to just sit there like that. I don’t know why I was giving that idiot Finn kid so much power over me.

“Okay?” Patrick asked, startled and confused.

When I turned around, Finn was staring at me, just as I knew he would be. Unlike Patrick, his expression didn’t register any uncertainty or surprise. Swallowing hard, I walked over to his table, and I was a little stunned to find that I felt nervous. I almost never felt nervous, and there was nothing to even be nervous about. This kid was just looking at me, nothing more.

“Why are you staring at me?” I asked him pointedly.

“Because you’re standing in front of me,” Finn replied simply. He looked up at me, his eyes framed by dark lashes, and there wasn’t any hint of embarrassment or even denial about being confronted. It was definitely unnerving.

“You’re *always* staring at me,” I persisted, trying to be as calm and collected as he was. “It’s weird. You’re weird.”

“I wasn’t trying to fit in,” Finn said. I twisted my ring on my thumb and hated that I had to fumble for a response.

“Why do you look at me all the time?” I rephrased my original question.

“Does it bother you?” Finn’s eyes flashed at something that might have been surprise, but it disappeared so quickly, it was probably nothing more than my imagination.

“Answer the question,” I demanded and stood up straighter, trying to make my presence more imposing so he wouldn’t realize how much he was rattling me.

“Everyone always looks at you,” Finn replied coolly and leaned back in his chair. “You’re very attractive.”

That sounded like a compliment, but his voice was completely emotionless when he said it. I couldn’t tell if he was trying to make fun of a vanity I didn’t even have, or he was simply stating facts. Was he flattering me or mocking me? Or maybe something else entirely?

“Nobody stares at me as much as you do,” I countered as evenly as I could.

“If it bothers you, I’ll try and stop,” Finn offered.

That was tricky. In order to ask him to stop, I had to admit that it was getting to me, and I didn’t want admit to anyone that anything got to me. If I lied and said it was fine, then he would just keep on doing it. I had no way to win in this situation.

“I didn’t ask you to stop. I asked you why,” I amended. That didn’t really help, but it made me look slightly less weak. Maybe.

“I told you why,” Finn said.

“No, you didn’t,” I shook my head. “You just said that everyone looks at me. You never explained why *you* looked at me.”

Almost imperceptibly, the corner of his mouth moved up ever so slightly, revealing just the hint of a smirk. It wasn’t just that he was amused with me; he was pleased with me. He was glad that I had caught him, like he had been challenging me somehow and I passed. That pissed me off, but what pissed me off even more was that I was happy I had passed, that I had made

him happy in some insignificant way. My stomach did a stupid flip thing I had never felt before, and I swallowed hard, hoping to fight it back.

"I look at you because I can't look away," Finn answered finally.

His reply dumbfounded me. I was struck completely mute, trying to think of some kind of clever response, but my mind refused to work. My jaw probably slacked, and I imagined that I looked like an awestruck school girl, and I hurried to collect myself.

"That's kind of creepy," I said at last, but my words came out weak instead of accusatory.

"I'll work on being less creepy then," Finn promised.

I had called him out on being creepy, justifiably so, and it didn't faze him at all. He didn't stammer an apology or flush with shame and regret. He just kept looking at me evenly. Most likely, he was a damn sociopath, and for whatever reason, I found *that* endearing. First Patrick's overt naivety, and now Finn's total disregard for human emotion. Something was really out of whack with me.

It was impossible for me to come up with a witty retort, but thankfully, the bell rang, saving me from the rest of that awkward conversation. Finn just nodded, thus ending our exchange, and gathered up his books. Numbly, I went back over to the table to do the same, and Patrick was giving me a weird look. Finn was already long gone. He had hurried away almost as soon as I turned my back to him.

"Sorry," I mumbled as we cleared up our things. I had rather rudely ditched him in the middle of his explanation, but he just smiled and shook it off. "I didn't mean to just walk away. But that was bothering me."

"No, that's good. You're not the kind of person to keep things to yourself," Patrick said.

"No, I'm not," I admitted wearily. "That kid's just been bothering me."

"I wouldn't worry about him." Patrick slung his bookbag over his shoulder and smiled reassuringly at me. "He's harmless."

“You think everyone is harmless,” I pointed out and started walking out of the library.

“Do I?” Patrick wondered aloud and followed a step behind me. “No. I don’t think Tegan’s harmless.”

“She actually *is* harmless,” I laughed.

Patrick kept me company the rest of the way to my class, and he parted with a hearty wave. True to his word, Finn wasn’t creepy the rest of the day. Every time I saw him, he was doing something innocuous that didn’t involve looking at me. I still got that feeling that was looking at me when I had my back to him, but as it turned out, I couldn’t seem to do much about feelings.

After school, Matt picked me up, but he was in a distinctly sour mood. I thought about asking him what was up, but he usually told me things when he was ready. When we got home, he was all about slamming doors and throwing things around. Naturally, I followed suit and threw down my bookbag and kicked off my shoes. One of them hit the cupboard with a heavy bang, and he looked at me funny.

“What? Aren’t we all mad about something?” I asked in response to his expression. He just shook his head and walked into the living room. Sighing, I went after him. “What?”

I don’t even know if the living room could really be considered “decorated.” There was a couch and two matching chairs from somebody’s expensive shabby chic collection, and an antique coffee table in the center of the room. A few cardboard boxes were stacked behind the couch, holding all of Maggie’s knick knacks and family photos which we never, ever put up. A few books were scattered across the coffee table, mostly Matt’s architecture books and a few of Maggie’s choices, which were things by Nicholas Sparks or had Oprah’s stamp of approval. The books were supposed to go on a built-in book shelf on either side of the fire place, but nobody ever got around to putting them away. Whenever we moved somewhere new, Maggie would quickly paint all the rooms, and that was the end of her decorating. Matt picked up one of his

books and flopped heavily on the couch, preparing to ignore me by looking at famous buildings in Rome.

“Where’s Maggie?” I had noticed an unfamiliar silence, without any sounds of music upstairs or Maggie harassing us about our lives. Matt grunted and angrily flipped the page. “Oh. Is that what this is about?”

“It’s not about anything,” Matt replied curtly.

“She’s there, isn’t she?” I sat down in the chair next to him, and he just shook his head, refusing to even talk about it. “It really doesn’t bother me, Matt.”

“She promised she’d be back by now,” Matt muttered.

“It’s like a two hour drive. How did you expect her to be back by now?”

“She said she’d make sure you wouldn’t find out!” Matt had softened a little and warily looked at me out of the corner of his eye. He incorrectly assumed that I was more sensitive than I really was and always made a big show of protecting me from things that I didn’t need protection from.

“You know, if you didn’t have this attitude, I wouldn’t have even know she was there,” I pointed out gently. He furrowed his brow and shook his head again.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Matt sighed and rested his head on the back of the couch. “I didn’t want her to go. I don’t know why I agree to let her do this stuff.”

“You let her?” I laughed a little and leaned back in the chair, pulling my knees up to my chest. “She’s 36 years old and she’s your guardian! You don’t let her do anything.”

Matt humphed and went back to pretending to read his book. Maggie was technically both of our guardians, but Matt had probably done more “guardianing” than anyone else. He was disturbingly mature for his age, especially when he had been a teenager. Most nights, he’d skip parties and dates to stay home and try to get me to do some homework. Of course, this was

almost entirely my fault since I never responded to anybody else's attempts at help.

"I don't know why this bothers you so much," I said when Matt seemed content to stew in silence. Sometimes I'd let him, but other times I couldn't help but poke and prod him. "It doesn't even bother me."

"It should!" Matt looked at me seriously, and it could still surprise me how much hurt he was carrying around after all these years.

"Hello, hello!" Maggie chirped, coming in the door side into the kitchen. Matt glowered down at the book, getting angrier at the happy sound of her voice. "Anybody home?"

"Living room!" I told her.

Maggie walked into the living room, her big canvas bag hanging off her arm, and she pushed her oversized sunglasses up on her head. She looked like she had spent the day at the beach, and I imagined that's what she had planned for her cover story. I'm sure she could sense the tension in the room, but she had expected that from Matt no matter when she returned, so she smiled brightly at me, trying to play it off as a cheery afternoon.

"I heard you were visiting Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane," I smiled at her, referencing the nuthouse from *Batman*.

"Oh, she's not like that," Maggie replied, sounding deflated. Her smile instantly disappeared, and she dropped any pretense of being happy. Matt scoffed loudly at Maggie's minor defense of our mother, but she ignored him. "I don't know why you always do this. You freak out on me, insisting that Wendy can't know where I'm at, but then you always tell her, and you're way more upset by it than she is!"

"Because you shouldn't be seeing her!" Matt shouted fiercely and tossed his book down on the table. He rarely raised his voice in anger, so when he did, it was kind of a stunning thing.

"Matt, I've gone over this with you a thousand times." Maggie rubbed her forehead and looked down at the floor. "She is sick, and she is family."

“She is your *ex*-sister-in-law!” Matt growled, not for the first time. Maggie was our father’s only sister, and with Dad dead, Matt was always quick to point out that she had no real relationship with our mother.

“We don’t abandon family!” Maggie retorted vehemently.

“She is not family!” Matt bellowed and got to his feet. There were only two things they ever argued about: me and Mom. I suppose those were only two things in life that Matt was really passionate about, for entirely different reasons. “Once you try to kill someone in the family, you’re out!”

“She is sick, Matt!” Maggie was almost pleading with him to understand, but it was completely pointless.

We had heard every clinical diagnosis of Mom, every attempt at explaining her psychotic break. Doctors rationally and repeatedly explained to me how none of this was my fault, although to be honest, I don’t think I’ll ever fully believe that. I do not think I did that anything merited a murder attempt, but I’m pretty sure that if I hadn’t been such a brat growing up, I wouldn’t have drove her to it.

At any rate, nothing had ever satisfied Matt. For some reason, I had never been that curious about why Mom did it. I’ve been curious about *her*, wondering what life was like for Matt and everyone else that lived with her. But as for her motives, they never seemed that relevant or that blurred. She was fragile, and I was volatile. She was on the edge, and I pushed her. Maybe Matt’s problem was that he refused to believe that I had any part of what happened, so he was left with only half a story, and that was never good enough for him.

“You were there, Maggie! You saw her!” His voice had that quavering edge to it. He didn’t cry, not ever, but his pain was always so transparent. “You saw what she was like and what she tried to do! You of all people know what she’s really like!”

“Yes, Matt, I was there! I saw how crazy she was!” Maggie looked at him incredulously.

“We’re making a new start here!” I interjected, and Matt looked down at the coffee table. I had a feeling he’d momentarily forgotten I was there, and

he was ashamed that he had brought up anything about Mom. “Maybe we should... Maybe Mom should stay in the past.”

Truth be told, I didn’t care one way or another if Maggie saw Mom. She could visit her every day, and it wouldn’t bother me at all. I had never felt any connection to that woman, not before she tried to kill me and certainly not after. I’d have felt about the same if Maggie drove to visit Jeffery Dahmer or something. What bothered me was how upset Matt got.

“I respect your feelings,” Maggie said as carefully as she could. “But I don’t think that I can just abandon her.”

Maggie eyed me up regretfully, and Matt could barely contain his emotions. His fists clenched tightly at his sides, and his eyes had this weird misty quality to them. I couldn’t stand it. In my mind, I started begging Maggie to just let it alone. Matt couldn’t take it anymore. *Just please don’t see Mom anymore, please, please, please.* I looked at Maggie directly, pleading with her with my eyes, and her expression changed. It went from being apologetically resolute to something sorta foggy. Her eyes had gone blank and her face went lacks.

“I think I’ll stop seeing your mom,” Maggie said softly, almost questioning. I let out a heavy sigh of relief, and she shook her head, clearing it of whatever she was thinking. Her change of heart had happened too quickly for Matt to let go of his anger, but Maggie gave him an easy smile. “Sorry about all that. I guess I should probably get supper started.” She gave me a slightly bewildered look and shook her head again. “The drive must’ve gotten to me. Um, Wendy, I picked you up some of that sticky rice you love. I think I’ll make that.”

“Alright, that sounds good,” I nodded.

After she went into the kitchen to make supper, Matt excused himself to go downstairs, where he had his home gym set up. I heard Verdi Requiem blasting out through the floorboards a few minutes later, meaning he had a lot more steam to blow off. He’d probably stay down there working through it until supper was ready.

I picked up *Roman Architecture* off the table and felt the familiar twinge of guilt as I leafed through it. Matt would've loved to travel Europe and study, but that would've meant leaving me behind, so he never could. As it was, Matt's high school and college grades had severely suffered because of his constant moving to follow me. Both he and Maggie thought it was in my best interest to go to the best schools, and while those were usually boarding schools, I had never lived in a dorm. They had always assumed that I would completely self-destruct without their supervision. Matt could've lived on campus at other places, but he thought I would destruct without him in particular.

Matt never held a job, not a real one, because we moved so much. He has a degree and completed an internship, but then we had to move. And move again. Maggie used to be a child psychologist but she hasn't worked since I was like eight or nine, when she finally gave up on the whole thing. I get kicked out of school, we transfer, and everyone starts over again. I have been completely ruining their lives, and I cannot wait until I'm eighteen and on my own and I can finally let them live their lives in peace.

Cafeteria food is a plague on mankind, I'm certain of it. I've been to some of the classiest schools in the country, and still found very little that I'd be willing to eat. Sometimes I'm surprised I don't starve to death. All I can taste is salt and preservatives and vomit. I had gotten a tray because I was absolutely famished, but as soon as I started pushing it down the tray line, I felt that familiar wave of nausea as I was forced to smell everything.

"Generally, people, you know, get food here," Patrick commented. He had grabbed a tray right behind me, and he was watching as I slid past all the offerings (macaroni and "cheese," pizza, mashed potatoes, canned corn) without taking any.

"I find that hard to believe," I scoffed. Patrick had loaded up on the macaroni and pizza, but turned down the corn. But he was over six foot and growing, so none of that would show on his waistline.

"You're not one of those anorexic girls, are you?" Patrick asked, eyeing me up sincerely.

"No, I am definitely not one of those girls!" I shook my head. We had reached the end of the line where they had a few sorry looking lettuce leaves, a bowl of oranges, and red Jell-o cubes. Luckily, my love for Jell-o is Biblical and I loaded up my plate. "But if I was, I probably wouldn't tell you."

"Wait." Patrick thought this over for a minute as I grabbed a bottled water. "Is that your way of telling me that you really are?"

"Nope. I'm not. I'm just saying that when you ask questions like that, you're usually gonna get the same answer no matter what," I said. I fumbled in my pocket for the money I owed the cashier, and Patrick narrowed his eyes at me. "When you ask someone if they're a liar or if they stole that or if they cheated on you. Everybody is always gonna say no, whether they did it or not. Asking the question doesn't get you anywhere."

"I sorta feel like I should make you eat a Big Mac now to prove me wrong." Patrick took his turn paying the cashier, and I waited for him.

We had been sitting together during lunch the last week or so at school, and that still felt odd to me. I had eaten lunch by myself almost my entire school career. Normally, we sat at a little round table in the corner of the room, underneath a banner for the football team. We were all team spirit.

"Hey, Wendy, wait," Patrick stopped me when I started heading over to our table. "Let's sit somewhere else." Our table was empty, and there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it, so I didn't understand the sudden decision to move tables.

"Okay. Where?" I shrugged.

"How about... over there." Patrick nodded to the opposite side of the room, but there weren't any tables open. I scanned the crowd, trying to figure out who he'd want to be sitting with... but then I figured it out. Finn had glanced up at me.

"Seriously?" I scoffed. "You wanna sit with *him*?"

"Come on, Wen." Patrick looked at me imploringly, and then looked over at where Finn was sitting by himself, opening his bottle of water. "He's all alone, and he looks so forlorn."

"No, he doesn't. He looks thirsty," I watched Finn take a long drink of water.

"You know how much it sucks being the new kid," Patrick insisted.

"Are you like the welcome wagon or something?" I scowled at him. By the expression he was giving me, I knew I'd have little choice in the matter if I wanted to continue a friendship with him. And for some stupid reason, I really did. I exhaled loudly, my sign of defeat, and Patrick grinned broadly. "He's *so* creepy, though."

"He is not." Patrick had started walking over to the table, so I followed reluctantly after him. "And you know what? I think thou dost protest too much."

“I know that’s Shakespeare, but I can’t tell how that applies here,” I grumbled.

“You know *exactly* how that applies here,” Patrick flashed me a knowing look, and I felt my cheeks flush for a second. Maybe I liked Finn more than I was willing to let on, and I definitely didn’t appreciate Patrick catching onto that.

When we got to the table, Finn pretended not to even notice us, making me want to kick him in the shins. I knew that he always noticed me. He had chosen mac and cheese and an orange for lunch, but he seemed to be pushing around the macaroni more than eating it.

“Hey, do you mind if we sit with you?” Patrick asked politely, but before Finn could even answer, I pulled out a chair and sat across from him. I set my tray down with a bit of an excess clatter, making Patrick jump a little, but Finn didn’t move a muscle.

“Sure,” Finn gestured to the empty chair next to him and finally turned his attention to me. His dark eyes were rather mesmerizing, which is why I always failed at our staring contests. I didn’t trust anything that hypnotic, so I looked down at my Jell-o cubes and tossed one in my mouth.

“So how do you like school so far?” Patrick asked when he sat down.

“I don’t know,” Finn admitted, looking down at his tray. Patrick had already started scarfing down in his food, making me simultaneously nauseous and jealous. The food was disgusting, but I was starving and wished I had something that I could wolf down.

“You know, Wendy hasn’t been here very long either,” Patrick gave a little nod at me, and I narrowed my eyes at him. What was this he was doing? Was he trying to set us up?

“I had heard that, yes.” Finn stabbed a noodle and stared at it for a moment, then just set it down on his plate and leaned back. “This is the worst food in the world.”

“Wendy hates the food here too,” Patrick interjected, and this time I kicked him under the table. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Stop,” I whispered, which was silly since Finn was right there, looking at me. “I know what you’re trying to do. And stop.”

“Alright. I will stop making conversation, since it displeases you so,” Patrick raised an eyebrow and went back to eating. “If you want to not eat and not talk, then... well. You win. I guess.”

“I’m eating,” I pouted and ate another Jell-o cube. “They do have bad food here though.”

“Yet everyone seems to be eating it,” Finn scanned the rest of the cafeteria, sounding mildly surprised.

“So, are you from a private school too?” Patrick looked up at Finn. I had just been coming to the same conclusion myself. He was well-dressed, well-mannered, and he had a slight air of distaste about him.

“Something like that,” Finn answered vaguely and turned his attention back to me. “You went to a private school?”

“I’ve been to many private schools. So many, they stopped taking me,” I said with a hint of pride. Finn’s general stoic expression was broken with almost glaring disapproval, which made my stomach tighten.

“Why?” Finn asked directly.

“I have an anger management problem.” That’s the short answer, but he nodded like that made sense. His eyes never left mine, and this time I was determined not to look away. I decided that my best course of action was to throw him off his game somehow. “You have the darkest brown eyes I have ever seen.” As soon as it came out of my mouth, I wanted to take it back. It was vaguely swoony and not at all menacing, like it had somehow sounded in my head. Oh yeah, complimenting his eyes, that’s really gonna hurt his feelings.

“Your eyes are almost the same color,” Finn replied instantly, which rattled me, but I kept my eyes locked on his. I would win this. “Maybe a shade lighter.”

“They are not,” I retorted incredulously. My eyes were a fairly dark brown, but I couldn’t say for sure how dark they were compared to Finn’s. Without a mirror handy, I didn’t know how he could say it with such certainty.

“No, they are,” Patrick agreed. I rolled my eyes at that, thus breaking my eye contact with Finn. I would’ve been disappointed if I hadn’t been so relieved. Looking at him like that was making my heart react stupidly, and I was eager to make it stop.

“Of course you side with him,” I grumbled and leaned back in my chair.

“To be fair, the truth sided with him,” Patrick said.

“You’re getting angry over your own eye color?” Finn asked, and if I didn’t know any better, I would think he sounded slightly bemused.

“No. I’m not getting angry over anything,” I lied and crossed my arms over my chest. I was getting angry but with myself for getting so flustered over everything Finn said and did.

“So, how come you moved here?” Patrick turned back to Finn, apparently tiring of my current attitude. Not that I blamed him. I was tired of my attitude.

“Work,” Finn replied. His goal seemed to be to reveal nothing about himself.

“Your parents?” Patrick asked.

“Family business,” Finn answered stiffly, then nodded to me. “What about you? Why here? Why this school?”

“I really don’t know,” I admitted. Maggie and Matt had explained their decision to me, but in the end, I didn’t really care why they picked here, so I had forgotten. “My brother thought it was a good school, I guess.”

“Your brother?” Finn raised an eyebrow, looking mildly confused.

“Yeah, I live with my older brother and my aunt,” I explained. “They’re my guardians.”

“Where are your parents?” Finn pried. It was beginning to feel more like an interrogation, and I bristled at it.

“I don’t really think that’s any of your business,” I said icily.

Finn’s confusion disappeared into a mask I couldn’t read. He just looked at me, the way he always did, and despite my anger, my stomach insisted

doing that flipping thing. I wanted to look away from him, but it was like I couldn't. It wasn't just my normal urge to beat him at something. This was an actual compulsion that I had no control over.

"This pizza is really good, you guys," Patrick tried to cut through the tension that had settled at the table. He broke whatever spell Finn had over me, and I lowered my eyes, staring at the Jell-o on my plate and trying to figure out what was going on.

"I do like curls," Tegan was saying in a voice so loud it was obviously meant for me, "but I'm just so afraid that my hair would end up a Brillo pad like *hers*." They were walking right behind me, and one of her minions cackled. Touching my soft, messy curls, I turned to glare after her, but she didn't even notice.

"I wanna kick her right in the labia," I growled, still glaring at her departing figure.

"No, yeah, that seems like a perfectly reasonable reaction," Finn said. "She made a silly snide comment you know isn't true, so you threaten physical harm. Perfect." Patrick laughed at our exchange, although I didn't find it amusing.

"I think I might hate you," I lied, staring at Finn as harshly as I could.

Leaning forward on the table, Finn matched my gaze with a much softer one. "I don't think you do." With that, he stood up and started clearing his tray. "If you'll excuse me, I've got an exam to study for. I'll see you in class."

I watched him walk away, feeling my heart race with anger and something far more sinister. I couldn't make sense of my mixed emotions about him. Most of the time, I really, really wanted to kick him in the shins. But other times, I felt perfectly content to just stare into his eyes, and I had never felt anything like that before. Nor had I ever wanted to. My life had been built around me being a self-contained island, and I had no intention of letting anyone else on it.

"So, he's interesting," Patrick allowed and took a drink of his milk.

"He is a creep!" I insisted.

Watching Patrick laugh with a big milk mustache, I realized that he's exactly where I went wrong. I had let him onto my island, and he had stowed Finn along with him. It was all Matt's fault for making me make friends, and then I realized that I already let Matt on my island. Apparently I wasn't quite as self-contained as I thought I was.

"Let's get out of here." Patrick wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt and stood up. "I ate way too much." His plate was completely empty and it had been overflowing when he sat down, so yeah, he had eaten a lot.

"Why did you want to sit with him?" I persisted, picking up my tray as I got up. "You know I don't like him, right? You're not secretly scheming anything?"

"I'm not much of a schemer," Patrick admitted, and that seemed pretty honest. We walked over to the garbage cans to dump our trays, and he must've been able to tell that I wasn't exactly satisfied with that answer because he continued. "I told you the truth before. He's new and he seems alone a lot. And okay, yeah, I did think he might like you or something. So I thought it would be nice if you two could be friends. Or all of us could be friends, really. Just to be nice."

"Just to be nice?" I eyed him up suspiciously.

"Yeah!" Patrick laughed. "Believe it or not, I am a nice guy. And sometimes, I do think just for the sake of being nice. Isn't that weird?"

"Kinda," I nodded.

We had left the lunchroom and were walking down the hall. Several other kids had left lunch a little bit earlier and were loitering around. Before lunch, I had dumped my bookbag in my locker, and I went to retrieve it. Patrick followed me. I struggled to open my locker com because locks of any kind were a sworn enemy of mine. I either twisted it around too much or not enough. Patrick leaned on the locker next to mine to wait out the fight.

"Hey, you know what? We should go!" Patrick exclaimed suddenly.

"What? Where?" I still hadn't gotten my locker to open, so I was only half paying attention to him. Patrick nodded at something across the hall, and I

glanced back over my shoulder at a bright orange flyer hanging on the hall, proclaiming the fall semi-formal the event of the season. “The dance? You can’t be serious.”

“Why can’t I?” Patrick grinned. “It’d be fun. Have you ever even been to a dance?”

“That’s beside the point,” I shook my head and yanked on the lock, which stubbornly refused to budge.

“That’s exactly the point! You have to go to at least one dance in your high school career!” Patrick insisted and his excitement was building. He clearly thought this was the greatest idea he’d ever had. “Oh, come on, Wendy! It’ll be so much fun! I promise.”

“I doubt that,” I scowled. My lock finally gave way and opened, so I had a momentary lapse in judgment as elation spread over me. “When is it?”

“Friday. At seven.” Patrick had already won, and he knew it.

“In two days? Don’t I need to get a dress or something?” I opened my locker and started rummaging through it so I could switch out my books for class.

“I have the sinking suspicion that you already have something,” Patrick said. “So. I’ll pick you up on Friday at seven?”

“You know you will see me at some point over the next two days,” I pointed out, looking up at his goofy smile. “Okay, fine. Yes. Seven. Friday.”

“You won’t regret it!” Patrick promised and took a step back from my locker. “I gotta go get my stuff for class. But this is a good idea! You gotta live a little, Wen!”

“Yeah, I don’t know how that relates to a school dance!” I called after him, watching as he turned and jogged the rest of the way down the hall.

My experience with friends was admittedly limited, but I really didn’t understand what was happening here. Patrick seemed to be trying to set me up with Finn at lunch, but he had just asked me to the dance, and he was far happier about it than any guy should be. Finn was a total creep. He really was. Sure, he had really amazing dark eyes, and this mysterious sort of sex appeal

going on. But he was a creep, and that gave him no right to make me feel all fluttery about him. I had met lots of jerks in my time, and a few nice guys, and none of them had ever had this effect on me. I sighed and grabbed my bookbag, realizing that I had bigger problems at hand. I had just agreed to go to a dance.

Following the eventful lunch on Wednesday with Finn, he had avoided me the rest of the day. And by avoided me, I mean “treated me pretty much like he usually did.” I could feel him staring at me, but only when I wasn’t looking, and there wasn’t much I could do about that. Besides, I wasn’t in a hurry to talk to him again. I was trying to avoid feeling the way that he made me feel.

Unfortunately, I should’ve known that Patrick expected us to sit with Finn at lunch the next day, and I was starting to think that might be his plan for the rest of the year as well. Somehow, Finn managed to eat with us without me having the urge to punch him or... or... I don’t know. Do something else to him. Patrick hijacked the conversation, so we didn’t have any leeway to talk about things that I might find upsetting. Instead we talked about why people didn’t carry boom boxes on their shoulders anymore.

“Even in the 80’s, they had Walkman’s and stuff,” Patrick pointed out. “So they weren’t carrying boom boxes just to hear music. If they wanted to do that, they could’ve carried a small, portable Walkman. No, the boom box meant that they wanted everyone else to hear their music too. Why did that stop?”

“When you consider how cumbersome a boom box was to carry around, it makes even less sense,” Finn agreed thoughtfully. “And they took like 37 D batteries. Wasn’t that the subplot of a Spike Lee movie? Somebody spent the whole film trying to get batteries for his boom box.” He had half of a turkey sandwich in his hand, but I had yet to see him take a bite of it. He had just been gesturing around with it since we had sat down at the table.

“Yeah, yeah, Radio Raheem in *Do The Right Thing*,” I answer quickly swatting it away. “I hate that movie. But you’re right. They were huge and expensive with the batteries. With iPods now, don’t they have like smaller, light weight iPod boom boxes?”

“Yeah, but I think they all double as a charging base so you have to plug them in,” Patrick shook his head. “But I mean, if there was a demand for it, I’m sure they would come up with some kind of thing like that.”

“Maybe the iPod killed everything,” Finn shook his head and leaned back in his seat, as if the idea depressed him. “Since it’s been around, nobody’s had the urge to harass their peers with their music anymore.”

“I should get a boom box,” Patrick added thoughtfully.

“You should,” Finn agreed, then tossed his uneaten sandwich onto his plate. “Anyway, I should get out of here. I gotta check on something before class.” He nodded at both of us and stood up. “I’ll see you guys later.”

After he left, Patrick smiled appreciatively at me. For lunch, I had settled on a massive pear and I took a bite out of it, waiting for Patrick to explain what he was so happy about it. He didn’t, so I quickly chewed my bite down and swallowed.

“What?” I demanded.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” Patrick was practically beaming. “I mean, you talked to him. And it was good. Right?”

“What is your deal?” I shook my head, refusing to admit that I had had a decent time over lunch.

“I’m just trying to prove to you that he’s not a creep,” Patrick feigned too much innocence, making me all the more suspicious. “If you’d just admit, I’ll stop.”

“Never. He *is* a creep. Just because he understands the complexities of boom box use in the 21st century does not make him any less creepy.” I took another bite of my pear, and Patrick shook his head at me. “I’m starting to think *you* might have a little crush on him.”

“Now you’re just projecting,” Patrick chuckled.

“Maybe you are,” I countered.

Patrick ate the rest of his meatloaf-esque meal, then suggested we leave. I had already finished my pear, and the lunchroom smell upset my stomach, so

I was happy to oblige. We still had plenty of time to kill before class started, so we meandered slowly in the direction of our lockers.

“Hey, hold up,” I paused at the women’s restroom, and Patrick halted next to me. “I’m gonna run in real quick.”

“I’ll be right here.” Patrick leaned on the wall next to the bathroom.

“Alright,” I smiled and turned to head into the bathroom.

Stupidly, I had been looking at Patrick instead of paying attention to where I was going. At the same time I went to enter the bathroom, Tegan started to come out, and we ran into each other. I don’t know if she was running or what, but it wasn’t a gentle bump. It was a total smack into each other. I cracked my skull on hers and stumbled backwards. I saw white for a minute, and when I regained my footing, Tegan was standing in front of me, yelling.

“Why don’t you watch where you’re going, you dirty bitch!” Tegan shouted at me. Between the hit and the confusion of actually getting screamed at, I was too startled to say anything for a second. “Are you like half-retarded or something? Oh my god! You totally are! You’re drooling all over yourself, *again*.”

“What the hell is your problem?” I yelled back. I’m ashamed to admit that I also absently wiped at my chin to check for any drool, and there wasn’t any. I have no idea what she was talking about, unless she hit her head so hard that she was hallucinating. “*You* ran into *me*!”

“I don’t even know why they let you in this school, you brain dead freak!” Tegan hissed, stepping closer to me. She was challenging me, which I didn’t understand at all. I could kick her ass, and I wouldn’t hesitate. In fact, why wasn’t I already kicking her ass?

Tegan open her lip-glossed mouth to say something more, but I had enough. Before she could get a word out, I punched her in the face. I don’t mean one of those little-girlie cat-fight slaps either. I full on decked her on the mouth, where her idiotic insults were coming from. Her eyes widened with shock, and she stumbled backward. She tripped on her own ridiculous shoes

and fell on the ground. Her lip was already bleeding, so maybe I would've just left it at that. I was trying to make a new start, after all.

"You're dead, bitch!" Tegan growled. She was crumpled on the floor bleeding, and instead of begging for mercy, she thought threatening me would be the best way to go. Well, she thought wrong.

I bent over and grabbed a clump of her blond hair in my fist, causing her to yelp in pain. She tried to scramble away from me, but only succeeded in pulling her hair more. I cocked my arm back, preparing to wail into her. Then I felt a strong hand on my wrist, and when I tried to move my arm, I couldn't. I turned to glare at the interloper, expecting Patrick.

"Stop," Finn commanded coolly, gripping my wrist tightly. It wasn't enough where it hurt, but it was just enough where I knew I couldn't break free. "Let her go."

"What are you doing?" I demanded. I was still super pissed off, and I wasn't a big fan of people intervening in these kinds of situations, especially people like Finn who gave me ambiguous feelings.

"There's a teacher coming!" Patrick shouted nervously.

"Come on." Finn yanked my wrist and started pulling me.

Reluctantly, I untangled my fingers from Tegan's hair and let Finn drag me away from her and the gathering crowd of onlookers. If I hadn't promised Matt I would turn things around, I wouldn't care if a teacher caught me pounding on Tegan. She deserved it. I looked uncertainly back at Patrick, who ran a hand fretfully through his thick hair.

"I'll cover for you. Hurry." Patrick nodded, shooing me on.

Just before Finn dragged me around the corner, I saw Patrick go over to Tegan to try and clean up my mess. The bottom half of her face was covered in blood, and she screamed when Patrick went near her.

"Where are we going? What are you doing?" I snapped at Finn.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I couldn't believe I was letting anyone drag me anywhere. Why wasn't I prying his fingers off of me or putting

up a fight? Maybe, just maybe, it had something to do with how warm and strong his hand felt on me, and maybe, I kind of like it.

“Shut up,” Finn whispered harshly.

Finn peered in a window in the door to the art room. Since lunch hadn’t ended yet, the class was still empty. It was a studio art class, though, so it was never locked in case students wanted to work on something, and the teachers never hung around to monitor it. Finn pulled open the door and pushed me inside.

“Will you stop pulling me around like that?” I barked at him, but he said nothing.

I finally wrenched my wrist free from him and took several steps away. He stood in front of me, clearly annoyed, rubbing the back of his head. His dark eyes burned on me, and all my anger disappeared. I was too startled and confused to really feel anything else. My heart pounded heavily in my chest, and I tried to slow it down.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked, almost meekly, and rubbed the wrist he had been grabbing. It didn’t really hurt, but it felt like something to do.

“What the hell are you doing?” Finn shot back. He was looking at me like I had done something wrong, and maybe I had, but I didn’t get why he cared so much.

“I was fighting with this bitch that has been out to get me since I got here!” Some of the anger surged back through me, and I felt my confidence return. She had deserved it, and even if she hadn’t, I was still pissed off and Finn had no right to be mad at me for that. “Now I’m trying to figure out why you stopped me and what the hell your problem is!”

“You can’t solve everything with a fight,” Finn said, as if that explained anything.

“Good. Great. Maybe I can’t,” I admitted. “But why do you even care? And why did you drag me off like that?”

“So you didn’t get caught! Do you want to get suspended again?” Finn looked at me evenly, but I just furrowed my brow at him.

Had he been trying to protect me? He was afraid that I might get expelled or something? What did that even matter to him? My heart fluttered happily at the thought of him caring about me in some way and trying to protect me, but the rest of me angrily acknowledged that I didn't need anyone to protect me. I could take care of myself.

"That doesn't answer anything!" I shook my head. "You stopped me *before* the teacher was coming. That was just incidental."

"A teacher was going to come eventually," Finn reasoned. "And even if they didn't, Tegan isn't going to keep this to herself."

"She will if she knows what's good for her," I crossed my arms over my chest.

"Wendy!" Finn was completely exasperated, and I couldn't figure out why. "You think you're so wild and untamed, but you're not. You're just rude."

"She was rude!" I countered defensively.

"So what? Just because she's an idiot doesn't mean you have to stoop to her level!" Finn insisted. "You're almost an adult! You can't keep freaking out like an angry little kid every time something doesn't go your way!"

"You're the one that's freaking out!" I snapped. Finn nodded, seemingly aware that he was letting this get to him more than it should. He ran a hand through his black hair and took a deep breath.

"You're a bright girl, Wendy, but you can be so... hard to be around." Finn sounded pained, and he wasn't looking at me when he spoke. For some reason, his words stung a lot deeper than they should have.

"You frustrate me so much!" I still had no idea why he was so upset, and I had no idea how he could make me so upset.

"You frustrate me!" Finn countered, not unkindly, and looked back up at me.

"Me? How did I frustrate you?" I asked incredulously. "I'm nothing but straight with you! I don't drag you off without any explanation!"

His normal unruffled demeanor had returned. He stood in front of me with that perfectly unreadable expression, and he smoothed out the untucked tails of his navy blue button-down shirt.

“What do you want me to explain?” Finn kept his eyes on me evenly, and I swallowed to keep back my anger. I wanted to shout at him, but if he was going to play this reasonable, then I was going to prove to him that I could too.

“Why you were so upset that I was fighting with Tegan.” I looked at him expectantly, and part of me thought he would just brush me off and walk out of the classroom. The bell was about to ring, and I had my fingers crossed that it would hold off long enough for him to answer.

“Fair enough.” He paused thoughtfully before continuing. “It matters to me if you get expelled. Your safety is important to me,” he answered coolly.

I had no idea what to make of that. Truthfully, I had no idea what to make of anything about him. He was like nothing I had experienced. The obvious follow up question to what he just said would be, why do those things matter to you? Instead of asking that, I just stared at him, trying to collect my thoughts and slow the fluttering of my heart, and then the bell rang before I had a chance to really find anything out.

“We should get to class.” Finn went to the door and held it open for me.

“Okay,” I nodded and walked over to the door. I stopped when I was right next to him and looked up at him. This close up, his eyes were even more intimidating, and he smelled sweetly of cologne. “But if you every drag me away like that again, I will punch you. Hard.”

“I don’t doubt you will, and I’ll keep that in mind.” A hint of his smile played on the corner of his lips, sending my ridiculous heart into a tailspin.

I lowered my eyes and hurried out the door. I glanced back over my shoulder as I walked away, and he was going in the opposite direction. Taking a deep breath, I rushed to my locker and tried to convince myself that I wasn’t attracted to that clearly disturbed boy. Patrick was waiting anxiously at my

locker, but he broke out into a relieved smile when he saw me. Tegan and any sign of our fight were long gone.

“So, everything’s okay?” Patrick ruffled his hair and watched me as I struggled to open my locker. After he second, he offered, “Here. Let me try. What’s your com?”

“36-21-7,” I told him. “I don’t know if everything’s okay. What happened after I left?”

“Mr. Meade came and got Tegan and took her to the nurses’ office,” Patrick explained, and he popped open my locker com almost immediately. “She didn’t give up your name or anything, so you’re good. Where did you go? What happened with Finn?”

“I don’t know.” I honestly didn’t know how explain what had transpired between us. The best I could come up with is that he had been trying to protect me, and he’d been angry that I’d put myself in danger in the first place. That sounded stupid to say aloud, so I just loaded up my bookbag and shrugged. “He just took me to the art room and told me to grow up.”

“So, he did it just to save you from the fight? So you wouldn’t get expelled?” Patrick asked, and a smirk was growing on his face, one that I didn’t approve of. “He *helped* you, if you will.”

“I guess.” I slung my bag over my shoulder and slammed my locker shut.

“Oh, yeah, he is a *total* creep!” Patrick nodded exaggeratedly. “You really nailed that one on the head. I’m never gonna question you again.”

“Shut up,” I laughed and shook my head. “Don’t you have a class you’re late for or something?”

“Always!” Patrick turned and jogged down the hall, apparently taking my suggestion seriously.

I sat through Algebra, but I was even more fidgety than normal. I had an adrenaline rush from the fight with Tegan and the bizarre rendezvous with Finn. Class went by incredibly slow, especially since I had History next hour

with both Tegan and Finn, and I was kind of excited to see what that would bring.

To be honest, History was a little anti-climactic. Tegan was gone, and Mr. Meade hushed the class when people tried to speculate. There were a lot of murmurs and glances in my direction, but I didn't give away anything. I tried to play completely innocent, like I had no idea what any of them could possibly be thinking.

When I came to class, Finn was already there. Instead of blankly staring at me or ignoring me, as had been previous greetings, he actually gave me a small smile and nodded hello at me. Throughout Mr. Meade's lecture, when I was wishing I was sleeping, I would occasionally glance over at Finn. He would look back at me and offer me some kind of friendly expression. Something had changed between us, and I for one, liked it.

After school, Patrick rushed out after me to walk me to the parking lot. There was a comfortable routine growing, and I enjoyed it. Maybe it was good that Finn had stopped me from slaughtering Tegan. I was actually starting to like this school.

"Hey, Wen," Patrick grinned when he caught up with me. "So, everybody is talking about you and the way you took down Tegan. You're like Mothra."

"Mothra?" I wrinkled my nose at him.

"Yeah. *Mothra vs. Godzilla*." Patrick stopped, thinking. "Or wait. No. Mothra dies in that. So, you're like Godzilla, and she's like Mothra. Except Godzilla still gets killed by Mothra's babies. Oh, well, never mind. You're the big man on campus. That's what I meant."

"Alright." I stopped at the beginning of the parking lot so I could talk to him for a minute before departing to get into my brother's car.

"It's pretty cool being you right now," Patrick offered me a sly smile.

"It's always pretty cool being me," I teased.

Finn's Cadillac was parked a few spaces down from where we were standing, so I wasn't that surprised when I saw Finn walking towards us. I kind

of expected him to just go to his car, erasing any idea I had that things might be changing. Instead, he walked over to us and actually joined in the conversation of his own volition.

“So, it sounds like you’re in the clear,” Finn said to me.

“Thanks to you,” Patrick piped in, correctly assuming that I wouldn’t.

“Everyone really is looking at you now.” Finn gestured to all other students that were filtering out of the school. An awful lot of them were looking my way and whispering. It was a very weird feeling. “How are you coping with your new found celebrity? I know you don’t like it when people stare.”

“Not people, just you,” I corrected him, but I added a smile so I wouldn’t seem so bitchy.

“I see.” Finn smiled crookedly at me, delighting me endlessly.

“Hey, did you know about the dance tomorrow night?” Patrick tried to ask Finn casually, but I could see pre-calculation all over it. “Me and Wendy are going. You totally should to. It’ll be a lot of fun.”

“Maybe I’ll check it out.” Finn was talking to Patrick, but his eyes flitted over to me for a second, gauging my reaction. Naturally, I tried to be completely emotionless about the whole thing. “I should get going. Do you need a ride or anything, Wendy?”

“Uh, no, my brother’s here,” I stumbled. His offer startled me, and I’m pretty sure that’s actually the main reason he asked me. He just liked catching me off guard.

“Alright,” Finn nodded. “I will see you both tomorrow.”

As soon as Finn had gotten into his car and I was certain he couldn’t hear us, I turned to Patrick, looking at him oddly. “So what’s the deal with you inviting him to the dance? Do you swing both ways or something?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I don’t swing any way.” Patrick winked at me and started walking away. “I’ll leave you with that to ponder over.”

“I don’t know what that means!” I called after him as he made his way towards his car.

“See you tomorrow, Wendy!” Patrick waved at me and kept on walking.

Tegan had a fat lip in school the next day, but she didn't say a word to me. I was starting to think that when she snarled "you're dead" at me, it may have been an empty threat. School was pretty uneventful, which was kind of nice.

After school, as we were walking out, Finn assured me that he'd be seeing me at the dance, and I was suddenly very excited about it. Patrick reminded me that he'd pick me up at seven, and I gave him my address so that would actually be possible. Then all I had left to do was pick out a dress, do something with my hair, and oh, yeah, tell Matt.

I waited until we got home for the simple reason that Maggie lives there too. I knew she would go bananas with happiness over the dance, so I figured that she could work as a good balance to Matt, who would most likely recommend instating a chastity belt. Once in the door, I kicked off my shoes and tossed aside my bag. I grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, and Matt started going through the mail that Maggie had left on the kitchen island.

"Hey, is Maggie around?" I asked, twisting the bottle top on and off repeatedly.

"Yeah, she's upstairs," Matt replied absently. "Why?"

"Oh. I just... I had something to tell you," I said unsurely, then took a long drink of my water.

"Yeah?" Matt turned to look back at me, worry tightening his voice. "What?"

"It's good news," I insisted and took a deep breath. Matt turned around completely, leaning his back against the island and crossing his arms over his chest. He was suspicious of anything I considered good news. "There's this dance tonight at school, and it's fully chaperoned. And, well, Patrick's going to pick me up at seven. And Finn is going to meet us there."

"Patrick?" Matt raised an eyebrow and his voice got harder. "That goofy guy that's supposed to be 'just a friend?'" He did angry air quotes, which would've made me laugh if I wasn't feeling defensive.

“He is just a friend! We’re going with Finn too! We’re all friends!” I left out the part that while Patrick and I were definitely just friends, I wasn’t so sure about exactly what was going with me and Finn.

“But just Patrick is picking you up? Not Finn?” Matt said gruffly. “You know, even if there is another boy involved, that doesn’t help your case. Going somewhere with *one* handsy, teenage boy is bad enough, let alone throwing another one in the mix.”

“It’s just a dance!” I said. “A school sanctioned function! And I’m just doing what you told me! I’m making friends! They just happen to boys! It’s really not that big of a deal!”

“I’ve never met these boys, and I only just started hearing about them a few days ago.” Matt shook his head. “No, this sounds like a bad idea. I mean, why am I just hearing about this dance now?”

“Because Patrick just asked me today,” I lied. As a rule, I didn’t lie to Matt about anything important. But this wasn’t all that important, and it was mostly a white lie anyway.

“He asked you? That’s not what you said. You said you were going as friends.”

“Yeah, we are. But he asked me. I didn’t just spontaneously decide I was going with him,” I shrugged. Matt was making me question what I thought I knew. We were just friends, weren’t we? I mean, Patrick was pretty obviously trying to set me up with Finn, and it just might work if I stopped fighting him on it so much.

