

Immortal

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Arrival

Gathering my borrowed sleeping supplies, I folded the blanket before placing everything on the empty seat next to me. I started yawning as I took my plane ticket out to check the flight number as one of the attendants read the gates for some of the connecting flights.

“Did you sleep well?” the overly attentive flight attendant from the previous night asked as she gathered the pillow and blanket.

“Fine, thank you,” I said with a small smile.

“Do you need help finding your connection, sweetie?” she asked still playing the concerned mother figure.

“Thank you, but they already announced the gate for my connecting flight.” I said trying to keep my voice pleasant. I hated being short. People always thought you needed help. It wasn’t my fault I looked closer to twelve than eighteen.

“Alright then sweetie, you just let me know if you need help over to the gate,” she commented before moving to the next row to get everything gathered and safely stored before we landed.

I lifted the shade over the window to look outside at the fluffy pink clouds. I started to feel the plane descend from thirty thousand feet with a drop in my stomach. One of the attendants was going around making sure everyone had their seatbelts buckled while I tried to not think about the plane crashing.

I wrapped my hands around the armrest and searched for a song to distract me from the twisting in my stomach. I started lightly humming to myself to stop the spinning in my head while the plane made its final decent into the airport. I shut my mouth tight as the plane touched down with a lurch. I could feel the bile threatening in the back of my throat as it rapidly slowed to taxi over to the gate.

The captain turned off the fasten seat belt sign and people started to move groggily around the cabin. I waited for most of the commotion to die down, before reaching up into the overhead compartment, and retrieving my bag. I rummaged through it briefly finding my brush. Pulling it out, I started running it through my hair. I worked it through the tangled maze until all the knots

and snags were gone. Throwing the brush back into my bag, I leaned back into my seat and waited to disembark.

The captain came on the intercom again, "Thank you for flying with us..." in the all too familiar monologue. The aisle soon clogged with passengers trying to get through the door first. I waited in my seat in no hurry to enter the crush. Once the aisle cleared, I vacated my designated sleeping area and made my way into the terminal and the nearest restroom.

I checked my reflection after taking care of my immediate needs. The circles under my eyes were more defined than they were last night due to my waking early and lack of sleep before the flight. My skin had returned to its normal creamy ivory tone, and my dark auburn hair lay flat thanks to the brushing I had given it on the plane.

I looked down at my clothes quickly making sure I still looked okay after being asleep on the plane for four hours. My light blue blouse showed no signs of stress thanks to the invention of wrinkle free materials, and I could leave my jeans in a crumpled heap for days with no sign of distress.

I grabbed my toothbrush, tooth paste, gave my teeth a quick scrub, and rinsed my mouth out. I splashed some water on my face before leaving the restroom to get to my flight. It helped to clear the last of the cobwebs from my uncomfortable sleep.

As I walked to the gate, I grabbed the phone out of my purse and turned it on. I had thirty minutes before my flight left. I scrolled through my recently called numbers and pressed send. It rang several times before my Mom's familiar voice picked up on the other end.

"Hello," she said in her I was still sleeping voice.

"I'm in Atlanta," I said in a hurried voice. "We made it on time so I should be at the airport by nine."

"Okay, I'll see you then," she said and started to snore. I laughed tuning my phone off and flipping it closed.

I made it to the gate just as the plane started to board. I found my seat and grabbed the book I brought to read. I threw my bag into the overhead compartment and sank into my chair wishing the flight was already over.

After reading the same sentence three times, I gave up, and leaned my head back against the seat. I watched as the rest of the passengers finished boarding. There were the usual college students returning from break. Some parents dropping their kids off at college for the first time.

I wondered, if I had not lived in Gainesville most of my life, would I have that same eager expression on my face that seemed to light all of theirs. I looked at my reflection in the window again, all I could see there was the lack of sleep I was suffering from.

There was a slight commotion near the front of the plane, and I turned to investigate. My breath caught in the back of my throat. A young man stood in the aisle looking at the numbers in search of his assigned seat. I watched as the faces of the women fall, as he moved down the aisle and closer to where I was seated.

He stood around six foot two with a slim build. The thin dark blue vintage t-shirt he wore hinted at the smooth muscles underneath. His skin was a pale ivory just a shade or two lighter than my own. He wore his dark chestnut brown hair gently tousled framing his perfect face with full light pink lips. By far his most striking feature was his eyes. The deep blue caught and held the mornings light making them shimmer like the ocean after a storm.

I could feel my heart beating faster. Maybe he would sit next to me. I tried to calm myself. It didn't matter if he sat next to me. After the hour-long flight, it wasn't as if I would ever see him again. For some reason, I just couldn't convince myself not to care.