“So how does Finn work into this equation?” Matt didn’t believe anything I was saying, which I didn’t think was very fair considering how little I lied to him.

“Patrick asked him too. And I can’t drive, unlike Finn, so Patrick offered to pick me up.” I crossed my arms and looked at him evenly. “So there. That’s everything.”

“I still don’t know,” Matt shook his head.

“You know what? Let’s ask Maggie and see what she thinks,” I suggested and started walking out of the kitchen to find her. Maggie would think this was the greatest idea ever, and we both knew it.

“Her opinion doesn’t count!” Matt insisted, grudgingly following me.

“We’ll see about that!” I retorted. “Maggie! Mags! Where are you?”

Telling Maggie about the dance may have been the worst idea I’ve ever had, and my life is made up almost entirely of bad ideas. I discovered her upstairs, painting the bathroom a pale yellow. As soon as I told her, she clapped her hands together, tossed her paint brush in the sink, and embraced me so tightly, she probably cracked a rib. Matt started to voice his complaints, but Maggie shut him down. To keep him from getting in her way, she commanded him to finish the bathroom before the paint dried. He complied only because he knew that there was no stopping Maggie anymore, and at least this way he wouldn’t have to witness anything.

Maggie knew better than my mother to try and force me into things I didn’t like. I wasn’t a Barbie, and I made it impossible for her to treat me like one. She just sat on the bed and watched me as I rummaged through my closet, offering suggestions and comments on everything. This included an endless stream of questions on both Patrick and Finn, and Matt would grunt or scoff every now and then at my answers, so I knew he was listening.

Once I had decided on a simple blue dress that Maggie insisted looked amazing on me, I let her do my hair. I only agreed to it because honestly, I couldn’t really do it myself. My hair refused to listen to anything I tried to do it, and while it wasn’t exactly obedient for Maggie, she had a few tricks up her sleeve that outwitted it. She left some of it down, so the curls would frame my face, and pulled the rest of it back. When Matt saw me, he looked really pissed off and a little awed, so I knew that I must look pretty awesome.

I stood in front of the door, standing on my tip-toes to look out the half-moon window at the top. It was getting close to seven, and I couldn’t believe how anxious I was feeling. If Finn hadn’t promised he’d see me at the dance, I knew I wouldn’t feel this way at all. I liked Patrick, but he never made

my stomach freak out the way Finn did. Just thinking of him made my heart speed up, and I hated the way it felt. And secretly loved it too.

“When is this boy getting here?” Matt grumbled. He stood about a foot behind me, hovering even more than he usually did. Yellow paint stained his hands and hair, but he didn’t seem to notice. He just crossed his arms and glowered at the door, as if he was expecting a burglar to break in at any moment.

“I don’t know. Soon.” I fidgeted with my thumb ring again and adjusted my necklace, making sure it was centered.

“Are you sure he’s even coming?” Matt asked hopefully.

“Matt, leave her alone,” Maggie commanded. “And back off. Give her some room to breathe.” She was using an amazing amount of restraint by staying back. Perched on the arm of a living room chair, she had on a flannel shirt splattered with paint and a bandana wrapped around her hair to protect it. I was actually a little surprised that she hadn’t bothered to get changed to meet Patrick, but then again we had kind of run out of time.

“I am backed off,” Matt muttered but took a few steps back in Maggie’s direction.

“You’re gonna have a lot of fun tonight,” Maggie promised for the hundredth time. I must’ve looked nervous, which didn’t help the situation any.

When I heard the sound of a car, I stretched up on my toes again to peer out the window. Patrick had parked in front of the house in a beat up Honda, and my heart skipped a beat. He had actually picked me up. We were going to the dance. And Finn would be there. I swallowed hard and tried to remind myself that none of this was a big deal at all. I couldn’t believe what a freak I was being.

“He’s here,” I said and took a step back from the door, so it wouldn’t look so much like I had been waiting around like a total loser.

“He is?” Matt panicked and rushed to the door, so he could get a look at him through the window. “That’s his car? That’s a death trap! There’s no way you’re going in that!”

“Matt! Knock it off!” Maggie ordered him.

“Maggie, you haven’t seen this car!” Matt insisted but moved back so there was actually room for me to open the door. Maggie gave him a severe look, and he sighed his resignation.

I practically opened the door before Patrick even knocked. He looked a little startled by my speed at answering the door but quickly grinned broadly at us. I could feel Matt behind me, doing everything but growling at Patrick, and I tried to smile apologetically at him.

“Hey, Wendy,” Patrick said easily and gave me a quick look over. “You look really nice.”

He was a bit surprised, but I think it was because he hadn’t expected me to dress up so much. If it had just been the two of us, without any possibility of Finn, I wouldn’t have, but I didn’t want him to know that so I just kept smiling. Patrick had just put on a white tee shirt with dark wash jeans, but he looked pretty good.

“You look good too,” I nodded. Matt was still seething behind me, so I opened the door farther so I could introduce them and then I could get out of there. “Um, Patrick, this is my older brother, Matt, and that’s my aunt, Maggie.” Patrick didn’t look the least bit intimidated Matt, who shook his hand much more forcefully than necessary. Maggie got up off the couch and hurried over to say hello.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Maggie gushed, shaking his hand.

“Likewise,” Patrick assured her.

“They’re painters,” I said when I saw him looking over their paint covered clothing. “Well, I guess we should get going.”

“Have her back by ten,” Matt demanded, staring harshly at Patrick.

“Midnight,” Maggie said over him.

“The dance doesn’t go til midnight,” Matt snapped incredulously.

“I know.” Maggie kept smiling and started ushering me out the door. “Have fun guys!”

“Midnight at the very latest!” Matt amended as I shut the door behind me.

“Sorry,” I smiled sheepishly at Patrick. “Insanity runs pretty heavily in my family.”

“Good to know,” Patrick grinned as we walked to his car.

My only experience with dances was what I had seen on TV, but it really wasn’t that far off. The theme appeared to be “Crepe Paper in the Gymnasium,” and they had mastered it perfectly. The school colors were white and navy blue, so white and navy blue streamers covered everything, along with matching balloons. For romantic lighting, they had strung everything with white Christmas lights. A table to the side was covered in refreshments, and the band playing on the makeshift stage under the basketball hoop wasn’t that bad. Their set list appeared to only include songs from the films of John Hughes, and we came in the middle of a “Weird Science” cover that was quite a bit more electronic than I remember it being. When the song ended, they announced their name as “Shermer, Illinois.”

The biggest difference between real life and what films had taught me is that nobody was actually dancing. A group of girls stood directly in front of the stage, swooning at the foxy lead singer, but otherwise, the floor was mostly empty. The refreshment table had a small crowd, and people were scattered all over the bleachers.

“The cool kids come later,” Patrick explained when he noticed me looking around.

“So we’re not the cool kids?” I asked.

“Nope. We’re the punctual kids,” Patrick quipped.

Like a gentleman, he got me a cup of punch, and then we went over to the bleachers to sit. We sat on the first row because I had stupidly worn a pair of strappy heels that I didn’t trust myself to make it to the top in. As soon as we sat down, I kicked them off anyway, because for the most part, I hate shoes. We people watched and spent a lot of time mocking the other people that had bothered to show up on time.

As the night wore on, I found myself getting increasingly nervous. Finn still wasn't here. Patrick hadn't asked me to dance either, and other kids were actually starting to. The band had moved onto some kind of Tears For Fears medley about the time Tegan arrived, and she was arguably the coolest kid in school. She had used a gallon of concealer and lipstick to try to fix her lip, but she still looked like hell. I couldn't revel in this, though, because I was starting to think that Finn had stood us up.

"Okay, so maybe this isn't as much fun as I promised it would be." Patrick misread the look on my face for disappointment with him and the dance itself, so I forced a smile and shook my head.

"No, no, it's fun," I insisted. I was about to suggest dancing, hoping that would lighten my mood, but then Finn finally pushed through the gymnasium doors.

Wearing a slim-fitting black dress shirt and dark jeans, he looked good. He had the sleeves rolled up and an extra button undone on his shirt, and I wondered why I had never realized how attractive he looked before. I'm sure I had a goofy smile plastered on my face, so I erased it as quickly as I could and tried to look bored.

"Well look who decided to grace us with his presence," Patrick joked happily when Finn walked over to us. Patrick had leaned back on the bleachers, spreading his arms out behind so one of them was kind of behind me, but not around me at all.

"I had stuff with work," Finn explained vaguely and sat down next to Patrick. He glanced over at me but didn't say anything about how I looked. Already, he looked annoyed and he'd just gotten here. This wasn't exactly how I had hoped things would go.

"Work? I didn't know you worked," Patrick commented.

"Family business," Finn sighed. Eager to change the subject, he looked over at us. "Have you guys been dancing?"

"Nope," Patrick grinned. "Dancing is for suckers."

“Is that why you came to a dance?” Finn asked pointedly. Patrick laughed, and Finn looked down at my bare feet. “You didn’t wear the right shoes for dancing. You didn’t even wear the right shoes for walking.”

“I don’t like shoes,” I told him defensively. My dress only came to above my knees, but I tried to pull it down, as if I could get it to cover my bare feet, which had suddenly become a source of embarrassment.

Finn gave me a look I couldn’t read at all, then went back to staring at the people dancing out in front of us. By now, the floor was almost entirely covered. Kids still dotted the bleachers, but they were mostly the headgear kids and the ones with dandruff. We were among the geeks and freaks of the school, and ordinarily I didn’t care. In fact, I didn’t even really care now. But I was sitting on the sidelines feeling foolish for not wearing shoes.

“So this is what you’re doing? Watching other people dance?” Finn asked.

“Sometimes,” Patrick admitted with a shrug. “But right now, I’m gonna go get some punch.” He stood up and glanced back at us. I was still playing with the hem of my dress and Finn appeared to be glaring at the dance floor. “You kids don’t have too much fun while I’m gone.”

“Yeah, that’s gonna be hard,” I sighed. Patrick laughed as he walked away. The refreshments were on the side other of the gym, and I lost sight of him through the crowd dancing.

Finn leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and I moved so I was sitting up straighter. I thought we had been getting along, that we were growing into something nice and comfortable, but there was this awful awkward feeling hanging in between us. My dress was strapless, and I rubbed at my bare arms, feeling naked and uncomfortable.

“You cold?” Finn glanced over at me, and I shook my head. “I think its cold in here.”

“It’s a little chilly,” I admitted. “But nothing I can’t handle.”

“Yeah, you can handle anything,” Finn replied dryly.

Patrick still hadn't returned with his punch, and I was starting to think he never would. It had probably been part of his plan, but it was failing horribly. Finn would barely look at me, which is a complete 180 from his constant creepy staring. Somehow, I found this worse. I don't know why he had even come to the dance if he hated it so much, and I was about to ask him that when he turned to look at me.

"You wanna dance?" Finn asked me flatly.

"Are you asking me?" I couldn't tell if he wanted to know if I liked dancing in general or if I wanted to dance with him, but either way, at that moment, that answer to both those questions was no.

"Yeah," Finn shrugged.

"Yeah?" I shrugged sarcastically. "You really know how to sweet talk a girl." His mouth crept up in his hint of a smile, and that officially won me over, the way it always did. I would've said yes to anything he said when he smiled at me, and I hated myself for it.

"Fair enough." Finn stood up and extended his hand to me. "Would you, Wendy Everly, care to dance with me?"

"Sure." I placed my hand in his, trying to ignore how soft and warm his skin felt and the rapid beating of my own heart, and got to my feet.

Naturally, the band had just started playing "If You Leave" by OMD, making me feel like I had walked into a perfect movie moment. Finn led me to the dance floor, and he placed his hand on the small of my back. I put one hand on his shoulder, and he held my other hand. I was so close to him, I could feel the delicious heat radiating from his body. His eyes were the darkest eyes I had ever seen, and they were looking at only me. For one unspoiled minute, everything in life felt perfect in a way that it never had before. Like there should be a spotlight on us and we were the only two people in the world.

Then something changed in Finn's expression, something I couldn't read, but it definitely got darker.

"You're not a very good dancer," Finn commented in that emotionless way he did.

“Thanks?” I said unsurely. We were mostly just swaying in a small circle, and I wasn’t really sure how I could screw that up, and we seemed to be dancing the exact same way as everyone else. Maybe he was joking, so I tried to sound playful when I said, “You’re not that great yourself.”

“I’m a wonderful dancer,” Finn replied matter-of-factly. “I just need a better partner.”

“Okay.” I stopped looking up at him and started straight ahead over his shoulder. I didn’t understand what was happening at all. “I don’t know what to say to that.”

“Why do you need to say anything to that? It’s not necessary for you to speak incessantly. Although, I’m not sure you’ve realized that yet.” Finn’s tone had gotten downright icy, and I was still dancing with him because I couldn’t come up with enough sense to walk away.

“I’ve barely said anything. I’ve just been dancing with you.” I swallowed hard and didn’t appreciate how crushed I was starting to feel. “And you asked me to dance! It’s not like you’re doing me a favor.”

“Oh come on,” Finn disparaged me with an exaggerated eye roll. “The desperation was coming off you in waves. You were all but begging to dance with me. I *am* doing you a favor.”

“Wow.” I stepped back from him, feeling confused tears threatening and this awful pain growing inside of me. “I don’t know what I did to you!” His expression softened, but it was too late.

“Wendy-”

“No!” I cut him off. I had started shouting, and everyone around us had stopped dancing and had started staring at us, but I didn’t care. “You are a total dick!”

“Wendy!” Finn repeated, but I turned and hurried through the crowd.

There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to get out of there. Patrick was standing by the punch bowl, talking to some kid very animatedly about something, but when he saw me, he stopped and grew concerned. My

shoes were on the other side of the gym, but I had no intention of going across the dance floor to get them.

“I want to leave. *Now*,” I hissed at Patrick.

“What-” Before he could ask what happened, Finn appeared at my side.

“Look, Wendy, I’m sorry,” Finn apologized sincerely, which only pissed me off. If he was sorry, then why had he even said that stuff in the first place? It was like he had been going out of his way to hurt my feelings.

“I don’t wanna hear anything from you!” I snapped and refused to look at him. Patrick looked back and forth between the two of us, trying to decipher what was going on.

“Wendy,” Finn floundered. “I didn’t mean-”

“I said I don’t want to hear it!” I glared at him, but only for a second

“Wen, maybe you should let the guy apologize,” Patrick suggested gently. “I don’t know what happened, but it never hurts to listen.”

“Yes it does!” Then, like a small child, I stomped my foot. “I want to go!”

“I think you should calm down first,” Patrick said, and I could tell he wasn’t ready to change his mind. Like me, he had envisioned some magical spark between Finn and I that clearly didn’t exist, but since he hadn’t heard what Finn had said to me, he wasn’t quite as willing to give up on the dream as I was. “The night is still really early, and you shouldn’t go home mad. So why don’t you just hear what Finn has to say.”

Finn stood just to the side of us, watching me intently, and part of me really, really wanted to listen to Patrick. If I stayed there, I knew I would let Finn say whatever he wanted to me, and like an idiot, I would probably believe him. And I didn’t want that. I wasn’t going to let him make a fool of me again.

I clenched my fists and looked at Patrick directly in his eyes. I kept chanting what I wanted over and over in my head. *I want to go home, just take me home, please, please, just take me home. I can’t be here anymore.* Patrick just stared at me encouragingly, as if he could will me into talking to Finn. Then his hopeful

expression started to change. His face relaxed and got faraway. Blinking, he just started blankly at me for a minute.

“I think I should just take you home,” Patrick said groggily.

“What did you just do?” Finn demanded, almost frantically. I turned to look at him, and Patrick shook his head tiredly. “Wendy, what the hell did you do?”

“Nothing!” I snapped and looked back at Patrick. “Let’s get out of here.”

“No!” Finn stepped in between Patrick and I, blocking my attempt to escape. “Do you even know what you just did?”

“I didn’t do anything!” I repeated, growing irritated. “I just wanna go!”

“Yeah, I know you do!” Finn’s eyes were wide and startled, and his reaction was confusing me. I really hadn’t done anything, and I didn’t know what he was freaking out about.

“Good! Cause I’m gonna go.” I tried to step around him, but he grabbed my wrist, gripping it with the same iron grasp he did when I had punched Tegan. “Let me go!”

“I need to talk to you,” Finn maintained. “In private.”

“Why should I-” I wanted to argue with him, but he was looking at me too insistently.

“I’ll be right back,” Finn assured Patrick, but he just nodded dazedly at us.

Still hanging onto my wrist, Finn dragged me away. We went through the side doors into a small, empty alcove. Once in there, Finn let go of my wrist and glanced out the windows on the doors, as if we might have been followed. As soon as he turned to look back at me, I slapped him as hard as I could across his face. He took a step back and stared at the floor.

“I told you if you ever drug me anywhere again, I would punch you,” I told him and crossed my arms over my chest.

“That you did,” Finn acknowledged, still rubbing his face. His cheek had already started to redden, and I felt a dim satisfaction from that. He totally deserved it.

“You’re lucky that I slapped you instead.”

“I believe it.” He stretched his jaw and then looked at me, putting it behind him. “What did you do out there? With Patrick?”

“I didn’t do anything with Patrick.” I shook my head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You really don’t?” Finn eyed me suspiciously, unable to decide if he believed me or not. “You didn’t notice the way Patrick acted?”

“He acted like Patrick,” I shrugged.

“No, he didn’t,” Finn persisted. “When you went up to him and said you wanted to go home, he said no. And then you kept staring at him, and he looked foggy and dazed. Then suddenly, he said he would take you home like you wanted.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I stumbled.

A chill ran over me and I started feeling vaguely nauseous. I had noticed the change in Patrick’s expression, and it wasn’t the first time I had seen something like that. Just the other day, Maggie had reacted the same way when I had tried to convince her not to see my mom anymore. There had been times before that, too, but I never thought anything of them. And I didn’t want to right now either.

“Yeah, you do.” Finn nodded solemnly. “You just don’t know what it is.”

“I’m just very... persuasive,” I said without any real conviction.

That is what I had always thought it was, whenever I bothered to think about it. I was rather pretty, and over the years, I had managed to get boys to do things with the right smile. And if that didn’t work, I hadn’t been afraid to kick some ass to get what I wanted. Recently, things had started to get even easier, where I just had to look at people, without the coy smile or the threat to bodily harm. But I thought it was because I had just gotten really good at it.

“Yeah, you are,” Finn admitted. “But you can’t do that. Not like this.”

“Do what?” I feigned innocence. “I didn’t do anything! And even if I did, who are you to try and stop me?” Something else flashed in my mind, and I looked at him. “Can you even stop me?”

“Stop you from what?” Finn took a step closer to me. “What do you think happened? What do you think you did to Patrick?”

“I just... glared at him,” I answered uncertainly.

“You did more than glare. You used *persuasion*,” Finn said emphatically, as if that were somehow much different than what I had been saying. “I guess that’s a kind of slang you don’t understand. Technically, it would be called psychokinesis.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I can assure you that I’m not psychic by any definition of the word.” I was starting to find it disturbing how matter-of-factly he was talking about all of this, as if we were talking about biology homework instead of the possibility that I possessed some kind of paranormal ability.

“Not yet,” Finn allowed. “Persuasion is when you want something from somebody, and just by thinking about it, you can get them to do it. It’s a form of mind control.”

“Whoa!” I put up my hands and took a step back. “I did not use mind control on Patrick! Or anyone ever! If I could, I would be using it on you now to get you to stop being such a freak.”

“You can’t use it on me now.” Finn shook his head absently, but he was too nervous or excited to really pay attention to how weirded out I was getting. “It’s really not that major, especially the way you’re using it. But you already have some mastery of it, and you didn’t even know you had it.” His brow furrowed and he stared off into space for a minute. “You really didn’t know that’s what you were doing?”

“I’m not doing anything!” I insisted.

Confused and frightened, I wanted to run away. Finn was saying things that sounded completely insane and impossible, but they also sounded kind of

true. Even as I started questioning everything about myself, in the back of my mind, I suspected that this might just be another twisted trick. Finn obviously got off on confusing and hurting me, and this was all just part of his game.

“Wendy, calm down, okay?” Finn reached out to me at some poor attempt at being comforting, but I jerked back from him. The last thing in the world I wanted was him to touch me right now. Well, maybe not the last thing, but I was not ready to calm down. “You just need to stop and think for a minute.”

“No! I want to go home! And maybe I can’t ‘persuade’ you or whatever the hell it is you call it, but Patrick’s all ready to go and waiting for me.” I reeled and grabbed the door, preparing to escape before I actually started crying or throwing up or whatever it was I ended up doing.

“Wendy!” Finn grabbed my arm to stop me, and I yanked it back from him.

“Don’t touch me!” I yelled, and he flinched but let go.

Patrick was still by the punch bowl, but when he saw me running towards him, he didn’t argue with me. He just put his arm around me and ushered me out of the gymnasium. He tried to ask me what had happened with Finn, but I refused to talk about it. It wasn’t even so much that I wanted to keep it a secret from him. I was too afraid that I might cry if I even mentioned it. He drove around for awhile so I was reasonably calm by the time I went home.

Matt and Maggie were waiting by the door for me, but I barely said a word to them. That freaked out Matt, who started threatening to kill Patrick and every other boy at the dance, but I managed to reassure him that I was fine and nothing bad had happened. Finally, he let me go up to my room, where I proceeded to throw myself onto the bed and not cry. Maggie knocked on the door a little way later and offered to talk, but there was nothing I could really say to her, so I sent her away.

The night swirled in my head like some bizarre dream. There was all the excitement and nerves about seeing Finn, and then that glorious moment

where we danced together, before he completely shattered it. Even now, after the way he'd treated me, I couldn't shake how wonderful it had felt being in his arms like that. In general, I never liked being touched or being close to people, but I loved the way I had felt with him. His hand strong and warm pressing on the small of my back and the soft heat that flowed from him. When he had looked at me then, so sincerely, I had thought...

I don't know what I thought, but it turned out to be a lie. After he freaked out on me about psychokinesis, I could suddenly explain all his odd behavior; he was completely insane. That had to be it. His random mood changes. His flat affect.

Because I couldn't really "persuade" people. It wouldn't be possible to just look at Patrick to get him to do what I wanted. He had just been able to see how distraught I was and changed his mind. And even if I did do that, how come nobody had noticed before? How did Finn even notice? He had said that "persuasion" was a slang term, too, implying that a group of people used it in place of psychokinesis. They used it so frequently they had their own terminology.

What it came down to is that I knew nothing about Finn. I could barely tell when he was mocking me and when he was being sincere. Sometimes I thought he was into me, and other times he obviously hated me. He could just as easily be insane as he could be telling the truth. There wasn't anything I knew about him for sure. Except that despite everything, I still really liked him.

Sometime in the night, after I had changed into sweats and a tank top, and after I had spent a very long time tossing and turning, I must've finally fallen asleep. When I woke up, it was still dark out, and I had drying tears on my cheeks. I had been crying in my sleep, which seemed unfair since I never let myself cry when I was awake. I rolled over and glanced at the alarm clock. It's angry numbers declared it was a little after three in the morning, and I wasn't sure why I was awake. I flicked on my bedside lamp, casting everything in a warm glow, and I saw something that scared me so badly, my heart stopped.

A figure was crouched out my window, my *second story* window. Admittedly, there's a small roof right outside of it, but that's still not exactly the thing you expect to see. On top of that, it wasn't just anybody. It was Finn Holmes, looking hopeful, but not at all ashamed or frightened at having been caught peeping into my room. In fact, he knocked gently at the glass, and belatedly, I realized that's what had woken me up. He hadn't been peeping intentionally; he'd been trying to sneak into my room. So that was *slightly* less creepy, I supposed.

For some reason, I got up and went over to the window. I caught sight of myself in my mirror, and I did not look good. My pajamas were of the sad, comfy variety, and not the sexy negligee type I would've liked to wear for a midnight rendezvous. My hair was a total mess, and my eyes were red and puffy. On top of that, I knew I shouldn't even let Finn in my room. He was clearly psychotic and probably a sociopath, and he didn't make me feel good about myself. Besides, Matt would kill us both if he caught him in here.

So, I stood in front of the window, my arms crossed, and glared at him. I was pissed off and hurt, and I wanted him to know it. Normally, I prided myself on not getting hurt, let alone telling people if they had hurt me. But this time, I thought it would be better if he knew that he was a dick.

"I'm sorry!" Finn talked loudly so his voice would carry through the glass, and his eyes echoed the sentiment. He looked genuinely remorseful, but I wasn't ready to accept his apology yet. Maybe I never would.

"What do you want?" I demanded as loudly as I could without Matt hearing me.

"To apologize. And to talk to you." Finn looked earnestly at me. "It's important." I chewed my lip, debating between what I knew I should do and what I really wanted to do. This was the first time anyone had ever snuck up to my window or apologized to me after I had slapped them. "Please."

Against my better judgment, I opened the window. I left the screen in so he could mess with that, and took a step back so I was sitting on the end of my bed. Finn pulled the screen out easily, and I wondered how much experience he had with sneaking in girls' windows. Carefully, he climbed into my room, shutting the window behind him. He glanced over my room, making me feel self-conscious. It was rather messy, with clothes and books strewn about. My computer was on my desk in the corner, buried beneath water bottles and other random garbage. I had posters on my wall for *Labyrinth* and the Cure, but the rest of my stuff sat in two large cardboard boxes and a trunk on one side of my room.

"So what did you want?" I said as curtly as I could, trying to drag his attention back to me instead of inspecting my disarray.

"I'm sorry," Finn repeated, with that same sincerity he had outside. "Tonight I was cruel." He looked away thoughtfully before continuing. "I don't want to hurt you."

"So why did you?" I asked sharply.

Licking his lips, he shifted and exhaled deeply. He had intentionally been mean to me. It wasn't some accident because he was cocky or unaware of how he treated people. Everything he did felt meticulous and purposeful. Even though he claimed he didn't want to hurt me, the simple act of him having hurt me proved that that he wanted to. But he hesitated on telling me the reasons.

"I don't want to lie to you, and I promise you that I haven't," Finn answered carefully. "So... I'm not going to tell you right now. It doesn't seem appropriate."

"I don't care if it seems appropriate or not!" I snapped, then remembered that Matt and Maggie were sleeping down the hall and hastily lowered my voice. "I think I have a right to know what's going on."

"I came here to tell you," Finn assured me. "To explain everything. This isn't the way we normally do things, so I had to make a phone call before I came to see you. I was trying to figure things out. That's why it's so late. I'm sorry."

“Call who? Figure out what?” Then it dawned on me, and a pit started growing in my stomach. “Oh. This is about that crap you were talking about earlier. The psychokinesis or whatever?”

“It’s more than that.” He rubbed the back of his head and stared at the floor. “You’re not going to believe me. You’re going to think I’m insane. But I have *never* lied to you, and I’m never going to. Do you believe that at least?”

“I think so,” I replied tentatively.

“That’s a start,” Finn allowed. He took a deep breath, and I nervously pulled at a strand of my hair and watched him. Almost sheepishly, he said, “You’re a changeling.” He looked expectantly at me, waiting for some kind of dramatic reaction.

“I don’t even know what that is,” I shrugged. “Isn’t it like a movie with Angelina Jolie or something?” I shook my head. “I don’t know what it means.”

“You don’t know what it is?” Finn smirked. “Of course you don’t know what it is. It would make it all too easy if you had even the slightest inclining about what is going on.”

“It would, wouldn’t it?” I agreed sarcastically.

“A changeling is a child that has been secretly exchanged for another,” Finn explained slowly.

The wind felt like it had been knocked out of me. The room got this weird, foggy quality to it. My mind flashed onto my mother, and the things she had screamed at me. There had always been this feeling inside me of not belonging, but I had always blamed that on some latent residue from my mother. But now, suddenly, Finn was confirming all the suspicions I had been harboring. It sounded almost too good to be true.

“But how...” Dazedly, I shook my head and realized one important fact. “How would you know that? How could you possibly know that? Even if it were true?”

“Well...” Finn watched me as I struggled to let everything sink in and decided to continue. “You’re Trylle. It’s what we do.”

“Trylle? Is that like your last name or something?” I asked skeptically.

“No,” Finn shook his head. “Trylle is the name of our ‘tribe,’ if you will.” He rubbed the side of his temple. “This is so hard to explain. We are a, um, band of trolls.”

“You’re telling me that I’m a *troll*?” I raised my eyebrow, and finally decided that he must be insane. Nothing about me resembled a pink-haired doll with a jewel in its stomach, or a creepy, little monster that lived under a bridge. Admittedly, I was short, but I was actually rather pretty, and Finn was at least six feet tall.

“You’re thinking of trolls as they way they’ve been misrepresented, obviously,” Finn hurried to explain. “That’s why we prefer Trylle. You don’t get any of that silly ‘Billy Goats Gruff’ imagery. But now I have you staring at me like I have totally lost mind.”

“You have lost your mind,” I nodded. I was trembling, out of shock and fear, and I didn’t know what to think. I should’ve thrown him out of my room, but then again, I never should’ve let him in in the first place.

“Okay. Think about it, Wendy.” Finn moved on to trying to reason with me, as if his idea had real merits. “You’ve never really fit in anywhere. You have a quick temper. You’re very intelligent. You are the pickiest eater in the world. You hate shoes. Your hair, while lovely, is hard to control. You have dark brown eyes, dark brown hair.”

“What does the color of my eyes have to do with anything?” I retorted, focusing on the things that I felt like I could disagree with. In fact, none of the things he said were all that conclusive.

“Earth tones. Our eyes and hair are always earth tones,” Finn answered. “And often times, our skin has almost a greenish hue to it.”

“I’m not green!” I looked at my skin anyway, just to be sure, but it didn’t look green.

“It’s very faint, when people do have it,” Finn said. “But no, you don’t. Not really. Sometimes it gets more predominant after you’ve been living around other Trylle for awhile.”

"I am not a troll," I insisted fiercely. "That doesn't even make any sense. It doesn't... So I'm angry and different. Most teenagers feel that way. It doesn't mean anything." I combed through my hair, as if to prove it wasn't that wild. My fingers got caught in it, proving his point rather than mine, and I sighed. "That doesn't mean anything."

"I'm not just guessing here, Wendy," Finn informed with a wry smile. "I know who are you. I know you are Trylle. That's why I came looking for you."

"You're looking for me?" My jaw dropped. "That's why you stare at me all the time in school. That's how you knew where I lived and how you found my bedroom window. You're stalking me!"

"I'm not *stalking*," Finn looked at me defensively. "I'm tracking you. I'm a tracker. It's my job. I find the changelings and bring them back."

Of all the major things that were wrong with this situation, the thing that bothered me the most is when he said it was his job. There hadn't ever been any attraction between us. He had just been doing his job, and that meant following me. He was stalking me, and I was only upset about it because he was doing it because he had to, not because he wanted to. I really wanted to throw up.

"I know this is a lot to take in," Finn admitted. "I'm sorry. We usually wait until you're older and are starting to have signs on your own. But if you're already using persuasion, then I think you need to head back to the compound. You're developing early."

"I'm what?" I just stared up at him.

"Developing. The psychokinesis," Finn said like it should be obvious. "Trylle have varying degrees of abilities. Yours are clearly more advanced."

"They have *abilities*?" I swallowed, thinking of the dazed look on Patrick's face. "Do you have abilities?" Something new occurred to me, twisting my insides. "Can you read my mind?"

"No, I can't read minds," Finn replied.

"Are you lying?" I pressed uneasily.

“I won’t lie to you,” Finn promised.

If he hadn’t been so attractive standing in front of me in my bedroom, it would’ve been easier to ignore him in the first place. If I hadn’t felt this ludicrous connection with him, I would’ve thrown him out right away. As it was, it was hard to look into his eyes and not believe him. But after everything he had been saying, there was only one conclusion I could come to.

“Then you must be insane,” I swallowed hard.

“Wendy,” Finn sounded exasperated. “You know I’m not lying.”

“I do,” I nodded. “You believe everything you’re saying, which means you’re insane. And after what I went through with my mom, I’m not ready to let another crazy person into my life. So you have to go.”

“Wendy!” He was in complete disbelief.

“Did you really expect any other reaction from me?” I stood up, keeping my arms crossed firmly in front of me, and I tried to look as confident as I possibly could. “Did you think you could treat me like shit at a dance, then sneak into my room in the middle of the night and tell me that I am a troll with magical powers, and I’d just be like, yeah, that sounds right? And what did you even hope to accomplish with this? What were you trying to get me to do?”

“You’re supposed come with me back to the compound,” Finn said, defeated.

“And you thought I would just follow you right out?” I smirked to hide the fact that I was really tempted to do that. Even if he was insane.

“They usually do,” Finn replied in a way that completely unnerved me.

Really, that answer is what completely lost me. I might have been willing to follow his delusions because I liked him a lot more than I should, but when he made it sound like there had been lots of other girls willing to do the same thing before me, it was kind of a turn off. Crazy, I could deal with. Slutty, not so much.

“You need to go,” I told him firmly.

“You need to think about this. This is obviously different for you than it is for everyone else, and I understand that. So I’ll give you time to think about

it.” He turned and opened the window. “But there is a place that you belong. There is a place where you have family. So just think about it.”

“Definitely,” I gave him a plastic smile.

He started to lean out the window, and I walked closer to him so I’d be able to shut the window behind him. Then he stopped and turned to look at me. He felt dangerously close to me, his eyes full of something smoldering just below the surface. When he looked at me like that, he took all the air from my lungs, and I wondered if this is how Patrick felt when I persuaded him.

“I almost forgot,” Finn said softly, his face so close to mine I could feel his breath on my cheeks. “You looked *really* beautiful tonight.” He stayed that way a moment longer, completely captivating me, then abruptly he turned and climbed out the window.

I stood there, barely remembering to breathe, as I watched him grab onto a branch of the tree next to my house and swing down to the ground. A cool breeze fluttered in, so I closed the window. In case he still might be lurking somewhere outside, I pulled my curtains shut tightly. Feeling very dazed, I staggered back to my bed and collapsed on it. I had never felt more bewildered in my entire life.

Naturally, I barely got any sleep. What little I had was filled with dreams of little green trolls coming to take me away. I laid in bed for hours after I woke up, trying to put everything in perspective. Everything felt muddled and confusing. I couldn’t let myself believe that anything Finn had said made sense, but I couldn’t discount how badly I wanted it to be true. I had never felt like I belonged anywhere. Until recently, Matt had been the only person I had ever felt any connection with.

Lying in bed at six-thirty in the morning, I could hear the morning birds chirping loudly outside my window, probably sitting in the same tree that Finn had used to get to my room. Everyone in the house was asleep, and it was completely silent. I thought of my brother, laying in his bed a few doors down, and Maggie across the hall from him. Both of them sleeping contentedly, unaware of anything going on.

Quietly, I got up and crept downstairs. I didn't want to wake them this early. Matt got up with me every day to make sure that I was awake and drove me to school, so this was his only time to sleep in. Maggie didn't get up until nine or ten most days, but I had never faulted her for that. Matt had always been a morning person, but Maggie and I couldn't stand them.

For some reason, I felt desperate to find something to prove we were family. All my life I had been trying to prove the opposite, but as soon as Finn had mentioned that it might be a real possibility, I felt oddly protective. Maggie and Matt had sacrificed everything for me. I had never been that good to either of them, but they had loved me unconditionally, as they proved time and time again. Wasn't that evidence enough?

I crouched on the floor next to one of the cardboard boxes behind the couch in the living room. Maggie's pretty cursive had scrawled across it the word "memorabilia." That was her code word for family stuff. Matt had more of a revulsion for our family than I did, so Maggie used less offensive words to keep him from getting riled up. She never actually unpacked any of the pictures or anything, because the last time she had Matt had smashed all the picture frames. Admittedly, that had been almost ten years ago, but I was betting that his reaction now would have only lessened slightly.

Underneath Matt and Maggie's diplomas and lots of Matt's graduation photos, I found several photo albums. Based on the covers, I could tell which ones had been Maggie's purchases. My mother had only had one with a faded brown non-descript cover. Maggie picked albums covered in flowers and polka dots and happy things. Below the oldest photo album, there was a damaged blue baby book. Carefully, I pulled it out, along with my mom's photo album.

My baby book had been blue because all the ultrasounds had said I was a boy. Tucked in the back of the book there was even a cracked ultrasound photo where the doctor had circled what they had incorrectly assumed was my penis. Most families would have made some kind of joke about that, but not mine. Mom had just looked at me with disdain and said, "You were supposed to be a boy."

Most parents start out filling the beginning of the baby book perfectly, but then forget as time goes on. Not mine. Mom had put one or two pictures in, and that was it. Most of the handwriting was either my father's or Maggie's. My foot prints were in there, along with my measurements at birth and a copy of my birth certificate. I touched it delicately, proving that my birth was tangible. I had been born in this family, whether Mom and I liked it or not.

"What are you doing, kiddo?" Maggie asked softly from behind me, and I jumped a little. "Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." I tried to cover up my baby book, feeling as if I had been caught doing something naughty. I turned to look back at her and smiled meekly. Wrapped in her house coat, Maggie yawned and ran a hand through her sleep disheveled hair. "What are you doing up?"

"I could ask you the same thing," Maggie replied with a smile. She sat down on the floor next to me, leaning against the back of the couch. "I heard you get up." She nodded to the pile of albums on my lap. "You feeling nostalgic?"

"I don't know really."

"What are you looking at?" Maggie leaned over so she could peer at the photo album. "Oh, that's an old one. You were just a baby then."

I flipped open the book, and it went it chronologically, so the first few pages were of Matt when he was little. There were lots of pictures of Mom, Dad, and Matt, and they all looked ridiculously happy. All three of them had blond hair and blue eyes. They looked like something out of a Hallmark commercial or something.

Maggie looked at it with me, making clucking sounds at my dad. She gently touched his picture once and commented on how handsome he was. Even though everyone agreed that my father had been a good guy, we rarely talked about him. It was part of our way of not talking about Mom and not talking about what happened. Everything before my sixth birthday didn't matter, and that just happened to include every memory of Dad.

About ten pages into the book, everything changed. As soon as pictures of me started to appear, my mother began looking surly and sullen. In the very first picture, I was only a few days old. I was wearing an outfit with blue trains all over it, and my mother glaring at me.

“You were such a cute baby!” Maggie laughed. “But I remember that. You wore boys clothes for the first month because they were so sure you were going to be a boy.”

“That explains a lot,” I mumbled, and Maggie laughed. “Why didn’t they just get me new clothes? They had the money for it.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Maggie sighed, looking far away. “It was something your mother wanted.” She shook her head. “She was weird about things.”

“What was my name supposed to be?” I couldn’t remember. When I was younger, people had talked about it, but nobody ever reminisced about my childhood anymore.

“Um... Michael!” Maggie snapped her fingers when she remembered. “Michael Conrad Everly. But then you were girl, so that ruined that.”

“How did I get Wendy from that?” I wrinkled my nose. “Michelle would make more sense.”

“Well...” Maggie looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “Your mother refused to name you, and your father... I guess he couldn’t think of anything. So Matt named you.”

“Oh yeah.” I faintly remembered hearing that before. “But why Wendy?”

“He liked the name Wendy,” Maggie shrugged. “He was a big *Peter Pan* fan, which is ironic because *Peter Pan* is the story of a boy who never grows up, and Matt was a boy who was always grown up.” I smirked at that. “Maybe that’s why he’s always been so protective of you. He named you. You were his.”

There was a picture of me when I was about two or three, and Matt was holding me in his arms. I was lying on my stomach with my arms and legs outstretched, and he was grinning like a mad man. He used to run me around

the house like that, pretending that I was flying, and call me “Wendy Bird,” and I would laugh for hours.

As I got older, it became more and more apparent that I looked nothing like my family. My dark eyes and dark frizzy hair contrasted completely with them. In every picture with me, my mother had these completely exasperated look on her face, as if she had spent the last half hour fighting with me before the picture. But then again, she probably had. I had always been contrary to everything she was. In the pictures of my fifth birthday, I covered all my gifts in cake and stood in my underwear, and my mother stood directly behind me, looking as if she wished she were anywhere else in the whole world.

“You were a strong-willed child,” Maggie admitted, looking at the picture of me naked at my fifth birthday. “You wanted things the way you wanted them. And when you were a baby, you were colicky. But you were always an adorable child, and you were bright and funny.” Maggie gently pushed a strand of hair back from my face. “You were *always* worthy of love. You did nothing wrong, Wendy. She is the one with the problem, not you.”

“I know,” I nodded.

But for the first time, I truly believed that this all might be entirely my fault. If Finn was telling the truth, as these pictures seemed to confirm, I wasn’t their child. I was something else entirely. I was exactly what my mother accused me of being, and she was just more intuitive than everybody else. It was my fault because I wasn’t even human.

“What’s wrong?” Maggie asked, looking concerned. “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” I lied and closed the photo album.

“Did something happen last night?” Her eyes were filled with love and worry, and it was hard to think of her as not being my family. She had been the closest thing to a mother I had growing up, and she had done a very good job, all things considered. “Did you even sleep?”

“Yeah. I just... woke up, I guess,” I answered vaguely.

“What happened at the dance?” Maggie leaned back against the couch, resting her hand on her chin as she studied me. “Did something happen with a boy?”

“Things just didn’t turn out the way I thought they would,” I said honestly. “In fact, they couldn’t have turned out more different.”

“Was that Patrick boy mean to you?” Maggie asked with a protective edge to her voice.

“No, no, nothing like that,” I assured her. Even though it would be easier to just blame everything on Patrick, he had been nothing but a gentleman, and I didn’t want to badmouth behind him back. Besides that, I had probably used some kind of mind control thing on him, and that didn’t seem right to do that and then talk shit about him. “He was great. But he’s just a friend.”

“Oh.” Understanding flashed across her eyes, and I think she had gotten the wrong idea from that, but whatever kept her from asking more questions. If she wanted to think that I had a crush on Patrick and he didn’t reciprocate, that was fine by me. “Being a teenager is hard, no matter what family you come from.”

“You’re telling me,” I muttered.

Upstairs, I heard the sound of Matt getting up and moving around. Maggie shot me a nervous look, so I hurried to pack up the photo albums. He wouldn’t exactly be mad at me for looking at them, but he definitely wouldn’t be happy either. And first thing in the morning, I did not want to deal with a fight with my brother, on top of worrying about whether or not he was really even my brother.

“You know, you can talk to me about this stuff whenever you want,” Maggie whispered as I slipped the albums back in the cardboard box. “Well, at least whenever Matt isn’t around.”

“I know,” I smiled at her.

“I suppose I should make you breakfast.” Maggie stood up and stretched, then looked down at me. “What do you even eat for breakfast?”

“Nothing, usually. I barely wake up in time for school,” I said.

“Hmm,” Maggie thought for a minute. “How about plain oatmeal with fresh strawberries? Those are things you eat, right?”

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I nodded.

Something pained me when she asked that. There were so many things I wouldn’t eat and I was constantly hungry. It had been a struggle just to feed me. When I was a baby, I wouldn’t even drink breast milk. Which only added more fuel to the idea that I wasn’t my mother’s child.

Maggie had turned to walk into the kitchen, but I called after her. “Hey, Mags. Thanks for everything. Like... making me food and stuff.”

“Yeah?” Maggie looked surprised but totally happy. “No problem.”

Matt came downstairs a minute later, deeply confused by the fact that both Maggie and I were up before him. We ate breakfast together for the first time in years, and Maggie was overly happy thanks to my small compliment. I was subdued, but I managed to play it off as something resembling happiness.

It was hard to say whether I believed they were my real family or not. There were so many signs pointing to the contrary. But they had raised me and stood by me the way no one else had. Even my own mother had failed me, but not Matt or Maggie. They were unfailing in their love for me, and most of the time, they had gotten next to nothing in return. And that’s what got me the most. They were nothing but love and understanding, and I was nothing but cold indifference. I was nothing like them.

The weekend was turbulent. I kept expecting Finn to appear at my window again, but he didn't, and I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. I wanted to talk to him, but I was terrified. Terrified that he might be lying, and terrified that he might be telling the truth. It was hard for me to concentrate or enjoy anything all weekend long. I kept looking for clues in everything. Like Matt is pretty short and so am I, so he must be my brother. Then a minute later he would say he prefers winter to summer, and I hate winter, so he must not be my brother. These weren't clues one way or another, and deep down I knew that. But I was really desperate for answers. My whole life had been one giant question, and I was so close to finally getting it resolved.

That wasn't everything, though. There was also that burning unanswered question about what exactly Finn had wanted with me. Sometimes, he treated me like I was nothing more than an irritant. Then there were other times, when he looked at me and took my breath away. Any feelings he had for me were probably solely related to the fact that he believed it was his duty to "track" me, and that was disappointing.

I hoped that school would bring some kind of resolution to all of this. When I got up Monday morning, I took extra care to look nice, but I tried to pretend like it wasn't for any particular reason. That it wasn't because this was the first time I'd see Finn since he had come into my room, and that I still wanted to talk to him. I still wanted to impress him.

When the first period bell rang and Finn still hadn't taken his place a few rows behind me, a knot started growing in my stomach. I looked around for him all day, half expecting him to be lurking around some corner. He never was, though. His family had probably hauled him off to a nuthouse or something, or maybe he had failed at his job and taken off. At any rate, he wasn't here.

“So what’s going on with you?” Patrick asked me as I craned my neck around the hallways, still on my hopeless search for Finn. We were on our way to lunch, but I was slowing us down considerably by looking around.

“Nothing,” I muttered absently.

“He’s not here,” Patrick sighed.

“What?” I snapped my attention back to him and tried to feign innocence. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re looking for Finn, and he’s not here.” Patrick slowed to a stop and looked apologetically at me. “Look, I’m sorry about Friday night. I don’t know what really happened at the dance, but I should’ve just taken you home when you asked. I guess I misjudged Finn or something.” He shook his head, as if he didn’t quite believe that. “But anyway, I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. You did nothing wrong,” I insisted honestly. To cement my image as being anti-Finn, I added, “Finn is just a total psycho. He stopped by my house a few hours after the dance, and he was rambling all this weird crap.”

“What kind of weird crap?” Patrick’s expression deepened with concern. “Are you okay? Did he do anything?”

“No, it wasn’t anything like that,” I assured him. “He just said that I had super powers or something. I don’t know. It didn’t make any sense. His family probably has him at home sedated or something.”

“Wow.” His eyes widened with surprise. “I am really sorry now. I had no idea.”

“No, it’s fine. Honest.” I brushed him off and started walking to the lunchroom again. “Come on. I’m starving.”

Later on, I knew I might regret saying anything to Patrick about Finn. If Finn came to school again and we were to get along, it would make things harder if Patrick thought that Finn was insane. But I didn’t really think that would be an issue. Part of me knew that Finn wouldn’t be back to school anymore. His cover had been blown, and I wondered if I would ever see him again.

I had barely paid attention to anything all day in school, and I felt incredibly defeated when I walked to Matt's car. I had expected to have gained something today, but in the end, I was left with even more questions. Matt noticed my surly demeanor and tried to ask about it, but I just shrugged him off. He had been growing increasingly concerned since I had come home from the dance upset, but I had been unable to put his mind at ease.

As we got closer to our house, I saw a silver Cadillac parked in front, but it looked too good to be true. I blinked hard, thinking it must be a mirage, but it was still there. When we approached, I could see Finn, sitting on the swing on the front porch. I bit my lip to keep from showing any level of happiness.

"Who is that?" Matt demanded when we turned into the driveway.

"Finn," I replied absently, still staring out the window at him.

"Is he the boy that upset you at the dance?" Matt asked protectively.

"No, no," I lied. Then I smiled to reassure him. "Just let me talk to him, okay?" Matt gave me a hard look and for an awful second I thought he would insist on kicking Finn of the porch or something.

"I'm going to meet him first," Matt said.

"Sure, fine." That actually made me really nervous, but I had no real choice.

I hopped out of the car and had to force my feet to walk slowly around the house to the front porch. Finn had seen us pull up, and he stood up. His face betrayed none of his reasons for his visit, and he had a five o'clock shadow growing, making him look older. It was actually pretty sexy too, but it would only succeed in making Matt feel even more protective. I climbed up the steps to the porch, feeling Finn's dark eyes on me, and I did my best not to smile or give him any clue that I was happy to see him.

"Hi," I said quietly, and Finn just looked at me. Matt stood right behind me, and Finn gave him a small nod. "This is my brother, Matt." Finn tried to keep his eyes on Matt, but they flitted uncertainly to me when I said "brother" before going back to Matt. "Matt, this is Finn."

Finn leaned forward and shook Matt's hand respectfully, but neither of them said anything. Finn was sizing Matt up, and that made me nervous. Sure, Matt worked out, but Finn was taller, and even if he wasn't, I didn't want them fighting. A thick tension settled over us as they just stared down each other, neither of them willing to give.

"Matt, isn't there something you need to do inside?" I suggested hopefully and glanced over at him. He made no motion for the door, and I wondered fearfully if he planned on chaperoning my talk with Finn.

"I'll be right inside," Matt finally relented. It was more of a warning to Finn, who nodded his compliance to Matt.

Even after he had turned to walk in the house, Finn stared after him. Out of the corner of his eye, he glanced at the window next to where we were standing. We stood in silence for a moment, both of us waiting until we were sure Matt had gone, but I refused to say anything until Finn did.

"He's watching us," Finn glanced at the window again.

"Yeah, I know." I couldn't see anything, but Finn was right. Matt was probably waiting just inside the door in case I decided to scream for help.

"He thinks you need protection." Finn looked confused by the idea.

"Yeah, I know," I repeated and shifted uncomfortably.

"You don't need *him* to protect you," Finn sounded bemused. "He wants to kick my ass."

"I thought you couldn't read minds," I eyed him suspiciously.

"I can't. It was written all over his face." Finn had been staring at the door since Matt went inside, but he finally looked down at me. "But I didn't come here to talk about him." He took a step back and gestured to the porch swing. "Let's sit and talk."

I purposely gave him a wide berth when I walked over to the swing. He hadn't made up for his bout of insanity the other day, and I wanted to make sure he knew that. Finn sat down next to me, with his back to the window. I saw the curtains shift inside the house as Maggie peeked out for a second, but then she saw me looking and scurried away.

“Okay. Talk.” I kept my voice low and hoped he would do the same.

“Have you thought about what I said Friday?” Finn asked quietly, and my stomach twisted.

I must’ve been hoping that he would forget about all of that, that it was just some kind of bad dream. It wasn’t, of course. I considered that it might be true some of the time, and the rest of the time I tried not to think about it at all.

“I have,” I admitted cautiously and looked down at my knees. “But... I don’t believe you.”

“I think you do,” Finn said confidently. “I think you don’t want to, but you know it’s true. This life has never felt right to you, and you’ve started to have hints about your abilities. You just hadn’t put it together yet.”

I twisted my thumb ring and tried to shy away from his unflinching gaze. It was upsetting how easily I was willing to believe something so absurd. Maybe it was the way he said things, or maybe I was just so desperate to believe that there was a place where I made sense.

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Just because I have a temper and I’m weird doesn’t mean I’m a whole other species.”

“We’re not another species,” Finn corrected me. “We’re more like another race.”

“Oh, yeah, now it makes sense,” I replied dryly.

“This is a lot, but...” Finn gently took my hand, pressing it warmly between his strong hands. It was surprising and wonderful, and I swallowed hard to try and calm my stomach. “I want you to come with me, Wendy. You need to find out who you are.”

“I-I...” I stumbled. His proximity and his touch were making it harder for me to come up with a convincing argument, but I knew I had one. “I can’t. My brother would never let me.”

“He’s not your brother,” Finn replied quickly, and that stung a little bit.

I had always questioned my mother and myself, and even recently I had been questioning whether or not Matt was really my brother. But I had never

said it aloud, and I had never really believed that he couldn't be, even when I believed that I wasn't exactly human.

"That doesn't matter," I brushed him off. "Matt still wouldn't let me go."

"I can take care of him," Finn offered helpfully, and I looked aghast at the idea. "Or you could. You could use persuasion on him."

"No!" I shook my head, appalled. "I can't just leave him. Even if I believed you, which I'm not saying that I do, I can't." I chewed my lip and looked apologetically at Finn.

"I'd like to say that I understood, but I don't." Finn sighed resignedly. Letting go of my hand, he leaned back a bit and watched me. "I can say that I am disappointed." He looked away from me, thinking of something.

"I'm sorry," I said meekly.

"You shouldn't be sorry." He ran a hand through his black hair and looked at me again. "I won't be going to school anymore. It seems unnecessary, and I don't want to disturb your studies. You should at least get an education."

"What? Don't you need one?" I was too shocked to mask how upset that prospect made me. My heart dropped to the pit of my stomach as I realized that this might be the last time I saw Finn.

"Wendy," Finn gave a small humorless laugh. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew. I'm twenty-years-old. I'm done with my education."

"Why were you..." I trailed off, already figuring out the answer to my question.

"I was just there to keep track of you, and I've found you." Finn dropped his eyes and sighed. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper and handed it to me. "Here. It's my address and phone number. So you can get a hold of me, if you change your mind."

"So you're not leaving?" I asked, perplexed. His mission was done, and a failure, so I thought he would just ride off into the sunset.

"You're still here, so I am too. At least for awhile," Finn explained.

"How long?"

“It depends on things.” Finn shook his head, as if he didn’t really know. “Everything about your situation is so different. It’s hard to say anything with certainty.”

“You keep saying that. That I’m different. What does that mean? What are you talking about?”

“Usually, when changelings get about eighteen, a little after, they have some signs and symptoms of what’s happening,” Finn explained. “Your abilities start to kick in with puberty, but they’re so faint, you don’t notice. They get their full force by the time you’re twenty. So a tracker comes, finds you, and when they explain what’s going, it’s a relief. Because you knew you were different.”

He looked at me earnestly, and I did understand that feeling to an extent. It was hard to swallow, but as soon as he had told me that I wasn’t my mother’s child, it had been like all the pieces of my life had suddenly fit together. When I actually thought about it and realized how implausible that was, though, I couldn’t completely believe it.

“So why did you come for me now? And why did you wait so long to tell me? You’ve been around for a couple weeks,” I pointed out.

“You moved more than any other.” Finn nodded to the house. “We’d lost you a couple times already, and they were afraid that something might be the matter. So I was here, monitoring you until you were ready, and at the dance, I thought you might be.” He exhaled deeply. “I guess I was wrong.”

“Can’t you just ‘persuade’ me to go along?” I asked, and some part of me hoped he could. I really did want to go with him, but there was too much I couldn’t get over.

“I can’t,” Finn shook his head. “I can’t do that.”

“Wendy?” The front door swung open, and Matt leaned out, interrupting my conversation with Finn.

I became acutely aware of how close we were sitting together. Our knees were nearly touching, and Finn had actually leaned in towards as me. As

soon as Matt came out, I automatically moved back a bit, and Finn saw that, so he mimicked it and sat up straighter.

“Uh, yeah?” I felt kind of dazed, but I was starting to realize that was just the effect Finn had on me. Matt was glaring at both of us, and I wanted to glare back, but I couldn’t muster it.

“Don’t you have homework?” Matt made it sound like a command.

“I don’t know,” I floundered.

“Why don’t you come in anyway.” That definitely was an order.

“Okay.” I waited a second for him to go back inside so I could say good-bye to Finn privately, but Matt was going to stay planted in the door until I went in. Sheepishly, I turned to Finn. “Thanks for stopping over.”

“Just think about things.” Finn stood up, and I looked up into his dark eyes. I would be devastated if I never got to see them again, and just knowing that he was leaving now made me want to cry. He pointed to the piece of paper in my hands. “Keep in touch. Okay?”

“I will,” I promised, and a trace of his smile played on his lips.

Finn nodded at Matt when he walked past him, who just glowered in return. I stayed on the porch until Finn drove away, and Matt kept his post, as if Finn would suddenly dash up and kidnap me the second he went inside. I rubbed the paper in my hands and wondered how long I could go before I talked to him.

“Are you coming?” Matt asked, not unkindly.

I was staring down at the note, already feeling the sting of Finn’s absence. Why wouldn’t I go with him? I was more attracted to him than I had ever been to anyone, and I don’t mean just physically. In general, people didn’t interest me, but he did. He was promising me a life where I fit in, where I was special, and maybe most importantly, a life with him. What was I staying here for? It wasn’t just because of Matt. I would have to leave him eventually, and it would probably be fairly soon, with or without Finn.

The problem was that I just wasn’t convinced, not entirely. I had always been a logical person, and I very rarely let emotion guide me. Okay.

That's not true at all. I let anger and annoyance dictate everything, but I had never let longing cloud anything before. It was a new kind of emotion, so I didn't trust it or my own judgment. If there were just some proof, I could go happily with Finn...

"Wendy?" Matt repeated.

"Hey, Matt?" I stared down at the paper. "Are you busy this afternoon?"

"I don't think so..." Matt answered tentatively. He had come out of the house and walked over to me. "Why? What's on your mind?"

"I was thinking... I'd like to go visit Mom."

"Absolutely not!" Matt was livid. "Why would you even want that? That's so completely out of the question. No way, Wendy. That's just obscene."

I looked up at him, staring into his angry, confused blue eyes, and tried to remember what I had done with Patrick and Maggie. According to Finn, I had probably been using persuasion for awhile, but I had never purposely done it before. It had always been something accidental. And if I could use it, I hadn't been doing it long enough to be that good at it, and Matt was very adamant against me seeing my mother, so he might not be able to be convinced even if I did have it.

Staring directly in his eyes, I just repeating the same thoughts over and over. *I want to see Mom. Take me to see her. Please. I want to see her.* His expression was hard, but eventually, it started to soften around the edges. It took longer than it had with Patrick or Maggie. If somebody were watching, it would've been much more obvious that something was going on.

"I'll take you to see Mom." Matt sounded like he was talking in his sleep, and I instantly felt guilty for what I was doing. It was manipulative and cruel. But I wasn't just doing it to see if I could. I needed to see Mom, and this was the only way I could do it.

"Okay," I stood up quickly and carefully tucked Finn's note in my pocket. "Let's go before Maggie asks too many questions. Or any for that matter."

Matt nodded. He went into the house to grab his car keys and let Maggie know that we were going for a “drive.” I felt nervous and sick, and I knew Matt would be irate once he figured out what was going on. I didn’t know how long this persuasion would last. We might not even make it to the hospital where Mom lived, but I had to try. We got in the car, and Matt started driving me to see my mother for the first time in over eleven years.

There were several times throughout the long car ride that Matt seemed to become aware that he was doing something he would never do. He would start ranting about how terrible Mom was and that he couldn't believe he'd let me talk him into this. Somehow, it never occurred to him to turn around, but maybe it *couldn't* occur to him.

"She's a horrible person!" Matt snarled as we approached the state hospital. I could see the internal battle waged underneath his grimace and his tortured blue eyes. His hand was locked tightly on the steering wheel, but it looked like he was trying to pull it away and he couldn't.

Guilt flushed over me again, but I tried to push it away. I didn't want to hurt him, and controlling him like this was reprehensible. Before when I'd done it, it had been accidental, but I had done this knowing exactly what I was doing and how it would make him feel. The only real comfort I had was that I wasn't doing anything wrong. I wanted to see my mom, and I had every right to. Matt was just being overzealous about his protective duties, once again.

"She can't do anything to hurt me," I reminded him for the hundredth time. "She's locked up and medicated. I'll be fine."

"It's not like she's going to strangle you or anything," Matt allowed, but there was an edge to his voice where he hadn't completely ruled out that possibility. "She's just... a bad person. I don't know what you hope to gain from seeing her!"

"I just need to," I said softly and looked out at the window.

I had never been to the hospital, but it wasn't exactly as I imagined. My entire basis for it was Arkham Asylum, so I had always pictured an imposing brick structure with lightning always flashing just behind it. It was raining lightly and the skies were overcast as we pulled up, but that was the only thing similar to the psychiatric hospital of my fantasies. Nestled in thick pine forest and

rolling grassy hills, it was a sprawling white building. It looked more like a resort than a hospital.

After Mom had tried to kill me and Matt had tackled her in the kitchen, Maggie had called 911. Mom was hauled off in a police car, still screaming things about me being monstrous, and I was taken away in an ambulance. Charges were brought against my mother, but the case never went to trial. She plead out, claiming she was not guilty by insanity. Matt had been very upset about that, but he had thought that she would be out in no time at all. They had originally given her cross diagnosis of latent postpartum depression and temporary psychosis brought on by the death of my father. With medication and therapy, there had been the general expectation that she would be out in a relatively short amount of time.

Cut to eleven years later where my brother is talking to the security guard so we can get clearance to get inside. From what I understand, she refused to admit any remorse for what she's done. Matt went to visit her once, five years ago, and what I got out of it is that she didn't know she did anything wrong. It was inferred, but never actually spelled out, that there was a fairly good chance that if she got out, she'd do it again.

There was a great deal of bustling about once we finally got inside. A nurse had to call a psychiatrist to see if I would even be able to see her. Matt paced anxiously around me, muttering things about everyone being insane. We waited in a small room filled with plastic chairs and magazines for 45 minutes until the doctor came to meet with me. We had a brief conversation where I assured him that I only wished to speak with her, and he seemed to think it might be beneficial for me to have some closure.

Matt wanted to go back with me to see her, afraid that she would damage me in some way, but the doctor assured him that orderlies would be present and my mother wasn't prone to violence. He eventually relented, much to my relief, because I had just been about use persuasion on him. He couldn't be there when I talked to her. I wanted an honest conversation, and I didn't know how he'd react.

A nurse led me back to an activity room of some kind. They were a few small tables, some of them with half-completed puzzles on them, a couch and a few chairs. On one wall, there was a cabinet overflowing with beat up games and battered puzzles. Plants lined the windows, but otherwise it was deserted. The nurse assured me that my mother would be here soon. I sat down at one of the tables and waited.

A very large, very strong looking orderly brought her into the room. I stood up when she came in, as some kind of misplaced show of respect. She was older than I had expected her to be. In my mind she had stayed frozen the way I saw her last, but she had to be in her mid-forties by now. Her blond hair had turned into a frizzy mess thanks to the years of neglect, and she had it pulled back in a short pony tail. She was model thin, the way she had always been, in a beautifully elegant borderline-anorexic way. A massive blue bathrobe hung on her, frayed and worn, the sleeves hung long down over her hands. Underneath, she wore generic, ill-fitting scrubs. Her skin was pale porcelain, and even without any makeup, she was stunningly beautiful. More than that, she carried this regality with her. It was clear that she had come from money, that she had spent her life on top, ruling her school, her social circles, even her family. Her eyes were an icy blue, staring at me with the same cold indifference they always had.

“They said you were here, but I didn’t believe them,” Mom gave me a wry smirk. She stood a few steps away from me, and I wasn’t sure what to do. The way she looked at me was the same way someone might inspect a particularly heinous looking bug just before they squashed them under their shoe.

“Hi, Mom,” I offered meekly, unable to think of anything better to say.

“Kim,” she corrected me coldly. “My name is Kim. Cut the pretense. I’m not your mother, and we both know it.” She gestured vaguely to the chair I had pushed out behind me and walked over to the table. “Sit. Take a seat.”

“Thanks,” I mumbled, sitting down. She sat down across from me, crossing her legs and leaning back away from me, like I was contagious and she didn’t want to get sick.

“That’s what this is about it, isn’t it?” Mom waved her hand in front of her face, then laid it delicately on the table. Her nails were long and perfect, recently painted with a clear polish. “You’ve finally figured it out. Or have you always known? I never could tell.”

“No, I never knew,” I admitted quietly. “I still don’t know.”

“Look at you. You’re not my daughter,” Mom gave me a contentious look and clicked her tongue. “You don’t know how to dress or walk or even speak. You mutilate your nails.” She pointed her manicured hand at my chewed down fingernails. “And that hair!”

“Your hair isn’t any better,” I countered. My dark curls had been pulled up in their usual bun, but I had actually tried this morning when I was getting ready. I thought it looked pretty good, but apparently, I was wrong.

“Well...” Mom smiled humorlessly. “I work with what I got.” She looked away for a moment, then turned back to me, her icy gaze resting on me. “But what about you? You must have all the styling products in the world. Between Matthew and Maggie, I’m sure you’re spoiled rotten.”

“I get by,” I allowed sourly. She made it sound like I should feel ashamed for the things I had, like I had stolen them. Although, I suppose in her mind, I kind of had.

“Who brought you here anyway?” The idea had just occurred to her, and she glanced behind her, as if she expected to see Matt or Maggie waiting in the wings.

“Matt,” I answered.

“Matthew?” Mom looked genuinely shocked. “There is no way he would condone this. He doesn’t even...” Sadness washed across her face and she shook her head. “He’s never understood. I did what I did to protect him too. I never wanted you to get your claws into him.” She touched at her hair

and tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them back and her stony expression returned.

“He thinks he has to protect me,” I informed her, mostly because I knew it would bother her. Disappointingly, she didn’t look that upset. She just nodded understanding.

“For all his sense and maturity, Matthew can be incredibly naive. He thought of you as some lost, sick puppy he needed to care for.” She brushed a frizzy strand of hair from her forehead and stared off at a spot on the floor. “He loves you because he’s a good man, like his father, and that has always been his weakness.” Then she looked up hopefully. “Is he going to visit me today?”

“No.” I almost felt bad about telling her that, but she smiled bitterly at me and I remembered why she was here.

“You’ve turned him against me. I knew you would. But...” She shrugged emptily. “It doesn’t make things easier, does it?”

“I don’t know.” I leaned in towards her. “Look, M-... Kim. I am here for a reason. I want to know what I am.” I backtracked quickly. “I mean, what you think I am.”

“You’re a changeling,” she said matter-of-factly. “I’m surprised you didn’t know that by now.”

My heart dropped, but I tried to keep my expression neutral. I pressed my hands flat on the table to keep from them shaking. It was just I had suspected, and maybe I had always known. When Finn told me, it had instantly made sense, but I don’t know why hearing it from her made things feel so different. Maybe because she was an objective third-party. Well, she wasn’t that objective, and she was definitely insane, so she probably wasn’t my best source for advice.

“A changeling?” I fought to keep my voice even. “What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Mom snapped, looking at me like I was an idiot. “Changeling! You were changed out for another child! My son was taken and you were put in his place!” Her cheeks reddened with rage and the

orderly took a step closer to her. She held up her hand and fought to keep herself contained.

“Why?” I asked, realizing that I should’ve asked Finn this question days earlier. “Why would anyone do that? Why would they take your baby? What did they do with him?”

“I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing.” She smiled painfully at me and fresh tears were standing in her eyes. Her hands were trembling when she touched her hair and she all but refused to look at me. “You know what you did with him. You know far better than I do.”

“No, I don’t! What are you talking about?” I demanded in a hushed voice. The orderly was giving me a hard look and I had to at least look I wasn’t freaking out.

“You killed him, Wendy!” Mom snarled, that sad smile plastered on her face. She leaned in towards me, her hand clenched into a fist, and I knew she was using all her will power to keep from hurting me. “You *killed* him!”

“Mom...Kim, whatever!” I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. “That doesn’t make any sense. I was just a baby! How could I kill anything?”

“How did you get Matthew to drive you here?” Mom demanded through gritted teeth, and an icy chill ran down my spine. I opened my eyes to see her leaning across the table, her face contorted with unmasked hatred. “He would never drive you here. He would never let you see me. But he did. What did you do to him to make him do it?” I lowered my eyes, unable to even pretend to be innocent. “Maybe that’s exactly what you did to Michael!” Her hands were clenched so tightly that her nails were digging into her, creating little half-moon cuts on her palms.

“I was just a baby,” I insisted without any real conviction. “I couldn’t have... Even if I did, there had to be more people involved. I wouldn’t just pick a family. I mean, I couldn’t! It doesn’t explain anything! Why would anybody take him or hurt him and put me in his place?”

“You were always evil,” Mom ignored my question. “I knew it since the moment I held you in my arms.” She had calmed herself a bit and leaned back

in her chair. "It was in your eyes. They weren't human. They weren't kind or good."

"Then why didn't you just kill me then?" I demanded, growing irritated.

"You were a baby!" Her hands were still shaking and her lips had started to quiver. She was losing the confidence she had walked into the room with. "Well, I thought you were. You know I couldn't be sure." She pressed her lips together tightly, trying to hold back tears.

"What made you so sure?" I asked. "What made you decide that day? On my sixth birthday. Why that day? What happened?"

"You weren't mine. I knew you weren't." She brushed at her eyes to keep the tears from spilling over. "I had known forever. But I just kept thinking about what the day should've been like. With my husband, and my son. Michael should've been six that day, not you. You were a horrible, horrible child, and you were alive. And he was dead. I just... it didn't seem right anymore." She took a deep breath and shook her head. "It still isn't right."

"I was six years old." My voice had started quavering, and I was surprised that this had gotten to me so hard. I had never thought this had bothered me. I know that sounds stupid, but I had never felt anything about her or what happened. But I was wrong, because I felt hurt and scared and nauseous. "*Six-years-old*. Do you understand that? I was a little kid, and you were supposed to be my mother!" Whether she really was or not was irrelevant. I was a child, and she was in charge of raising me. "I had never done anything to anyone! I still haven't! I never even met Michael!"

"You are *lying*!" Mom hissed. "You were always a liar! You're a monster! And I know you're doing things to Matthew! Just leave him alone! He's a good boy!" She reached across the table and grabbed my wrist painfully, and the orderly came up behind her. "Take what you want! Take anything! Just leave Matthew alone!"

"Kimberly, come on." The orderly put his strong hand on her arm, and she tried to pull away from him. "Kimberly!"

“Leave him alone!” Mom shouted again and the orderly started pulling her up. She was fighting against him, screaming at me. “Do you hear me, Wendy? I will get out of here someday! And if you’ve hurt that boy, I will finish the job I started!”

“That’s enough!” The orderly bellowed and started dragging her out of the room.

“You’re not human, Wendy! And I know it!” That was the last thing she yelled before he carried her out of my sight.

I sat in the room long after she’d gone, trying to catch my breath and get myself under control. Matt couldn’t see me like that. I really, really thought I was going to throw up, but I managed to keep it down. My whole body was shaking.

Everything was true. I was a changeling. I wasn’t human. She wasn’t my mother. She was just Kim, a woman who had lost her grasp on everything when she realized I wasn’t her child. I had been switched out for her son, Michael, and I had no idea what had happened to him. Maybe he was dead. Maybe I really had killed him, or someone else had. Maybe someone like Finn.

She was convinced that I was a monster, and I had nothing to argue that with. In my life, I had caused nothing but pain. I had ruined Matt’s life, and I was still. Not only did he constantly have to uproot himself for me and spend every minute worrying about me, but I was manipulating and controlling him, and I couldn’t say for sure how long that had been going on. I couldn’t fully understand the long-term effects of it either. Maybe he didn’t even really care for me. When I was very small, I could’ve used persuasion on him and convinced him that he needed to take care of me.

Maybe it would’ve been better if she had killed me when I was six. Or better yet, when I was still a baby. Then I wouldn’t have been able to hurt anybody.

When I finally went out to the waiting room, Matt rushed over to hug me. I stood there, but I didn’t hug him back. I felt bad for even taking it. He inspected me to make sure I was alright. He had heard there was some kind of

scuffle and was petrified that something had happened to me. I just nodded and got out of there as fast as I could.

“So...” Matt began on the drive home. I rested my forehead against the cold glass of the car window and refused to look at him. I had barely even spoken since we left. “What did you say to her?”

“Things,” I replied vaguely.

“No, really,” he pressed. “What happened?”

“I tried talking to her, she got upset,” I sighed. “She said I was a monster. You know, the usual.”

“I don’t know why you even wanted to see her. She is a terrible person.”

“Oh, she’s not that bad.” My breath fogged up the window and I started drawing stars and hearts in the mist. “She’s really worried about you. She’s afraid I’m going to hurt you.”

“Oh,” Matt scoffed. “That woman is insane! She obviously is since she lives there, but... You can’t listen to her, Wendy. You aren’t letting anything she said get to you, are you?”

“No,” I lied. Pulling my sleeve up over my hand, I erased my drawings on the window and sat up straighter. “How do you know?”

“What?”

“That she is insane. That... I’m not a monster.” I twisted nervously at my thumb ring and stared at Matt, who just shook his head. “I’m being serious. What if I am bad?”

Matt suddenly put on his turning signal and pulled his car over to the shoulder. Rain pounded down on the windows as other cars sped by us on the freeway. He turned to face me completely, putting an arm on the back of his seat.

“Wendy Louella Everly, there is nothing bad about you. *Nothing*,” Matt emphasized solemnly. “That woman is completely insane. I don’t know why, but she was never a mother to you and you don’t need to worry about the things she says. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“Be serious, Matt,” I shook my head. “I’ve gotten expelled from every school I’ve ever gone to. I’m unruly and whiny and stubborn and so picky. I know that you and Maggie have to struggle with me all the time.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re bad. You’ve had a *really* traumatic childhood, and yeah, you’re still working through some things, but you are not bad,” Matt insisted. “You are a strong-willed teenager who isn’t afraid of anything. That’s all.”

“At some point that has to stop being an excuse! Sure she tried to kill me, but I have to take responsibility for who I am as a person.” What I was saying was true, and the painful knot in my stomach only seemed to grow larger.

“You are!” Matt actually smiled at that. “Since we’ve moved here, you have shown so much promise. Your grades are going up, and you’re making friends. And even if that makes me a little uncomfortable, I know it’s a good thing for you. You’re growing up, Wendy, and you’re going to be okay.”

“Okay,” I nodded, unable to think of an argument for that.

“I know I don’t say it enough, but I’m proud of you, and I love you.” Matt pushed a strand of hair behind my ear and bent over so he could kiss the top of my head. It was something he hadn’t done since I was little, and it stirred something inside me. I closed my eyes and refused to cry. He straightened back up in his seat and looked at me seriously. “Okay? Are you okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I forced a smile at him.

“Good.” He pulled back out in traffic, continuing the drive home.

My heart squeezed painfully in my chest, but I had no idea what to do.

It was after midnight when I was certain they had both fallen asleep. I lay in bed for a long time, pretending to be asleep myself, and debating about what to do. On one hand, I knew that Matt would be devastated if I left, and I knew nothing about Finn or where he would take me. On the other hand, I was destroying Matt's life, and I had never fit in anywhere in my life. What had finally pushed me over the edge was the conviction that Matt had when said he loved me and that I wasn't bad. The truth was that I didn't know if I was bad or not. I didn't really know what I was capable of, and maybe I had killed Michael the way Kim kept insisting. And Matt deserved something more than that. He needed a life of his own that wasn't burdened by me constantly.

I packed a small bag, grabbing just the essentials. Some clothes, underwear, etc. I thought about leaving a note for Matt, but I didn't know what I could possibly say. "Sorry, Matt, I'm not your real sister. I'm actually a troll, and I'm going to discover my family. Best of luck." Grabbing Finn's note out of my pants pocket, I climbed out my window and prepared to shimmy down the tree like Finn had the other day. Unfortunately, I wasn't anywhere near as graceful as he was, and I fell to the ground. Thankfully, I wasn't seriously injured.

Finn only lived a few blocks away from me, but I should've guessed that. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on me and all. It was the upstairs apartment in a large house, and his Cadillac in the driveway assured me it was his place. The front door looked just like an ordinary house, and I felt weird just walking inside. His note claimed that once inside, I would find a separate staircase that led me up, but it was strange walking into an unknown house. Right inside the doorway, there were doors on either side, leading to two separate downstairs apartments, and a vast staircase leading up, and I slowly climbed up.

Chewing my lip, I knocked tentatively on his apartment door. It was very late, and I wasn't sure if he would be up or if he was home. Then something else dawned me. I wasn't even sure if he lived alone. Maybe he had family or a roommate or worse – a girlfriend – living with him. My stomach twisted and just when I had convinced myself that I should leave, Finn opened the door.

His hair was messy, and he was wearing a white tee shirt and plaid pajama pants. He still sported that unshaven look that made him look devilishly handsome. It was odd because it hadn't really occurred to me that he would sleep. I mean, obviously he would, but once he'd confessed to me that he was a Trylle tracker, I had kind of assumed that he would forgo sleep to keep a 24-hour watch on me.

"Sorry to wake you," I apologized sheepishly, and then gestured to the steps behind me. "I can go if-"

"No, no!" Finn took a step back and opened the door wider. "Come in. Please."

"Sorry," I repeated sneaking in past him. He smelled delicious, even in his sleep, and I was starting to wonder if that was just his natural scent and not cologne.

His apartment was large and spacious, and it looked fairly expensive, but he had done nothing with it. The living room had a couch and a table with a few books stacked on it. The kitchen had nothing at all in the way of furniture, and I couldn't see the bedroom or bathroom from where I was at, but I imagined they were similarly decorated.

"There's no need to be sorry." He motioned to the couch. "Have a seat. Do you need anything? I can get you water or something."

"No, I'm okay." I sat on the couch and set my bag on the floor by my feet. Finn was still standing, studying me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure," Finn nodded.

"Am I a monster?" My voice cracked embarrassingly.

“What do you mean?” Confused, he sat down on the coffee table across from me.

“I mean... am I a monster?” I stared down at my hands. “Is that what it means to be Trylle?”

“Do you think I’m a monster?” Finn countered reasonably.

I looked up into his dark eyes. Sometimes, he seemed cold and cruel, but I didn’t think that was even who really was. Something about being a tracker made him more in control of himself, making him indifferent and stoic. But it had never occurred to me that he was a monster. A wave of comfort rolled over me. Even I was bad, I wasn’t inherently so. It wasn’t built into my DNA because I was Trylle.

“No, I don’t,” I smiled in relief.

“Is that why you came tonight?” He looked down at the bag by my feet. “Or is there something else?”

“I think...” I bit my lip. “I think I’d like to go. To wherever it is that I’m supposed to be.”

“Are you certain?” Finn eyed me up. “This afternoon, you were completely opposed to the idea. What happened to change your mind?”

“I saw my mother. Er, well... the woman who supposed to be my mother.” I shook my head, hating the way this all sounded. “What do you call her? Is there a name for her?”

“Usually, her name will suffice,” Finn replied, and I felt like an idiot.

“Yeah. Of course.” I took a deep breath. “Anyway I went and saw Kim.” I looked up at him. “Do you know about her? I mean... how much do you really know about me?”

“Honestly, not that much.” Finn seemed to disapprove of his own lack of knowledge. “You were incredibly elusive. It was rather disconcerting.”

“So you don’t...” I trailed off, realizing with dismay that I was on the verge of tears. “She knew I wasn’t her daughter. She had always known, and she had...” My lips quivered and I didn’t understand where this was coming from. The stress and the ups and downs of the last few days must’ve really gotten to

me. I had told this story a hundred times before, and I had never cried when I talked about. “When I was six, she tried to kill me. She... um... she cut me with the knife she used to cut my birthday cake...” Tears slid down my cheeks, and I wiped at them quickly. “She had always told me that I was a monster, that I was evil. And I guess I had always believed her.”

“You’re not evil,” Finn insisted earnestly, and for some reason, I started sobbing. He moved on the couch so he was next to me and pulled me roughly into his arms. I pressed my head against his chest, letting my tears soak his shirt. “This will all make sense soon. There’s somewhere you belong.”

He held me in his arms until I calmed down, and I was surprised to find how much I enjoyed the feel of it. I had never been one that enjoyed physical contact, but I had never felt so safe and protected as I did in his arms.

“I’m really sorry,” I sniffled. As soon as I stopped crying, I pulled away from him and wiped at my face. “I normally don’t cry. Not ever. I don’t know what’s gotten into me.”

“No, it’s alright. You’ve been going through a lot lately,” Finn reassured me.

I pushed my palm against my eyes to dry them. Taking a deep breath, I looked over at him. Even though he had retracted his arms, he was still sitting close to me, his knee gently pressed against my leg. When I looked at him, he seemed to become aware of this and moved his leg away.

“What does it mean?” I asked, and he cocked his head. “To be Trylle. That’s it, right? That’s what I am?”

“You are.” Finn looked at me for a moment, then nodded and took a breath before getting to his feet. “And that is a very long answer, one that I think is best explained by your mother.”

“My mother?” I had spent so long thinking of Kim as my mother and I didn’t understand what more she would know about this, then I realized he meant my *real* mother. “My mother is here?”

“No, she isn’t.” He glanced at a clock hanging on the wall. “So we should get going so you can talk to her and get everything in order.”

“Go where?” I stood up out of surprise.

“Förening,” Finn explained. “It’s where I live – where you’ll live.” He gave a small smile, meant to ease my concerns, and it did, a little. “Unfortunately, it’s about a seven hour drive.”

“Where is it?”

“It’s in Minnesota, along the Mississippi River. It’s in a very secluded area.” He gestured to the hallway. “I’m going to pack some of my things so we can go. I’m assuming you have everything you need.”

“Yeah, but we’re going *now*?” It was almost one in the morning. That didn’t seem like the most opportune time to start a lengthy road trip, especially considering I had already spent four hours roundtrip to see Kim.

“Yes. You have much to discuss and learn, and we don’t have that much time before your... ‘family’ notices you are missing and searches for you.” Finn looked vaguely exasperated. “You are under eighteen, so once again, that presents more challenges. This could technically be construed as kidnapping, so it’s better if we’re in the safety of Förening before they realize you’re gone.”

“Oh.” I pulled at my sleeve, thinking of how frantic Matt would be when he tried to wake me in the morning and found me gone. I wondered if he’d blame himself and how much time he would spend looking for me. Maybe I should’ve left a note.

“Are you ready?” Finn asked pointedly.

“Um, yeah. Yes.” I nodded and pushed Matt out of my mind. “I was just... worrying about sleep.”

“You can sleep on the ride,” Finn said. “And I’ll be fine.”

He disappeared down the hall to his room to pack up his things, and I gulped down my concerns. This is what I wanted. More than that, I needed to leave Matt alone, and I needed to find my real family. I needed to find out who – and what – I really was, and I couldn’t do that staying here. Besides that, Finn would be there, and that counted for more than it probably should have.

When he came out, he had changed into jeans and a slim fitted sweater and carried an oversized duffle bag. He grabbed a few bottles of water from the fridge. The books on his table, which appeared to be the entire works of Kurt Vonnegut, he scooped up and shoveled into his bag, along with the bottles of water. After he finished, he slung the bag over his shoulder and looked at me expectantly.

“Ready?” Finn asked.

“Yeah, but what about all your stuff?” It wasn’t that nice of stuff, but there had to be more of his stuff laying about his apartment than just what fit in one duffel bag.

“It’s not really my stuff.” He motioned to the couch. “This is just cheaper than a hotel, and this is just junk, really. Everything that’s really mine is in my bag or at home.”

“You don’t really live here,” I reminded myself. It was still hard getting used to the idea that he was an adult doing his job, and not just some misunderstood classmate. “How often do you do this?”

“As often as I need to.” Finn opened the front door and waited for me. “We need to get going.”

I grabbed my bag and walked out the door. When we got out to his car, he took my bag from me and put it in the trunk. He didn’t say anything as we drove away from his house, from this town, from my life. I thought I would be too anxious and excited to sleep, but after about an hour into the drive, I started nodding off. I fought to stay awake until I realized it would just be quicker if I slept.

When I opened my eyes, the sky had started to lighten. I had curled up on the seat with my knees pressed against my chest, so my whole body felt sore and ached. Looking around, I sat up and stretched, trying work the kinks out of my limbs and neck. I didn’t recognize any of the scenery, but I had never been here before. Finn glanced at me, and he looked surprisingly awake. I’m not sure how much sleep he had gotten before I showed up at his place, but I would’ve thought a drive like this would be wearing on him.

“I thought you were going to sleep the whole ride,” Finn mused.

“How far away are we?” I yawned and slouched low in the seat, resting my knees against the dashboard.

“About an hour or so.” He flipped open the arm rest between us and pulled out a bottle of water and offered it to me. “Thirsty?”

“Yeah, thanks.” I took it from him and took a long drink. Sleeping always made me incredibly thirsty. “So what is this Förening place we’re going to?”

“It’s a town, sort of,” Finn said. “They consider it to be more of a compound, but in the way the Kennedy’s have a compound. Not like a military base or anything. It’s just a glorified gated community, really.”

“So do people live there too?” I stretched my neck and looked over at him.

“Not in the sense you’re talking about.” He hesitated before he continued and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “It’s entirely Trylle, trackers, and mänsklig. There’s about five thousand that live there in total, and we have gas stations, a small grocery store, and a school. It’s just a very small, quiet community.”

“Holy hell.” My eyes widened. “You mean there’s just a whole town of... of... trolls? In Minnesota? And nobody ever noticed?”

“We live very quietly,” Finn reiterated. “And there are ways to make people not notice.”

“You sound like you’re in the mafia,” I commented, and Finn smiled crookedly. “Do you guys make people sleep with the fishes or something?”

“Persuasion is a very powerful ability,” he said and his smile disappeared.

“So you have persuasion?” I asked carefully. Something about it seemed to upset him, and as I expected, he shook his head. “Why not?”

“I’m a tracker. Our abilities are different.” He glanced over at me, and sensing that I would just ask more questions, he went on. “They’re more suited for tracking, obviously. Persuasion isn’t that useful in that arena.”

“What is useful?” I pressed, and he sighed wearily.

“It’s hard to explain. They’re not even real abilities in the sense of the word.” He stared out the windshield and shifted in his seat. “It’s more instinct and intuition. It’s easier for me to get a sense of who I’m following and stay on them. Like the way a bloodhound follows a scent, except its not actually something I can smell. It’s just something I know.” He looked over to see if I was getting it, but I just stared at him blankly. “For example, I knew you were at my door before I opened it. And when you went to visit that woman last night—” (that woman being someone who I had thought was my mother my entire life) “-I knew you were far away and I knew something was distressing you.”

“You can tell when I’m upset? Even when you’re not around me?” My heart started to panic, realizing the implications of this. He could tell when I was distressed, he could tell when if I was happy, or maybe harboring feelings of lust.

“As long as I’m tracking you, yes,” Finn nodded.

“I thought you said you weren’t psychic,” I muttered.

“No, I said I couldn’t read minds, and I can’t.” Then with an exasperated sigh, he added. “I never have any idea what *you’re* thinking.” He noticed my discomfort, so he continued. “I can’t tell everything you’re feeling. Just distress and fear. I need to be alert to situations when you’re in danger so I can help you. My job is to keep you safe and bring you home.”

“How do you know how to track me? Before you find me, I mean. You said you only tune into my feelings when you’re tracking me. How does that work?”

“Your mother has things from when you were baby. A lock of hair usually,” Finn elaborated, and I felt an odd warm feeling inside. My mother had things from me. Kim had never treasured anything about me, but someone out there had. She had taken a lock of hair when I was born and kept it safe all these years. “I get a vibe from that, and they usually have a general idea about where you are. You were trickier, but most people are fairly easy to find. Then once I’m around you, I start to get a real scent of you, and that’s it.”

“Is that why you stared at me all the time?” I thought of the way his eyes were always on me, and the way I could never make sense of his expression.

“Yes.” There was something about his answer. He wasn’t lying exactly, but he was holding something back. I thought about pressing him further but there were so many other things I wanted to know.

“So... how often do you do this?” I returned to the question he had refused to answer before we left his apartment. I might have forgotten if he hadn’t seemed too reluctant to answer.

“Why do you want to know?” Finn asked.

“Why don’t you want to answer?” I challenged him. He thought for a minute, but apparently didn’t come up with something to counter it because he answered.

“You are my eleventh.” He looked at me to gauge my response, so I kept my face as expressionless as possible.

I was a little surprised by his answer. It seemed like an incredibly time consuming process, for one thing. For me, he had lived in the same town as me for over two weeks, set up an apartment, and somehow enrolled in high school. He seemed fairly young to have done that eleven times. Plus, it was unnerving to think about there being eleven other changelings out there. Eleven other kids who had gone through the same things as me.

“How long have you been doing this?” I asked, trying to figure out how he had time for all of this.

“Since I was fifteen,” Finn answered, further shocking me.

“Fifteen?” I shook my head. “No way. You’re trying to tell me that at fifteen-years-old, your parents sent you out into the world to track and find kids? And these eighteen-year-old kids, they trusted you and believed you?”

“I am very good at what I do,” Finn replied matter-of-factly.

“Still. That just seems... unreal.” I couldn’t wrap my mind around it. Admittedly, he did seem intelligent and determined, but at fifteen, I had no self-

control. If I had been given a credit card and sent across the country, I wouldn't have come back. "Did they all come back with you?"

"Yes, of course," he said simply.

"Do they always? With everyone, I mean?" I continued. I had considered not going with him, and I tried to imagine how I would've reacted if it had been somebody else other than Finn. I had never met any other trackers to compare him to, but it still seemed unlikely that I would've went off with just anybody.

"No, they don't. They usually do, but not always."

"But they always do with you?" I persisted.

"Yes." Finn looked over at me again. "You did. Why do you find it so hard to believe?"

"No, it's not that." I took another drink from water and tried to think about what was bothering me. "Wait. You were fifteen? That means that you were never... you weren't a changeling. Is everyone? How does this work?"

"Trackers are never changelings." He rubbed the back of his neck and pursed his lips. "I think it's best if your mother explains the changelings to you. Its complex and I don't know all the details."

"How come trackers aren't ever changelings?" I questioned.

"We need to spend our lives being trained to be a tracker," Finn said. "And our youth is an asset. It's much easier to get close to a teenager when you are a teenager than it is when you're forty."

"A big part of what you do is building trust," I remarked, eyeing him up with new suspicions.

"Yes, it is," Finn admitted.

"So at the dance, when you were being a total dick to me. That was you building trust?" I asked him pointedly. For a split second, he looked pained, but his normal emotionless expression returned.

"No. That was me putting a distance between us." His eyes were too fixed on the road and his expression hardened. "I shouldn't have asked you to

dance. I was trying to correct the error. I needed you to trust me, but anything more would be misleading.”

“I see.”

The nice things he said to me had been to gain my trust. Everything that had transpired between us had just been because he was trying to get me to the compound. He had been keeping me safe, getting me to like him, and when he noticed my crush developing, he had tried to put me in my place. It stung painfully, so I just swallowed hard and stared out the window.

“I’m sorry if I’ve hurt you,” Finn said quietly, noticing my distress. I could’ve lied to him, but that would’ve been pointless. He knew when I was upset, even if it wasn’t so clearly written on my face.

“Don’t worry about,” I replied icily. “You were just doing your job.”

“I know that you’re being facetious, but I was. I still am.”

“Well, you’re very good at it.” I crossed my arms and stared out the window. I didn’t feel much like talking anymore. There were still a million questions I had about everything, but I’d rather wait and talk to them with somebody else, anybody else.