Then he stopped. He was right next to my seat. My head was spinning a little from lack of oxygen. I took a deliberately slow deep breath, to calm myself and try to stop the pounding in my chest.

Looking at the numbers listed above my head, he did not even glance down. He placed a small carry on in the overhead compartment then turned and sat on the other side of the aisle from me. The young woman seated next to him looked like she would explode from the excitement.

I tried not to feel the disappointment at his sitting on the other side of the plane. Even if he had sat next to me, I doubt I could have mustered up enough courage to even say hello. I turned to examine my reflection in the window. I needed to be sure the disappointment I felt was not reflected on my face like it was on so many others. There was a little more color in my cheeks and I looked awake now, but there was nothing else to see written on my pale skin.

The familiar drone started on the intercom as we started to taxi to the runway. I took my book out to try reading again, but found it even harder to concentrate with him so close. I wished now that his seat was further in the back or front, where I couldn't see him. I looked out the window forgetting my book, instead focusing on the increasing noise from the plane's

engines. I could feel the butterflies in my stomach as gravity pulled me back into my seat. This time, however, they had nothing to do with the plane taking off.

I spent the short flight dividing my time between looking out the window, staring at my book, and trying not to stare at the blue-eyed young man across the aisle. I ended up failing miserably. He lounged in the seat, appearing oblivious to the girl chattering next to him. Staring at the back of the seat in front of him, he looked more like an angel come down from heaven to deliver a message than some guy headed to school.

Before I knew it, the plane was landing. I couldn't decide if I was happy to be getting off, or if I wished it would just keep going. I stood to get my bag out of the overhead compartment glancing over at the Adonis seated across the aisle. He was still facing forward making no attempt to collect his things.

As I pulled my bag out, I paid close attention so I didn't drop it on my head. The thought of embarrassing myself in front of a stranger I would never see again seemed silly, but I couldn't help worrying.

"Excuse me," a silky voice said from over my shoulder. "May I get my bag before you close the door?"

I almost dropped my bag on my foot. "Sure," I finally managed to answer. I was surprised by how steady my voice sounded.

I fell back into my seat without turning to look at him. I could feel the heat burning my cheeks as the blush spread across my face. Looking out the window while everyone started to exit the plane, I waited giving my face time to regain its normal coloring.

As the commotion died down, I stood to leave. Expecting the gorgeous young man to have exited the plane, I was shocked to see him still seated across the aisle. The girl who had occupied the seat next to him was now walking down the aisle very slowly. She kept turning her head to look back at him. I had to force myself not to do the same, as I made my way to the exit.

Once in the terminal I scanned the small crowd gathered near the gate. It took a couple of sweeps before I noticed my Mom standing against the wall near the back. I forced a smile on my face as she caught sight of me. The sentiment felt hollow. Maybe I was just anticipating the upcoming conflict.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a man dressed in a simple black suit and tie standing off to the side of the terminal with a small sign in hand. He might as well have screamed, 'I'm a

chauffeur does anyone need a ride.’ It wasn’t until I saw the dark haired stranger from the plane making his way over that I started to pay closer attention. Surreptitiously, glancing at the white eraser board I checked the name written there. Samuel Grant was spelled out in neat black block letters. The name suited him.

I finished covering the distance to my Mom.

“Hey, Mom,” I said my voice a little stilted. Neither of us attempted to embrace each other like so many others in the terminal.

“How was your trip?” she asked as we walked around the corner to the luggage carousel.

“We didn’t crash.” I liked flying about as much as a root canal without anesthesia. She thought it was silly, planes were safer than cars she would always remind me.

She gave me an odd look. She didn’t always get my sense of humor. “Did you get a nap on the plane?”

“Yeah,” I said trying to come up with something to say. “How was your summer?” I asked as we found an empty place near the luggage carousel to wait for the rest of my things to be off loaded.

I half listened as my Mom rambled on about her summer and everything she had done. Nodding my head in the appropriate places was all the encouragement she needed to continue.

Scanning the room, I wasn’t looking anywhere in particular when I caught sight of Samuel standing across the carousel from me. He was waiting with his chauffeur for his luggage to make its way from the plane.

I couldn’t help getting a better look at his long lean body. I didn’t realize I was staring at the beautiful figure only a few short feet away, until he turned and caught me. I lowered my gaze blushing brightly at my obvious social faux pa.

I kept my head down until the luggage started its slow journey around the carousel. Paying close attention to the bags making the rounds, I tried to distract myself enough so I didn’t look across at Samuel again. It worked for the most part. I only glanced up once as I collected my last bag.