The scenery had started giving away to tall tree-lined bluffs. The car rolled up and down through the hills and valleys, and it really was stunningly beautiful. Eventually, Finn slowed and we turned, driving steeply to the top of a bluff. The road curved down, winding through the trees, and through them, I could see the Mississippi River cutting through the bluffs.

A large metal gate blocked our path, but when we got to it, a guard nodded at Finn and waved us through. Once through, I saw beautiful houses dotted along the bluffs, mostly obscured by the trees. It was an odd sensation. I felt like there were more homes than what I could actually see. Everyone of them appeared luxurious and perfectly poised to make the best of the view.

We pulled up in front of a massive house perched precariously on the edge of the bluff. The driveway made a half-circle in front of it, with a grand fountain. It was pure white, with long vines growing up beautifully over it. The back, which faced the river, was made entirely of windows, and it seemed to be

held up by weak supports. While stunningly gorgeous, the house looked as if it would fall off the edge at any moment.

“What’s this?” I took a break from gaping at the house to look back at Finn. He smiled at me in the way that sent shivers through me.

“This is it,” Finn smiled. “Welcome home, Wendy.”

I had come from money, but it had never been anything like this. This was aristocratic. Finn carried my bag for me as we walked up to the house. When he rang the doorbell, it was one of those tremendous bonging sounds. This had to be the most beautiful house I had ever seen. I couldn't believe that I'd truly come from this, and if I had, why would I have ever left? I had never felt so small or ordinary in my entire life.

With a house like this, I had expected a butler to answer the door. Instead, it was just a kid. He was about my age, with sandy hair cascading across his forehead, and he was very attractive. Which made sense, because I couldn't believe that anything ugly ever came from a house like this. It was too perfect. He seemed confused and surprised at first, but when he saw Finn, an understanding came to him and he smiled broadly.

"Oh my god. You must be Wendy." He opened the massive front door so we could come in. Finn let me go in first, which made me nervous, and I felt embarrassed with the way this kid was smiling at me. He was dressed like any other normal kid I had gone to school with, at least in the private schools, and I found that weird. As if he would run around in a tux first thing in the morning.

"Um, yeah," I mumbled awkwardly.

"Oh, sorry, I'm Rhys." He touched his chest, gesturing to himself, then turned back to Finn. "We weren't expecting you this soon."

"Things happen," Finn explained noncommittally.

"I'd really love to stay and talk, but I'm already running late for school." Rhys glanced around and looked apologetically at us. "Elora is down in the drawing room. You can get yourself there, right?"

"I can," Finn nodded.

"Alright. Sorry. I would show you down there if I could." Rhys smiled sheepishly and picked up his messenger bag lying by the front door. "It was really nice meeting you, Wendy. I'm sure I'll be seeing a lot more of you."

Once he hurried out the door, I took a moment to take in my surroundings. The floors were marble and there was a giant, crystal chandelier hanging above us. From where I was standing, I could see the breathtaking view through the windowed back wall of the house. It was all floor to ceiling glass, and all I could see were the tops of trees and the river plummeting below us. It was enough to give me vertigo, and I was on the other side of the house.

“Come on,” Finn instructed. He started walking ahead of me, turning down a decadently furnished hall, and I scampered after him.

“Who was that?” I whispered, as if the walls could hear me. They were lined with pictures, a few of which I recognized as being my master painters.

“Rhys.”

“Yeah, I know but... is he my brother?” I asked. I had already decided that he was foxy, so I really hoped that he wasn’t.

“No.” That was all Finn would say on the subject.

Abruptly, he turned into a room. It was the corner of the house, so two of the walls were entirely glass. One interior wall had a fireplace, and hanging above it was the portrait of an attractive, older gentleman. The other interior wall was lined with books. The room was filled with elegant, expensive looking furniture, and an easel in front of the window. A velvet chaise lounge was poised in front of the fireplace, and a woman laid on it, her back to us. Her dress was dark and flowing, just like her black hair that hung down her back.

“Elora?” Finn said cautiously, and I got the sense that he was intimidated by her. This was as unnerving as it was surprising. He didn’t seem like he could be intimidated by anyone.

When she turned to look at us, I forgot to breathe. She was much older than I had expected, in her fifties probably, but there was something stunningly elegant and beautiful about her. Her eyes were dark and large, and in her youth, she had probably been unbearably attractive. As it was, I could hardly believe that she was real.

“Finn!” Her voice was angelic and clear, and her surprise was endearing. With a graceful move, she swiftly sat up, and Finn did a small bow to

her. It confused me, but I clumsily tried to copy it, and this caused her to laugh. She looked at Finn, but gestured to me. "Is this her?"

"Yes. It is." There was a hint of pride in his voice. He had brought me here, and I was starting to realize that must have been a very special request.

"Oh my." Elora smiled wistfully at me and got to her feet.

Poised and regal, she was absolutely captivating. The length of her skirt swirled around her feet making it seem more like she floated than actually walked. Once in front of me, she inspected me carefully, gesturing for me to turn around so she could see all of me. When I had finished, she smiled appreciatively at me.

"You are lovely," Elora sounded almost awed by me, and I felt a blush redden my cheeks. "It's Wendy, isn't it?"

"Yes, ma'am," I smiled nervously at her.

"What an ordinary name for such an extraordinary girl." She looked displeased for a moment, then turned to Finn. "Excellent work. You can be excused while I talk to her. Stay close by, though. I'll call when I need you."

"Yes." Finn set down my bag and did another small bow before leaving the room. His level of reverence made me uncomfortable. I wasn't sure how to act around her.

"I'm Elora, and I won't expect you to call me any different. At first, this is all so much to get used to. I remember when I first came back." She smiled and gave a light shake of her head. "It was a very confusing time." I nodded, unsure of what else to do, and she gestured expansively to the room. "Sit. We have much to talk about."

"Thanks." Uncertainly, I took a seat on the edge of the sofa, afraid that if I really sat down on it I would break it or something.

Elora went back to the chaise lounge where she laid on her side, letting her dress flow around her. She held her head up with her hand and watched me with intense fascination. Her eyes were dark and beautiful, but there was something familiar about them in a weird way. They reminded me of an eagle's eyes or wild animal trapped in a cage.

“I’m not sure if Finn has explained it to you, but I am your mother,” Elora said conversationally.

It was impossible. I wanted to correct her. There must be some mistake. Nothing as stunning and elegant as that could spawn me. I was clumsy and awkward and impulsive. Her hair was like silk, and as it had been pointed out to me before, my hair was like a Brillo pad. There was no way that I was related to her. There must’ve been an error somewhere along the lines.

“Ah. I see he did not,” Elora mused. “From your bewildered expression, I take it you don’t even believe me. But let me assure you, there is no mistaking who you are. I personally chose the Everly family for you and delivered you to them myself. Finn is the best tracker we have, so there is no way you could be anyone else but my daughter.”

“I’m sorry,” I stumbled out an apology. “I didn’t mean to question you. I just...”

“I understand. You’re still used your to normal human way of being. That will all change soon,” Elora promised. “Did Finn explain anything to you about Trylle?”

“Not really,” I admitted carefully, afraid that I might get him in trouble.

“I’m certain you have many questions, but let me explain everything to you, and if you still have questions, you can ask me when I’m done.” Elora had a coldness to her voice, and I doubted I’d ever be able to question her on anything.

“Trylle are, to the layman, a troll, but that term is antiquated and demeaning, and as you can tell, it doesn’t do us justice at all.” Elora gestured to the expanse of the room, all her grace and luxury, and I nodded. “We are merely beings closely related to humans, but more in tune with ourselves. We have abilities, intelligence, and beauty that far surpass that of the human, but we have much fewer numbers. We keep to ourselves and try to ensure our way of life.

“Our way of life is relatively simple. There is an order to how we do things,” Elora went on. “And I am ensured with the responsibility of keeping

that order. Again, the term isn't entirely right, but I am the Queen." She paused letting me take it in. "Meaning you are the Princess." I wanted to ask her a question or refute her but she held up her hand to silence me. "You are my only child, the last of my legacy.

"There are two important distinctions to our lifestyle as Trylle that separate us from the humans," Elora continued. "We want to live a quiet life communing with the earth and ourselves. We work to strengthen our abilities and use them to better this life, to protect ourselves and the things around us. We devote our entire lives to this cause. Förening exists only to preserve and enhance the Trylle way of life.

"The other distinction is how we maintain this lifestyle, although it isn't that different really." She looked thoughtfully out the window. "Human children have their boarding schools, but they prepare them for a life of servitude. That's not what we want. We want a life of complete and total freedom. That is why we have changelings.

"Changelings are a practice that date back hundreds, maybe thousands of years." Elora looked at me gravely, and I gulped back the growing nausea in my belly. "Originally, we were more forest dwellers, less ... industrialized than you see now. Our children would be prone to starvation and medical problems, as well as our lack of a serious educational system. So, we'd leave our babies in place of human children so they would have the benefits that only their childhood could offer, then when they were old enough, they would come back to us.

"That practice evolved because we began to evolve. Changelings were healthier, more educated, and wealthier than the Trylle counterparts that stayed behind," Elora elaborated. "Eventually, every child born was a changeling. Now we could easily match the healthcare and education of the human population, but to what ends? In order to maintain that level, we'd have to leave the solace of the compound and spend our lives doing menial jobs. The changeling is essential to our way of life.

“We leave our children with the most sophisticated, wealthiest human families, without them being celebrity. Everyone would notice if when the Jolie-Pitt children turned eighteen, they suddenly vanished,” Elora looked disgusted at the thought of them. “So we go just below that. The changelings live a childhood that is the best this world has to offer, and then return with a hefty inheritance from their host families that infuse our society with cash. That, of course, isn’t the only goal, but it is a large part of how we can live like this. The money you obtain from your host family will be how you will be able to live the rest of your life.”

“Wait. I’m sorry. I know I’m not supposed to interrupt, but...” I licked my lips and shook my head. “I just had to clarify a few points.”

“By all means,” Elora said, but venom dripped from her voice.

“I’m a princess?” I pointed unsurely at myself. It sounded stupid and immature just saying it aloud. “And when I was baby, you gave me to strangers to raise so I could have a good education, a good childhood, and I would bring money back. Is that right?”

“Yes.” Elora raised an eyebrow, daring me to question it.

I wanted to yell so badly I was shaking. But I was still afraid of her. She looked like she could snap me in half with her mind, so I just twisted my thumb ring and nodded confirmation with her. According to her, I was the last of her legacy, and she had dumped me off on a crazy woman that tried to murder me, just because Elora never wanted to work and needed cash.

“Shall I continue?” Elora asked, and she didn’t even try to mask the condescending tone in her voice. I nodded meekly. “I don’t even remember what I was saying.” She waved her hand in irritation. “If you have any other questions, I suppose you can ask them now.”

“Just... um... where’s my father?” I asked timidly.

“Oh.” Elora looked away from me and stared out the window. “Dead. I’m sorry. It happened shortly after you were born.”

Finn had promised me a different life where I belonged, but really, it seemed to be the exact same life with different trappings. My mother here

seemed almost as cold and crazy as my fake mom, and either life, my dad was dead.

“Also, I don’t have any money.” I shifted uneasily.

“Of course you don’t,” Elora thought I was being ridiculous. “You probably won’t have access to your trust fund until your twenty-one or so, but with persuasion, you can change that. Finn tells me you’re very advanced with that, so I’m sure you can easily lower it to eighteen and get at it then. Maybe even add more to it.”

“What?” I shook my head. “No. I don’t even know if I have a trust fund.”

“I specifically chose the Everly’s because of their wealth.” Elora looked incredulous. “There is money set up for you. There has to be.”

“Yeah, I know you chose them for their money, because it certainly wasn’t for their mental health.” I lowered my eyes, realizing I had been smart with her, but quickly plowed through it. “My dad killed himself when I was five, so none of his insurance paid out. My mom never worked a day in her life, and she’s been in a mental institution for the past eleven years, which has eaten a lot of her funds. Not only that, we’ve moved around a lot and wasted tons of money on moving and houses and tuition. We’re not poor by any means, but I don’t think we’re anywhere near the kind of rich you think we are.”

“Stop saying ‘we.’ They’re not part of you,” Elora snapped and sat up. “What are you talking about? The Everly’s were one of the wealthiest families in the country! You couldn’t have bled them completely dry!”

“I don’t know how much money we – *they* – have, but we don’t... er... I didn’t live like they were that rich. My brother drives a Prius!” I was almost shouting in frustration. “And you said the money isn’t the important thing, but that sure seems to be what you’re hung up on. If you weren’t listening, I had a *terrible* childhood! My father, well the man I thought was my father, killed himself! And then, six months later, my fake mother tried to kill me!”

Elora had been more shaken about my confession that my family wasn't loaded than she had about Kim trying to kill me. She sat very still for a moment, then took a deep breath.

"Oh. So she was one of those." That was all Elora had to say about that.

"What do you mean by that?" I pressed, and by now, I was livid. The casual, callous air that she had about my death. She hadn't cared at all if they tried to kill me, except that it would've upset her plans to get my inheritance. "One of those?"

"Oh, well." Elora shook her head as if she hadn't meant to say that. "Every now and again, a mother knows. Sometimes they hurt the child or kill them."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. You knew there was a chance that she might kill me?" I snapped and stood up. "You knew that I could die but you just left me? Unmonitored? I know you didn't follow me because Finn kept telling me how hard I was to find. You didn't care what happened to me at all!"

"Don't be so melodramatic," Elora rolled her eyes. "This is the way we live. It's a very small risk, and it rarely happens. And you lived. No harm done."

"No harm done?" I pulled up my shirt, showing her the scar that stretched across my belly. "I was six-years-old and I had sixty stitches. You call that no harm done?"

"You're being disgusting." Elora stood up and waved me off. "You've had a long travel, and I'm sure this is all very confusing. You have much to take in, and you're not in your best light right now. I think it would best if you got some rest, and we can speak later."

I wanted to protest, but I knew it would be a moot point. As soon as I had started getting upset, she had stopped really listening to me. I let my shirt fall back down on my belly and Elora glided over to the window. She clasped her hands in front of her and stared out the window. She never said a single word, but a minute later, Finn appeared in the doorway.

“You need something, Elora?” Finn did a small bow to her back, but she probably had ways of seeing him even when she wasn’t looking.

“Wendy is tired. Set her up in her room,” Elora commanded diffidently. “See that she has everything she needs.”

“Of course.” Finn picked up my bag off the floor and looked at me. His dark eyes felt comforting, and even though I knew this was just his job, I felt relieved knowing he was there.

He left hastily, probably at Elora’s behest, and I hurried after him. I wrapped my arms tightly around myself, trying to steady my nerves. Everything felt too shocking and too upsetting to really understand. I was reeling from everything, and I couldn’t make sense of how I really fit into it. Elora was right, though. I probably did need rest, and maybe if I slept on it, everything would seem better somehow. But I doubted it.

Finn led me up a winding staircase and down another elaborate hall. At then end, he opened a heavy wooden door, revealing what I assumed was my room. It was massive, with high vaulted ceilings, and one entirely windowed wall that made it seem even larger. A massive four post bed sat in the center, and everything was rather modernly furnished. A laptop, flat screen, gaming systems, iPod, and every other gadget I could possibly want. Finn sat my bag on the bed and opened the closet door, which was already stocked full with clothing. He opened another door and flicked on the light, showing my own private bathroom that more closely resembled a spa.

“How do you know where everything is?” I asked. He seemed to know this house very well, and thinking about Finn helped calm me some.

“I stay here from time to time,” Finn replied nonchalantly.

“What? Why?” I felt a terrible pang of jealousy, terrified that he was somehow involved with Elora in a perverse fashion. He did seem to revere here more than I thought he should.

“Protection. Your mother is a very powerful woman, but she’s not all-powerful,” Finn explained vaguely. “Since I’m tracker, I can get tuned into her. I can sense danger and aid her if it’s required.”

“Is it required?” At that moment, I didn’t particularly care if a band of raging marauders tried to do her in, but if there were frequent attacks on her “castle,” I thought I should know.

“No. Not since I’ve been here,” Finn said. “I’ll be staying on awhile to help you get acclimated. Everybody knows this isn’t a perfect system. Rhys’s room is down the hall. My room, along with Elora’s, is on the other wing.”

I definitely felt better knowing he would be around. I didn’t think I could handle it all if I was left alone in this house with that woman. While clearly stunning and powerful, there wasn’t any warmth to her. I hadn’t realized that I even wanted that until now. After all the years of rejecting Maggie and even Matt’s attempts at bonding, I hadn’t known how much I craved it.

“So...did you do this?” I gestured to my high tech room.

“No. Rhys decorated it.” Finn didn’t look that interested in any of the expensive gear I had laying about, so that made sense. “The clothes were all Willa, I believe. You’ll meet her later on.”

“Rhys isn’t my brother?” I asked again. I couldn’t figure out how he fit into all of this. We had only met briefly, but he had seemed nice and normal.

“No. He’s mänsklig,” Finn answered, as if I would understand.

“What does that mean?” I furrowed my brow at him.

“It means he’s not your brother,” Finn replied glibly and made a step towards the door. “Is there anything you need before I go?”

I was disappointed by his abrupt decision to go, especially when I felt so isolated and confused, but I had no reason to keep him. Still hugging myself tightly, I shook my head and sat back on the bed. Finn nodded and headed to the door. Instead of leaving, he paused and looked back at me.

“Are you going to be alright with all of this?” Finn asked, looking at me very seriously.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “This wasn’t all what I had expected.” I had no idea what I thought this would be like, but it wasn’t this at all. It was far grander and far worse than anything I had envisioned. “I just... I feel like I’m in the *Princess Diaries*, if Julie Andrews had been a thief.”

“Mmm,” Finn murmured knowingly and walked back over towards me. He sat on the bed next to me and crossed his arms over his chest. “I know the way life is a hard concept for some.”

“They’re grifters, Finn.” I swallowed hard. “That’s all they are. I’m just a means to swindling money out of rich people. Jokes on her, though. My family’s not that rich.”

“I can assure you that you are much more than that to her, much more,” Finn told me, looking at me intently. “Elora is a complicated woman, and showing emotion doesn’t come easy for her. But she is a good woman. Regardless of whether you have money or not, you will have a place here. Always. And in the end, it’s up to you if you even want to bring any money.”

“Yeah?” I looked at him hopefully.

“Yes,” he promised with small smile. “But right now, you look exhausted. Get some sleep. You’ll feel better when you wake up.”

Finn helped me get settled into my room. My closet was massive and over-stocked, but he knew exactly where my pajamas were at. He taught me how to close the blinds for my windows, which were run by remote control. He practically tucked me into bed, and I was very tempted to ask him to stay with me, but I knew what his answer would be. Besides that, he’d gotten even less sleep than I had and needed to get to his own bed and rest.

Once he left, I pulled the covers tightly to me and tried not to let this all get to me. I was starting to think that Matt and Maggie might have been the only people that loved me for me, and now I was supposed to steal from them. Even if it wasn’t really stealing. I knew they would freely give me anything I asked for, and that hurt worse. More than that, I was starting to think that maybe the only thing I really wanted was to be back at home with them.

In new places, I usually slept horribly, but the last few days had been so draining, that I slept surprisingly soundly. In fact, I was so out that I barely even heard the knocking at my door. It started out meek and timid, but it got louder until I couldn't ignore it. Groggily, I stumbled out of bed and nearly tripped over the furniture on my way to the door. It was dark in my room and I was unfamiliar with my surroundings.

I opened my bedroom door, preparing to eviscerate whoever had disturbed me from my slumber. Then I saw Rhys, looking unfairly attractive, standing in my doorway. He was grinning broadly and his blue eyes were dancing. When he realized I'd been sleeping, he looked mildly apologetic, but it didn't really put a damper on his mood.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Rhys apologized insincerely. "I just wanted to see how you were doing, how you liked it here."

"I don't know," I yawned and crossed my arms over my chest. My hair had to be a terrible mess, and I probably looked like hell, so I hid as much of my body as I could behind the door. "It's too soon to tell yet. I've mostly been sleeping."

"You like the stuff?" Rhys asked, undeterred by my apparent tiredness. "I picked out everything that I liked, which I know sounds kind of vain. I asked for some input from Rhiannon, because she's a girl, but it's still so hard to pick out stuff for someone you've never met."

"No, it all looks really good. You did a good job." I rubbed my eyes and yawned again. "But I need to shower or something. I just woke up."

"Oh right," Rhys nodded. "I understand. My room is right there." He pointed his thumb at a door almost directly across from mine. "So if you need anything... I'm right here." He looked kind of embarrassed. "Sorry. I just got done with school, and I didn't have a chance to talk to you this morning. But... yeah. I'll leave you be."

“Wait. You just got done with school?” I furrowed my brow, trying to understand. “Does that mean you’re a tracker?”

“No.” It was his turn to look confused. “I’m mänks.” When he saw the perplexed look on my face, he corrected himself. “Sorry. It’s just short for mänsklig.”

“What the hell does that mean?” I demanded, growing exasperated.

“They’ll explain it to you later,” Rhys shrugged. “Anyway, I should let you wake up. If I’m not in my room, I’ll be downstairs, getting some food.”

“Thanks,” I nodded.

Rhys turned and walked down the hall, whistling a song I didn’t recognize. I shut my door, wishing I could understand this all better. I had half-expected to fall asleep and wake up from all of this. None of this could be really happening. It didn’t make sense. I was a Trylle Princess to a grifter empire, and I had a mänsklig living across the hall from me, whatever the hell that meant.

I felt slightly better after my nap, and I hoped that a shower would improve things even more. Feeling the hot water pound on my skin somehow had an adverse effect. It gave me time to think. I lived in this amazing stunning house with these cold, indifferent people, and the price of admission was stealing from the only people that cared about me. Sure, Finn was here, but he had made it perfectly clear that his only interest in me was business. Why should I stay here?

Part of the reason I had decided to come here in the first place was so I could give Matt a better life. Without me, it would undoubtedly be easier. But the way I had left, he was probably going mad with worry. He wouldn’t sleep for a week. I couldn’t just leave him like that, not without an explanation. And maybe, I couldn’t leave him at all.

I went through my closet, looking for something to wear. Most of the clothes seemed too fancy for me. Not that I had grown up wearing rags or anything. In fact, if my mother... er, Kim hadn’t gone crazy and left, these would be exactly the kind of clothes I’d be expected to wear now. All high class

fashion pieces. Eventually, I managed to dig up a simple skirt and shirt that would resemble something I'd actually wear.

I was starving, so I decided that I should try and find the kitchen. The floors were cold tile under my feet, and strangely, I had yet to see any rugs or carpet in the entire house. Admittedly, I had never been fond of the feel of carpet on my feet, or really the feel of anything on them. When I thought back to my closet, as large and full as it had been, there hadn't been any shoes. It must be a Trylle thing, and that thought was oddly comforting. I was part of something.

The bottom of the stairs led directly into the entryway, but to the left, below the wing where I lived, there was the living room. A fire place filled the partial wall separating it from an elegant dining room. The furniture appeared to be hand crafted wood and upholstered with white. In here, the floors were all smooth golden wood, and the colors were in earth tones. Everything was aimed towards the glass wall, forcing you to admire the view.

"Nice digs, right?" Rhys commented, and I whirled around to find him standing behind me, smiling. "Elora built this place ten years ago. She's pretty proud of it."

"I bet." I looked around the room appreciatively. "She definitely has good taste."

"Yeah," Rhys shrugged. "You gotta be hungry, though. Come on. I'll whip you up something in the kitchen." He started walking out of the room, and I followed after him. "You'll probably hate what I make, though. You're into all that health food junk like everybody else, right?"

"I don't know." I had never thought of myself as a health nut, but the things I preferred tended to be organic and vegan. It had never been by choice, though. It was just the way it was. "I like natural things, I guess."

He nodded knowingly as he led me past the ornate dining room into a massive kitchen. There were two professional grade stoves, two massive stainless steel fridges, a gigantic island in the center, and more cupboard space than I had my entire house. Rhys went over to the fridge and pulled out a bottle of Mountain Dew and a bottle of water.

“Water, right?” Rhys held it out to me, and I took it from him. “I’m really not the best cook, but you’ll have to settle for me. The chef is off today.”

“You have a chef?” I wasn’t sure if he was kidding or not, but in a place like this, they definitely had some kind of staff.

“Yeah, part-time.” Rhys took a drink from his Mountain Dew, then set it on the island and went to the other fridge to start rooting around. “Just weekends, but that’s because it’s usually when we entertain. I don’t know what Elora eats during the week, but I’m on a fend-for-yourself basis.”

I leaned on the island, drinking my water. I realized this kitchen reminded me of the one in our house in the Hamptons, the one Kim had attempted filicide in, but that one had been smaller. If she hadn’t left, this is probably how I would’ve been raised. In fact, I’m sure this is how she had been brought up. Her parents died when I was seven, but their house had been overly grand, like this one. They often made comments to Maggie about how she raised me and Matt, but Maggie had really attempted to raise us as a normal family, even though we weren’t.

Kim’s parents had obviously been incredibly loaded, and they only had her and another daughter, who I think had married some European playboy and lived in France or Spain or something. When they died, they had to have left money for Matt and I. And our father’s parents had died before I was born, and there had to be inheritance from that as well. The more I thought about, the more I started thinking that Maggie had way more money than she let on. She and Matt had never talked about it, but we both most have a pretty large trust set up.

Maggie easily could’ve lived like this. A beautiful house somewhere with a nanny raising Matt and me. She could’ve had the best cars, and paid off every school that tried to expel me. As it was, she had never really fought any of my punishments because she thought they were fair and I needed to learn something. She could’ve just added a wing to a school, and sent me off there to work it out myself. Instead, she had made the choice that taking care of me herself was more important than spending money. Before she had custody of

me, she had been working because she wanted to, not because she needed to. She had made a choice that my own mother never would have.

“So you like shitake mushrooms, right?” Rhys was saying. He had been pulling things out of the fridge, but I had been too lost in thought to notice. His arms were overflowing with vegetables.

“Uh, yeah, I love mushrooms.” I straightened up and tried see what all he had, but for the most part, it looked like things I enjoyed.

“Excellent.” Rhys grinned at me and dropped his armload of food into the kitchen sink. “I’m going to make you the best stir fry you’ve ever tasted.”

He went about chopping things up, and I offered to help him, but he insisted that he could handle it. The whole time, he talked amicably about his new motorcycle he’d gotten last week. He’d taken it out for a spin just before he came in, and he mentioned all sorts of technical terms that I didn’t understand. I tried to keep up with it, but all I ever knew about motorcycles is that they went fast and I liked it.

“What are you making in here?” Finn came into the kitchen, sounding vaguely disgusted. His hair was damp from a recent shower, and he smelled like the grass after a rain, only sweeter. He walked past me without even a glance in my direction and went over to where Rhys had thrown everything into a wok on the stove.

“Stir fry!” Rhys proclaimed.

“Really?” Finn leaned over his shoulder and peered down at the ingredients in the pan. Rhys moved to the side a little so Finn could reach in and grab something out of it. He sniffed it, then popped it into his mouth. “Well, it’s not terrible.”

“Stop my beating heart!” Rhys put his hand over his heart and feigned astonishment. “Has my food passed the test of the hardest food critic in the land?”

“No. I just said it wasn’t terrible.” Finn shook his head at Rhys’s dramatics and went to the fridge to get a bottle of water. “And I’m certain that Elora is a much harsher food critic than I’ll ever be.”

“That’s probably true, but she’s never let me cook for her,” Rhys admitted, shaking the wok to stir up the vegetables more.

“You really shouldn’t let him cook for you,” Finn advised, looking at me for the first time. “He gave me food poisoning once.”

“You cannot get food poisoning from an orange!” Rhys protested and looked back at him. “It’s just not possible! And even if you can, I just *handed* you the orange. I didn’t even have a chance to contaminate it!”

“I don’t know.” Finn shrugged. A smile was creeping up, and I could tell he was amused by how much Rhys was getting worked up.

“You don’t even eat the part I touched! You peeled it and threw the skin away!” Rhys sounded exasperated. He wasn’t paying attention to the wok as he struggled to convince us of his innocence, and a flame licked up from the food.

“Food’s on fire,” Finn nodded to the stove.

“Dammit!” Rhys got a glass of water and splashed it in the stir fry, and I was starting to question how good this was going to taste when he was done with it.

“See?” Finn looked at me, and I smiled. “Did you sleep okay?”

“Yeah, I slept great,” I nodded.

“Good.” He was standing next to me, looking as if he wanted to say something but thought better of it. He just nodded and walked out of the kitchen.

When Rhys finished cooking, his food was only moderately edible, but I picked at it anyway. He pulled stools up to the island, explaining that he only ate in the dining room when it was absolutely required. He soaked his food in some kind of sauce, but it didn’t smell at all appetizing. He downed his Mountain Dew with fervor, but I just sipped at my water.

“So what do you think?” Rhys nodded at the plate of food I was trying to eat.

“It’s pretty good,” I lied. He had obviously worked hard on it, and his blue eyes showed how proud he was of it, so I couldn’t let him down. To prove my point, I took a bite and smiled.

“Good. You guys are hard to cook for,” Rhys admitted sourly and took a mouthful of his own food. “I don’t know how you can eat this plain, though.”

“I don’t know how you can eat it with sauce.” I wrinkled my nose at the smell of it.

“To each his own, I guess,” Rhys laughed lightly. When he looked down at his plate, his sandy hair fell into his eyes, and he brushed it away.

“So... you know Finn pretty well?” I asked carefully, stabbing my fork into a mushroom.

Their banter earlier had left me curious. Finn seemed to genuinely enjoy Rhys, even if he didn’t approve of his cooking, and I had never seen Finn enjoy anybody. Patrick, he had kind of liked, but I think that had been more of a means of getting closer to me. He openly looked down on Matt, and while he respected and obeyed Elora, I didn’t think he really liked her.

“I guess.” Rhys shrugged like he hadn’t really thought about it. “He’s just around a lot.”

“Like how often?” I pressed as casually as I could.

“I don’t know.” He took a bite and thought for a minute. “It’s hard to say. Storks move around a lot.”

“Storks?”

“Yeah, trackers,” Rhys smiled sheepishly. “You know how you tell little kids that a stork brings the babies? Well, trackers bring the babies here. So we call them storks. Not to their faces, though. They don’t like it that much.”

“I see.” I wondered what kind of nickname they had for people like me, but I didn’t think that now was the best time to ask. “So they move around a lot?”

“Well, yeah. They’re gone tracking a lot, and Finn is in pretty high demand because he’s so good at it,” Rhys explained. “His parents were some of the best, I guess. And then when they come back, a lot of them stay with some

of the more prestigious families. Finn's been here off and on for like the past five years or so. But when he's not here, somebody else usually is."

"So he's like a bodyguard?"

"Yeah, something like that," Rhys nodded.

"But what do they need bodyguards for?" I thought back to the rod iron gate and security guards that had allowed our entrance into Förening in the first place. When I had looked around the entryway, I remembered seeing a fancy alarm system by the front door. This all seemed like an awful lot of trouble to go to for a small community hidden in the bluffs.

"She's the Queen. It's just standard procedure," Rhys answered evasively, and he purposely stared down at his plate. He tried to erase his anxiety before I noticed and forced a smile at me. "So how does it feel being a Princess?"

"Honestly? Not as awesome as I thought it would be," I replied, and he laughed heartily at that.

Rhys kind of straightened up the kitchen after we finished eating, but he explained the maid would be in tomorrow at ten to take care of the rest of it. He gave me a brief tour of the house, showing me all the ridiculous antiquities that had been passed down from generation to generation. There was room that only had pictures of previous Kings and Queens. When I asked where a picture of my father was, Rhys just shook his head and said he didn't know anything about it.

Eventually, we parted ways. He cited some homework he had to get done, and he had to get to bed because he had school in the morning. I wandered around the house a bit more, but I never saw either Finn or Elora. I played around with the stuff in my room, but I quickly tired of it. Feeling restless and bored, I tried to get some sleep, but I had slept too late in the afternoon.

On top of all that, I felt incredibly homesick. I longed for the familiar comfort of my regular sized house with all my ordinary things. For Maggie's suppers that she worked so hard on, and the way she always sang when she did

the dishes. If I were at home, Matt would be sitting in the living room, reading a book under the glow of the lamp light. He'd be telling me to get to bed, and I'd be trying to convince him that we should stay up all night and watch *The Gladiator* again. I didn't really like the movie that much, but Matt loved the architecture, so he would sometimes cave.

Right now, he was probably sitting in the kitchen, staring at the phone. Or driving around. He had probably tracked down Patrick and threatened injury on him. Maggie was probably crying her eyes out, and I know Matt blamed himself for it. If he hadn't let me go see Mom, I'd still be there. Or at least that's what he thought, and it really wasn't that far from the truth. But he hadn't actually let me go see her. I'd made it so he didn't have a choice.

My actual mother was somewhere in this house, or I assumed she was, anyway. She had abandoned me with a family that she knew nothing about except that they were loaded, and she knew there was a risk that my mother could kill me. It happens sometimes. That's what she said. When I came back, after all these years away from me, she hadn't hugged me, or even been that happy to see me.

I didn't want to be here anymore. I threw off my covers and changed out of their chintzy pajamas into my regular old clothes I had packed in my bag. Leaving behind everything they had given me, I crept quietly down the stairs. In a way, I felt bad for leaving them like that. Well, I felt bad for leaving Finn and Rhys without saying good-bye, but Rhys would understand. Finn might not, but maybe I didn't care what he thought anymore. Hopefully, he stopped tracking me and had tuned into Elora so he wouldn't notice I was leaving. That would be a damper in my plans.

Once I got outside, I realized I had no way to get home and no idea how to get there. The cold night air rested heavily on me, and I knew I had to figure something out. I looked around, but I didn't have to look far. Rhys had left his motorcycle sitting out in the driveway. Thanks to my grand theft auto a couple years back, I knew how to drive one. I looped my arms through my backpack, and popped the bike in neutral so I could coast it to end of the

driveway. Just as I suspected, Rhys was the kind of guy who left his keys in the ignition. Luck was on my side tonight.

The bike sped easily through the winding streets of Förening, and I barely even noticed the houses sleeping in the trees. There was the iron gate at the end of the road to contend with, but when I got to it, it was just as I thought. They opened up as soon as they saw me approaching. They didn't care who left; they only checked when you came in.

Once I was out of town, I topped out the bike and almost lost control a few times, but it felt worth it. I stopped at the first gas station I saw and bought a map. It was actually fairly easy to get back. It was mostly highway, and once I got to town, I'd be able to figure it out from there. I drove as fast as I could the whole way there, afraid that Finn or somebody would notice I was missing and chase after me. Even if it meant that I never got to see Finn again, I didn't want to go back.

I might never see Finn again. That took a painful minute to sink in, and I actually started to slow the bike down. Then I reminded myself that he had no interest in me, and he'd be leaving shortly to track someone else. And even if he didn't, I would barely see him. Since he was no longer tracking me, he would no longer be interacting with me. Fighting back tears, I pushed the bike harder and couldn't wait to get back.

The sky had that eerie blue glow of very early morning when I pulled up in front of my house. I hadn't even turned off the motorcycle before Matt threw open the front door and came jogging down the porch. Last time I had come home with a stolen motorcycle, he had freaked out on me and started yelling. This time, it was different. Even in the dim light, I could see how stricken he was. He threw his arms around me and held me so tightly to him, I couldn't breathe. I didn't care, though. I hugged him just as hard, and over his shoulder, I saw Maggie running out of the house, crying. I buried my face in his shoulder, breathing in his familiar scent and relishing the protection of his arms. After a whirlwind few days, I was finally *home*.

The joy of being home lasted about ten minutes. There was hugging and crying, and that was nice. Then there was Maggie yelling at me. It was a little shocking that she was the one that went to anger first, but Matt looked too exhausted to be mad. Maggie chased me into the house, yelling shrilly about how they had thought I was dead or murdered, and I was tempted to point out that those were pretty much the same things. I sat on the couch and let her go on and on, knowing that I really deserved it. I may have left for a good reason, even though I wasn't that sure of it anymore, I definitely hadn't left in the right way. Sneaking out in the middle of the night when I know that their lives revolve around me wasn't the nicest thing I had ever done.

All the while, Maggie walked back and forth in front of me. Tissues were still wadded up in her hand, and her eyes were red from all the crying she had been doing. Matt stood off to the side, leaning against the fireplace, watching me with this drawn expression on his face. He never said a word. I only mumbled yes or no when it was appropriate, but it was mostly just Maggie talking.

"I just can't believe you would do this!" Maggie had started winding down, and she stood in front of me, one hand on her hip and stared at me. "I mean, of all the stupid things you've done over the years, you've *never* done anything like this. You never ran away. What on earth possessed you to do something like this?"

"I don't know," I shrugged.

"Were you mad at us? Did we do something wrong?" Maggie was almost pleading with me, that sad, desperate look in her eyes. I had messed up, and she was wondering what she had done wrong.

"No, of course not." I swallowed hard and shook my head. "It wasn't anything you did."

"Then why?" Maggie demanded. "Where did you go?"

"I went with Finn," I said quietly. On the drive here, I had been trying to think of a good line to feed them, but I thought the easiest, most believable thing would be to just blame it on a boy. I actually had gone with Finn, and Matt already didn't trust him, so that was the best way to go.

Maggie and Matt exchanged a look. That's what he had been afraid of. Maggie turned to look back at me, but Matt just stared out the window. She had tried a haphazard sex talk with me a few years ago, but neither of them were really prepared for me to grow up. When she looked back at me, she took a deep breath.

"Did..." She nervously played with the cross around her neck. "Did you go with him willingly? I mean... he didn't force you or anything? Did he?"

"No, no, of course not!" I insisted.

"Did he hurt you at all?" Maggie asked carefully, and Matt tensed up.

"No! No, he didn't do anything wrong!" The last thing I wanted was to get Finn in trouble. Things hadn't turned out the way I wanted them to, but he had been nice to me. And I still liked him. My heart ached at the thought of him.

"Good," Maggie sounded relieved. Matt had closed his eyes, preparing for the worst. I didn't want to know what he would do if he found out that somebody had actually hurt me. "So then why did you go?"

"I don't know," I sighed. "Finn... Just to get away. I thought it'd be fun."

"Where did you go?" Maggie asked.

"Um, just... a cabin. His friends' cabin." I looked down, afraid she could read the lie on my face.

"Where did the motorcycle come from?" Maggie pointed out the window to the bike, and I realized that I hadn't really thought this plan through at all.

"It's his friends." Almost truth. Rhys was kind of his friend. I think.

"Wendy, you can't go stealing other people's stuff!" Maggie rubbed her temple and exhaled tiredly. "I'm gonna have to call the police and have them

impound the bike. Oh, and I need to call them and let them know that you came home. I'll feel like such an idiot too. They kept insisting that you'd just run away, but I kept saying, 'No, Wendy isn't like that.'"

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"I have to make phone calls." She shook her head and walked into the kitchen, preparing for the arduous task of explaining to everyone that I was home safe and that she was a fool.

Maggie left us alone in the living room, and Matt continued staring out of the window for a minute. I twisted my thumb ring around my finger and waited for him to say something. From the kitchen, I could overhear Maggie making apologies to someone that kept cutting her off.

"You can't do that, Wendy," Matt said finally. His voice was low and quiet, but it made far more of an impact than all of Maggie's shouting. I suddenly felt like crying and I stared down at my lap. "If you're unhappy here, or if you want to see a boy, we can work with that. But you can't just leave like that." He exhaled shakily. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you. I can't even..." He shook his head. "You can't ever leave like that again."

"I won't. I'm sorry." I blinked back tears and looked up at him. He was chewing the inside of his cheek, the way he did sometimes when he was trying not to let on how upset he was. "I am so sorry, Matt. I know I screwed up. I promise it won't ever happen again." He looked over at me, appearing more haggard than he ever had before.

"Have you slept?" Matt asked, and I shook my head. "Why don't you get some rest? We can talk more later."

I had to go past him on my way to the steps, and I paused next to him. He looked at me curiously, and without thinking, I threw my arms around him and hugged him. At first, he didn't do anything, but he was probably in shock. I could count the times I had initiated a hug in my entire life on one hand. Then he hugged me back and kissed the top of my head.

"Don't scare me like that again," Matt murmured into my hair.

When I went to my room, I realized that no place had ever looked better. We hadn't lived here long enough for this place to really feel familiar, but my stuff was my stuff. Besides, every house we'd lived in had the same "house" feel, which was a sharp distinction from the "don't touch" quality of Elora's mansion. I flopped back in my bed, burying myself in the blankets, and promising myself that I'll never, ever leave again. I didn't care what more was out in the world. Nothing beat the comfort and safety of home, and nobody in the world loved me as much as Matt and Maggie. Hell, nobody else in the world loved me at all.

Matt roused me a few hours later to ask if I wanted lunch, but I declined. He looked better, but he probably hadn't slept yet. Only he could go without sleep for over a day and wouldn't even consider a nap. I laid in bed awake for awhile after that. I was probably grounded from everything anyway, so this made sense for me to stay up here. Maggie came in a little while later to check on me, and then informed me she was heading down to the police station to take care of the motorcycle. I realized they'd probably be checking on me every hour or so from now on to make sure I hadn't skipped out.

I had no intention of ever leaving again. When Finn had told me that I was Trylle, and things had started fitting together, I had been excited by the prospect of having somewhere to belong. But I didn't belong there. Maybe I didn't belong anywhere, but at least I was wanted here. No matter how much money Matt and Maggie might have, or I guess technically, I might have, there was no way I would ever give Elora any of it. She seemed to be living well enough without needing me to steal from my family. Maybe her legacy would die then, but so what? If it meant that much to her, then maybe she wouldn't have dumped me off.

My room felt too quiet, so I went over to my iPod and started scrawling through songs to listen to. A light tapping sound startled out me from my search, and my heart skipped a beat. I set down my iPod and walked over to my window. Sure enough, when I pulled back the curtain, there was Finn, crouched on the roof outside of it. For a second, I considered closing the

curtain and ignoring him, but his dark brown eyes were too much. Besides, this would give me a chance to say a proper goodbye.

“What are you doing here?” Finn asked as I soon as I opened the window. He stayed out on the roof, but I hadn’t moved back so he could come in.

“What are *you* doing here?” I countered, crossing my arms on my chest.

“I came here to get you, obviously.” He glanced behind him at a man walking his dog on the sidewalk, then looked at me. “Mind if I come in so we can finish this conversation?”

“Whatever.”

I took a step back and tried to seem as indifferent as possible, but when he slid in the window past me, my heartbeat sped up. He stood right in front of me, looking down in my eyes, and he made the rest of the world disappear. I shook my head and stepped away from him, so I wouldn’t let myself get mesmerized by him anymore.

“Why did you come in the window?” I asked.

“I couldn’t very well come to the door. That guy would never let me in here to see you,” Finn reasoned, and he was definitely right. Matt would probably deck him if he saw him again.

“That guy’ is my brother, and his name is Matt.” I felt incredibly defensive and protective of him, especially after the way he reacted when I came home. I had never seen him like that before.

“He’s not your brother. You need to stop thinking of him like that.” Finn cast a disparaging look around my room. “Is that what this is all about? You came back to say goodbye to all of this?”

“I’m not saying goodbye,” I said icily and stuck my chin out defiantly. I went over and sat on my bed, trying to make a physical point of laying claim to this space. Finn only rolled his eyes at my display.

“You can’t possibly stay here, Wendy.” Finn waved away the idea like it was completely preposterous. “Get whatever you need, and then we need to get out of here before *Matt* notices I’m here.”

“I am not going!” I insisted emphatically.

Finn was eyeing me up, trying to decide if I was really serious. I couldn’t tell if he disapproved or not. His expression stayed even and thoughtful. Crossing his arms over his chest, I hated how attractive he was and whatever power it was he held over me. Just the way he looked at me made my heart race and my stomach flip. It was going to be terrible never seeing him again, and I tried to push the thought from my mind.

“Do you realize what you’re giving up?” Finn asked softly. “You are a Trylle Princess. It isn’t just about money, Wendy. There is so much that life has to offer you. More than anything they can give you here. If Matt understood what was in store for you, he would send you there himself.”

“You’re right. He probably would. If he thought it was what’s best for me,” I admitted. “Because he really cares about me and always wants what’s best. Nobody there wants what’s best for me.”

“You think I don’t want what’s best for you?” Finn questioned incredulously, and there was an underlying trace of affection that shivered through me. “Do you really believe I would encourage you to do this if it would adversely effect you?”

“I don’t think you know what’s best for me,” I replied as evenly as I could. He had thrown me off my guard by hinting at caring about me, and I had to remind myself that that was part of his job. All of this was. He needed to make sure I was safe and convince me to get home. That wasn’t the same as actually caring about *me*.

“Elora can be... a difficult woman,” Finn said carefully. “But you are her daughter, and she loves you. You deserve to know your mother, and you deserve the life she has in store for you. You will live a life of royalty, and you will lead people! This is something that nobody else can give you!”

“Do you know much money my family has?” I asked pointedly. I wasn’t sure if Finn had any idea how valuable or invaluable I might be. “I mean, this one here, that I live with.”

“Yes, I do.” He looked taken back my abrupt change in questions, but he straightened up and answered me directly. “I know the exact amount in fact. Elora had me checking finances yesterday.”

“Right. Cause that’s what matters.” I sighed and shook my head, then I looked up at him. “How much do they have?”

“Do you want to know your trust and what you stand to inherit, or your guardian and brother’s total wealth?” Finn had gone expressionless. “Do you want net worth? Liquid assets? Are you including real estate, like the house they still own in the Hamptons? Dollar amount?”

“I don’t really care,” I shook my head. “I was just... Elora was convinced that we really did have a lot of money, and I was just curious.”

“Yes. You really do have a lot of money,” Finn explained. “More than even Elora had originally thought.” I nodded and looked at my feet. “You live well below your means here.”

“I think Maggie thought it would be better for me, and Matt and I never really cared that much about money.” I kept staring at my feet, then finally I looked up at Finn. “They would give me anything. They would give me all of it if I asked. But I’m never taking any money from them, not for myself and certainly not for Elora. Make sure you tell her that when you go back to her. I will never give her any of their money. *Never.*”

I had expected him to protest in some way, but Finn surprised me. His lips curled into the edge of a smile, and if anything, he looked almost proud of me. I was condemning their way of life, so I had thought he would defend it, but he approved of it.

“You are sure this is what you want?” Finn asked gently.

“Absolutely.” But I sounded more confident than I really was.

I was turning down any chance at getting to know my real mother, my family history, a throne, and spending more time with Finn. Not mention that my abilities, like persuasion, which Finn had promised their would be more of as I got older. On my own, I’m sure I’d never be able to master or understand them. So I was losing them too.

"I do think you'd find happiness with us," Finn said, almost sadly. "But I won't force you to come with me. If this is your decision, then I'll have to respect it."

"Thank you," I smiled wanly at him.

We looked at each other, and I wished he wasn't so far away from me. I was wondering if it would be appropriate if we hugged when the door to my bedroom opened. Matt and Maggie planned on checking on me constantly to make sure I hadn't escaped again. Unfortunately, Maggie was gone dealing with the police, meaning that it was Matt who opened the door. As soon as he saw Finn, his eyes burned with rage and his cheeks reddened. Quickly, I jumped up, moving in front of Finn to block any attempts that Matt would have at killing him.

"Matt! It's okay!" I held up my hands.

"It is not okay!" Matt growled coming into my room. "What the hell do you think you're doing in here? You are not allowed anywhere near her ever again!"

"Matt, please!" I put my hands on his chest, trying to push him back away from Finn, but it was like trying to push a brick wall. He reached over my shoulder, pointing at Finn as he yelled. I glanced back at Finn, and he just stared blankly at my brother.

"You have some nerve, you little bastard!" Matt shouted, and he kept pushing back on me, trying to get closer to Finn. "She is seventeen-years-old! She's a minor! That's kidnapping! That's statutory rape! I don't know what the hell you did with her, but you're never doing it again!"

"Matt, please, stop!" I begged. "He was just saying goodbye! *Please!*"

"Perhaps you should listen to her," Finn offered calmly.

It was his composure that really pissed Matt off. He was screaming at Finn, and he wanted him to react in some way. Matt had been suffering and terrified, and he just wanted to make Finn feel an ounce of that. Unfortunately, Finn's only reaction to things like this was to stand there, cool and collected. So, Matt's only recourse was physically harming him.

Matt actually knocked me out of the way, and I fell backwards onto the floor. Finn's eyes flashed darkly at that, and when Matt pushed him, he didn't move an inch. He just glared down at my brother, and I knew that if they fought, Matt would be the one with a serious injury.

"Matt!" I wailed and jumped to my feet.

Already, I had started chanting *Leave my room. Leave my room. You need to calm down and get out my room. Please.* I wasn't sure how effective it would be if I wasn't looking at him, so I grabbed his arm and forced him to turn to me. His blue eyes were burning, and he tried to look away instantly, but I caught him. I kept my eyes focused and just kept repeating it over and over in my head. Finally, his expression softened and his eyes glazed.

"I'm going to leave your room now," Matt said robotically. Much to my relief, he actually turned and walked out into the hall, closing the door behind him. I'm not sure if he walked any farther than that, or how much time I had, so I turned to Finn.

"You have to leave," I insisted breathlessly, but his expression had changed to one of concern.

"Does he do that often?" Finn asked.

"What?" I had no idea what he was talking about and I just wanted him to go before somebody got hurt. "What are you talking about?"

"He pushed you. He clearly has an anger problem." Finn glared at the door Matt had left through. "He's unstable. You shouldn't stay here with him."

"Yeah, well, you guys should be more careful who you leave babies with," I muttered and went to the window. "I don't know how much time we have so you need to go."

"He probably won't ever be able to come into your room again," Finn explained calmly, brushing me off. "I'm serious, Wendy. I don't want to leave you with him."

"You don't have much of a choice!" I felt exasperated and ran a hand through my hair. "Matt's not usually like that, and he would never hurt me. He just hasn't slept, and he blames you for taking me away, and he's not wrong."

The panic was wearing away, and I realized that I had just used persuasion on Matt again, and I felt nauseous. “I *hate* doing that to him. It’s not fair and it’s not right.”

“I am sorry,” Finn looked at me sincerely. “I know you did that to protect him, and that’s my fault. I should’ve just backed down, but when he pushed you...” He shook his head. “My instincts just kicked in.”

“He’s not going to hurt me,” I insisted.

Finn glanced back at the door, and I could tell he really didn’t want to leave. If Matt had just waited five more minutes to check on me, none of this would’ve happened. When Finn looked back at me, he sighed heavily.

“I’m sorry for the trouble I’ve caused you. When you change your mind...” He hesitated for a moment. “I’ll find you.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He looked at me uncertainly, and he was probably fighting the urge to throw me over his shoulder and take me with him. Instead, he climbed out the window and swung back down to the ground. When he started walking to his car, I suddenly remembered something and leaned out the window.

“Hey, Finn!” I shouted, and he turned back to me. “Tell Rhys I’m sorry I took his bike! It’s in town in the impound lot!”

“I’ll collect it for him, and I’ll be sure to pass along the sentiment.”

With that, he turned around the neighbors’ hedges and I couldn’t see him anymore. I kept looking after him, wishing that this didn’t mean I had to say goodbye to him. There were still doubts about what I’d be giving up, but I couldn’t do that to Matt again. The awful truth was that I was more than a little sad to see Finn go. I was on the verge of tears, but I managed to hold them back. Eventually, I shut the window and closed my curtains.

There was a very good chance that I'd never be allowed out of the house again. After Finn left, I found Matt sitting on the steps, looking bewildered and pissed off. He wanted to yell at me about Finn, but he couldn't seem to understand exactly what had happened. The best I could get out of it is that he vowed to kill Finn if he ever came near me, and I pretended like I thought that was a reasonable thing to do.

The next morning, Matt didn't even want to send me to school. He was afraid that I would bolt as soon I got there, and I had to keep reminding him that I had come home of my own volition. If I really wanted to be away, I'd still be away. I neglected to point out that Finn had just recently tried to whisk me away, and I had declined. After far more arguing than the situation called for, Maggie finally convinced Matt to take me to school.

Everyone at school was staring at me like I had three-heads, except for Tegan who refused to even make eye contact. That made me feel a little better, and after spending the night feeling a tad heartbroken about everything, it was a nice pick-me-up.

Patrick bounded over to me like a golden retriever when he caught sight of me. He threw his arms around me and wrapped me an uncomfortable bear hug. From him, I got the explanation about everybody's attitude. Apparently, Matt had gone ballistic at the school the day I had gone missing, and blamed everyone there for letting in a "bad influence" like Finn. From the start, he had been convinced that Finn had something to do with it, and I was sometimes surprised about how accurate Matt's intuition was.

I fed Patrick a similar story to the one I'd told Matt and Maggie. Finn and I had run off to his friend's cabin on a whim, and then I had come home. Patrick tried to press for details about the status of our relationship, but I kept insisting that we were just friends. It pained me knowing that we weren't even that, but it was the easiest explanation I had.

The day dragged on and on. It didn't help that I found myself constantly looking around for Finn. Part of me kept insisting that the last few days had been a bad dream, and that Finn should still be here, watching me like he always did. On top of that, I kept feeling like I was being watched. My neck got that scratchy feeling it did when Finn stared at me for too long, but whenever I turned around, there wasn't anybody there. At least not anybody worth noting.

When I walked out to Matt's car, I was absolutely certain someone was watching me. I looked all over the parking lot for Finn's car, but there was nothing. At home I felt distracted and ill at ease. I excused myself from supper early and went up to my room. I peered out my curtains, hoping to find Finn lurking around somewhere nearby, but no such luck. Every time I looked for him and didn't find him, my heart hurt a little bit more.

By the time I went to bed, I had convinced myself that it must be Finn. Before he had left, he said that when I was ready, he would find me. He was probably still tracking me, but because of everything that had happened with Matt, he had to keep at a distance. But he was out there, and I knew it. I tossed and turned all night, trying to decide what to do.

The horrible truth was that I missed Finn, a lot more than I should. I didn't know how much longer he'd be hanging around. Even if I was some princess, there could only be so much time he could devote to tracking me. Eventually, he'd have to move on and find someone else. I wasn't ready for that. I didn't like the idea of him moving on when I hadn't.

Around five in the morning, I gave up entirely on sleep. I looked out the window again, and this time I thought I saw something. He was out there, hiding nearby. I couldn't take it anymore. Matt and Maggie were still sound asleep, and it wasn't like I was running away this time. I just needed to go out and talk to Finn, to make sure he was still there. I didn't even bother changing out of my pajamas or fixing my hair. Since I was falling for Finn, and he wasn't feeling anything for me, I probably should've tried harder with my appearance, but I was in a hurry.

Hastily, I climbed out onto the roof. Once again, I tried to grab onto the branch and swing to the ground like Finn had. As soon as my fingers grabbed the branch, they slipped off and I fell to the ground, landing heavily on my back. All the wind had been knocked out of me, and I coughed painfully. I would've loved to lay in the lawn for ten more minutes and try to ease the pain, but I was afraid that Matt or Maggie had heard something. I scrambled to my feet as quickly as I could and rounded the hedges towards the neighbors' house.

Nobody was there. The street was completely deserted. I wrapped my arms tightly around myself to ward off the cold that was seeping in and looked around. I *know* he had been out here. I had seen something. Maybe my fall had scared him away, like he thought it was Matt or something. I decided to walk a little farther down the street, investigating everyone's lawn for a hidden tracker. My back ached from the fall, and my knee felt a little twisted and weird. That left me hobbling down the street in my pajamas at five in the morning. I had truly lost my mind.

Then I heard something. Footsteps? Somebody was definitely following me, and based on the dark chill running down my spine, it wasn't Finn. It was hard to explain how exactly I knew it wasn't him, but I knew it just the same. Slowly, I turned around.

A girl was standing there, a few feet behind me. In the glow from the streetlamp, she looked ravishing. Her hair was cut in a short brown pixie cut and stood out all over. Her skirt was short and her black leather jacket went down to her calves. A wind came up, blowing back her coat a bit, and she reminded me of some kind of action star, like she should be in *The Matrix*. But the thing that caught my attention the most was that she was barefoot.

"Okay... um, I'm going to go home now," I announced. She was just staring at me, so I felt like I had to say something.

"Wendy Everly, I think you should come with us," she said with a sly smile.

"Us?" I asked, but then I felt him behind me.

I don't know where he had been before that, but suddenly, there was presence behind me. Cautiously, I looked over my shoulder. A tall man with dark, slick-backed hair was staring down at me. He was wearing the same jacket as the girl, and I thought it was neat that they had matching outfits, like a crime fighting duo. He smiled sinisterly at me, and that's when I decided that I was probably in trouble.

"That's a really nice invitation, but my house is like three houses down." I pointed towards it, as if I didn't think they already knew exactly where I lived. "So I think that I should probably just get home before my brother starts looking for me."

"You should've thought of that before you left the house, shouldn't you?" the guy suggested wickedly. I really wanted to take a step forward so I'd be away from him, but I thought that would only make him pounce on me. I could probably take the girl, but I wasn't so sure about him. He was like a foot taller than me.

"I just needed a little breath of fresh air," I explained lamely. The girl laughed lightly, and I couldn't stop thinking of her bare feet. I suddenly thought of Elora, and the way she'd been barefoot, and the way I had no shoes in my closet. "You guys are trackers?"

"You're a quick one, aren't you?" the girl smiled wider at me.

"But I already told Finn I wasn't going back!" I protested, feeling irritated. Finn had promised me that he'd respect my decision, but apparently he'd run and narced on me, so they'd sent these two clowns to bring me back. "I want nothing to do with you guys or Elora or anything."

"Finn?" Her smile twisted into something surprised and pleased. She licked her lips and looked past me at the tracker standing behind me. "I told you it was her."

I might have said too much. These two were trackers, but maybe not the same kind as Finn. Maybe they were bounty hunters or kidnappers or just big fans of chopping up girls into little pieces and disposing of them in a ditch. Fear was creeping through me, but I tried not to let on. If they were actually

tracking me, they would be able to sense my distress anyway, but I did not want that at all.

“Well, this has been a blast, but I have to get ready for school. Big test and all that.” I started taking a step away, but the guy’s hand clamped instantly on my arm in a very painful fashion.

“Don’t damage her!” the girl insisted, her eyes flashing wide. “She’s not to be hurt!” Not to be hurt. Okay. That’s a good thing. I can work with that, at least. Maybe I could use it to my advantage.

“Yeah, easy on the merchandise!” I tried to pull my arm from him, but he refused to let go.

I had already decided that I wasn’t going wherever these two wanted to take me. Even if it was just back to Förening with Elora, I still didn’t want that, especially if I was going to be forced. Since they were under some kind of instruction not to hurt me, I thought I might have some leeway with fighting them. I only had to get a few houses down, then I’d be at home, and Matt kept a gun under his bed. He was ridiculously protective of me.

I elbowed the guy in the stomach as hard as I could. He made a coughing sound and doubled over but didn’t let go of my arm. I kicked him in the shin and raised my arm so I could bite his hand that was gripping me. He yowled in pain, and then the girl was in front of me. He had let go of me, and she tried to grab me, so I punched her. Unfortunately, she dodged it, so my fist just connected with her shoulder. Then I was off balance, and the guy grabbed me around the waist. I started screaming and kicked at him as hard as I could. Apparently he got tired of that, so he dropped me on the ground. I was on my feet instantly, and he grabbed my arm again and turned me so I was facing him. He raised his hand and slapped me harder than I had ever been hit before. Everything went white and there was a ringing in my ear. He let go of me, so I collapsed backwards on the grass behind me.

“I said not to hurt her!” the girl hissed.

My neck ached from the force of his hit, and my jaw screamed painfully. The back of my eye had a spreading pain, but I knew I couldn’t just

take it laying down. I tried to stagger to my feet. She kicked me, not hard enough to really hurt, but enough so I'd fall back. I laid on my back and stared up the lightening sky and realized that I didn't stand a chance against them.

"I didn't! I was subduing her!" the guy growled and looked down at me. "And if she doesn't knock it off, I'll subdue her again, but harder this time!"

"Let's just get her to the car," she sounded exasperated.

He bent down to try and pick me up, but I hit away his hands. I was laying on my back, and I lifted up my legs. I wasn't really trying to kick him, but I was going to use my legs to push him back if he came near me. In response, he hit my calf hard enough to give me a Charlie horse, which I just gritted my teeth through. He put his knee on my stomach, holding me down so I couldn't fight as much. When he tried to grab me, I pushed him back with my hands, so he grabbed my wrists, pressing them tightly together with one hand.

"Stop!" he commanded. My eyes were welling with tears because I knew I couldn't really fight him off, and I had no idea where he was going to take me or what he would do with me. I tried to pull my hands free, but he just squeezed tighter and my bones felt like they were about to snap. "Just stop! We're going to take you no matter what!"

"Like hell you are!" Finn barked, his voice coming from out of nowhere.

I swiveled my head, trying to see around the guy that had me pinned to the ground. The girl stood just to the side of us, but between her and the guy I could see Finn, and I had honestly never been so happy to see anyone anymore. Tears of relief spilled over my cheeks, but I didn't even care. From where I was laying and the way the street light him, Finn looked glorious towering over everyone.

"Oh, dammit," the girl sighed. "If you hadn't spent so much time fighting with her, we'd be out of here by now."

"She was the one fighting with me!" the guy insisted.

“Now I’m the one fighting with you!” Finn growled, glaring at him.
“Get off her! *Now!*”

“Finn, can’t we just talk about this?” She was trying to sound sultry and flirty when she took a step closer to Finn, but he didn’t even look at her, making him score even more points with me. “I know how you feel about duty, but there’s got to be some kind of arrangement we can come to.” She took another step closer to him, so he pushed her back, so hard she stumbled and fell backwards.

“I hate fighting with you, Finn,” the guy muttered, and reluctantly, he let go of my hands and took his knee off my stomach. I took the opportunity to try and kick him in the nuts, and reflexively, he whirled on me and smacked me hard again.

Before I could even curse him for hitting me again, Finn was on him. I had rolled onto my side, cradling my repeatedly injured face, so I could only see part of what was going on. My attacker had managed to get to his feet, but I could hear the sounds of Finn punching him. The girl leapt on his back to stop him, but Finn elbowed her in the face, so she collapsed to the ground, cradling her bleeding nose.

“Enough!” The guy had cowered down, putting his arms over his face to protect himself from anymore blows. “We’re done! We’ll get out of here!”

“You better fucking get out of here!” Finn shouted, sounding angrier than I had even known he was capable of. “If I see you anywhere near her again, I will kill you!”

The guy walked over to the girl and helped her to her feet, then they both turned and headed down the street to a black Porsche parked nearby. Finn stood on the sidewalk in front of me, watching them until they got in the car and sped off down the road. When he was certain they were gone, he smoothed out his black hair and turned to me.

I was still laying on the ground, and he knelt down next to me. Tears were drying on my cheeks, but I didn’t even bother trying to wipe them away. Gently, he placed his hand on my cheek where I had been slapped, and the skin

was tender, so it stung a little, but I refused to show it. His hand felt too good to push away. His dark eyes were pained when he looked me over, and as terrible as everything had been up until this moment, I wouldn't have traded it for anything because it led to this, to him touching me and looking at me like that.

"I'm sorry it took me so long." He pursed his lips tightly, blaming himself for not getting here sooner. "I was sleeping, and I didn't wake up until you were completely panicked."

"You sleep in your clothes?" I asked, looking at his usual dark jeans and button-up shirt combo.

"Sometimes," Finn admitted, and he pulled his hand from my face, much to my dismay. "I knew something was up today. I could feel it, but I couldn't pinpoint it because I couldn't stay as close to you as I would've liked. I never should've slept at all."

"No, you can't blame yourself." I tried to sit up and Finn took my hand, helping me up. "It was my fault for coming out of my room."

"What were you doing out here?" Finn looked at me curiously, and I looked at the ground, feeling embarrassed.

"I thought I saw you," I admitted quietly. His face went dark again and he looked away from me.

"I should've been here," he said, almost under his breath, and then he got to his feet. He held out his hand to me and pulled me to my feet. I grimaced a little, but what hurt the worst was my back from falling from the tree. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." I forced a smile. "A little sore, but fine." He touched my cheek again, just with his fingertips, sending flutters through me. He was looking at my injury very seriously, and then his eyes met mine, dark and wonderful. It was at that moment that I knew that I had officially fallen for him.

"You're going to have a bruise," Finn murmured dropping his hand. "I'm sorry."

“It’s not your fault,” I insisted. “It’s mine. I was being an idiot. I should’ve known...” I trailed off. I had been about to say that I should’ve known it was dangerous, but how would I have possibly known that? I had no idea who those people were. “Who were they? What did they want?”

“Vittra,” Finn growled, glaring down the road as if they would appear at the sound of their name. He tensed up as he scanned the horizon, then put his hand on the small of my back so he could usher me away. “Come on. I’ll explain more in the car.”

“The car?” I stopped where I was, making him press his hand harder on my back until he realized I wasn’t going anywhere. His hand stayed there, and I had to ignore the small pleasure of it so I could argue with him. “I’m not going in the car. I have to go home before Matt realizes I’m gone.”

“You can’t go back there,” Finn was apologetic but firm. “I’m sorry. I know this is directly against your wishes, but it’s not safe for you there anymore. The Vittra have found you. I will not leave you here.”

“I don’t even understand what this Vittra is, and Matt is...” I shifted uncomfortably and looked backed towards my house.

Matt was tough, as far as people went, but I wasn’t sure what kind of match he would be for the guy that attacked me. And even if he could take him, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to bring that element into the house. If something happened to Matt or Maggie because of me, I could never forgive myself.

“Wendy, we must hurry, before Matt awakes and in case they decide to come back,” Finn insisted urgently. Reluctantly, I nodded and let him take me away.

Apparently, he’d run to rescue me this morning, because his car was still parked at his house two blocks away. It was really starting to lighten, and I knew that Matt would be getting up any minute, so I quickened my pace. That pleased Finn who wanted to get out of here as fast as possible.

“It’s going to break his heart.” I swallowed hard and refused to cry again, not so soon after I had just cried. I hated what I was turning into. In the past five years, I had cried less often than I had in this past week.

“He’d want you to be safe,” Finn assured me, and he was right. But Matt wouldn’t know I was safe. He wouldn’t know anything about me.

“Do you have a cell phone?” I asked hopefully, looking up at Finn.

“Why?” Finn kept glancing around as we approached his car. He pulled his keys from his pocket and used the keyless entry to unlock it.

“I need to call Matt and let him know that I’m okay,” I said. Walking in front of me, Finn held the passenger door open for me and I got inside. As soon as he got in the driver’s seat, I turned to him. “Well? Can I call him?”

“You really want to?” Finn seemed kind of surprised when he started the car.

“Yes! Of course I do!” I exclaimed.

Finn threw the car in gear and sped off down the road. The whole town was still asleep, except for us. He glanced over at me, debating. Finally, he grudgingly dug in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. When he handed it to me, I smiled gratefully.

“Thank you.” When I started dialing the phone, my hands were shaking, and I felt sick. This was going to be the hardest conversation of my life and I was not looking forward to it. I held the phone to my ear, listening to it ring, and I tried to slow my breathing.

“Hello?” Matt answered the phone groggily. He hadn’t woken up yet, and he didn’t know I was gone. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. “Hello?”

“Matt?” I said, afraid he would hang up if I didn’t say something soon.

“Wendy?” Matt instantly woke up, panic thick in his voice. “Where are you? What’s going on? Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” My cheek still hurt, but I was fine. Even if I wasn’t, I couldn’t tell him that. “Um, I’m calling because... I’m leaving, and I wanted you to know that I was safe.”

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” Matt was up moving around. I could hear him open his door, and then the bang as he threw open my bedroom door. “Where are you, Wendy? You need to come home right now!”

“I can’t, Matt!” I rubbed my forehead and let out shaky breath.

“Why? Does somebody have you? Did Finn take you?” Matt demanded. In the background, I could hear Maggie asking questions. He’d woken her up with his commotion of looking for me. “I’ll fucking kill that little bastard if he lays one hand on you.”

“Yeah, I’m with Finn, but it’s not like you think,” I said thickly. “I wish I could explain everything to you, but I can’t. He’s taking care of me though. He’s making sure I’m safe.”

“Safe from what?” Matt snapped. “I take care of you! Why are you doing this?” He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. “If we’re doing something wrong, we can change it, Wendy. You just need to come home, right now.” His voice was cracking, and it broke my heart. “Please, Wendy.”

“You’re not doing anything wrong.” Silent tears started sliding down my face, and I tried swallow down the lump in my throat. “You didn’t do anything. This isn’t about you or Maggie, honest. I love you guys, and I would take you with me if I could. But I can’t.”

“Why do you keep saying ‘can’t?’ Is he forcing you?” Matt growled. “I’ll call the police! We’ll come get you!”

“No, he’s not forcing me!” I sighed and wondered if this phone call had been a bad idea. Maybe I’m just making it worse for him. “Please don’t try and find me. You won’t be able to, and I don’t want you to. I just wanted you to know that I was safe and that I love you and you never did anything wrong. Okay? I just want you to be happy.”

“Wendy, why are you talking like that?” Matt sounded more afraid than I had ever heard him before, and I couldn’t be certain, but I think he’d started to cry. “You sound like your never coming back.” He swallowed hard. “You can’t leave forever. There’s no reason to. You... Whatever is going on, I can take care of it. I’ll do whatever I have to do. Just come back, Wendy.”

“I’m so sorry, Matt, but I can’t.” I wiped at my eyes and shook my head. “I’ll call you again if I can. But if you don’t hear from me, don’t worry. I’m okay.”

“Wendy! Stop talking like that!” Matt shouted. “You need to come back here! Wendy!”

“Goodbye, Matt.” I hung up to the sound of him yelling my name.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself that this was the only thing I could do. It was the only way that I could keep them safe, and it was the safest thing for me, which is exactly what Matt would want. If he knew what was going on, he would agree with this completely. It didn’t change the fact that it had absolutely killed to say goodbye to him like that. Hearing his pain and frustration so evidently over the phone....

“Hey, Wendy. You did the right thing,” Finn assured me, but I just sniffled.

He reached over and took my hand, squeezing it lightly. Ordinarily, I would’ve been delighted by that, but right now I was doing everything I could to keep from sobbing or throwing up. I had just promised Matt that I would never do anything like this again. I wiped at my tears, but I couldn’t seem to stop crying. Finn let go of my hand so he could flip back the armrest, getting it out of the way.

“Come here,” Finn said gently. He put his arm around my shoulders and pulled me closer to him. I rested my head against his shoulder, and he held me tightly to him. Eventually, I stopped crying, but I don’t know when that it was because it wasn’t until after I had fallen asleep.

We arrived at Elora's manor in the early afternoon, and the bright sunlight gleamed off it, making it look even more majestic and imposing than it had before. Finn didn't knock on the door this time. He just punched the key code in the alarm and let me in. I had woken up about a minute before we pulled up to the house, so my eyes were puffy from sleep and crying. He had still had his arm around me and I was nestled in close to him. When he saw that I was awake, he had taken his arm back, and I felt a familiar disappointment. When we walked into the house, he made a point of not touching me, once again reminding me that anything I thought happened between us was just my imagination.

As we made our way down the long hall towards the drawing room, I passed a mirror and stopped to investigate. I had left the house wearing light green pajama pants and a green top, and they were both stained with dirt and grass stains from falling from the tree and getting slapped around by that guy. My face was red and swollen where I had been slapped, and my temple was turning purplish. My hair was a total and complete disaster. Twigs and grass were stuck in it. Red rimmed and bleary, my eyes looked like I had spent the night on a heavy bender, and honestly, I felt like I had. I was sore all over.

Finn had stopped to wait for me, and he prompted me when I had spent too long hating my reflection. He knocked on the heavy wooden door to the drawing room. I didn't hear anything, but a moment later, he opened the door, as if she had summoned us in.

"Elora," Finn stepped into the room and gave a small bow.

Elora was sitting in the corner of the room on a stool. A large canvas was set on the easel before her. It was only partially finished, but it appeared to be some kind of fire, with dark smoke filtering over broken chandeliers. She continued painting for several minutes while we stood there. I glanced over at Finn, but he just shook his head, trying to quiet me before I voiced a complaint.

His hands were clasped behind his back, and he stood rigidly straight, reminding me of a soldier.

"I see you decided to grace us with your presence." Elora still had her back to us, but I assumed she was talking to me. Her long hair fell down her back, shimmering when she leaned forward to paint.

"I didn't have a choice," I replied.

"You always have a choice." Elora sounded irritated, then she finally turned back to look at me. Her eyes widened with surprise, but her expression lacked anything resembling concern. "What happened?"

"Vittra," Finn answered with the same contempt he had before.

"Oh?" Elora raised an eyebrow. "Which ones?"

"Jen and Kyra," Finn said.

"I see." Elora stared off for a minute, then started setting aside her paint supplies carefully. She got off the stool and turned to face us, smoothing out the non-existent wrinkles in her dress. Sighing tiredly, she sat on one of the sofas in the room and gestured to the one across from her. I took a seat, but Finn remained standing. Placing her delicate fingers on her chin, she looked over at Finn. "You're sure it was just Jen and Kyra?"

"I believe so," Finn said, thinking hard. "I didn't see any signs of others, and they would've called for back up, had there been any to call. They were quite insistent on taking Wendy. Jen got violent with her."

"I can see that," Elora nodded at my face. "They know who she is, then?"

"They called me by my full name," I interjected helpfully, but Elora had turned her attention back to Finn. She stared at him for a minute, and he nodded.

"Hmm." Elora settled back on the sofa. "I suppose that this will be a lesson to you. Running away in the middle of the night like that." Her eyes were heavy with disdain. "You must have better sense than that. If you truly wanted to leave, all you had to do was ask. That was childish and irresponsible."

"I'm sorry," I mumbled. "I just missed my family."

“They are not your family!” She rolled her eyes and waved the idea away. “No matter. You won’t be able to see them anymore. With the Vittra after you, this is the only place you’ll be safe.”

“What are the Vittra? I don’t understand who they are or what they wanted with me.” I glanced over at Finn, but he just kept staring at Elora.

“Förening is populated with Trylle.” Elora gestured widely around, referencing the whole town. “The term Trylle is a distinction similar to a tribe. We are trolls, and over the years the troll population has been dwindling. Our numbers used to be great, but there are less than a million of us in the entire planet.

“We are one of the largest tribes left, but we are not the only one,” Elora continued. “The Vittra are a warring faction, and they have been going down even faster. They are forever looking to pick off some of us. Either by turning them to their side, or simply by getting rid of them.”

“So the Vittra want me to live with them?” I wrinkled my nose. “Why? What I do for them?”

“You are the Princess,” Elora explained with a condescending smile. “You will one day be Queen, and being the leader of Trylle carries great weight.”

“But if I’m not here, won’t you just find another replacement? I mean, there’s going to be a Queen here even if I’m not,” I pointed out.

“There is more to it than that. We are not all created equal,” Elora went on, and cast an odd look at Finn. “We are far more gifted than the others. You have already tapped into persuasion, and you have the potential for much more. Vittra are lucky to have any abilities. Adding you to their ranks would greatly change their power to influence.”

“You’re saying I’m powerful?” I raised a sardonic eyebrow. There was nothing powerful about me.

“You will be,” Elora amended. “That is why you need to live here, to learn our ways so you can take your rightful place.”

“Okay.” I took a deep breath and ran my hand along my pajama pants. None of this seemed real or made sense. The idea of myself as a Queen was completely absurd. I barely managed to pass for an awkward teenager.

“Finn will be staying to watch over you,” Elora nodded again to Finn. “Since they’re looking for you, added protection would be prudent.” Her eyes were locked on Finn for a moment, then she turned back to me. “You look a mess. Why don’t you get yourself cleaned up?”

“Um, yeah, okay,” I nodded unsurely and stood up. “Thanks. I guess.”

“Thank you,” Finn did a small bow to her, and then we left the room.

After walking away from her, there was always this sudden sense of being able to breathe again. I didn’t really feel it when I was with her, but it was as if she took all the oxygen from the room. As soon as I left, I could suddenly feel the shift. Breathing deeply, I ran my hand up and down my arm to stifle the chill that ran over me. Everything she had said would’ve freaked me out if I had believed it, so I pushed it from my thoughts.

“Are you holding up alright?” Finn looked at me carefully.

“Yeah, I’m great.” I tucked some of my curls behind my ears, but mostly, I was just happy that I was still walking. “So... what’s going on with you and Elora?”

“What do you mean?” Finn looked at me from the corner of his eye.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged, afraid that I had been imagining things. “It just seems like she looks at you intently a lot, and like you understand exactly what she means.” As soon as it came out of my mouth, it dawned on me. “That’s one of her abilities, isn’t it? Kind of like what I can do, but less manipulative. Cause she’s not controlling you, is she? She’s just telling you what to do.”

“Not even telling me what to do. She’s just talking,” Finn corrected me.

“Why doesn’t she talk to me like that?” I asked.

“She wasn’t sure if you’d be receptive. If you’re not accustomed to it, hearing another person’s voice in your head can be unsettling,” Finn explained. “And she didn’t really need to.”

“But she needed to with you?” I slowed down, and he slowed to match my pace. “She was talking to you private about me, wasn’t she?” Finn paused, and I could see that he was considering lying to me.

“Some of it, yes,” Finn admitted.

“Can she read minds?” I felt slightly horrified at that thought.

“No. Very few can.” When he looked over at me, he smiled crookedly. “Your secrets are safe, Wendy.”

Finn walked me the rest of the way to my room, although I fell silent after that. My mind spun from everything that happened, and I looked forward to getting cleaned up and pulling the twigs from my hair. He paused at my door, and I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to invite him in or something. Then he just smiled, nodded, and told me he’d be down the hall if I needed anything.

When I came out of my shower, wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe, I was surprised to find Rhys sitting on my bed. He had my iPod, the one that had come with the room, and he was scrolling through it. I ran a finger through my wet tangles of hair and cleared my throat loudly, since he apparently hadn’t heard me exit the bathroom.

“Oh, hey!” Rhys set aside the iPod and got to his feet, grinning at me in a way that made his eyes sparkle. Then he remembered something, and he attempted a scowl. “You stole my bike.”

“Oh, yeah I’m really sorry about that,” I admitted sheepishly. “Did Finn get it back for you? My aunt took it to the impound lot.”

“No, he told me about it, but I guess you guys didn’t have time cause you left in a hurry.” His expression got more serious as he leaned in towards me, and it took me a minute to realize he was admiring the bruise I had growing on the side of my face. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I brushed off his concern and walked around to the other side of the bed. It suddenly seemed like a good idea to put some distance between us. When he looked at me like that, it made me acutely aware of the fact that I wasn’t wearing anything underneath my fluffy robe.

“Good,” Rhys smiled. “But you know, I would’ve let you take it anyway. My motorcycle, I mean. If you had just asked, I wouldn’t have stopped you.” His eyes got uncharacteristically somber when he glanced around my room. “I know what its like to want to escape.”

“You aren’t happy here?” I blurted out before I could think about how rude that sounded. His eyes met mine, just for a second, revealing something more than that, but then he quickly dropped them.

“Why wouldn’t I be happy?” Rhys asked wryly. He was standing directly on the other side of the bed as me and he ran his fingers along my silk sheets, staring at the bedspread intently. “I have everything a kid could want. Video games, cars, toys, money, clothes, servants...” He trailed off, but then a slow smile returned to his face and he looked up at me. “And now I have a Princess living across the hall from me. I’m ecstatic.”

“I’m not really a Princess,” I shook my head and tucked my hair behind my ears. “Not in the real sense of the word. I mean... I just got here.”

“You look like a Princess to me.” The way he smiled at me made me want to blush, so I stared down at my bedspread, unsure of what else to do.

“So what about you?” I kept my head down, but I raised my eyes up to meet his. The smile playing on my lips felt oddly flirtatious, but I didn’t mind it. “Are you some kind of Prince?”

“Hardly,” Rhys laughed. He ran a hand through his sandy hair, looking rather sheepish. “I should probably let you finish getting dressed. The chef is on tonight, and supper is served promptly at six. So be there or... eat cold leftovers.”

Once he left, I took a deep breath and flopped back on my bed. Everything felt way too big in this house. There was all this vast space between everything, and it felt like I was trapped on an island. I had thought that’s what I had wanted. To be my very own island, but here I was, and I felt nothing but isolated and confused.

I was pretty sure that people weren’t telling me things. Every time I asked something, there were only half-answers and vague responses before they

quickly changed the subject. For being set to inherit a kingdom of sorts, I was pretty low on the information rung.

I had expected supper to be some kind of grand ordeal, but it wasn't at all. The dining room was empty, so I followed the voices into the kitchen. A man in all white was working the stove, his long graying hair pulled back in a ponytail. Rhys had a stool pulled up to the island, munching on a bread roll and laughing loudly at something. A girl looking a little bit older than me stood on the other side of the island, a Mountain Dew bottle in her hand. Her hair was a shiny red, her eyes sparkled green, and she had a nervous smile. Finn had his back to me when I came in the kitchen, but he glanced over his shoulder at the sound of my footsteps.

"I was just coming to see if you'd like to join us," Finn turned around and greeted me.

"Yeah, we were having dinner *and* a show," Rhys smirked, looking at the girl. "Rhiannon was just about to burp the alphabet!"

"Oh my gosh, Rhys, I was not!" The girl protested, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment. "I just drank the Mountain Dew too fast and I said excuse me!" Rhys laughed again and tossed a piece of bread in his mouth. She looked apologetically at me. "I'm sorry. Rhys can be such an idiot sometimes. I wanted to make a better first impression than this."

"You're doing okay so far." I wasn't used to the idea of anybody trying to impress me ever, and she definitely had a certain likable quality to her.

"Keep it down! I'm trying to work!" The chef grumbled at the stove. Rhys just smirked, so Rhiannon cast a warning glare at him.

"Anyway, Wendy, this is Rhiannon, the girl next door," Rhys gestured between the two of us. "Rhiannon, this is Wendy, future ruler of everything around you."

"Wendy would be just fine," I corrected him.

"Hi, nice to meet you." She set down her pop and came over to me so she could shake my hand. "I've heard so much about you."

“Oh yeah? Like what?” I was curious to see what people were saying about me. So far, I couldn’t imagine that much of it had been good. Rhiannon floundered helplessly for a minute, looking to Rhys for help, but he just laughed. “It’s okay. I was just kidding.”

“Oh. Sorry.” She flashed an embarrassed smile, and Rhys pushed out a stool next to him, patting the seat.

“Why don’t you come have a seat, Rhiannon, and chillax for a bit?” Rhys offered, trying to settle her discomfort. She felt awkward and embarrassed because of me, and I could not wrap my head around that concept.

“Are you hungry?” Finn asked. He had gone over to a cupboard to start getting out plates, and he looked back at me.

“Uh, yeah,” I nodded. “Famished, actually.”

Finn got plates for everyone, then got water for the two of us and pop for Rhys and Rhiannon. Rhys continued to tease Rhiannon about everything, and she kept blushing and making apologies for him. I suspected that their relationship modeled something that resembled a normal healthy sibling relationship, and I had to push that thought away before I had a chance to think of Matt. The chef complained the entire time of all the noise we were making, but that only encouraged Rhys to get louder.

Finn pulled up a stool next to mine, and he spoke very little while we ate. Rhys tended to dominate the conversation, with Rhiannon interjecting when he said things that were categorically untrue or apologizing when she thought he was being rude. He never really was, though. For the most part, he was funny and lively and kept things from ever feeling awkward.

Occasionally, Finn would look over at me and make quiet comments when Rhys and Rhiannon were otherwise engaged in some kind of debate. Hidden underneath the lip of the island, I felt his knee brush against mine. At first, I assumed it was a simple accident because of our close proximity, but as I finished my meal, I noticed that he had actually tilted himself towards me, leaning in closer. It was a subtle move, one that Rhys and Rhiannon probably wouldn’t catch, but I definitely had.

“You are such a pest!” Rhiannon grumbled playfully after Rhys had flicked an unwanted tomato on to her plate. She tried to put it back on his plate, but he lightly slapped at her hand and pushed her away. “Rhys! You’re like a five-year-old sometimes!”

“Dinner’s not always this exciting,” Finn assured me, his voice low. I leaned towards him so I could hear him better, and his dark eyes met mine. “Sometimes Rhys is gone.” A small smile played on his lips. “Although, with you around, things are bound to get more exciting.”

“You think so?” I asked, trying to make my voice sound sexier somehow, but I completely failed. Finn smiled wider, and my heart nearly hammered out of my chest.

“Sorry for interrupting your play time,” Elora spoke from behind us. Her voice wasn’t that loud, but somehow it seemed to echo through everything.

Rhys and Rhiannon immediately stopped their fighting, both of them sitting rigidly and staring down at their plates. Finn moved away from me, but he turned around to face Elora, making that look like it had been his intention all along. I glanced back over my shoulder at her, and the way she looked at me made me feel guilty, even though I was pretty sure I hadn’t done anything wrong.

“You weren’t interrupting anything,” Finn assured her, but I sensed a nervousness below his calm words. “Were you planning to join us?”

“No, that’ll be quite all right.” Elora surveyed the kitchen and the small mess we had created on the island with heavy distaste. “I needed to speak with you.”

“Would you like us to be excused?” Rhys offered, and Rhiannon already started sliding off her seat.

“That won’t be necessary.” Elora held up her hand, and Rhiannon blushed as she climbed back on the stool. “The Strom’s will be coming for dinner tomorrow.” Her eyes went back to Rhys and Rhiannon, and she seemed to cower under Elora’s gaze. “I trust that you two will find a way to make yourselves useful.”

“When they come over here, I’ll go over there,” Rhys suggested cheerily. She nodded at him, showing that his response was sufficient enough.

“As for you, you will be joining us.” Elora smiled at me, but there was something uneasy masked behind it. “The Strom’s are very good friends of our family, and I expect you to make a good impression with them.” She gave Finn that intense look, meaning she was saying things I wasn’t meant to hear, and he nodded understanding. “Finn will be in charge of preparing you for the dinner, making sure you are on your best behavior and know everything you need for tomorrow evening.”

“Okay,” I nodded, figuring that I had better say something.

“That is all. Carry on.” Elora turned and walked out of the room, her skirt flowing behind her, but nobody said anything until she was long gone.

Finn stood up and started clearing away his dishes, and Rhiannon almost shivered with relief. She was more terrified of Elora than even I was, and I wondered what Elora had done to make her so deserving of that fear. Only Rhys seemed to shake it off as soon as she had gone.

“I don’t know how you can stand that creepy mind speak thing she does with you, Finn.” Rhys shook his head and took another bite of his food. “I would freak out if she were in my head.”

“Why? There’s nothing in your head for her to get to,” Finn commented dryly, and Rhiannon giggled nervously.

“What did she say to you, anyway?” Rhys pressed, looking up at him. Finn continued cleaning up the island but didn’t respond. “Finn? What’d she say?”

“It’s nothing to concern yourself with,” Finn admonished him quietly. He finished wiping down the counter, then turned to me. “Are you ready?”

“For what?” I asked dumbly.

“We have a lot to go over before tomorrow night.” He glanced warily at the clock, then back at me. “Come on. We better get started.”

As it turned out, I wasn't completely stunted socially and had a basic understanding of manners, so there wasn't all that much that Finn needed to tutor me on. What he had said had been common sense things, like always say please and thank you, but in the end, he encouraged me to keep my mouth shut whenever possible. I think his task had been less about preparing me for the dinner and more about keeping me in line. I suspected that the secret things Elora had been telling him had just been warning him to baby-sit me, or else.

Dinner was at eight, and company was arriving at seven. Rhys had popped in to wish me good luck and let me know he was heading over to Rhiannon's, in case anybody cared. Finn came in shortly after I had gotten over the shower, looking even sharper than usual. He was clean shaven for the first time since he'd stopped going to school, and he wore a black button-up shirt with a narrow white tie and black pants with a black blazer over it. It should've been little much with so much black, but he managed to pull it off, all the while looking incredibly sexy.

"Well don't you look dapper?" I commented.

Once again, I was wearing only my bathrobe, and I wondered why nobody thought it was inappropriate for boys to barge in when I wasn't dressed. At least this time I was doing something semi-sexy; sitting on the edge of my bed putting lotion on my legs. It was my usual routine that I did every time I showered, but since Finn was in the room, I tried to play it off as being sensual when it really wasn't.

Not that Finn had even noticed. He knocked once, opened my bedroom door, and only gave me a fleeting glance as he headed straight to my closet. I sighed in frustration and hurriedly rubbed the lotion in while Finn busied himself. He had flicked on the light and was apparently rummaging through my clothes.

“I don’t think I have anything in your size!” I said and leaned farther on my bed, trying see what he was doing in there.

“Funny,” he muttered absently.

“What’s so hard about dressing me? And what’s wrong with how I dress myself?” I countered, watching him, but he didn’t even look at me. He was far too focused on the task at hand.

“You are a Princess, and you need to dress like one.” He gave a resigned sigh, and he started leafing through my dresses and pulled out a long, white sleeveless dress. It was actually a very pretty, looking much too fancy for me, and when he came out of the closet, he handed it to me. “I think this might work. Try it on.”

“Isn’t everything in my closet suitable?” I tossed the dress on the bed next to me and turned to look at him. “Wasn’t everything picked out for these occasions?”

“Yes, but different things are better for different occasions.” Finn came over to the bed to smooth out the dress, making sure it didn’t have any wrinkles or creases. “This is a very important dinner, Wendy.”

“Why? What makes this one so important?” I demanded.

“The Strom’s are very good friends of your mother’s and the Kroner’s are very important people. They affect the future,” Finn finished smoothing the dress and turned to me. “Why don’t you continue getting ready?”

“How do they affect the future? What does that mean?” I pressed.

“That’s a conversation for another day,” Finn nodded towards the bathroom. “You need to hurry if you’re going to be ready in time for dinner.”

“Fine,” I sighed, getting up off the bed.

“Wear your hair down,” Finn commanded. My hair was wet so it was lying nicely down, but I knew that as soon as it dried, it would turn into a wild thicket of curls.

“I can’t. My hair is impossible.” I ran my fingers through my dark hair.

“We all have difficult hair. It’s the curse of being Trylle,” Finn said. “Even Elora and I. It’s something you must learn to manage.”

“Your hair is nothing like mine,” I insisted dourly. His hair was short and obviously had some product in it, but it looked smooth, straight, and obedient.

“It most certainly is,” Finn replied shortly.

I meant to prove him wrong, so instinctively, I reached out and touched his hair, running my fingers shallowly through the hair past his temples. Other than being stiff with product, it felt like my hair. It wasn’t until I had done it that I realized that there was something inherently intimate about running my fingers through another person’s hair. I had been looking at his hair, but then I met his dark eyes and realized exactly how close I was to him. Since I was short, I had stood on my tiptoes a bit, leaning up to him like I was about to kiss him, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I thought that would be a very good course of action right about now.

“Satisfied?” Finn asked, and I retracted my hand and took a step back. “There should be hair products in your bathroom. Experiment.”

I nodded my compliance, still feeling too flustered to really speak. Finn was unnaturally calm, and at times like that, I really hated it. I barely even remembered to breathe until I was in my bathroom. Being that near to him made me forget everything but his dark eyes, the heat from his skin, his wonderful scent, the feel of his hair beneath my fingers, the smooth curve of his lips...

That had to be the end of that. I had a dinner tonight to worry about, and somehow, I had to do something with my hair. I tried to remember what Maggie had used in my hair before I went to the dance with Patrick, but that felt like a lifetime ago. Thankfully, my dark hair had magically decided to behave itself tonight, making the whole process go easier. Finn seemed to think my hair looked better down, so I left the length of it hanging in the back and pulled the sides back with clips. The bruise was fading on my temple, and I covered it up easily with concealer. I also had a fully stocked jewelry box, and I went with a diamond necklace.

The dress was much trickier to get on. It had one of those stupid zippers that refused to move higher than my lower back, and I couldn't win. Tentatively, I pushed open the bathroom door.

"I need help with the zipper," I said meekly, gesturing to the open slit down my back.

Finn had been looking out the window, at the sun setting on the bluffs, and when he turned, his eyes rested on me for almost a minute before he nodded and walked over. One of his hands pressed warmly on my bare shoulder to steady the fabric as he zipped me up, and my skin shivered involuntarily.

"So what do you think?" I smiled at him when he had finished.

"You look like a Princess," Finn smiled crookedly at me.

I walked over to the full length to investigate for myself. Even I had to admit that I looked lovely. With the white dress and the diamonds, I almost looked too lavish. Maybe it was too much for just a dinner.

"I look like I'm getting married," I commented and glanced back at Finn. "Do you think I should change?"

"No, it's perfect." He looked pensively at me. The doorbell chimed loudly, and Finn nodded. "The guests have arrived. We should greet them."

We walked down the hall together, but at the top of the steps, Finn purposefully fell a few steps behind me. Elora and the Kroner's were standing in the alcove as I descended the steps, and they all turned to look up at me. It was the first grand entrance I had ever made in my life, and there was something wonderful about it.

The Kroner's consisted of a stunningly beautiful woman in a floor-length dark green dress, an attractive man in a dark suit, and a rather foxy boy about my age. I could feel them appraising me as I walked towards them, so I was careful to keep my steps as smooth and elegant as possible.

"This is my daughter, the Princess." Elora smiled in away that almost looked loving and held her hand out to me. Even she looked more extravagant than usual. Her dress was had more detailing and her jewelry was more

pronounced. I smiled politely and did a small curtsy. Immediately after, I realized that they were probably the ones that should be curtsying to me, but they all smiled pleasantly at me. “Princess, these are the Kroner’s. Aurora, Noah, and Tove.”

“It’s such a pleasure to meet you,” Aurora had a syrupy tone to her words that I wasn’t sure if I trusted or not. Her dark hair was up, with a few perfectly placed curls falling from it. Her dark eyes were large and stunning.

Her husband, Noah, did a very small bow towards me, as did her son, Tove. Both Noah and Aurora looked appropriately respectful towards Elora and me, but Tove looked vaguely bored. His mossy green eyes met mine very briefly, then looked away, as if he were uncomfortable looking at me.

Elora ushered us into the sitting parlor to wait until supper was served. The conversation was overly polite and banal, but I suspected there were undercurrents that I wasn’t really picking up. Elora and Aurora did most of the talking, with Noah adding very little. Tove said nothing at all, preferring to look anywhere but directly at anyone. Finn was more in the background. He was very poised and polite, but I was under the impression that Aurora didn’t entirely approve of his presence.

The Strom’s were fashionably late, as Finn had predicted they would be. Finn had been a tracker for Willa, so he knew her and her father, Garrett, quite well. His wife (Willa’s mother) had died some years earlier. Finn claimed that Garrett was easy-going, but that Willa was a tad high-strung. She was twenty-one, and prior to living in Förening, she’d been privileged to the point of excess.

When the doorbell rang, interrupting the irritatingly dull conversation between Aurora and my mother, Finn immediately excused himself to answer the door and returned with Garrett and Willa in tow. Garrett was a rather handsome man his mid-forties. His hair was dark and disheveled, making me feel better about my own imperfect hair. When he shook my hand with a warm smile, he immediately put me at ease.

Willa, on the other hand, had that snobby look that was always simultaneously bored and pissed off. She was a waif of a girl with light-brown waves that fell neatly on her back. Her outfit had come straight from the runway, right down her ankle covered in diamonds. She shook my hand, and I could tell that her smile was an attempt at sincere, making me hate her a little less.

Once they arrived, we adjourned to the dining room for supper. Finn pulled my chair out for me before I sat down, and I enjoyed it since I couldn't remember a single time that anyone had done that for me before. Willa seemed to try and engage Tove in conversation as we walked into the other room, but he remained completely silent.

Garrett sat in the chair nearest to Elora, and Willa took a seat next to him, and I sat at the other head of the table, with Finn and Tove flanking me on either side. Finn waited until everyone was sitting to take a seat himself, and this would be the standard for the evening. As long as at least one person was standing, so would Finn. He was always the first to his feet, and even though the chef and a butler-esque fellow were on staff tonight, Finn would offer to get anyone anything they needed.

The dinner dragged on much more sorely than I had imagined it could. I was wearing white, so I was terrified of spilling any drop of food on my dress. Not only that, but I had never felt so judged in my entire life. It felt as if both Aurora and Elora were just waiting for me to screw up so they could pounce, but I wasn't sure why either of them would want me to. I could tell that on several occasions Garrett tried to lighten the mood, but nobody allowed it. Aurora and Elora dominated the conversation, and everyone else rarely said anything.

Tove stirred his soup a lot, and I became mildly hypnotized by the act. Then something happened. He let go of his spoon, but it kept swirling around the bowl, stirring the soup without any hand to guide it. I must have started to gape because I felt Finn gently kick me under the table, and I quickly dropped my eyes back to my own food.

“It is so nice to have you here,” Garrett said randomly, changing the entire topic of conversation. He smiled at me, and it seemed genuine. “How do you like the palace so far?”

“Oh, it is not a *palace*, Garrett,” Elora laughed. It wasn’t a real laugh, though. It was the kind of laugh rich people had whenever they talked about new money people. Aurora tittered right along with it, and that quieted Elora down somehow.

“You’re right. It’s better than a palace,” Garrett joked, and Elora smiled demurely.

“I like it. It’s very nice.” I tried to look happy, but I was afraid to elaborate more. I wasn’t sure if they had heard anything about my escape the first time I was here, and I didn’t want to sound like a liar.

“Are you adjusting here alright?” Garrett asked.

“Yeah, I think so,” I said quietly. “I haven’t been here that long, though.”

“It does take time,” Garrett allowed, and looked at Willa with affectionate concern. His easy smile returned quickly and he nodded at Finn. “But you’ve got Finn there to help you. He’s an expert at helping the changelings acclimate. You really got a winner with that one.”

“I’m not an expert at anything,” Finn demurred politely. “I just do my job the best I can.”

“Have you had a designer to come over to make the dress yet?” Aurora asked conversationally, taking a polite sip of her wine. It had been a minute since she’d last spoken, so it was time for her take the conversation back over. “That dress she has on is very lovely, but I can’t imagine that was made specifically for her.”

“No, it was not.” Elora gave her a plastic smile, and cast a very small but very distinct glare at me and my dress, which until just that second had felt like the most beautiful thing I had ever worn. “The tailor is set to come over tomorrow.”

“That is cutting it a bit short for Saturday, isn’t it?” Aurora questioned, and I could see Elora bristling just below the surface of her perfect smile.

“Not at all,” Elora explained with any overly soothing tone, almost as if she were talking to a small child or a Pomeranian. “I am using Fredrique Von Ellsin, the same one that designed the Willa’s gown. He works very quickly, and his gowns are always immaculate.”

“Yes, my gown was divine,” Willa interjected politely.

“Ah, yes,” Aurora allowed herself to look impressed. “We have him on reserve for when our daughter comes home next spring. He’s much harder to get in then, since that is the busy season for when the children return.” There was something vaguely condescending in her voice, if we had done something tacky by me arriving here when I did. “That is one major benefit at having the Princess come home in the fall. Everything will be so much easier to book. When Tove came home last season, it was so difficult to get everything just right. I suppose you’ll have everything you want right on hand. That should make for a stunning ball.”

Several things were setting off alarms in my head. First, they were talking about me like I wasn’t even there, and even Tove to a lesser extent, but he didn’t seem to notice or care about anything going on around him. Secondly, they were talking about something going on Saturday that I apparently needed a specially designed dress for, and yet nobody had cared to mention this to me. Then again, this shouldn’t surprise me. Nobody told me anything.

“I haven’t had the luxury of making provisions a year in advance the way most people do, since the Princess came home most unexpectedly.” Elora’s sweet smile was dripping with venom, and Aurora smiled back at her and pretended not to notice.

“I can certainly lend you a hand. I just did Tove’s, and as I said, I’m already preparing for our daughter’s,” Aurora offered helpfully.

“That would be delightful.” Elora took a long drink of her wine.

Dinner continued along that way. Elora and Aurora making polite conversation that tried to mask how much they detested each other. Noah

didn't say much, but at least he managed not to look awkward or bored. Willa and I ended up watching Tove quite a bit, because I was certain he was moving things without touching them.

Unlike the Strom's, the Kroner's didn't linger around after dinner. I assumed that was because Elora actually liked Garrett and Willa. Elora, Finn, and I walked the Kroner's to the door, with Finn being the one to actually open the door for them. When saying their goodbyes, Aurora and Noah bowed before Elora and me, making me feel quite ridiculous. There was absolutely no reason why anyone should bow to me.

To my astonishment, Tove gently took my hand in his, kissing it softly when he bowed. When he stood up, his eyes met mine, and very seriously he said, "I look forward to seeing you again, Princess."

"And I, you." That came right off the top of my head, and I was so pleased that I had said something that sounded completely perfect for the moment.

After they departed into the night, oxygen seemed to return to the house, and Elora let out an irritated sigh. Finn actually rested his forehead against the door for a moment before turning back around to face us. I felt much better knowing that everyone else had found the evening exhausting.

"Oh, that woman." Elora rubbed her temples and shook her head, then pointed at me. "*You*. You do not bow to anyone, ever. Especially not that woman. I know you thrilled her endlessly, and she's going to be telling everyone about the little dimwitted Princess who didn't know enough not to bow before a Marksinna." I looked at the floor, feeling any sense of pride at the way I made it through the night vanish. I had apparently embarrassed Elora wholly. "You don't even bow before me, is that clear?"

"Yes," I muttered.

"You are the Princess. *Nobody* is higher than you. Have you got that?" Elora snapped, and I nodded. "Then you need to start acting like it. You sit there like a wallflower when you need to command the room! They came here to see you, to gauge your power, and you need to show them! You have got to

blow everyone away! They need to have confidence that you will be able to lead them all when I am gone!” I kept my eyes locked on the floor, even though I knew that probably offended her, but I was afraid that I would cry if I looked at her yelling at me. “You sit there like some beautiful, useless jewel, and that’s exactly what she wants.” She sighed disgustingly again. “Oh, and the way you gaped at that boy...”

After her small tirade, she abruptly stopped. We immediately went to the sitting parlor, where Garrett and Willa were waiting for us, but the entire atmosphere had changed to one of a more relaxed tone. Finn even loosened his tie. Elora lounged on the chair next to Garrett, and he seemed to captivate a disproportionate amount of her attention.

A whole other side of Finn emerged. He sat next to me, his leg crossed over his knee, making charming small talk with them. He was still gracious and respectful and not all that talkative, but he always seemed to add something the conversation. I bit my tongue, afraid to say the wrong thing, but Garrett and Willa were definitely entertained by him, and even Elora looked pleased.

Garrett and Elora talked some kind of politics, which I didn’t really follow, and Finn added things when appropriate. Willa looked completely bored by the conversation, and I just concentrated on not saying anything else stupid. Elora apparently had to appoint a new Chancellor in six months, but I didn’t even know what that was, and I thought asking would only make me look foolish.

As the night progressed, Elora had to excuse herself because of a migraine. Garrett and Finn offered their condolences and help, but neither of them seemed that surprised or concerned by this occurrence. They continued on with that whole Chancellor business again, and Willa couldn’t take it anymore. She said she needed fresh air and invited me to join her.

Down at the far end of the hall, there was a small alcove of a room with nearly invisible glass doors. It led out to a lovely balcony that ran from one corner of the house to the other. The balcony was lined with a thick black

railing that went up to my chest. Willa went over to the corner farthest away from everyone and leaned on it.

From out here, the view was even more intimidating. The balcony was literally hanging over a hundred foot drop. Below us, there was nothing but the tree tops of maples, oaks, and evergreens. Farther down, I could see the tops of houses, and way down at the bottom of the bluff, the turbulent river pumped past us. A breeze blew over us, sending a cold chill down my bare arms, and Willa sighed.

“Oh knock it off!” Willa grumbled, and at first, I thought she was talking to me. She was more scantily clad than I was, and I didn’t understand how she wouldn’t be cold. She lifted her hand, waving her fingers lightly in the air, and almost instantly, her hair that had been blown back in the breeze settled on her shoulders. The wind had died away.

“Did you do that?” I asked, trying not to sound as awed as I felt.

“Yeah. That’s the only thing I can do. lame, isn’t it?” Willa complained and wrinkled her nose.

“No, actually, I think it’s pretty cool,” I admitted. She controlled the wind! Wind was an unstoppable force, and she just wiggled her fingers, and it stopped. I thought it was magic.

“I kept hoping I’d get a *real* ability someday, but my mother only had command over the clouds, so at least I did better than that,” Willa shrugged. “You’ll see when your abilities start coming in. Everybody hopes for telekinesis or at least some persuasion, but most of us are stuck with basic use of the elements, if we’re lucky. The abilities aren’t what they used to be, I guess.”

“Before you came here, did you know you were something?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder at her. She had her back on the railing, and she leaned back over it, letting her hair hang down towards the ground.

“Oh, yeah. I always knew I was better than everyone else.” Her eyes fluttered close and she wagged her fingers again, stirring up a light breeze to flow through her hair. “What about you?”

“Um... kind of.” Different, yes. Better, not at all.

“You’re younger than most of us are, though,” Willa commented. “You’re still in school, aren’t you?”

“I was.” Nobody had made any mention of school since I got here, and I had no idea what their intentions were for the remainder of my education.

“School sucks anyway.” Willa stood up straight and looked at me solemnly. “So why did they get you early, anyway? Is it because of the Vittra?”

“What do you mean?” I asked nervously.

“I’ve just heard stories that the Vittra have been prowling around lately, trying to catch Trylle changelings,” Willa said casually. “I figured you’d be a top priority cause you’re a Princess, and that’s kind of a big deal here.” She looked thoughtfully at her bare toes and mused, “I wonder if I’d be top priority. My dad’s not a King or anything like that, but we are kind of royalty. What’s lower than a Queen? Is that a Duchess or something?”

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. I knew nothing of monarchy and titles, which was ironic considering that I was now integral to a monarchy.

“Yeah, I think I’m like that.” Willa narrowed her eyes in concentration. “My official title is Marksinna. We’re not the only ones, though. There’s maybe six or seven other families in Förening alone with the same title. The Kroners were next in line for the crown if you didn’t come back. They’re real powerful, and that Tove is a real catch.” While he was attractive, nothing had really impressed me about Tove other than his telekinesis, but I wouldn’t refer to him as a catch. Still, it felt weird knowing that they were for my spot, and we had just eaten dinner with them. “I don’t have to worry that much about it, though.” Willa yawned loudly. “Sorry. Boredom makes me sleepy. Maybe we should go inside.”

It was getting cold, so I was ready to head in. Willa lay on the couch as soon as we went back in and all but fell asleep, so Garrett excused himself shortly after. He went to say goodbye to Elora, and then helped Willa out to the car. Finn offered to be of assistance, but Garrett refused. The butler had gone about cleaning everything else up, so Finn suggested that we head up to our

respective rooms. The night had been surprisingly tiring, so I was eager to comply.

“What’s going on?” I asked after the Strom’s left. It was the first chance all evening I’d really been able to talk to him. “What is this ball or party or whatever that’s happening on Saturday?”

“It’s something like a debutante ball, except that boys go through it too,” Finn explained as we climbed the stairs.

Dully, I remembered how grand I had felt coming down the stairs a few hours earlier. For the first time, I had felt almost like a Princess, and now I felt like a child playing dress up. Aurora had seen through my fancy trappings (which she didn’t even find that fancy) and realized that I wasn’t special myself.

“I don’t even know what a debutante ball is,” I sighed. I knew nothing of high society.

“It’s a coming out party, your presentation to the world,” Finn elaborated. “Changelings aren’t raised here. The community doesn’t know them. So when they come back, they are given a small amount of time to acclimate, and then they are introduced. Every changeling has one, but most are very small. Since you are the Princess, you will be having a very large one. There will be guests from all over the Trylle community. It is quite an ordeal.”

“I am not ready for that at all,” I groaned.

“You will be,” Finn assured me.

We walked in silence the rest of the way to my bedroom as I fretted and worried about this upcoming party. It hadn’t been that long ago that I had gone to my very first dance, and now I was expected to be the center of a formal ball. There was no way that I could pull that off. Tonight had only been a semi-formal dinner, and I hadn’t performed well at that.

“I trust you’ll sleep well this evening,” Finn said when I started to open the bedroom door.

“You need to come in with me,” I reminded him, then pointed to my dress. “I can’t unzip this thing on my own.”

“Of course.”

Finn followed me into the darkened room and flipped on the lights. The glass wall worked as a mirror thanks to the black night. In my reflection, I still thought I looked nice, and then I realized that's probably why I had to have other people pick out my clothes. My judgment was too flawed. I turned away from it, and waited for Finn to unzip me.

"I really botched things tonight, didn't I?" I asked sadly.

"No, of course not," Finn insisted. His hand pressed warm on my back and I felt the dress loosen around me as he pulled the zipper down. I wrapped my arms around me to keep it up, then turned back to look at him. Some part of me was distinctly aware that we were only a few inches from each other, my dress was barely on, and his dark eyes were fixed on me. "You did exactly what I told you. If anyone ruined things, it was me. But the night wasn't ruined. Elora is just sensitive about them."

"Why? Why does she let them get to her so much?" I wondered. "She's the Queen."

"Monarchs have been overthrown before," Finn answered calmly. "If you seemed unfit for the position, they could contest it, and they would be next in line to take the title." All the color drained from face. There was suddenly way too much pressure on me to perform. "Don't worry. You'll be fine." His expression saddened again, and he added quietly, "Elora has a plan to appease them."

"What is it?" I pressed. Instead of answering, his eyes got far away and his expression blanked. His brow furrowed, and then he nodded.

"I am sorry. You're going to have to excuse me. Elora requires assistance in getting to her room."

"You're helping Elora?" I stumbled over the question, unable to hide my shock.

Somehow, it seemed it vaguely inappropriate that Finn would be helping her to her room. Maybe it was because she had just asked him inside his head, and I couldn't get read on what exactly was the nature of their

relationship. I might have been feeling a little jealous of my mother, and that added a nauseous feeling on top of everything else.

“Yes. Her migraine is quite severe,” Finn explained and started taking a step away from me.

“Alright, well, have fun with that,” I muttered.

The door closed softly behind him, and I went into the bathroom to take off my jewelry and change into baggy pajamas. Sleep was very difficult for me that night. I was too anxious thinking about all the things I was expected to accomplish. I knew nothing about this world or these people, and yet I was supposed to rule over them someday. That wouldn’t have been so bad, except that I was supposed to master enough of everything in less than a week so they would believe that I could rule. If I didn’t, everything my mother worked so hard for would be taken away. Even though I wasn’t that fond of Elora most of the time, I was even less fond of Aurora, and I didn’t like the idea of my family’s legacy being ruined by me.

Apparently, lazy Sundays happened even in Förening. I woke up late, and the chef was still on hand to make breakfast. I saw Finn briefly, passing him in the hall, but it was no more than a nod hello. I flopped in my bed, thinking I would spend the day bored out of my mind, then Rhys knocked on my door. He invited me over to his room to watch movies with him and Rhiannon. His room was basically a masculine version of mine, except that he had a huge overstuffed couch sitting in front of his plasma TV. We ended up watching *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy because Rhys insisted it was much funnier once you'd spent time with actual trolls.

I sat on one end of the couch, and Rhiannon sat on the other, so Rhys sat between us. He started directly in the middle, but somewhere around three or four hours into the marathon, I noticed him moving closer to me, not that I minded. He still talked and joked a lot with Rhiannon, and they had a way of making me feel comfortable and happy. She left right after the third movie started, saying she had to get up early in the morning.

Once Rhiannon had gone, I became aware of the fact that Rhys and I were sitting alone in his darkened bedroom. I thought about moving away or something, but I didn't really have any reason to. The movie was fun, he was foxy, and I enjoyed being with him. It wasn't too long before his arm "casually" went around my shoulders. I almost laughed at how he did it, reminding me of boys on sitcoms, but I liked the way it felt and I didn't want to scare him away. He never made any moves farther than that, and eventually I leaned into him and rested my head on his shoulder.

What most people may not realize is that watching all three extended edition versions of *Lord of the Rings* in one sitting ends up being over eleven hours of movie viewing. If we had skipped extended, we could've cut two hours out of the time, but Rhys claimed it wouldn't be the same experience. At one in the afternoon on a boring Sunday, that might sound like a genius idea, but by

the time midnight rolls around, it's a different story. The films are still good, but keeping my eyes open became a battle that I eventually lost.

In the morning, there was a commotion going on that I was completely unaware of. Maybe if I hadn't tried running away once previous, everyone wouldn't have been so paranoid. But I had, and they were, and when someone checked on my room that morning, they found it empty. This was because I was across the hall, on the couch with Rhys, sound asleep. Finn threw open the door in a panic, and that's what jolted me awake.

"Oh my gosh!" I exclaimed, jumping up off the couch. I was mid-heart attack from having Finn slam the bedroom door open. "What's going on? Is everything okay?"

Instead of answering, Finn just stood there, staring at me. Behind me, Rhys was coming awake much slower than I was. I glanced back at him, dressed in a tee shirt and sweats that somehow managed to look good on him, and it dawned on me how this looked to Finn. I was still clothed in my only lazy day comfy clothes, but we had been curled up together. My mind scrambled to think of some kind of excuse, but suddenly, even the innocent truth escaped me.

"She's in here!" Finn said flatly.

I groaned, realizing it was going to be even worse than if he'd just found me. Elora appeared in the door, her emerald robe flaring out from behind in her a dramatic billow. She was standing behind Finn, but she somehow managed to eclipse everything else. There were times I had thought she looked unhappy before, but they had nothing on the severe expression she had now. Her scowl was so deep, it looked painful. She'd obviously been roused from her sleep to hunt for me, and her hair was still in a thick braid hanging down her back.

"What do you think you're doing?" Elora barked. Her voice echoed painfully inside my head, and I had a feeling that she had added some of her psychic voice to make it more intense. Rhys was completely alert now, and he stood sheepishly next to me.

“Sorry. We were just watching movies and fell asleep,” I stumbled through an apology.

“It was my fault. I put the-” Rhys attempted to come to my aid, but Elora cut him off.

“I don’t care what you were doing! Do you have any idea how inappropriate this behavior is?” Her eyes narrowed on Rhys, and he shrunk back even more. “Rhys, you knew this was completely unacceptable. I can’t even begin to imagine what you were thinking, and frankly, I don’t even care!” She rubbed her temples as if this were giving her a headache, and Finn gave her a concerned look. “I don’t even want to deal you. Get ready for school, and get out of my sight!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Rhys nodded. “Sorry.”

“As for you-” Elora pointed a finger at me but couldn’t find the words to finish. She just looked so disappointed and disgusted with me. “I don’t care how you were raised before you came here, you still know what kind of behavior is ladylike and what isn’t.”

“I wasn’t-” I started, but she held up her hand to silence me.

“But to be honest, Finn, you disappoint me the most.” She had stopped yelling, and when she looked at Finn, she just sounded tired. He dropped his head in shame, and she shook her head. “I can’t believe you allowed this to happen. You are supposed to be educating her in the ways of Trylle and watching her. You know you need to keep your eyes on her at all times.”

“I know. I won’t let it happen again.” Finn bowed apologetically to her.

“I do not want to see any of you for the rest of the day.” She held her hands up, like she was done with the lot of us, and then shook her head and turned out of her room.

“I am so sorry,” Rhys apologized emphatically, his cheeks red with shame, and somehow, that only made him look cuter.

Not that I was really paying attention to how he looked just then. My stomach had twisted in knots, and I was thankful that I hadn't started to cry. I turned to Rhys to apologize as well, but Finn cut me off.

"You need to get ready for school," Finn snapped, and he was almost glaring at Rhys. Then he pointed to the hall and turned to me. "You. Out. *Now*."

"Jeez," I grumbled but did as I was told.

I had to sneak past him on my way out the door, and normally, I loved that but not today. My heart pounded erratically, but none of it was happy. Finn tried to keep his face expressionless, but tension and anger radiated from his body. I slunk across the hall to my room, and Finn barked something at Rhys about behaving himself.

"Where are you going?" Finn demanded when I opened my bedroom door. He had just emerged from Rhys's room and slammed the door behind him, making me jump.

"To my room?" I pointed at my room and looked confused.

"No. You need to come to my room with me," Finn said.

"What? Why?" I asked.

A very small part of me felt excited about the prospect of going to his room with him. That sounded like the start of a fantasy I might have, but the way he was looking at me now, I was afraid he might kill me once we were inside the privacy of his room.

"I need to get ready for the day, and I can't very well let you out of my sight, can I?" Finn had a heavy irritated undercurrent to his words. I just noticed that he was wearing pajama pants and a tee shirt, and his dark hair wasn't as sleek as it normally was. He had just woken up, too.

"Yeah, sorry." I nodded meekly and walked with him to his room. He was walking fast and pissed off, and I fell about a step or two behind. "I really am sorry, you know. I didn't mean to fall asleep there. We were just watching movies, and it got late. If I had known it would be like this, I would've made sure to be in my room."

“You should’ve known, Wendy!” Finn exclaimed, exasperated. “You should know that your actions have consequences and the things you do matter!”

“I am sorry!” I repeated, feeling tears sting the back of my eyes. “Yesterday was so boring and I just wanted to do *something*.”

“Wendy!” Finn whirled on me suddenly, startling me so I took a step backwards. My back hit the wall behind me, but he stepped closer to me. Putting one arm on the side of me, his face was only a few inches from mine, and his dark eyes blazed. Somehow, his voice was calm and even. “You know how it looks when a girl spends the night alone with a boy. I know you understand that. But it is *so* much worse when a *Princess* spends the night alone with a *mänsklig*. It could put everything in jeopardy.”

“I-I don’t know that means,” I fumbled.

Finn stayed there, glaring at me for another painful minute, then sighed and took a step back. He rubbed his eyes and stood in the middle of the hallway. I swallowed back tears and caught my breath. When he looked back at me, his eyes had softened a bit, but he didn’t say anything. He just walked to his room, and uncertainly, I followed after him.

His room was smaller than mine, but a much more comfortable size. One of his walls was entirely glass, but he had the blinds covering it. His bed was covered in dark blankets, and he had several bookshelves overflowing with books. In one corner, he had a small desk with a laptop on it. Like me, had an adjoined bathroom. When he went into the bathroom, he left the door open, and I heard the sound of him brushing his teeth. Tentatively, I sat on the edge of his bed and looked around.

“You must stay here a lot,” I commented. I knew that he stayed here on and off, but to have a room this full of his stuff implied a more permanent living situation.

“I live here when I’m not tracking,” Finn replied.

“My mother is quite fond of you,” I mumbled dimly.

“Not right now she’s not.” Finn turned off the water and came out, leaning on the doorframe to his bathroom.

“I am so sorry about that,” I apologized sincerely, but Finn just ran a hand through his hair and looked away from me. “I didn’t...” I trailed off, knowing that my apologies weren’t really good enough this time. “How did you even know I wasn’t in my room?”

“I checked on you,” Finn gave me a look like I was an idiot. “I check on you every morning.”

“You check on me when I’m sleeping?” I gaped at him. “Every morning?” He nodded. “I didn’t know that.”

“Why would you know that? You’re sleeping,” Finn pointed out.

“Well... it just feels weird. Like some kind of invasion of privacy,” I shook my head. I was used to Matt and Maggie checking on me, but it felt strange knowing that Finn would come in and watch me sleep, even if it was only for a second.

“I have to make sure you’re safe and sound. Its part of my job,” Finn said.

“You sound like a broken record sometimes,” I muttered wearily. “You’re always just doing your job.”

“What else do you want me to say?” Finn countered, looking at me evenly.

I knew exactly what I wanted him to say, but I couldn’t tell him. Instead I just shook my head and looked away from him. My sweat pants suddenly became very fascinating, and I picked lint off them. Finn kept looking at me, and I expected him to move on to finish getting ready. When he didn’t, I decided that I had to fill the silence with talking.

“What is a mänsklig?” I looked over at Finn, and he exhaled.

“The literal translation for mänsklig is ‘human.’” He tilted his head, resting it against the doorframe, and watched me. “Rhys is human.”

“I don’t understand. Why is he around?” I shook my head.

“Because of you,” Finn said, and that only confused me more. “You’re a changeling, Wendy. You were switched at birth. Meaning that when you took the place of another baby, that baby had to go somewhere else.”

“You mean...” It was incredibly obvious once Finn said it. Rhys had blond hair and blue eyes in a colony of brunettes, and what other purpose would he have here? “Rhys is Michael!” Suddenly, my crush on him felt very dirty. He wasn’t my brother, but he was my brother’s brother, even though Matt wasn’t really my brother. It still felt... not right, somehow.

“Michael?” Finn looked perplexed.

“Yeah, that’s what my mom – Kim, my fake mom – named him. She knew she had a son, and that’s Rhys!” My mind swirled. “But how... how did they do that?”

“We normally do same-sex exchange, a girl for a girl, a boy for a boy,” Finn explained. “Rhiannon is Willa’s mänsklig, for example. Elora had her mind set on the Everly’s. After he was born, she induced labor with you, and using persuasion on the family and hospital staff, she switched you out for him. It takes harder when you do a boy to girl switch, like that. Mothers are more likely to pick up on something being wrong, as was the case with you mother.”

“Wait, wait!” I held up my hands and looked at him. “She knew it was more dangerous? She knew that Kim was more likely to snap because Rhys was a boy? But she did it anyway?”

“Elora believed that the Everly’s would be the best for you,” Finn maintained. “And she wasn’t completely wrong. Even you freely admit that the aunt and the brother were good to you.”

I thought about my mother and how I had always kind of hated her. I thought she had been terrible and cruel, as had everyone else, but she had known that I wasn’t Michael. Kim had just been insanely good mother. She had remembered him, even when she shouldn’t have been able to, and she refused to give up on him. It was really tragic, when I thought about it.

“So that’s why they don’t want me with the mänsklig? Cause its like incest?” I wrinkled my nose at the thought.

“No. He’s not your brother,” Finn emphasized. “Trylle and mänsklig have absolutely no relation. The problem is that they’re human.”

“Are we like... physically incompatible?” I asked carefully.

“No. In fact, many Trylle have left the compound to live with humans, for various reasons, and have normal offspring,” Finn answered. “That’s part of the reason our populations are going down.”

“What happens to Rhys now that I’m back?” I questioned.

“Nothing. He’ll live here for as long as he wants. Leave if he decides to. Whatever he chooses,” Finn shrugged. “Mänsklig aren’t treated badly here. They aren’t exactly raised as their children, but they are given everything to keep them happy and content. They have an education at our schools. They even have a small trust set up for them. When they are eighteen, they are free to do as they please.”

“But they’re not equals,” I realized. Elora tended to talk down to everyone, but she was worse with Rhys and Rhiannon. I couldn’t imagine that Willa was much nicer either.

“This is a monarchy. There are no equals.” For an instant, Finn looked almost sad, then he walked over and sat on the bed next to me. “That’s part of what Elora is angry with me for not explaining sooner. There is a distinct hierarchy in how we live.

“In the Trylle community, there are classes. There is royalty, of which you are on the top,” Finn gestured to me. “After Elora, of course. Below that there are the Markis and Marksinna, but they can become Kings and Queens through marriage. Then there is your average Trylle, the common folk if you will. Below that, there are trackers. And at the very bottom, there is mänsklig.”

“What? Why are trackers so low?” I asked incredulously.

“We are Trylle, but we only track. My parents were trackers, and their parents before them, and so on,” Finn explained. “We have no changeling population. Ever. That means that we have no income. We bring nothing into the community. We provide a service for other Trylle, and in return, we are provided a home and food.”

“You’re like an indentured servant?” I gasped.

“Not exactly,” Finn tried to smile, but it looked forced. “Until we retire from tracking, we don’t need to do anything else. Many trackers, such as myself, will work as a guard for some of the families in town. You’ll also notice that all of the service jobs, like the nannies, the teachers, the chefs, the maids, they are almost entirely retired trackers themselves, and they make an hourly wage. Some are also mänsklig, but they stick around less and less.”

“That’s why you always bow to Elora,” I mused thoughtfully.

“She is the Queen, Wendy. Everyone bows to her,” Finn corrected me. “Except for you and Rhys, but you’re both rather impossible.” I smirked at that. “You’re actually very fortunate. Elora may seem cold and aloof, but she is a very powerful woman. *You* will be a very powerful woman. You will be given every opportunity the world has to offer you. I know you can’t see it now, but you will have a very charmed life.”

“You’re right. I cannot see it,” I admitted. “It probably didn’t help that I just got in trouble this morning, and I don’t feel very powerful.” Finn’s lip had a trace of a smile, and I turned to him. “I didn’t do anything with Rhys. You know that, right? Nothing happened.”

Finn stared thoughtfully at the ground. I studied him, trying to catch a glimpse of something, but his face was a mask. Eventually, he nodded. “Yes. I know that.”

“You didn’t this morning, though, did you?” I asked pointedly.

This time, Finn chose not answer. He stood up and said it was getting late and he needed to shower. He gathered his clothes and went into the bathroom. I thought this might be a good time to explore his room, but I suddenly felt very tired. I had been woken up early and had little sleep, and this morning had been draining. Lying back down, I rolled over and curled up in his blankets. They were soft and smelled just like him, and I easily fell asleep.

I would've thought I'd been living here long to have seen all the rooms in the house, but I was wrong. There was a whole wing that I had seen nothing of, and Finn still refused to show it to me. When I woke up, Finn directed me to sitting room on the second floor, down the hall from my room. The ceilings were still vaulted and had some kind of mural painted on them, but the furniture looked more like normal people furniture. Finn explained that this had once been Rhys's playroom, but when he'd outgrown it, they had tried to turn into it an appropriate sitting room for him. Apparently, he rarely used it.

Lying on my back on the couch, I stared up at the ceiling. Finn sat on an overstuffed chair across from me with a book splayed open on his lap. There were stack of texts on the floor next to him, and he was trying to give me a crash course on Trylle history. Unfortunately, despite the fact that we were some type of mythical creatures, Trylle history wasn't anymore exciting than human history had been.

"What are the roles of the Markis and Marksinna?" Finn quizzed me.

"I don't know. Nothing," I replied glibly.

"Wendy, you need to learn this," Finn sighed. "There will be conversations this weekend, and you need to appear knowledgeable. You can't just sit back without saying anything anymore."

"I'm a Princess. I should be able to do whatever I want," I grumbled. My legs were hanging over the arm of the couch, and I swung my feet back in forth.

"What are the roles of the Markis and Marksinna?" Finn repeated.

"In other provinces, where the King and Queen don't live, the Markis and Marksinna are the leaders. They're like governors or something," I shrugged. "In times when the King or Queen can't fulfill their job duties, for whatever reason, a Markis can step up and take their place. In places like

Förening, they're mostly just a way of saying that they're better than everyone else, but they don't really have any power."

"That is true, but you can't say that last part," Finn said, then flipped a page in the book. "What is the role of the Chancellor?"

"The Chancellor is an elected official, much like the prime minister in England," I answered tiredly. "The monarchy has the final word and weald the most power, but the Chancellor serves as their advisors and helps give the Trylle a voice in the way the government is run." I turned my head and looked over at him. "But I don't get it. We live in America, and this isn't a separate country. Don't we have to follow their laws?"

"Theoretically yes, and for the most part, Trylle laws coincide with American laws, except that we have more of them," Finn explained. "However, we live in separate pockets unto ourselves. Using our resources – namely cash and persuasion – we can get government officials to look the other way, and we conduct our business in private. If we were to do something drastic, like blow up something, they would be forced to interfere, but we don't do things like that."

"Hmm." I twirled a hair on my finger and thought over what he was saying. "Do you know everything about Trylle society? I mean, you certainly seem to. When you were talking with Garrett and Elora, it was like there was nothing you didn't know."

When the Strom's had been over, Finn had obviously charmed them. I'm sure he would've easily won the Kroner's over if he had tried. He had assumed it was his role to hide in the background with them, so he'd kept his mouth shut. But everything about him was more refined than me. Cool, collected, intelligent, charming, and handsome, he looked much more like a leader than I did.

"A foolish man thinks he knows everything. A wise man knows he doesn't," Finn replied absently, still looking down at the book.

“That’s such a fortune cookie answer!” I laughed, and even he smirked at me. “But seriously, Finn. This doesn’t make any sense. You should be the Prince, not me. I don’t know anything, but you’re all set to go.”

“I’m not a Prince,” Finn shook his head. “And you are right for the job. You just haven’t had the training that I’ve had. You’re new to all of this.”

“That’s stupid,” I grumbled. “It should be based on your abilities, not lineage.”

“It *is* based on abilities,” Finn insisted. “They just happen to come with lineage.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, and he shut the book on his lap.

“Your persuasion? That comes from your mother,” Finn elaborated. “The reason the Markis and Marksinna are what they are is because of the abilities they have, and they are passed down through their children. Regular Trylle have some abilities, but they’ve faded with time. To be honest, so have everyone’s. Your mother is one of the most powerful queens we’ve had in a very long time, and the hope is that you will help restore some of that power.”

“But I can barely do anything!” I complained, sitting up. “I have mild persuasion, and you said it wouldn’t even work on you!”

“Not yet, no, but it will,” Finn corrected me. “I’m sure you’ll have much more than that, as well. Once you start your training, it will make more sense to you.”

“Training? What training?” I wrinkled my nose.

“After the ball this weekend. Then you will begin working on your abilities. Most Trylle come here with even less than you have now, but with proper tutelage, they can harness them,” Finn said. “Right now, your only priority is preparing for the ball. So...” He flipped open the book again, but I wasn’t ready to go back to studying.

“But *you* have abilities,” I countered. “And Elora prefers you to me. I’m sure she’d like it better if you were Prince.” I realized sadly that that was true, and I laid back down on the couch, finding I felt better when staring at the mural of the sky.

“I’m sure that isn’t true.”

“It is too,” I grumbled. “What is the deal with you and Elora? She definitely likes you better than me, and she seems to confide in you. And from the way that Aurora regarded you, I’m assuming that isn’t the usual way of things.”

“Elora doesn’t really confide in anyone.” Finn fell silent for a moment, and then exhaled. “If I explain this to you, do you promise to get back to studying?”

“Yes!” I answered immediately and looked over at him.

“What I say to you cannot leave this room. Do you understand?” Finn asked gravely, and I nodded, gulping painfully.

I had been growing more and more preoccupied with Finn and Elora’s relationship. She was an attractive older woman, and he was definitely a foxy guy, and I could see her digging cougar claws into him. That was what I was afraid of, anyway. Then it would make whatever feelings I had for Finn seem even more disturbing.

“About ten or fifteen years ago, after your father was gone, *my* father came under the employ of your mother. He had retired from tracking, and Elora didn’t like living alone, so she hired him to guard her and the estate,” Finn explained. His eyes darkened and his lips tightened, and my heart raced. “Elora was in love with my father. They had to keep things quiet, because it would be quite the scandal if anyone found out. No one knew, except for my mother, who to this day still is married to my father. Eventually, my mother convinced my father to leave. However, Elora remained quite fond of him, and in turn, rather fond of me. She has personally requested my services over the years, and because she pays well, I have accepted. Since I am so good at my job, nobody has ever thought anything of it. Until you, of course.”

I stared at him, feeling nauseous and nervous. Since his father became involved with my mother after I was born, I could safely assume that we weren’t siblings, so at least that was something. Everything else made it feel rather disturbing, and I wondered if Finn secretly hated me. He had to secretly

hate Elora, and he was only here because of how much she paid him. Maybe he was some kind of glorified gigolo, and I had fight to keep from vomiting.

“I am not sleeping with her, and she has never made any advances of the sort,” Finn clarified, looking at me evenly. “She is fond of me because of her feelings for my father. I don’t blame her for what happened between them. It was a long time ago, and my father was the one that had a family to think of, not her.”

“Huh.” I looked up at the ceiling because it was easier than looking at him.

“I have distressed you. I’m sorry,” Finn apologized sincerely. “This is why I was hesitant to say anything to you.”

“No, no, I’m fine. Let’s just go on,” I insisted unconvincingly. “I have a lot to go over and all that.”

Finn remained silent for a minute, letting me absorb what he had just told me, but I tried to push it from my mind as quickly as possible. Thinking about it made me feel dirty, and I still had too much on my mind as it was. Eventually, Finn continued on with the texts, and I tried harder to pay attention. If I was thinking about what exactly a Queen’s job entailed, I wasn’t thinking about my mother bumping uglies with his father.

Frederique Von Ellsin, the dress designer, came over a few hours later. He was excitedly flamboyant, and I couldn’t tell for sure whether or not he was Trylle. Finn sat in the corner, off-handedly flipping through a book while Frederique made all kinds of notes. I wore only a slip as he took my measurements and sketched something on a notepad. Finally, he declared that he had the perfect gown in mind, and he dashed out of my room to get working on it.

All day long, there was an irritating succession of people. They were all staff of some kind, like caterers and party planners, so at least I didn’t have spend an hour getting ready to impress them. In fact, most of them ignored me. They just trailed after Elora as she listed an inconceivable amount of information about what she expected them to do, and they all scurried to write

it down or punch it in their Blackberries, or maybe just contemplated suicide. I know I wpild.

Meanwhile, I had the pleasure of camping out in my sweats all day again. Whenever Elora saw me, she glared at my apparel intensely, but she was always too busying prattling on demands to somebody else to complain about me. Everything that I managed to overhear only made my coming-out festivities sound even more terrifying. The most horrific thing I heard as she zipped by: “We’ll need seating for at least 500.” Five hundred people were going to be at a party where I would be the center of attention? Splendid.

The only upshot of the day was that I got to spend the entire thing with Finn. That became less enjoyable by the minute as Finn refused to talk about anything that wasn’t related to my performance at the party. We spent two hours going over the names and pictures of the more prominent guests that would be attending. Two whole hours spent pouring over a yearbook-type thing trying to memorize the faces, names, and notable facts about like a hundred people. At least we learned something with that. An eidetic memory was not one of my abilities.

Then there was the hour and a half spent at the dinner table. Apparently, I did not know how to eat properly. There were certain ways to hold the fork, tilt the bowl, lift the glass, and even place the napkin. Up until that time, I had never mastered any of those skills, and from what I gathered about the way Finn regarded me, I still hadn’t. Eventually, I gave up. Pushing my plate back, I laid my head down and pressed my cheek against the cold wood of the table.

“I can see you’ve had enough with this,” Finn sighed and pushed back his chair as he stood up. “Why don’t we do something fun for awhile?”

“Fun?” I looked up skeptically at him. “Do you mean fun *fun*? Or do you mean looking at pictures for two hours fun? Or Using a Fork 101 fun?”

“Something that at least resembles actual fun,” Finn answered. “Come on.”

Cautiously, I got up and followed him. Even if whatever he planned on doing was the most boring thing in the world, I didn't really have a choice. What I was going through right now was the montage part of every duckling-to-swan story. In the movies, they always showed clips of all the hard work they put in until they got better, and in thirty seconds flat, there would be the finished, transformed princess. Unfortunately, I couldn't montage my way through this. I actually had to endure.

As Finn led me down a hall to the west wing of the house, I realized that I'd never seen any of this before. When Garrett had teased Elora about this being a palace, he wasn't kidding. There were so many places I had yet to see. It was astounding. Finn gestured to a few rooms, pointing out the library, meeting halls where they conducted business, the opulent dining hall where we would hold the dinner on Saturday, and then finally, the ball room.

Pushing open the doors, which seemed to be two stories high, Finn led me into the grandest room I had ever seen. Massive and exquisite, the ceilings seemed to stretch on forever, thanks in part to the fact they were entirely skylight. Gold beams ran across it, holding up glittering diamond chandeliers. The floors were marble, the walls were off-white with gold detailing, and it looked every bit like the ballroom for Disney fairytales.

The decorators had started bringing things in, and one of the walls was lined with stacked chairs and tables. Table cloths and candlesticks and all sorts of decorations were littered in a pile around them. The only other thing in the room was a white grand piano setting in the opposite corner. Otherwise, the room was empty, except Finn and me.

I hated how taken I was with the splendor. I hated it even more that the room was this magnificent, and I looked like I did. My hair was in a messy bun, and I was wearing baggy sweats and a faded sweater with a boombox on it. Finn wasn't exactly dressed to the nines either, but his standard buttoned shirt and dark washed jeans looked much more fitting.

"So what's the fun part?" I asked, and my voice echoed off the walls.

“Dancing,” Finn’s lip twitched with a smile, and I groaned. “I’ve danced with you before, and I know that it needs some improvement.”

“The slow circles don’t cut it?” I grimaced.

“Unfortunately, no. A proper waltz should be enough, though. If you can master that, you’ll be set for the ball on Saturday,” Finn explained.

“Oh no.” My stomach dropped as I just realized something. “I’m going to have dance with these people, aren’t I? Like strangers and old men and weird handsy boys?” Finn laughed at that, but I wanted to curl in a ball and die.

“I could lie to you, but to be honest, those are probably the only people that will ask you to dance,” Finn admitted with a wry smirk.

“You are enjoying this more than I’ve ever seen you enjoy anything!” I pointed out, and that only deepened his smile. “Well, I’m glad you find this funny. Me getting felt up by compete strangers and tripping all over them. What a great time.”

“It won’t be so bad,” Finn insisted, then he motioned for me to come over. “Come on. If you learn the basic steps, at least you won’t be tripping over them.”

I sighed loudly and walked over to him. Most of my trepidation about dancing with strangers melted away the instant Finn took my hand in his. It suddenly occurred to me that before I had to dance with them, I got to dance with *him*. His hand went to the small of my back, and I cursed myself for wearing such a thick hoodie. Then I had a brilliant idea. I paused our training, claiming the bulk of my hoodie was too hard to dance with, and pulled it off. I was wearing a tank top underneath, so it wasn’t like I was being completely inappropriate.

After a few directions from him and a rough start by me, we were dancing. His arm was around me, strong and reassuring. He instructed me to keep my eyes locked on his so I wouldn’t get in the habit of watching my feet while I danced, but I wouldn’t have looked anywhere else anyway. His dark eyes always mesmerized me. We were supposed to keep a certain distance between our bodies, but I found it impossible. Soon, his stomach was nearly pressed

against mine, and I was certain we weren't going as fast as we were supposed to, but I didn't care. I was back in that moment with him, that wonderful one that seemed too impossibly perfect to be real.

"Right, okay." Finn suddenly stopped and took a step away from. Disappointed, I let my hands fall to the side. "You've got that down pretty well, but there's going to be music. So you should see how you do with that."

"Okay?" I said unsurely.

"Why don't I play the piano, and you count out the steps yourself?" Finn had already started backing away to the piano, and I was wondering what I had done wrong that made him stop so suddenly. "That might be a better way for you to learn."

"Um, okay," I shrugged uncertainly. "I thought I was doing fine before."

"We weren't going fast enough. The music will help you keep time," Finn explained.

I frowned at him, wishing he would just come back and dance with me. Before he had told me I was a terrible dance partner, and maybe that was the problem. Maybe I was just too bad of a dancer. He sat down at the piano and started playing a beautiful, elaborate waltz, but of course he could. He could do anything. I was just standing there, staring at him, until he directed me to start dancing.

I whirled around on the dance floor, but it definitely wasn't as fun as it had been with him. In fact, it wasn't really that fun at all. It might have been if I weren't trying to figure out what I did wrong that always made Finn back away from me at the worst possible moments. It was hard to concentrate on that, though, when Finn kept barking out corrections at me. Funny, he hadn't noticed any when we had been dancing together.

"Nope, that's it," I panted after what felt like an eternity. My feet and legs were getting sore, and a sheen of sweat covered my body. I had had my fill of dancing for the day, and I sat down heavily on the floor, then leaned back, sprawling out on the cool marble.

“Wendy, it hasn’t even been that long,” Finn insisted.

“Don’t care. I’m out!” I breathed deeply and wiped the sweat from forehead.

“Haven’t you ever worked hard at anything?” Finn complained. He got up from the piano bench and walked over to me, so he could lecture me up closer, apparently. “This is important.”

“I’m aware. You tell me every second of every day,” I grumbled.

“I do not.” Finn crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at me.

“This *is* the hardest I’ve ever worked at anything,” I said, staring back up at him. “Everything else I’ve quit before this, or I never even tried. So don’t tell me I’m not putting effort into this.”

“You’ve never tried harder than this? On anything?” Finn asked incredulously, and I shook my head. “That brother you had never made you do anything?”

“Not really,” I admitted thoughtfully. “He made me go to school I guess, and he really wanted me to graduate. But that’s about it.” Matt and Maggie encouraged me to do a lot of things, but there was very little they actually made me do. Even with me getting in trouble as often as I did, I was very rarely grounded.

“They spoiled you more than I thought,” Finn looked a surprised at that.

“They didn’t spoil me,” I sighed, then quickly amended, “They didn’t spoil me rotten. Not the way Willa was spoiled, and I’m sure a lot of the other changelings were. They just wanted me to be happy.”

“Happiness is something you work for,” Finn pointed out.

“Oh, stop with that fortunate cookie crap,” I scoffed. “We worked for it just like anybody else. They were just really careful with me, probably because my mom tried to kill me. It set them up to treat me more gently than they would’ve otherwise.”

“How did your mother try to kill you?” Finn asked directly.

It startled me a little. I had only very vaguely told him what happened, and we hadn't talked about it since. It surprised me that he was even talking about it now, since he very rarely seemed to want to talk about my past.

"It was my birthday, and I was being my usual bratty self. I was angry because she'd gotten me a chocolate cake, and I hated it," I explained. "We were in the kitchen, and she snapped. She started chasing after me with this giant knife. She called me a monster, and then she tried to stab me but she just managed to cut my stomach pretty badly. Then my brother Matt rushed in and tackled her, saving my life."

"She cut open your stomach?" Finn furrowed his brow with concern.

"Yeah." Randomly, I pulled up my shirt, revealing the scar that stretched across it. Immediately after I'd done it, I regretted it. Lying on the floor and flashing Finn the fattest part of my body did not sound like a good idea.

Finn crouched on the ground next to me, and tentatively, his fingertips traced along the mark etched on my belly. My skin quivered underneath his touch, and this nervous warmth spread through me. He just stared intently at it, then laid his hand flat on my belly, covering the scar. His skin felt hot and smooth, and inside, my stomach trembled with butterflies.

He blinked, and seeming to realize what he was doing, he pulled his hand back and got to his feet. Quickly, I pulled my shirt back down, and I didn't even feel that comfortable laying down anymore. I sat up and fixed my bun. It had gotten pushed all over when I laid back on it, so I had to take it out and redo it.

"Matt saved your life?" Finn asked, filling that semi-awkward silence that had shrouded us. He still had a very contemplative look on his face, and I wished I knew what he was thinking.

"Yeah," I nodded, and I got to my feet. "Matt always protected me, ever since I could remember."

"Hmm." Finn looked thoughtfully at me. "You bonded so much more with your host family than the changelings normally do."

“Host family?” I grimaced. “You make me sound like a parasite.” Then I realized that I probably was. They had dropped me off with them so I would use their resources, their money, their opportunities, and come back here with them. That’s exactly what a parasite did.

“You’re not a parasite,” Finn said. “They loved you, and you genuinely loved them in return. It is unusual, but that it is not a bad thing. In fact, it’s a very good thing. Maybe it’s given you a compassion that the Trylle leaders have been lacking for a very long time.”

“I don’t think I’m very compassionate,” I shook my head.

“You came to my aid last night,” Finn reminded me. “You shouldn’t have done that. I can handle myself, and Willa really means no harm. Defending me will only weaken you. But what you did, you did for the right reasons. You stood up for what you thought was right. It’s a wonderful quality.”

“If that’s not a mixed message, then I don’t know what is,” I shied away from his compliment. “I shouldn’t do that, but I should?”

“You shouldn’t defend *me*,” Finn clarified. “But you should defend those who can’t do it for themselves. I saw how badly it was bothering you when Willa was harassing Rhiannon, and I see how it gets to you the way Elora talks to people. Elora thinks the only way to command respect is to command fear, but I have a feeling that you will have an entirely different way of ruling.”

“And how will I rule?” I arched my eyebrow at him.

“That is for you to decide,” Finn said simply.

He finished up our lesson after that, saying I needed to rest up for tomorrow. The day had exhausted me, and I was eager to curl up in my blankets and sleep until Sunday, straight through the ball and all the angst that accompanied it. Sleep didn’t come easy, though. I found myself tossing and turning, thinking about the way it felt dancing with Finn and his hand resting warmly on my stomach. But I would always end up thinking of Matt and Maggie, and how much I still missed them.

I woke up startling early that morning. Actually, I’d been waking up all night long, and at six, I finally just gave into it. I got up with the intention of

sneaking downstairs to grab a bite to eat, but when I hit the top of the stairs, Rhys came barreling up them to meet me, chomping on a bagel.

“Hey, what are you doing up?” Rhys grinned, swallowing down his bite.

“Couldn’t sleep,” I shrugged. “You?”

“Same. I have to get up for school soon anyway.” He pushed his sandy hair out of his eyes and leaned back against the stair railing. “Are you worrying about this Saturday?”

“Kind of,” I admitted.

“It is pretty intense,” Rhys said, his eyes wide. I nodded noncommittally. “Is something else bothering you? You look pretty... upset, I guess.”

“No.” I shook my head and sighed, then sat down on the top step. I didn’t feel much standing anymore, and to be honest, I wanted to cry. “I was just thinking about my brother.”

“Your brother?” Something flashed across Rhys’s face, and slowly, he sat down next to me. He seemed almost breathless, and at first I didn’t understand, then it dawned on me.

I thought about how weird this must be for Rhys. His whole life he had known that this wasn’t his real family, and it wasn’t even the same as being adopted. It wasn’t like his family had given him up. He had been stolen, and not by a family that had wanted him. They had just wanted me to have his life.

“Yeah. I mean... *your* brother actually,” I corrected myself, and that felt painful saying it. Matt would *always* be my brother, no matter what our genetics claimed.

“What’s his name?” Rhys asked quietly.

“Matt. He’s pretty much the nicest guy in the whole world,” I said with tears burning my eyes.

“Matt?” Rhys repeated, in an awed tone.

“Yeah,” I nodded. “He’s the bravest guy ever. He would do anything to protect the people he cares about, and he’s completely selfless. He always puts

everybody first. And he's really, really strong. He's..." I swallowed and decided that I couldn't talk about him anymore. I shook my head and looked away.

"What about my mom and dad?" Rhys pressed, and I didn't know how to answer that.

"Dad died when I was five," I said carefully. "Mom took it pretty hard, and um... she's been in the hospital ever since. For psychiatric problems. Matt and my dad's sister, Maggie, they raised me."

"Oh." His face contorted with concern, and I suddenly hated Mom even more. I knew that she had done everything because she loved him, but this is what I was left with telling him. And she'd never be able to have a life with him because she'd always be locked up. All she had done was hurt him and me and Matt and everyone.

"I'm sorry." I placed my hand gently on his, to comfort him. "It's hard to explain how I know it, but your mom really loved you. She really wanted you. And I think she always hated me because she knew I wasn't you."

"Really?" There was something hopeful and sad in his eyes when he looked at me.

"Yeah. It kind of sucked for me, actually," I smiled wanly at him, and he laughed.

"Sorry about that," Rhys smiled back at me. "I guess I'm too hard to forget."

"Yeah, I guess you are," I agreed. Rhys moved his hand so it was actually holding mine, and even though his mood seemed to brighten, I didn't take it from him.

"So what about this Maggie? What's she like?" Rhys asked.

"She's pretty cool. A little overly attentive sometimes, but cool," I said. "She's incredibly loving and patient, and she put up with a lot of crap from me. They both did, really." I thought about how strange this all was, that they weren't my family anymore. "This's so weird. They're your brother and your aunt."

“No, I understand. They’re your family, too,” Rhys insisted. “They loved you and raised you. That’s what family is, right?” That was the exact thing I had needed someone to say to me for so long, and I squeezed his hand gratefully. I still loved them and always would, and I just wanted that to be okay.

“Wendy!” Finn apparently had just woken up and was on his way to check on me when he spotted me sitting on the steps. Instinctively, I pulled my hand back, and Rhys stood up. “What are you doing?”

“I just woke up. We were just talking.” I looked up at Rhys, who nodded in agreement, but Finn glared at us both. I felt like we’d been caught robbing a bank or having sex by the way Finn looked at us.

“I suggest you get ready for school,” Finn commanded icily.

“Yeah, that what I was doing anyway,” Rhys said somewhat defensively, then smiled down at me. “I’ll see you later, Wendy.”

“Yeah, okay,” I smiled back at him.

“What are you doing?” Finn hissed, glowering down at me.

“I already told you!” I insisted and stood up. He was still intimidating, but we were closer to the same height now, so I felt a bit better. “We were just talking!”

“About what?” Finn pressed.

“My family,” I shrugged. “What does it matter?”

“You cannot talk to him about your family,” Finn said firmly. “Mänsklig cannot know where they come from. If they did, they would be tempted to track down their families, and that would completely ruin our entire society. Do you understand that?”

“I didn’t really tell him anything!” I said defensively, but I felt stupid that that hadn’t occurred to me. “I missed them, and I just said stuff about how neat Matt was. I didn’t tell him their last name or where they lived or anything like that.”

“You have to be more careful, Wendy,” Finn persisted.

“Sorry! I didn’t know!” I didn’t like the way he was glaring at me, so I turned and started walking down the hall toward my room.

“Wait.” Finn grabbed my arm gently so I would stop and look at him. He took a step closer to me so he was right in front of me, but I was trying to be mad at him, so I refused to look at him. I could still feel his eyes on me and the heat from his body, and it did little to help me maintain my anger.

“What?” I asked curtly.

“I saw you holding his hand,” Finn lowered his voice.

“So?” I said. “Is that a crime?”

“No, but... you *can’t* do that,” Finn explained emphatically. “You cannot get involved with a mänsklig.”

“Whatever.” I pulled my arm from his grip, irritated that the only thing he ever thought about was the job. “You’re just jealous.”

“I am not jealous,” Finn said defensively and took a step back from me. “I am watching out for your well-being. You don’t understand how dangerous it would be to get involved with him.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered and started walking back to my room. “I don’t understand anything.”

“That’s not what I said,” Finn followed after me.

“But it’s true, isn’t it?” I countered. “I don’t know anything.”

“Wendy!” Finn snapped, and grudgingly, I turned back to look at him. “If you don’t understand things, it’s because I didn’t explain them well enough.” He swallowed hard and looked down at the ground, his dark eyelashes falling on his cheeks. There was something more that he wanted to say to me, so I crossed my arms, waiting. “But you were right.” He struggled with what he was saying, and I watched him carefully. “I was jealous.”

“What?” My jaw literally fell open and my eyes widened with surprise.

“That does not affect the job I have to do, nor does it change the fact that you absolutely cannot become involved with a mänsklig,” Finn said firmly, still looking at the ground instead of at me. “Now go get ready. We have another long day ahead of us.” He turned around and started to walk away.

“Wait, Finn!” I called after him, and he paused, half looking back at me.

“The matter is not open for discussion,” Finn replied coolly. “I promised I would never lie to you, so I didn’t.”

I stood in front of my bedroom door, reeling from his confession. For the first time, he had really admitted that at least some of his feelings for me had nothing to do with the job at hand. Yet somehow, I was supposed to forget all that and go about like everything was normal.

With the party only twenty-four hours away, Elora felt the need to check on my progress, not that I blamed her. Her plan was a dress rehearsal through dinner, testing my ability to converse and eat, apparently. She didn't want a massive audience to witness my possible failure, so she just invited Garrett, Willa, and Rhiannon over to join her, Finn, Rhys, and me. It was the biggest group she could assemble without risk of embarrassment. Since I had already met with these people, I didn't feel all that nervous, even though Elora informed me before hand that I needed to treat this the same way I would tomorrow night.

Everyone had clearly been instructed the same thing because they all appeared far more regal than normal. Even Rhys had dressed in a blazer, and he looked rather handsome. As usual, Finn was unnecessarily attractive, and thanks to his random confession of jealousy, I wasn't entirely sure how to act around him. He had come into my room before dinner to make sure that I was getting ready, but I couldn't help but feel that he was purposefully avoiding looking at me.

"Who will I be sitting by tomorrow?" I asked between careful sips of wine Elora instructed us where to sit, with at one end of the table, and I at the other. Rhys and Finn flanked either side of me, and Rhiannon and Will filled in the empty places..

"Between Tove Kroner and I," Elora answered, narrowing her eyes at the way I was drinking my wine. "Hold the glass by the stem."

"Sorry." I thought I had been, but I moved my fingers, hoping I was holding it more correctly.

"A Princess never apologizes," Elora corrected me.

"Sorry," I mumbled, then realized what I did and shook my head. "That was an accident. It won't happen again."

“Don’t shake your head; it’s not ladylike,” Elora chastised me. “A Princess doesn’t make promises, either. She might not be able to keep them, and she doesn’t want them held against her.”

“I wasn’t really making a promise,” I pointed out, and Elora narrowed her eyes more severely.

“A Princess is never contrary,” Elora said coolly.

“I’ve only been a Princess for like two weeks. Can’t you give me a little break?” I was growing frustrated by all the Princess talk. Nearly every sentence she’d said to me in the past two days had started with “a Princess” and it was followed by things that a Princess never or always did.

“You’ve been a Princess your entire life. It’s in your blood,” Elora said firmly, sitting up even straighter in her chair, trying to loom over me. “You should know how to behave.”

“I am working on it,” I grumbled.

“Speak up. Use a clear strong voice no matter what it is you’re saying,” Elora snapped. “And you don’t have time to work on it. Your party is tomorrow. You must be ready *now*.”

I wanted to snap something back at her, but both Rhys and Finn were giving me warning stares to keep my mouth shut. Rhiannon stared nervously at her plate, and Garrett just went about munching his food politely, while Willa took a long drink of her wine.

“I understand,” I exhaled deeply and took another drink of my wine. I’m not sure if I held the glass right this time, but Elora didn’t say anything.

“So, I got your picture of the dress,” Willa smiled at me. “It was really stunning. I’m a little jealous, actually. You only get to be the belle of the ball once, and you definitely will be tomorrow. You’re going to look amazing.” She was coming to my aid, changing the subject from things I was doing wrong to compliments about me. Even if she was a bitch to Finn and Rhiannon, I just couldn’t bring myself to hate her.

“Thank you,” I smiled gratefully back at her.

I had my final fitting earlier in the day, and since Willa had requested it the other night at dinner, I sent her a picture. It had actually been Finn's idea, and he had used his camera phone. I felt very awkward and not at all pretty posing for it, and he never reassured me that I looked good in the dress. It felt too fancy for me, and I would've liked a little boost just then. But Finn had just snapped the picture, and that had been the end of that.

"Have you seen the dress?" Willa turned to Elora, who nibbled primly at a piece of broccoli.

"No. I trust Frederique's designs, and Finn has final approval," Elora answered absently.

"I'm going to insist on being involved in the process when my daughter gets her gown," Willa offered thoughtfully. Elora bristled imperceptibly at that, but Willa didn't notice. "But I've always loved dresses and fashion. I could spend my whole life at a ball." She looked wistful for a moment, then smiled at me again. "That's why it's so great that you're here. You're going to have such a monumental ball."

"Thank you," I repeated, unsure of how else to respond.

"You had a lovely party yourself," Garrett interjected, feeling slightly defensive about the party he had thrown for his daughter. "Your dress was fantastic."

"I know," Willa smiled immodestly. "It was pretty great." Finn made a soft noise in his throat, and both Elora and Willa glared at him, but neither of them said anything.

"My apologies. Something caught in my throat," Finn explained, taking a sip of his wine.

"Hmm," Elora murmured disapprovingly, then cast her stare back at me. "Oh, that reminds me. I have been too busy this week to ask you. What were your plans for your name?"

"My name?" I asked, raising any eyebrow.

"Yes. At the christening ceremony." She looked at me for a moment, then looked sternly at Finn. "Didn't Finn tell you about it?"

“Yes, but isn’t that name already decided?” I was definitely confused. “I mean, Dahl is family name, isn’t it?”

“Not the surname,” Elora clarified, annoyed. “Dahl is *your* name. I meant your first name.”

“I don’t understand.” I furrowed my brow and tried to read her stony expression. “My name is Wendy.”

“That isn’t a name for a Princess,” Elora scoffed. “Everyone changes their names. Willa used to be called something different. What was it, dear?”

“Nikki,” Willa said. “I took the name Willa, after my mother.” Garrett smiled at that, and Elora tensed up slightly, but quickly tried to erase it. Her plan seemed to push all her tension in my direction.

“So what is it? What name would you like?” Elora pressed.

“I... I don’t know,” I stumbled.

Irrationally, my heart had started pounding my chest. I didn’t want to change my name, not at all. When Finn had told me that about the christening ceremony, I had assumed it would only be my last name, and while I wasn’t that thrilled about that, I didn’t care that much. Eventually, I would probably get married and change my name anyway, so I wasn’t terribly hung up on that. But Wendy, that was *my* name. I turned to Finn for help, but Elora noticed and snapped my attention back to her.

“If you need ideas, I have some.” Elora had a clipped tone to her voice, and she was cutting her food with an irritated fervor. “Ella, after my mother. I had a sister, Sybilla. Those name are both lovely. One of our longest running queens was Lovisa, and I’ve always thought highly of that name. If you don’t like any of those, you can go through the history books and see if you find anything.”

“It’s not that I don’t like any of those,” I explained carefully. Although, really, I thought Sybilla was quite terrible. “I like my name. I don’t know why I have to change it.”

“Wendy is a ridiculous name,” Elora waved off the idea. “It’s entirely improper for a Princess.”

“Why?” I persisted, and Elora glared up at me.

I flat out refused to change my name, no matter what Elora said. It’s not that I thought Wendy was a particularly fabulous name, but Matt had given it to me. He was the only one that had ever wanted me, and I wasn’t going to get rid of the only thing that I had left of him.

“It is the name of a mänsklig,” Elora said through gritted teeth. “And I have had enough of this. You will find a name to suit a Princess, or I will choose one for you. Is that clear?”

“If I am a Princess, then why can’t I decide what is proper?” I forced my voice to stay even and clear, trying not to let it shake with anger and frustration. “Isn’t that part of the glory of being a Princess, of ruling a kingdom? Is that I have some say in the rules? And if I want my name to be Wendy, why is that so wrong?”

“No Princess has ever kept her human name, and no one ever will.” Her dark eyes glared severely at me, but I matched it firmly. “My daughter, the Princess, will not carry the name of a *mänks*.” There was a bitter edge dripping from the word “mänks,” and I saw Rhys’ jaw tense. I knew what it was like to grow up with a mother that hated me, but I had never been required to sit quietly why she openly made derogatory remarks about me. My heart went out to him, and I had to struggle even harder to keep from shouting at Elora.

“I will not change my name,” I insisted. Everyone had taken to looking down at their plates while Elora and I stared down each other. This dinner had to be considered an epic failure.

“This is not the proper place to have this discussion,” Elora said icily. She rubbed her temple, then sighed. “It’s no matter. There isn’t a discussion to be had. Your name will be changed, and clearly, I will be picking for you..”

“That’s not fair!” Tears welled up in my eyes, and I had started to whine. “I am the Princess and it’s what I want! You said I didn’t have to answer to anybody!”

“Anybody but me,” Elora clarified calmly.

“With all due respect,” Finn interrupted our argument, startling everyone into looking at him. Elora pursed her lips tightly, but her eyes widened speculatively. His voice was emotionless and smooth, but the fact that he spoke up at all meant that he had to be upset. “If it is as the Princess wishes, then perhaps it’s as it should be. Her wishes are going to be the highest order of the land, and this is such a simple one that I can’t imagine anyone would find offense with it.”

“Perhaps,” Elora forced a thin smile at him, giving him a hard look, but he stared back at her, his eyes meeting hers unabashedly. “But my wishes are still the highest order, and until that has changed, my word will remain final.” Her smile deepened, growing even more menacing. “With all due respect, *tracker*, perhaps you care too much for her wishes, and too little for her duties.” His expression faltered momentarily, but he quickly met her eyes again. “Was it not your duty to inform her of the specifics of the christening and have her completely ready for tomorrow?”

“It was,” Finn replied without any trace of shame.

“It seems you may have failed at your duties, as well,” Elora surmised. “I’m beginning to question how exactly you’ve been filling your time with the Princess. Has any of it been spent on training?”

Suddenly, Rhys knocked over a glass of wine. The glass shattered and liquid splattered everywhere. Everyone had been too busy staring at Elora and Finn, but I had seen him out of the corner of my eye. Rhys had done it on purpose, and as soon as the glass went over, the attention was refocused. He started apologizing and rushing about to clean it up, but Elora had stopped glaring at Finn, and he no longer had to defend himself. Rhys had come to his rescue, and I couldn’t be more relieved.

After the mess was cleaned up, Willa, who had never been that fond of Rhys, suddenly began chatting incessantly with him, and he eagerly reciprocated. It was clear they were talking just so that Elora and Finn couldn’t. Elora still managed to squeeze in a few biting comments towards me, such as “really, Princess, you must know how to use a fork.” But as soon as she had

finished her sentence, Willa would pipe up with a funny story about this girl she knew or this movie she saw or this place she went. It was endless, and in general, we were all grateful.

When dinner had finished, Elora claimed she had a migraine brewing and a million things to do for tomorrow. She apologized that dessert would not be served tonight, but she didn't leave her seat at the head of the table when everybody started to excuse themselves. Garrett suggested that they should be heading out, and she nodded noncommittally.

"I will see you tomorrow evening," Elora replied hollowly. She was staring off into space instead of looking at him, and he tried not to look troubled by this.

"Take care of yourself," Garrett offered.

Finn, Rhys, and I rose to see Garrett, Willa, and Rhiannon to the door, but Elora's voice stopped me cold. I think it stopped everyone else, too, but they did a better job of playing it off.

"Finn?" Elora said flatly, still staring off at nothing. "Would you escort me to my drawing room? I'd like to have a word with you."

"Yes, of course," Finn replied, giving her a small bow.

I froze and looked to him, but he refused to look at me. He just stood stoically, hands crossed behind his back, and waited for Elora to ask for further assistance. I might've stood there until Elora commanded me to go, but Willa looped her arm through mine and started to drag me away. I wanted to hate her for it, but I knew she was just saving me from another of Elora's tirades.

"So, I'll come over about ten tomorrow morning," Willa said, purposely keeping her tone light and cheery. Rhys and Rhiannon were just ahead of us, whispering quietly amongst themselves. Garrett stole one last glance at Elora and walked on to the front door.

"What for?" I asked, feeling somewhat dazed.

"To help you get ready. There is *so* much to do!" Willa emphasized, then shot a look in the direction of the dining room. "And your mother doesn't seem to be the helpful type."

“Willa, don’t talk bad about the Queen,” Garrett remarked without conviction.

“Well, anyway, I’ll be over to help you with everything. You’ll be fabulous.” She gave me a reassuring smile and squeezed my arm.

“Thanks.” I wanted to smile at her, but I couldn’t make it work.

I was genuinely relieved to have her helping me, but there was a sick feeling growing inside of me. Whatever Elora was saying to Finn, it couldn’t be good. Garrett flashed me an unconvincing smile himself, then they disappeared out the door, leaving Rhys and I standing in the entryway.

“You okay?” Rhys asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I lied.

I felt oddly shaky and ill, and I was pretty sure that I didn’t want to be a Princess anymore. There weren’t many more dinners like this I could handle. I took a step away, preparing to tell Elora just that, but I felt Rhys’s hand warm on my arm, stopping me.

“If you go in there, you’ll just make it worse,” Rhys insisted gently. “Come on.”

He put his hand on the small of my back and started ushering me up the stairs. I couldn’t help but peer over the railing, hoping to catch a glimpse of something. I’m not sure what that would help, but I thought if I could just *see* what was happening, I could somehow make it okay.

“That was a rough dinner,” Rhys said with a joyless laugh.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be sorry. It wasn’t your fault,” Rhys assured me with his lopsided grin. “You just made this house a whole lot more interesting.”

We reached the top of the stairs, and I expected him to try and push me down to my room, but he didn’t. He knew that I had to wait for Finn and find out what happened. Rhys leaned his shoulder against the wall, facing me. Taking a deep breath, I leaned back against the wall next to him.

Elora had purposely made that spectacle public. Otherwise she would’ve said it privately, inside Finn’s head. For some reason, she had wanted

me to witness that. I didn't understand why or what she had in store for Finn. I wasn't even sure what exactly he had done wrong, except disagree with her. But he had been respectful and hadn't said anything that wasn't true.

"What do you think she's saying?" I asked.

"I don't know," Rhys said thoughtfully. "She's never really yelled at me."

"You've got to be kidding," I stared at him skeptically. Rhys behaved like a kid that had gotten in trouble a lot in his life, and Elora was about as strict as they came.

"No, seriously," Rhys laughed at my shock. "She's snapped at me to knock stuff off when she's around me, but do you know how often she's even around? I was raised by nannies. Elora made it perfectly clear from day one that she wasn't mother, and she never wanted to be."

"Did she ever want to be a mother at all?" What little I knew of her seemed to be lacking even the slightest bit of maternal instinct.

"Honestly?" Rhys debated whether or not to tell me, before sadly replying, "No. I don't think she did. But she had a lineage to carry on. A duty."

"I'm just part of her job," I muttered bitterly. "For once, I just wish that somebody actually wanted me around."

"Oh, come on, Wendy," Rhys admonished me softly and leaned in closer to me. "Lots of people want you around." His head rested on the wall right next to mine, and I could feel his blue eyes searching for something. I swallowed hard and looked down at the floor. "You can't take it personally that Elora's a bitch."

"It's a little hard not to." I fidgeted with my dress, and Rhys away. He was staring at the wall across from us instead of me, and I felt an odd combination of relief and disappointment. "She's my mother."

"Elora is a strong, complicated woman that you and I can't even begin to understand," Rhys explained tiredly. "She is a Queen above all else, and that makes her cold and distant and cruel."

"What was it like growing up with that?" I glanced over at him.

"I don't know." He shrugged. "Probably like growing up in a boarding school with a strict headmistress. She was always lurking in the background, and I knew that she had the final say on everything. But her interaction with me was an absolute minimum." He looked at me again, this time uncertainly.

"What?"

"She's not quite as secretive as she thinks, though. This is a big house, but I was a sneaky little kid," Rhys said, looking away from me. He bit his lip and fiddled with a button on his blazer. "You know she used to sleep with Finn's dad?"

"I did," I said quietly.

"I thought he would tell you." Rhys fell silent for a minute, chewing his lip. "Elora was in love with him. She's strange when she's in love. Her face is different, softer and more radiant." Rhys shook his head, lost in a memory. "It's almost worse seeing her like that, knowing that she's capable of kindness and generosity. It makes you feel gypped that all you ever get is icy glares from across the room."

"I'm sorry." I put my hand gently on his arm. I couldn't imagine how horrible it had been for him to grow up like that. He forced a smile at me, then shook his head, clearing it of the memory.

"Anyway. He left Elora, for his wife, which is just as well." Rhys looked thoughtful for a moment. "Although, I bet she would've thrown it all away to be with him, if he had really loved her. But that's not the point."

"What is the point?" I asked shakily.

"Rumor has it she keeps Finn around because of the torch she was still carrying for his old man. I don't know if that's true or not. She never confided anything in me, and nothing's ever happened between them." Rhys let out a heavy sigh. "At least... Finn never looked at her the way he looks at you." He let it hang in the air for a second as I tried to figure out what he meant by that. "So you've got that strike against you too. She never wanted to be a mother, and you're getting the one thing she never had."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded nervously.

“Wendy.” Rhys looked at me with a sad smile. “I know that I wear my heart on my sleeve, but you’re just as bad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I stuttered and looked away from him.

“Alright,” Rhys laughed hollowly. “Whatever you say.”

My knees seemed to have weakened, and I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the floor. Rhys followed suit, making some joke that I didn’t really catch. My mind was racing and my heart was pounding. Rhys must be imagining things. And even if he wasn’t, surely Elora wouldn’t punish him for that. Would she?

Finn reached the landing of the top of the steps, and I scrambled to my feet. He had probably only been with Elora for fifteen minutes or so, but in my mind, it felt like hours that stretched on forever. Rhys was sitting next to me, but he got up much slower than I had. Finn looked over us with some disdain, then turned and started walking to his room without a word towards me.

“Finn!” I jogged after him, but Rhys rather smartly decided not to follow. “Wait! Finn! What happened?”

“A conversation,” Finn replied glibly. I scurried to keep up with him, but he made no effort to slow down. He glanced back over his shoulder, looking for Rhys, but refused to look at me. “I thought I told you to stay away from the mänsklig.”

“Rhys was just sitting with me while I waited for you,” I said. “Get over it.”

“It’s very dangerous for you to be around him.” Finn had reached his bedroom, and he paused at the door, looking at me from the corner of his eye. “It’s dangerous for you to be around me.”

“What’s that supposed to be mean?” I demanded.

Finn went to his room without answering, but I pushed in right behind him. He tried to shut the door, but I knew he wouldn’t risk injuring me, so he put up very little fight when I barged into his room. Once I was in there, he took a step back from me and rubbed his forehead.

“You shouldn’t be here. These are my private quarters,” Finn said flatly.

“Just tell me what’s going on, and I will.” I crossed my arms firmly on my chest, staring up at him. I didn’t appreciate the way he wouldn’t look at me anymore. He was always looking everywhere but at me, and I missed his dark eyes.

"I have been relieved of my duties," Finn answered carefully. "Elora no longer perceives a threat, and I have been insubordinate. I am to pack my things, and leave the premises as soon as possible."

The air had completely gone out of the room. It had been my worst fear. Finn was going to leave, and it was all my fault. He had been defending me when I should've been defending myself. Or I should've just kept my mouth shut.

"What?" I gaped at him when I could finally speak. "That's not right. You can't... You've been here for so long, and Elora trusts you. She can't... It's my fault! I'm the one that refused to listen!"

"No, it's not you fault," Finn insisted firmly. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Well, you can't just leave! I have the ball tomorrow, and I don't know anything!" I continued desperately. "I'm not a Princess at all! You have so much left to help me with!"

"I wouldn't be helping you after the ball anyway," Finn shook his head. "A tutor will be coming in to help you learn everything you need to know from here on out. You're ready for the ball, no matter what Elora says. You'll do wonderfully tomorrow."

"But you won't be here?" I looked at him, unbelieving, and he turned away from me.

"You don't need me," Finn said quietly and started gathering up his things.

"This is my fault!" I repeated. "I'm gonna talk to Elora. I'll clear this all up. You can't leave, and she has to see that."

"Wendy, no, you can't-" Finn tried to stop me, but I had already started out the door.

There was this unbearable panic settling over me. Finn had forced me to leave the only people who had ever made me feel okay about myself, and I had done it because I trusted him. But now he was going to leave me, alone with Elora and a monarchy I didn't want. Rhys would still be here, but I knew

that it was only a matter of time before she sent him off as well. I was going to be more alone and isolated than I ever had been before, and I couldn't handle it.

Even as I was running down the stairs to Elora's room, I knew it was more than that. I knew that I just couldn't stand to lose Finn, and it didn't matter how Elora or anyone else treated me. A life without him just didn't seem possible anymore. I hadn't even fully realized how important he had become to me until Elora was threatening to take him away.

"Elora!" I threw open the drawing room door without knocking, and I knew it would piss her off, but I didn't care. Maybe if I was insubordinate enough, she would send me away too.

Elora stood in front of the windows, staring out at the black night, and she wasn't startled at all by the banging of the door as I threw it open. Without turning to look at me, she calmly said, "That's completely unnecessary, and it goes without saying that that is not at all how a Princess behaves."

"You're always going on about how a Princess should behave, but what about how a Queen should act?" I countered icily. "Are such an insecure ruler that you can't handle the slightest bit of dissent? If we don't bow instantly to you opinion, you ship us off?"

"I assume this is about Finn," Elora sighed.

"You had no right to fire him!" I shouted. "He did nothing wrong!"

"It doesn't matter if he did anything wrong, I can 'fire' anyone for any reason. I am the Queen." Slowly, she turned to me, her face stunningly emotionless. "It is not the act of disagreeing that I had a problem with; it was why."

"This is about my stupid name?" I spouted incredulously.

"There is much you still have to learn. Please, sit." Elora gestured to one of the couches, and she laid back on the chaise lounge. "There's no need to get huffy with me, Princess. We need to talk."

“I don’t want to change my name,” I said, but I sat down on the couch across from her. “I don’t know why it’s such a big deal to you, but I think I should just be able to keep Wendy. Names can’t be that important.”

“It’s not about the name,” Elora waved it away. Her hair flowed out like silk around her, and she ran her fingers through it absently. “I know that you think I’m cruel and heartless, but I’m not. You won’t believe me when I tell you this, but I cared very deeply for Finn, more than a Queen should care for a servant, and I am sorry that I have been so negligent in the examples that I have set for you. It pains me to see Finn go, but I can assure you that I did it for you.”

“You did not!” I yelled. “You did it because you were jealous!”

“My emotions played no part in this decision. Not even the way I feel about you factored into this.” Her lips were tight, and she stared emptily at me. “I did what I had to do because it was best for the kingdom.”

“How is getting rid of him best for anybody?” I asked.

“You refuse to understand that you are a Princess!” Elora sounded mildly irritated but quickly pushed it away. “It doesn’t matter if you understand the gravity of the situation. Everyone else does, including Finn, which is why he is leaving. He knows this is best for you, too.”

“I don’t understand.” I furrowed my brow with confusion and frustration. It would be so much easier if she would just spit things out.

“Trylle, true Trylle, have certain abilities. I know you think this is all about money, but it’s about something more powerful than that. Our bloodline is rich with tremendous abilities, far exceeding the general Trylle population,” Elora explained. “Unfortunately, Trylle have become less interested in our way of life, and the abilities have begun to weaken. It is essential to our people that the bloodline is kept pure, that the abilities are allowed to flourish.

“I know you think that the titles and positions are arbitrary,” Elora continued. “But we are in power because we have the most power. For centuries, our abilities outshined every other family, but the Kroners are rapidly

overreaching us. You are the last chance for hanging onto the throne, and for restoring power to our people.”

“What does this have to do with Finn?” I demanded, growing tired of political talk.

“Everything,” Elora answered with a thin smile. “In order to keep the bloodlines as clean and powerful as possible, certain rules were put in effect. Not just for royalty, but for everyone. When a Trylle becomes involved with a mänsklig, they are asked to leave the community. It’s not meant just as a repercussion for behaving outside of societal norms, but also so their half-breed spawn won’t weaken our abilities.” Something about the way she said “spawn” sent a chill down my spine.

“There’s nothing going on between Rhys and I,” I interjected, but Elora nodded skeptically.

“While trackers are Trylle, they don’t possess abilities in the conventional sense,” Elora went on, and I was starting to realize what she was getting at. “Trackers are meant to be with trackers. If Trylle is involved with them, they are looked down upon, but it is allowed. Unless you are royalty. A tracker can never, ever have the crown. Any Marksinna or Princess caught with a tracker will immediately be stripped of her title. If the offense is bad enough, such as a Princess destroying an essential bloodline, then they would both be banished.”

I swallowed hard. If anything happened between Finn and I, I wouldn’t be able to be a Princess, and I wouldn’t even be able to live in Förening anymore. That was shocking at first, until I realized that I didn’t even want to be a Princess or live here. What did I care?

“So?” I said, and Elora looked momentarily surprised.

“I know that right now all of this means nothing to you.” Elora gestured widely to the room around us. “I know you hate this, actually, and I understand. But this is your destiny, and even if you don’t see it, Finn does. He knows how important you are, and he would never let you ruin your future. That is why he offered up his resignation.”

“He *quit*?” I didn’t believe her.

Finn wouldn’t quit. He wouldn’t leave me here, not when he knew how much I needed him. And he had to know. That’s why he stood up for me with Elora. He knew that I would be lost without him, and he couldn’t do that to me. It would go against everything he believed in. It was his duty to take care of me.

“I blame myself because the signs were so obvious,” Elora sighed. “And I blame Finn, because he knows better than to get involved, better than anyone. But I commend him for realizing what the right thing was for you. He is leaving to protect you.”

“I don’t need him to protect me!” I got to my feet. “And there is nothing that I need protecting from! He has no reason to leave! Nothing’s going on! I’m not involved with anyone.”

“I would find that much more believable if you hadn’t raced down here with tears in your eyes to plead for his job,” Elora replied coolly. “Or if he had even offered up the smallest protest when I questioned him about his feelings for you. If he had promised me he could keep things purely business from here on out, I would’ve kept him.” She looked down at the chaise, playing with a loose thread in the fabric. “But he couldn’t even do that. He didn’t even try.”

I wanted to argue with her, but I was starting to realize exactly what she was saying. Finn cared about me, and he admitted it to Elora, knowing how she would react. He cared about me so much, he had been unable to continue his job. He couldn’t keep things separate anymore, and he was upstairs packing to leave right now.

I would’ve liked to yell at Elora more, blame her for everything horrible in my life and tell her that I was giving up the crown, but I didn’t have time to waste. I had to catch him before he left, because I had no idea where he would go. And he was far more important to me than anything here, especially now that I knew that he actually cared.

By the time I made it to his room, my breath was coming out raggedly. My hands were trembling, and that familiar butterfly feeling Finn gave me

spread out warmly through me. I was in love with him, and I wasn't going to give him up. Not for anything in this world or the next. He consumed every inch of my being without even trying, and I couldn't imagine existing without him.

When I opened his bedroom door, he was standing over his bed, folding clothes and putting them in a suitcase. He looked back at me, surprised by my appearance, and he let his dark eyes rest on me again. His cheeks were covered in dark stubble, and there was something so ruggedly handsome about him, he was almost unbearable to look at. The top few buttons of his dress shirt were undone, revealing a hint of chest that I found strangely provocative.

"Are you alright?" Finn stopped what he was doing and took a step to me.

"Yeah," I nodded, swallowing hard. "I'm going with you."

"Wendy..." His expression softened and he shook his head. "You can't go with me. You need to be here."

"No, I don't care about here!" I insisted. "I hate Elora! I hate this palace! I don't want to be a stupid Princess! And I don't care who is! There's somebody else that can take my place! They don't need me!"

"They do need you. You have no idea how badly they need you." Finn turned away from me. "Without you, it will completely fall apart."

"That doesn't make any sense! I'm just one stupid girl who can't even figure out which fork to eat with! I have no abilities! I'm awkward and silly and inappropriate! That Kroner kid is much better suited for this!" I continued. "I don't need to be here, and I'm not going to stay if you're not here!"

"There is much you have yet to learn," Finn said tiredly, almost to himself. He had started folding his clothes again, so I walked over to him and grabbed his arm.

"I want to be with you, and... I think you want to be with me." I felt sick to my stomach saying it aloud. I expected him to laugh at me or tell me that I was insane, but instead, he slowly looked over at me.

In a rare moment of vulnerability, his dark eyes betrayed everything they had been trying to hide from me. They were filled with affection and warmth, and something even deeper than that. His arm felt warm and strong under my hand, and my heart pounded in my chest. Gently, he placed his hand on my cheek, letting his fingers press warmly on my skin, and I stared hopefully at him

"I am not worth it, Wendy," Finn whispered hoarsely. "You are going to be so much more than this, and I cannot hold you back. I refuse to."

"But Finn, I—" I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but he pulled his hand away.

"You have to go." He turned his back to me completely, busying himself with anything so he wouldn't have to look at me.

"Why?" I demanded, tears stinging at my eyes.

"Because." Finn picked up some of his books off a shelf, and I followed right behind him, unwilling to relent in my pursuit of him.

"That's not even a reason," I said.

"I've already explained it to you," Finn hissed.

"No, you haven't! You've just made vague comments about the future!" I insisted.

"I don't want you!" Finn snapped.

I felt like I had been slapped. For a moment, I stood in a stunned silence, just listening to the sound of my heartbeat echo in my ears, but then I charged on. Maybe he didn't want me, but part of me still believed he did, and I wouldn't stop until I was sure it was true.

"You're lying!" I shouted, feeling a tear slip down my cheek. "You promised you would never lie to me!"

"Wendy! I need you to leave!" Finn growled.

He was breathing heavily, and his back was still to me, but he had stopped moving around. He leaned against his bookshelf, his shoulders hunched forward. This was my last chance to convince him, and I knew it. I touched his back, and he tried to pull away from me, but I wouldn't move my

hand. He whirled on me, grabbing my wrist. He pushed me until my back was against the wall, pinning me there. His body was pressed tightly against mine, the strong counters of his muscles against the soft curves of mine, and I could feel his heart hammering against my chest. His hand was still around my wrist, restraining one of my hands against the wall. I'm not sure what he intended to do, but he looked down at me, his dark eyes smoldering. Then suddenly, I felt his lips pressed roughly against mine.

He kissed me desperately, like a drowning man and I was his oxygen. I felt his stubble scraping against my cheeks, my lips, my neck, everywhere he dared press his mouth against me. He let go of my wrist, allowing me to wrap my arms around him and pull him even closer to me. Seconds ago, I had been crying, and I could taste the salt from my tears on his lips. Tangling my fingers in his hair, I pushed his mouth more eagerly against mine, kissing him until I couldn't breathe. My heart beat so fast, it hurt, and an intense heat spread through me. I had never wanted anything more than I wanted him.

"No..." Finn said hoarsely, and somehow he managed to pull his mouth from mine. His hands gripped my shoulders, holding me to the wall and he took a step back. Breathing hard, he looked at the ground instead of at me, and his dark lashes laid on his cheeks. "This is why I have to go, Wendy. I can't do this to you."

"To me? You're not doing anything to me!" I persisted and tried to reach out for him, but he held me back. "Just let me go with you."

"Wendy..." He put his hand back on my cheek, using his thumb to brush away a fresh tear, and looked at me intently. "You trust me, don't you?" I nodded hesitantly. "Then you have to trust me on this. You *need* to stay here, and I need to go. Okay?"

"Finn!" I protested.

"I'm sorry." Finn let go of me and grabbed his half-packed suitcase off his bed. "I stayed too long." He started walking to the door, and I ran after him. "Wendy! Enough!"

"But you can't just leave..." I pleaded.

He hesitated at the doorway but shook his head. Finn opened the door and left.

I could've followed him, but I didn't have anymore arguments. His kiss had left me feeling dazed and disarmed, and I wondered dimly if that had been his plan all along. He knew his kiss would leave me too weak to chase after him and too confused to argue with him. After he had gone, I just sat down on the bed that still smelled like him, and I started to sob.

I'm not sure I had slept at all when Willa burst in my room the next morning to wake me for the party. My eyes were red and swollen, but she made very little comment about it. She just started in on getting me ready and talking excitedly about how much fun it was all going to be. I didn't really believe her, but she didn't notice. Almost everything I did required verbal and physical prompts. She even had to remind me rinse the shampoo from my hair, and I was just lucky that modesty had never been her strong suit.

It was impossible to combine fresh heartbreak with the fervor of a ball. Willa kept trying to get me excited or at least nervous about anything, but it was completely futile. The only way I managed to function was by being completely numb. I didn't even understand how this had happened. When I had first met Finn, he had seemed creepy, and then he was just irritating. Repeatedly, I had rejected him and told him that I didn't need him or want to be around him. I had even run away from Förening before thinking I would never see him again. How had it turned into this? I had lived my whole stupid life without him, and now I could barely make it through the hour.

"Wendy," Willa sighed. I was sitting on a stool, wrapped in my robe, while she did something to my hair. She had offered to do it in front of a mirror so I could see her progress, but I didn't care. Holding a bottle of spray in her hand, she stopped what she was doing and just looked at me. "I know Finn's gone, and you're obviously taking it pretty hard. But he's just a stork, and you are a *Princess*."

"You don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled.

I had thought about defending him, but in all honesty, I was kind of pissed that he had left without me. There was no way that I could've left him after that kiss. As it was, it had been torture to stay behind. I just lowered my eyes and tried to close the subject.

“Fine. I don’t.” Willa rolled her eyes and went back to spraying my hair. “But you’re still a Princess, and this is your night.” I didn’t say anything as she yanked and teased my hair. “You’re still young. You don’t understand how many fish there really are in the sea, especially your sea. The most eligible, attractive men are gonna be all over you, and you’re not even gonna remember that stupid stork that brought you here.”

“I don’t like fishing,” I muttered dryly, but she ignored me.

“You know who is a catch? Tove Kroner.” Willa made a pleased sound, and I groaned inwardly. “I wish my dad would set me up with him.” She sighed wistfully and pulled painfully on a strand of my hair. “He’s really foxy, really rich, and he’s like the highest Markis in the world, which is so weird. The Marksinna are usually the ones with all the abilities. Of course guys have some things, but they almost always pale in comparison to what women have, but Tove has more than anybody else. He tries not to show off, but I’ve seen some of the stuff he can do, and it’s amazing. I wouldn’t be surprised if he could read minds.”

“I thought nobody could do that,” I commented, amazed that I was even following her.

“No. Only very, very few can. So few it’s almost the stuff of legends anymore.” She gently fluffed at my hair. “But Tove is the stuff of legends, so that makes sense. And if you play your cards right, you’ll be pretty damn legendary yourself.” She whipped me around so she was facing me again and smiled at her handiwork. “Now we just need to get you in your gown.”

Somehow, while getting me ready, Willa had managed to ready herself. She had on a floor length light blue gown that swept around her, and she looked so beautiful, I had no hope of topping that. After she had finally gotten me into my own dress, she forced me in front of the mirror, insisting that I looked too amazing to ignore.

“Oh wow.” Saying that to my reflection, I felt egotistical, but I couldn’t help it. I had never looked better in my life, and I doubted that I would ever look this good again.

The dress was a shimmery silver and white that flowed out around me. It was strapless in an elegant way, and the diamond necklace Willa had chosen set it off. My dark curls fell perfectly behind me, and Willa had added subtle touches of diamond clips in my hair. For the first time in my entire life, I actually looked like a Princess.

“You’re gonna rock it tonight, Princess,” Willa promised with a sly smile.

That was the last calm moment of the night. As soon as we stepped out of my bedroom, we were swept off by aides and staff that I didn’t even know Elora had. They were giving me a rundown of the times that everything was set to happen and where I had to be and who I had to meet and what I had to do. It was already more than I could comprehend, and at least momentarily, I was pushed out of the dull heartache that I got from thinking of Finn. I looked helplessly for Willa, and later on, I knew I would have to try and make this up to her. Without her, it would’ve been completely impossible for me to make it through.

First, there was some kind of meet and greet in the ball room. Elora stood on one side, and thankfully, Willa was allowed to stay on my other side, explaining herself as some kind of personal assistant to me. The three of us stood at one end of the ballroom, flanked by security that had the same stoic posture as Finn, and a long line of people waited to meet me. Most of them were famous and Willa filled in the names and titles as they approached, but Elora explained that anybody could come meet me today, so the line was absolutely endless. My face hurt from smiling, and there were only so many different ways I could say “pleased to meet you” and “thank you.”

After that, we went to the dining hall, and that was a more exclusive function. The table only seated a hundred (that’s right – *only* a hundred), but Willa was five places down from me, making me feel strangely lost. Whenever I felt insecure, I felt my eyes instinctively searching for Finn, only to remember that he wasn’t there. I tried to concentrate on eating my food properly, which

wasn't that easy considering how nauseous I felt and how badly my jaw hurt from the forced smiles.

My mother was sitting to my right at the head of the table, and Tove was sitting next to me on my left. Throughout the dinner, he'd said hardly a thing to me, and Elora had gone about making polite conversation with the current Chancellor, an obese balding man named Antonsson. Personally, the way he looked at me creeped me out, and I found it impossible to smile at him out of fear I might vomit.

"Drink more wine," Tove suggested quietly. Holding a wine glass in his hand, he leaned in a bit towards me to be heard over the echo of everyone talking. His mossy eyes rested on my briefly before averting and staring at an empty space across from us. "It relaxes the muscles."

"I beg your pardon?" I crinkled my forehead, not understanding what he was saying.

"From smiling." He gestured to his own mouth and forced a smile before quickly dropping it. "It's starting to hurt, right?"

"Yeah." I smiled lightly at him, feeling a growing soreness in the corners of my mouth.

"The wine helps. Trust me." Tove took a long drink from his wine, much larger than was polite, and I saw Elora eying him up as she chatted with Antonsson.

"Thanks." I took his suggestion, but I drank much more slowly than he did, afraid of inciting the wrath of Elora. I didn't think she'd do anything publicly, but then again, I didn't really think she'd let me get away with anything either.

As the dinner wore on, Tove apparently started getting restless. He leaned back in his seat, leaving his hand lying on the table. His wine glass would suddenly slowly slide over to his hand, then it would slowly slide away, without him ever having to touch it. It was a similar trick that I had seen him pull before, but I couldn't help but stare.

“You have persuasion, right?” Tove asked, glancing at me. I’m not sure if he caught me watching his trick or not, but I looked down at my plate either way.

“Mmm, yes,” I nodded.

“Is it pretty powerful? I heard it was.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table, and I could imagine that Elora was livid.

“I don’t think so. Not now anyway,” I stabbed absently at some kind of vegetable I had no intention of eating. “Since I’ve lived here, I haven’t used it at all.”

“Yeah, they do that on purpose,” Tove muttered disdainfully. He leaned in closer to me, lowering his voice, and he looked intently at me. “I can’t explain it but... I know what you can do.” He chewed his lip. “And your persuasion is going to be immensely powerful.”

“Maybe,” I allowed. His gaze was unnerving, and I didn’t want to disagree with him.

“Here’s a tip: use it tonight,” Tove was barely audible over the chatter. “You’re trying to please so many people and it’s exhausting. You can’t be everything to everyone, so I try not to be anything to anyone. My mother hates me for it but...” He shrugged. “Just use it a little bit, and you’ll charm everyone. Without really trying.”

“I have to try to use persuasion,” I whispered. I could feel Elora listening to us, and I didn’t think she’d approve of what we were saying. “It would be just as exhausting.”

“Hmm,” Tove mused, then leaned back in his seat.

“Tove, the Chancellor was just telling me that you had discussed working for him this spring,” Elora interjected brightly. I barely glanced up at her, but in that second, she managed to glare icily at me before instantly returning to her overly cheery expression.

“My mother was discussing it,” Tove corrected her. “I’ve never said a word to the Chancellor, and I have no interest in the position.” I was

increasingly becoming a fan of Tove, even if he weirded me out and I didn't understand what he meant most of the time.

"I see." Elora raised an eyebrow, and the Chancellor started saying something about the wine they were drinking.

Tove managed to look bored and irritated the rest of the dinner, chewing his nails and looking at everything except for me. His dark hair had soft, natural highlights coursing through it, and it was longer and more unruly than most of the men's. His skin was darker, too, tanned with a mossy undertone, the green complexion that Finn had told me about. Nobody here had skin like that at all, except maybe his mother, but hers was even fainter than Tove's already subtle coloring. He was definitely handsome, but I couldn't see why Willa would describe him as such a catch. There was something very strange and unstable about him. He belonged in this world even less than I did, but I imagined that there really wasn't any place that he fit in.

Moving on to the ballroom after dinner was by far the worst experience of the evening. Meeting people had been rough, but this was forced one-on-one interaction that went for several minutes. That doesn't sound that bad, but when I was trapped in a waltz with a sixty-year-old man who talked only of some great war two centuries ago while staring at me with glazed eyes, yeah, that got old very fast.

The ballroom looked positively magical when it was all done up, and I couldn't help but think of the brief dance I shared with Finn a few days before. That, of course, reminded me of the passionate kiss we had shared last night, making me feel weak and sick. I couldn't even force a smile when I thought of Finn. The fact that I didn't sob uncontrollably on the dance floor was a miracle.

Garrett managed to steal a dance with me, and that was a relief. He complimented me, but not in a creepy perv way everyone else seemed to be going for. I had been dancing nonstop for an hour because everyone kept cutting in. Every now and then, I would catch Elora spinning around on the floor, or Willa would sneak me a smile as she twirled around with some foxy

young guy. It was unfair that she got pick who she danced with, but I was stuck with every stranger that asked.

“You’re probably the most ravishing Princess we’ve ever had,” Chancellor Antonsson told me after he cut in a dance. His pudgy cheeks were red from exertion, and I wanted to suggest that he sit down and take a break, but I thought Elora would disapprove. He was holding me far closer than was necessary, but his hand was like a massive ham on my back, pressing me to him. I couldn’t pull away without making a scene, so I just tried to force a smile.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I demurred. He was sweating so badly, it had to be bleeding onto my dress. The beautiful white fabric would be covered in yellow stains after tonight.

“No, you really are.” His eyes were wide with some kind of weird pleasure, and I wished someone would hurry up and cut in. We had just started dancing, but I couldn’t take much more of this. “In fact, I’ve never seen anyone more ravishing than you.”

“Now that, I’m certain, cannot be true.” I glanced around, hoping to spot Willa somewhere so I could try and pawn him off on her.

“I know that you’ll be expected to start courting soon, and I’d just like you to know that I have a lot of things going for me,” the Chancellor went on. “I’m very wealthy, very secure, and my bloodline is immaculate. Your mother would approve of this arrangement.”

“I haven’t made any arrangements yet...” I trailed off.

I craned my neck around, knowing that if Elora saw me, she would accuse me of being rude. But I didn’t know how else to react. This blubbery sweaty man was grabbing my ass during what appeared to be some kind of marriage proposal. I had to get out of there.

“I’ve been told I’m an excellent lover, as well,” the Chancellor lowered his voice. “I’m sure that you don’t have any experience but I could definitely teach you.” He actually had a hungry look, and his eyes had dropped lower than my face. It was taking all my restraint not to push him off of me, and in my head I was screaming to get away from him.

“May I cut in?” Tove suddenly appeared at my side, out of nowhere. The Chancellor looked disappointed at the sight of him, but before he could say anything, Tove had put his hand on his shoulder and taken my hand, pulling me away from him

“Thank you,” I breathed gratefully as we waltzed away from a very confused looking Chancellor.

“I heard you calling for help,” Tove smiled at me. “You seem to be using your persuasion more than you think.” In my mind, I had been begging for a way out of that, but I hadn’t uttered an actual word.

“You heard me?” I gasped, feeling pale. “How many other people heard me?”

“Probably just me. Don’t worry. Hardly anybody can sense anything anymore,” Tove explained. “The Chancellor probably would’ve noticed if he hadn’t been too busy staring at your chest, or if you were more skilled at it. You’ll get the hang of it.”

“I don’t really care if I get the hang of it. I just wanted to get rid of him,” I muttered. “I’m sorry if I’m wet. I’m probably covered in his sweat.”

“No, you’re fine,” Tove assured me.

We were dancing the appropriate width apart, so he probably couldn’t feel my dress to tell if it was soaked or not, but there was something relaxing about dancing with him. My feet killed from being on them for over an hour straight, but for once, I didn’t have to say anything or worry about getting felt up or stared at. He barely looked at me and said nothing else at all.

Elora finally interrupted the festivities. The christening ceremony would be happening in twenty minutes, and she noted that I needed a break from all the dancing. The dance floor emptied and everyone took seats at the tables on the sides, or milled around the refreshments table. I knew that I should sit down while I had the chance, but I was desperate to have a moment to breathe, so I went to a corner hidden behind extra chairs and tables and leaned against the wall.

“Who are you hiding from?” Rhys teased, finding me in the corner. Dressed in a flashy tux, he looked amazing as he sauntered over to me, grinning.

“Everyone,” I smiled at him. “You look really good.”

“Funny, I was just gonna tell you same thing.” Rhys stood next me, putting his hands in his pockets, and smiling even wider at me. “Although, ‘good’ doesn’t even begin to you justice. You look... otherworldly. Like nothing else here can even compare to you.”

“It’s the dress.” I looked down, hoping to keep my cheeks from blushing. “That Frederique is amazing.”

“The dress is nice, but trust me, *you* make the dress,” Rhys insisted. I felt his blue eyes searching over me again, and gently, he reached over and fixed a strand of my hair back that fallen out of place. He let his hand linger there a minute, looking me in the eyes, then he just grinned and dropped his hand. “So, having fun yet?”

“A blast,” I smirked. “What about you?”

“I can’t dance with the Princess, so I’m a little bitter,” he said with a sad smile.

“Why can’t you dance with me?” I asked. I would’ve loved to dance with him. In all honesty, a dance with Rhys would’ve been the highlight of my night.

“Mänks,” he pointed his thumbs at himself. “I’m lucky I’m even allowed in.”

“Oh.” I looked down at the floor, thinking about what he’d just said. “Not to sound rude or anything, because I’m glad you’re here but... why are you here? Why aren’t you banned or something equally ridiculous?”

“Didn’t you know?” Rhys asked with a cocky grin. “I am the highest mänks in the land.”

“And why is that?” I couldn’t tell if he was teasing me or not, so I tilted my head, watching him as his expression got more serious.

“Because I’m yours,” he replied softly. He was invited because he was my mänsklig, my opposite, but when he answered, that’s not what he meant at all. Something in his eyes made me blush for real this time, and I smiled sadly at him.

One of Elora’s aides burst into the corner, ruining what was left of the moment, and demanding that I take my seat at the head table with the Queen. The christening ceremony was about to start, and a knot formed in my stomach. I hadn’t heard what my name was to be, and I was depressed about the idea of changing it. Besides, the break had been far too short.

“Duty calls,” I smiled apologetically at Rhys and started to walk past him.

“Hey.” Rhys grabbed my hand to stop me, and I turned to look at him. “You’re gonna be great. Everyone’s raving about you.”

“Thanks.” I squeezed his hand gratefully.

A cracking echoed through the room, followed by a tinkling that I didn’t understand. The sound was coming from everywhere so it was hard to place right away. But then it looked like the ceiling was raining glitter, and the skylights were crashing to the ground. Rhys realized what was happening before I did, and still holding my hand, he yanked me behind him to protect me. We were in the corner, so we were out of the way of the most of the glass, but from the painful screams, I gathered that everyone else wasn’t so lucky.

Belatedly, I saw the reason for broken skylights. People were falling through the glass, landing on the floor with surprising grace. Before I recognized them, I remembered the uniform. Long black trench coats and black apparel. The word seemed to well through the room without anybody saying anything: *Vittra*. There were about fifteen of them, and the guards were circling them. Blood and broken glass layered the floor. In the very center, I saw Jen, the tracker that had been so fond of hitting me before, and his eyes were scanning the crowd, so I hid behind Rhys as much as I could.

“You are not invited. Please leave.” Elora’s voice boomed above everything else.

“You know what we want, and we’re not leaving until we get it,” the tracker, Kyra, replied, stepping out from the crowd and walking towards Elora. She was walking on glass in bare feet but didn’t seem to notice. “She’s got to be here. Where are you hiding her?”

Staring over Rhys’s shoulder, Jen suddenly turned towards me, and his black eyes met mine. He grinned wickedly. Rhys instantly realized we were in trouble and tried to push me towards the door, but we never stood a chance. Jen bolted towards us, and everyone burst into life. The Vittra scrambled, going after the guards and other Trylle to throw them off. I saw Tove bound over the table he was sitting at, using his powers to send Vittra flying without even touching them. Elora was glaring at Kyra, who suddenly collapsed on the ground, writhing with pain.

That was all I saw because then Jen was in front of us, blocking out the chaos that was going on around him. I heard people screaming and felt a strong wind running through the room, attributing it to Willa’s attempts at helping. Rhys stood his ground, trying to defend me, but Jen sent him flying across the floor with one hefty punch.

“Oh, silly Princess,” Jen smiled menacingly at me. “You should’ve known you couldn’t get away from me.”

“Leave her alone!” Rhys had already jumped back to his feet, blood streaming down his face from a cut above his eye. He made it a step towards us when Jen punched him again, but much harder this time

“Rhys!” I wailed, reaching out for him, but Jen grabbed me around my waist, stopping me.

“That’s what you have protecting you now?” Jen laughed. Rhys appeared to be unconscious, and I prayed he wasn’t dead. “Did we scare Finn off?”

“Let go of me!” I screamed. I kicked at him and tried to pry his arm off of me.

Suddenly, he went flying into the wall, taking me with him. When he slammed into it, his arm loosened enough where I could scramble away from

him. Tove was standing on the other side of the table across from us, holding his hand palm out at Jen, so I assumed that he had been the reason that we had just went into a wall.

Somehow, the fifteen or so Vittra had the upper hand in the room. Other than Tove, Willa, and Elora, none of the Trylle really seemed to have abilities, or at least they weren't using them. The room was total pandemonium, and then I realized that there were even more Vittra streaming in through the ceiling. There was no way we could beat them. I don't even know why I said "we." I had done nothing but scream in the corner. When I had become so useless?

"This is why you need to work on your persuasion," Tove pointed out.

"Watch out!" I yelled as another Vittra came towards his back.

Tove turned, throwing his hand back and tossing the would-be-attacker across the room. Kyra was trying to get to my mother, and someone on the other side of the room had started using fire. I looked around to grab a weapon that I could use when I felt Jen's arms around my waist again. I yelped and flailed mercilessly in his arms. Tove turned his attention back to me, but there were two other Vittra chasing after him, so he only had a moment to send Jen flying back into the wall again. It was even harder this time, and it jostled me painfully, but Jen let go.

"You've got to be more careful, Tove!" Someone was shouting. My head throbbed dully from hitting the wall, and I blinked to clear it. A hand was taking mine, helping me to my feet, and I wasn't even sure if I should be accepting it, but I did anyway.

"I was just trying to get her free!" Tove snapped, and another Vittra yelled as he sent them flying into a table across the room. "And I'm busy here!"

I turned back to see who had helped me and all the air went out of my lungs. Wearing a black hoodie under a black jacket, Finn was surveying the mess around me. He had never looked more attractive to me than he did then. He was actually standing right next to me, holding my hand, and I couldn't think or move. It seemed totally unreal. I must've hit my head too hard.

“Finn!” I gasped, and he finally looked at me, his dark eyes a mixture of relief and panic.

“This is fucking Bedlam!” Tove growled angrily. A turned over table was between him and us, and he easily sent it sailing into a couple Vittra attacking the Chancellor, and then he walked over. All the Vittra were otherwise engaged so he had a moment to catch his breath.

“It’s worse than I thought,” Finn pursed his lips.

“We’ve gotta protect the Princess,” Tove insisted emphatically, looking at Finn intensely. I squeezed Finn’s hand and watched the two of them, trying to understand what they were talking about. Jen started to get up, so Tove slammed him back into the wall.

“I’ll get her out of here,” Finn nodded. “Can you handle it down here?”

“I don’t have a choice.” Tove barely had time to answer when Willa started screaming bloody murder across the room. I couldn’t see her, and that scared me all the more.

“Willa!” I yelled and tried to run to see what was happening. Finn wrapped his arms around me, pulling me back, and Tove took a step in the direction of Willa screaming.

“Get her out of here!” Tove commanded, and then dove into the fray.

Finn started dragging me out of the ballroom while I strained to see what was going on. Tove had disappeared, and I couldn’t see Elora or Willa. As he was pulling me, my feet hit Rhys’ leg, and I suddenly remembered that he was laying unconscious, bleeding on the ground. I struggled against Finn’s arms, trying to reach Rhys.

“He’s fine! They won’t touch him!” Finn tried to reassure me. He still had one arm around my waist, and he was much stronger than me, so I didn’t really stand a chance fighting against him. “You’ve got to get out of here!”

“But Rhys!” I pleaded.

“He’d want you to be safe!” Finn insisted and finally managed to drag me to the ballroom doors.

I paused, looking up from Rhys to see the chaos of the room. All the chandeliers suddenly crashed to the ground, and the only light was coming from someone who controlled a fire ability and the things they had lit on fire. People were screaming and yelling, and it was echoing off of everything.

“Wendy!” Finn shouted, trying to move me into action.

He let go of my waist and took my hand, yanking me out of the room. Using my free hand, I tried to pull up my dress to keep from tripping on it as we raced down the hallway. I could still hear the carnage from the ballroom, and I had no idea where he planned on taking me. I didn’t have time to question him, though, or even really to feel thankful that I was with him again. My only consolation was that if they got me tonight, I had at least spent the last few minutes of my life with Finn.

We rounded the corner towards the entryway, but Finn stopped sharply. Three Vittra were coming in the front doors of the palace, but they didn’t seem to have seen us yet. Finn changed direction, darting across the hall into one of the sitting rooms, pulling me by the hand with him. The room was completely dark, and he ran to a corner between a bookcase and the glass wall. He pulled me tightly to him, shielding me with his body. The door to the room was shut, but we could hear the Vittra outside. I held my breath, pressing my face into Finn’s chest and praying they didn’t come in the room.

When they finally walked past, Finn still didn’t loosen his grip on me, but I could hear his heartbeat slow ever so slightly. Somewhere beneath all my panic and fear, I became aware of the fact that Finn was holding me tightly in his arms. I looked up at him, barely able to make out his features in the moonlight that streamed in through the windows next to us.

“Why are we hiding?” I whispered.

“I don’t think I can protect you from all of them.” Finn swallowed hard, and very gently, pushed back stray curls from my face. His hand lingered on my cheek as he looked down at me. “They can’t get to you, and this is the best way I have for protecting you.”

“Why’d you come back?” I asked softly.

“Wendy...” The corner of his mouth turned up subtly. “I never really left. I was just down the hill, and I never stopped tracking you. I knew what was happening as soon as you did, and I raced back here.”

“Are we gonna be okay?” I asked plaintively.

“I won’t let anything happen to you,” Finn promised.

I looked up at him, searching his eyes in the dim light, and I wanted nothing more than to kiss him. As ridiculous as it sounds after everything that had happened, I just wanted to stay in his arms forever. He licked his lips, and I was certain that he felt the exact same way.

The door creaked open, and Finn tensed up instantly. He pushed me back harder against the wall, wrapping his arms around me to hide me. I held my breath and tried to stop my heartbeat. We heard nothing for a second, and then the light flicked on.

“Well, well, if the prodigal stork hasn’t returned,” Jen said acidly.

“You won’t get her,” Finn insisted firmly.

He pulled away from me just enough so he could face Jen. I peered around him, watching Jen walk in a slow semi-circle towards us. He walked in an oddly familiar way that, like something I had seen on Animal Planet. Jen was stalking his prey.

“Maybe I will, maybe I won’t,” Jen allowed. “But getting you out of my way would probably make it easier, if not for me than for somebody else. Because they won’t stop coming for her.”

“We won’t stop protecting her,” Finn countered.

“You’re willing to die to protect her?” Jen asked skeptically.

“You’re willing to die to get her?” Finn challenged evenly.

I had my fingers clenched onto the back of Finn’s jacket, and I watched the two of them stare each other down. I didn’t understand what was so damn important about me that so many Vittra were willing to kill, and according to Finn, so many Trylle were willing to die. In the ballroom, Tove had kept insisting that they had to protect me, and I hadn’t thought that Tove had cared

for me all that much. Was it just that I was a Princess? Had Elora endured similar things when she first came home?

“Neither one of you have to die!” I interjected. I tried to slip around Finn’s arm, but he pushed me back firmly. “I’ll go, okay? I don’t want anybody else to get hurt over this!”

“Why don’t you listen to the girl?” Jen suggested, wagging his eyebrows.

“Not this time,” Finn replied quietly.

“Suit yourself.” Jen had apparently tired of talking and dove at Finn.

Finn was wrenched from fingertips, and I screamed his name. They both went flying through the glass out onto the balcony, sending shards flying everywhere. I was barefoot, and I tried to follow carefully behind them. Jen managed to land a few good blows on Finn, but Finn was much quicker and seemed to be stronger. When Finn hit him, he staggered back several feet.

“You’ve been working out,” Jen smirked, wiping fresh blood from his chin.

“You could give up now, and I wouldn’t think any less of you,” Finn suggested.

“Nice try.” Jen lunged forward, kicking Finn in the stomach, but somehow, Finn held his own.

I knew that there was a very good chance that things wouldn’t end well, so I grabbed a giant shard of glass from off the balcony. I hoped I wouldn’t have to use it, but in this kind of scenario, I always thought it would be better to be safe than sorry.

Somehow, Jen managed to get Finn on the ground. He pounced on top of him and started hitting him in the face. This didn’t sit well with me, so I charged at him. Using all my might, I stabbed the glass into his back. I managed to slice open a finger, but I figured that it was worth it if I could save Finn and possibly kill Jen.

“Ow!” Jen shouted, but he sounded more irritated than wounded.

I stood right behind him, panting. That was not the reaction I had expected and I didn't know what to do. Jen did, though. He turned quickly, smacking me so hard across the face that I went flying to edge of the balcony. I only had a moment to notice the dizzying drop below as my head hung over the edge, and then I was scrambling to my feet and gripping onto the railing.

Finn had already jumped up and knocked Jen back down. Kicking him as hard as he could, Finn growled through gritted teeth, "Don't. Ever. Touch. Her. Again."

When Finn went to kick him again, Jen grabbed his foot and yanked him back to the ground. I heard the sound of Finn's head cracking against the heavy concrete of the balcony, and I yelled his name. It didn't really hurt him, but it stunned him long enough where Jen could bend over and wrapped his hand around Finn's throat. He lifted him up off the ground by his neck, and I raced to his aid. I jumped on Jen's back, which wasn't as smart as it sounded because Jen had a giant shard of glass sticking out of his back. Fortunately, I just cut through my dress and my side without actually impaling myself on it. It was enough to bleed and hurt, but not enough to kill.

"Get down!" Jen growled, then jerked his arm back, elbowing me hard in the stomach and knocking me off his back. I hurried to my feet but Jen already had Finn pressed back over the railing. The top half of his body was dangling over the edge, and if Jen let go, Finn would plummet to his death hundreds of feet below.

"Stop! Stop!" I pleaded, tears streaming down my face. "I'll go with you! Please! Just let go of him! *Please!*"

"I hate to break it to you, Princess, but you're going with me anyway!" Jen laughed.

"Not if I can help..." Finn barely managed to speak through Jen's hand clamped on his throat.

Finn kicked his leg up, planting it squarely between Jen's legs, and Jen groaned, but didn't loosen his grip on his Finn. Keeping his leg there, Finn started tilting backwards. Jen realized what he was doing, but Finn had reached

forward and grabbed onto Jen's jacket. He had changed the weight ratio, and in a moment that felt oddly slow motion, Finn went backwards over the railing, pulling Jen with him.

“No!” I screamed and lunged towards them, grabbing at thin air.

As soon as I reached the railing, Finn suddenly floated up to the top, coughing hoarsely. I gaped at him, too shocked to even believe he was real. He came over the top of the railing, then dropped heavily onto the ground. Lying on his back, he coughed again, and I rushed to his side, kneeling next to him. I touched his face, checking to make sure he was real, and his skin felt soft and warm under my hands.

“That was quite the gamble,” Tove remarked from behind me, and I turned to look at him.

Somewhere along the line, Tove had discarded his blazer, and his white shirt looked slightly burned and bloody. Other than that, he didn’t look that bad as he took a step towards us. It finally dawned on me what had happened. When Finn had gone over the balcony, Tove had used his power to catch him and lift him back up, setting him down safely.

“Nah, you always come through,” Finn said.

I went back to staring down at him, unable to completely believe that he was alive and here with me again. My hand was on his chest, above his heart, so I could feel it pounding. He placed his hand over mine, holding it gently, but he looked past me at Tove.

“What’s going on in there?” Finn asked Tove and nodded to the house.

“They’re retreating,” Tove explained, standing over us. “We finally managed to get the upper hand. A lot of people were hurt, but Aurora is working on them. For the most part, I think everyone will be okay.”

“Good.” Finn sighed in relief and looked back over at me. “What happened? Are you alright?” His hand went to my side, where I was bleeding all over my dress. I winced under his touch but shook my head.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine,” I insisted.

“Have my mother look at it. She’ll patch you both up,” Tove said. When I gave him a confused look, reluctantly taking my eyes off Finn, he went on, “Aurora’s a healer. She can touch you and fix you. That’s her ability.”

“Come on,” Finn forced a smile at me and slowly sat up.

He tried to seem like he was perfectly fine, but he had taken quite a beating and there was a hesitation in his movements. Tove helped him to his feet, then took my hand and pulled me up. I refused to leave Finn’s side. I wrapped my arm around his waist, and Finn put his arm around my shoulders, reluctantly putting some of his weight on me. We walked carefully through the broken glass back into the house, and Tove gave more details about the attack. He had been essential to their defeat. Other than the trackers that had been guarding, most of the Trylle had played defenseless, myself included.

The ballroom looked even worse than we left it. Someone had lit lanterns around the edge of the room so we could at least see better than before. Willa was still scraped and bruised, but she ran eagerly over to me when she saw me and threw her arms around me. She then launched into an excited tale about how she had blown a Vittra out of the ceiling, and I told her I was proud, but I was still too stunned by the destruction.

When Elora saw us, she pulled Aurora from where she was helping a bleeding man. I noted with some grim happiness that the Chancellor had a nasty cut on his forehead, and I hoped that Aurora couldn’t make time to fix him. Elora didn’t look any worse for the wear at all. In fact, if I hadn’t known, I would’ve never thought she’d been here when the fight was going on. Aurora, on the other hand, looked beautiful and regal, but she showed signs of the battle. Her dress was torn, her hair was a mess, and there was blood all over her hands and arms, but I doubted most of it was hers.

“Princess,” Elora looked genuinely relieved when I walked over to us, delicately stepping over broken tables and a Vittra corpse. “I’m glad to see you’re alright. I was very worried about you.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I mumbled. She reached out and touched my cheek, but there was nothing affectionate about it. It was the way I would touch a

strange animal in the zoo that they assured me was safe, but I didn't really believe it.

"I don't know what I would've done if something happened to you." She smiled wanly at me, then dropped her hand and looked at Finn. "I'm sure a thank you is in order for saving my daughter."

"No need," Finn replied rather curtly, and Elora gazed him intently for a moment, saying something in his mind. Then she turned and walked away, going to deal with something far more pressing than her daughter.

Aurora squeezed Tove's arms and looked at him affectionately, making me feel a horrible pang at my own mother's reaction. Aurora had seemed like an ice queen, too, but she could at least show signs of genuine happiness that her son hadn't died. The moment passed quickly, and then she was moving on to me. She tore open the hole in my dress wider so she could put her hand on my wound, and I gritted my teeth at the pain. Finn's tightened his arm reassuringly around my shoulders, and I instantly forgot the pain. He had this way of eclipsing everything else that I would be forever grateful for. A warm tingling sensation passed over my side, and moments later, the pain stopped.

"Good as new," Aurora smiled tiredly at me. She seemed to have aged since before she'd touched me, and I wondered how much all that healing took out of her. She started taking a step away, going back to helping other people, while Finn was leaning on me, clearly in pain.

"What about Finn?" I asked, and she looked back at me, startled. I was the Princess, but apparently, I had asked something wrong, and she didn't know how to react.

"No, no, I'm fine," Finn waved her off.

"Nonsense," Tove clapped him on the back. He nodded at his mother. "Finn saved the day. He deserves a little help. Aurora, wanna take care of him?" She looked uncertainly at her son, then nodded and walked over to Finn.

"Of course," Aurora murmured.

She started looking over him for his wounds, trying to find out specifically what he needed fixing. I glanced away from them, and I happened

to see Rhys sitting on the edge of a table. He was holding a bloody cloth to his forehead and staring down at the ground. The last time I had seen him, I thought he might have been killed trying to save my life.

“Rhys!” I shouted, and when he looked up and saw me, he smiled.

“Go see him,” Finn suggested quietly. Aurora poked at something painful in his side and he winced. “She’s taking care of me.”

“I got him.” Tove took Finn’s arm, so he would be leaning on Tove instead of me.

I didn’t really want to leave Finn, but I felt like I should at least say hi to somebody that tried to save my life. Especially since Rhys had been the only person that had told me I looked beautiful all night without sounding really creepy about it. I looked back at Finn, but he nodded me for me to go and tried not to let on how much pain Aurora was causing him.

“You’re alive!” Rhys grinned. He tried to stand up, but I gestured for him to sit back down. “I wasn’t really sure what happened to you.” He looked past me at Finn, and his expression faltered. “I didn’t know Finn was back. If I had, I wouldn’t have worried.”

“I was worried about you.” I reached out and carefully touched his forehead. “You took quite the punch there.”

“Yeah, but I couldn’t get one in,” Rhys grumbled, looking down at the floor. “And I couldn’t stop him from taking you.”

“Yes, you did!” I insisted. “If you hadn’t there, they would’ve hauled me off before anybody had a chance to do anything about it. You kind of saved the day.”

“Yeah?” His blue eyes were hopeful when he looked at me.

“Definitely,” I smiled back at him.

“You know, back in the day, when a guy saved a Princess’s life, she would reward him with a kiss,” Rhys commented. His smile was light, but his eyes were serious. If Finn hadn’t been standing a few feet behind me, watching, I probably would’ve kissed him. But I didn’t want to do anything to spoil

having Finn back, so I just shook my head and smiled. “Maybe when I slay the dragon. Then I’ll get a kiss?”

“I promise,” I agreed. “Would you settle for a hug?”

“A hug from you is never settling for anything,” Rhys assured me. I leaned over and hugged him tightly. A woman sitting next to us on the table looked aghast, and I realized the new Princess was openly hugging a männsklig. Things were really going to have change when I was Queen.

After Aurora healed up Finn, she suggested we both get rest. The room was still a disaster, but Tove insisted that he and his mother were taking care of everything. I wanted to protest and help more, but honestly, I was exhausted. Tove said that we were safe, and all but demanded that I go to my room. Naturally, Finn went with me, just in case it wasn’t completely safe. Before we even reached the stairs, Finn had taken my hand in his as we walked slowly to my room. Most of the way, I was silent, but when we got close to my door, I felt like I had to say something.

“So... are you and Tove like pals or something?” I was teasing, but I was curious. I had never really seen them even speak before, but there seemed to be a kind of familiarity with them.

“I’m a tracker,” Finn answered. “I tracked Tove. He’s a good kid.” He looked over at me, smiling a little. “I told him to keep an eye on you.”

“If you were so worried about me, why did you leave?” I asked more sharply than I meant to.

“Let’s not talk about that now,” Finn shook his head. We had stopped in front of my bedroom door, and there was something playful in his dark eyes.

“What should we talk about then?” I looked up at him.

“How beautiful you look in that dress.” Finn was facing me, looking me over appreciatively, and he put his hands on my sides.

I laughed, and then he was pushing me against the door. His body was so tight against me, I could barely breathe, and his mouth was searching mine. He kissed me in the same frantic way he had before, and I loved it. I wrapped my arms around him, pressing him to me, and pushed myself against him

eagerly. He reached around me, opening the door, and we tumbled into my room. He caught me before I actually fell, then lifted me easily into his arms and carried me. Gently, he tossed me onto the bed, and then lowered himself on top of me. His stubble tickled my neck and shoulders as he covered me in kisses.

Sitting back, he peeled off his jacket and hoodie, and I expected him to take off his tee shirt and pants, but he stopped, looking down at me. His black hair was slightly disheveled, but his expression was completely foreign to me. He just stared at me.

“What?” I asked, feeling strangely embarrassed.

“You’re just so perfect,” Finn said, almost sadly.

“Oh, I am not,” I blushed and laughed. “You know I’m not.”

“You can’t see what I see.” He leaned over me again, his face right above mine, but not kissing me. He made like he was going to, but kissed my forehead and my cheeks, and then very tenderly, kiss my lips. “I just don’t want to disturb you.”

“How are you going to disturb me?” I asked.

“Mmm.” A smile played on his lips and then he sat up, climbing off of me. “You should go change into pajamas. That dress can’t be comfortable.”

“What do I need pajamas for?” I sat up, and I tried to sound flirty, but I knew there was a panicked edge to it. As soon as we’d come in here, I thought things were going to go much farther than pajamas would allow.

“I’ll stay with you tonight,” Finn tried to reassure me. “But nothing more can happen except for sleep.”

“Why?” I pressed.

“I’m here,” Finn looked at me intently. “Isn’t that enough?”

I nodded and carefully climbed out of the bed. I stood in front of him so he could unzip my dress, and I felt his hands linger on my skin. Truthfully, I didn’t understand what was going on, but I would be happy for anything I had with him. After I changed into my pajamas, I climbed back into bed with him. He stayed sitting on the edge for a minute, then almost reluctantly, he came

over to me. I curled up in his arms, burying my head in his chest, and he held me tightly to him. Gently, he kissed the top of my head. Nothing had ever felt better than being with him like that, and I tried to stay up so I could relish every minute, but eventually, my body gave out and passed out.

In the morning, I woke up to Elora coming in my room for the first time ever. She was wearing pants, something else I had never seen her in. They were very fashionable, but they were pants. I was still curled up in Finn's arms, and she didn't seem surprised or that offended by it. I thought I was finally making progress when I moved a little bit away from him to look at her.

"I trust you slept well." Elora looked around the room, but not in a nervous way. She had just never been here before. "And I trust that Finn was a gentleman."

"He always is," I yawned.

He had started pulling away from me and getting out of the bed. I furrowed my brow but didn't say anything. It wasn't that shocking that she'd be upset that we were together, so I didn't think that much of it when Finn started to gather up his jacket and sweater.

"Thank you for protecting my daughter," Elora said without looking at him. He had paused at the doorway, and he looked back at me, his dark eyes looking more conflicted than I had ever seen them before. He nodded, then turned and walked out of my room, shutting the door behind him.

"Well, you took that much better than I thought you would," I admitted, sitting up.

"He's not coming back," Elora finally turned to look at me.

"What?" I stared at the door in dismay.

"He saved your life, so I gave him last night to say goodbye to you," Elora explained. "I will be transferring him out of here as soon as possible."

"You mean he knew?" I gaped at her. He had known, and hadn't let me in on it, and hadn't tried to steal me away.

"Yes. I made the agreement with him last night," Elora said.

“But... he saved my life!” I insisted, feeling that terrifying lump grow in my chest. The one that said I couldn’t possibly survive without Finn. “He should be here to protect me!”

“He is emotionally compromised and unsuitable for the job,” Elora explained flatly. “Not only that, if he stayed around, you would be banished from Förening. He doesn’t want that, and neither do I.” She sighed. “I shouldn’t even have given him last night, but... I don’t want to know what you did with him. Don’t tell me. Don’t tell anyone. Is that clear?”

“Nothing happened,” I shook my head. “But I want him back. He’s going to protect me better than anyone! If you want me alive, he’s the best bet!”

“Let me put it to you this way: he will do anything to keep you alive, Princess,” Elora looked at me evenly. “That means he would die to save you, without hesitation. Do you really want that? Do you really want him to die because of you?”

“No...” I trailed off, looking dazedly at my blankets. I knew she was right. Last night he had almost died to save me. If Tove hadn’t come out, he would be dead.

“Very well. It’s in his best interest that he’s not around you, either,” Elora said. “Now, you need to get up and get ready. We have much to go over.”

The next few days were an endless stream of defense meetings. There hadn't been an attack this severe on Förening ever. Elora and Aurora led all the meetings, while Tove and I sat quietly in the back. He was the most powerful and should've had more of a say, but he didn't seem that interested. The twenty or so other people that always seemed to be attendance offered advice that was completely pointless. Tove just told me that my best defense was getting my abilities under control.

I felt like a shell of myself. In truth, I didn't care whether I lived or died. If they attacked again, I would deal with whatever happened. Willa was busy working on self-defense classes and trying to get a better control of her wind ability. Elora barely spoke to me, and never uttered a kind word. I wandered around in a daze, and I couldn't imagine that things would ever get better.

"You're gonna have to snap out of this one day," Rhys said. I was laying in my bed, staring at the ceiling, and he leaned against the doorway, looking at me. He still had a nasty cut above his eyebrow, since Aurora wouldn't resort to healing a mänks. It was healing okay, but it always pained me to see it. It was just a reminder that he had gotten hurt for me.

"Maybe." I didn't feel like I ever would, and I hoped I didn't.

"Oh come on," Rhys sighed and came over to sit on the bed next to me. "I know that everything's that's happened has really taken its toll on you, but it's not the end of the world."

"I never said it was," I muttered. "I just hate this house. I hate this town. I hate my mother. I hate being a Princess. I hate everything about being here!"

"Even me?" Rhys asked honestly.

"No, of course not you," I shook my head. "You're about the only thing I like anymore."

“I feel privileged,” he smiled at me, but when I didn’t smile back, his quickly faded. “Look, I hate it here too. It’s a hard place to live, especially this house, with Elora. But... what else are we gonna do? Where else can we go?”

That’s when it occurred to me. I absolutely did not want this life, and this life truly didn’t want Rhys. Not only that, I didn’t particularly care whether I lived or died. I didn’t need protection, should anyone decide to come after me again, but I wasn’t so sure they would anymore. Tove had explained that the Vittra numbers had been damaged, and another attack any time soon would be highly unlikely.

But somewhere out there, I knew that my brother Matt was sitting, worried sick about me. He and Maggie would welcome me back with open arms, and they would be delighted to have Rhys. I didn’t know how I would explain him to them, but I’d figure something out. I missed them both terribly, and I was sick of the cold, confusing isolation of the Trylle life. I was not a Princess, and I didn’t want to be one. They said they would never force it on me, and it would feel so good to be home again. That wouldn’t really fix the Finn thing, but they would know the best way to mend a broken heart.

Rhys wasn’t so easily convinced that leaving was the best thing for me. After all, he had been unable to even fight against the Vittra. Reluctantly, I resorted to using my persuasion, but I didn’t really have another choice. He was okay with leaving himself; he was just worried about me. So all I was really convincing him is that he didn’t need to worry about me.

In the middle of the night, we crept out and got onto his new motorcycle. It wasn’t the same one I had stolen before, because that was still in the police impound. Apparently, Rhys literally got whatever he wanted. He sped off into the darkness, and I sat on the bike behind him, wrapping my arms tightly around his waist and burying my face in his leather jacket. I could feel his heartbeat speed up every time I squeezed onto him, but I pretended not to notice.

Going back home to my host family might not be the safest move in the world. I knew that. But I knew that Rhys deserved happiness, and his only

chance at that was with Matt and Maggie, who were just as desperate for him as he was for them. Not only that, I missed them terribly, and I needed a break from the ice queen.

There was one other thing. I had a feeling that Finn hadn't stopped tracking me yet. And maybe the only way I could see him again is if I ran away or got into some trouble. If he didn't come after me, that wasn't the end of the world. But if he did... well, that's just an added bonus, isn't it?