Reaching for a bag at the same time I did, our eyes met. I felt my skin heat as the blood rushed into my cheeks. My Mom’s inane chatter coming from over my shoulder created an odd background noise. His eyes were even more beautiful than they were on the plane.

“Come on Alina,” my Mom called from over my shoulder.

I heard what she was saying, but was unable to respond. Samuel's eyes held mine as sure as a rip tide could hold a swimmer. A few seconds later, he released me from his gaze. I shook my head slightly to help clear away the fog in my head.

"I have to stop and get some things on the way home. Did you need anything?" she asked as we started toward the exit.

"No, I'm good," I said as we walked through the sliding doors and out into the hot muggy morning. I really just wanted to go home and rest, not traipse around Gainesville all morning.

"Alina, what are you doing back there?" my Mom whined, while standing by the driver's side door. She had already opened the trunk and was waiting for me to put my bags in. She didn't bother to offer help.

"Nothing," I said sounding a little distracted. I watched as Samuel helped the chauffeur load his bags into the sleek black Mercedes parked in front of the terminal.

My Mom shook her head in frustration mumbling something under her breath as she climbed into the driver's seat. I threw my bags in the trunk and went to join her. I was already dreading the drive.

"So, how was your summer?" she finally asked. She didn't sound very interested.

"It was nice." I didn't bother to reveal any details. Besides, it wasn't as if she actually cared.

"Well, that's good honey," she said distractedly as she paid the attendant at the small gate. Pulling forward, we followed the little signs out to the road.

The traffic was light as we made our way across town. The rush I felt on the plane was seeping out of me the longer I sat. I reached over and turned on the radio, listening to the local station and nodding my head along with the song.

"Do have to listen to that racket?" my Mom asked, her voice irritated. She quickly reached for the radio and pressed one of the preprogrammed buttons.

I took a deep breath. I didn't need the argument this early in the morning, or this soon after returning from California. I took my iPod out of my bag. Thankfully, I had kept it with me instead of storing it in the trunk.

My Mom stopped at three stores on the way home. I didn't bother to go into the little boutiques with her. I was too tired to shop or be of any use, so I waited in the car for her to finish.

When we finally pulled into the garage, I didn't feel the release of being home. I was only going to be here for a few short weeks while I packed and got everything ready for the move. My Mom grabbed her bags from the back seat and headed inside. Grabbing my luggage, I followed after her a minute later.

Departure

When I walked through the door, I let out a small gasp. I couldn't believe it. This was just a sick joke. I couldn't speak as I stood in the door trying to convince myself this was all a bad dream.

"Shut the door Alina your letting all the cold air out," my Mom said from the kitchen.

I moved a few cautious paces into the foyer, just far enough to shut the door behind me. "What is all this?" I asked confused.

"Well, what do you think it is?" my Mom answered my question with one of her own.

I fought back the hurt I felt welling up inside me. The boxes were all clearly marked with my name. I walked back to my room leaving my suitcases by the front door.

My room was at the end of the hall with the door ajar. I stood outside staring into it in disbelief. The pictures that had adorned the walls were all missing. They were replaced by nondescript paintings that seemed better suited to a bed and breakfast. The familiar comforter that covered my bed was gone replaced by a plain multicolored quilt. I walked in, pulled open the drawers on the light brown dresser, and opened the closet. Everything was empty.

I turned around my face a mask of pain and confusion. My Mom was standing by the bedroom door with her arms folded.

"You packed all of my stuff?" My voice was barely a whisper.

"Well no not really," she said in a flippant tone. "I hired someone to do it. I just told them what to pack."

"You went through all of my stuff. How could you?" I asked trying to keep my emotions in check, but I was losing the battle. "Did you start to pack everything as soon I left for California or did you wait a few minutes?" I was shaking with anger.

My Mom rolled her eyes, "Don't be ridiculous. I had to find a reputable person to help with the packing."

Shaking my head, I couldn't believe how selfish she was. "I have nothing in this house, but what was in this room and you just went through it. Did you even think about how it would make me feel?" I could feel my temper boiling over.

"It's not like you're going to be here much longer." My Mom walked out of what used to be my room. I followed after her so mad I didn't know what to do. Was she purposefully trying to hurt me?

"You are the coldest person I have ever met." I pulled open the front door as she wheeled around to glare at me.

"Just make sure you're out of here soon," she said landing a last blow as I walked out.

It took every ounce of control I had not to slam the door behind me. How could the one person who was supposed to love me unconditionally be so brutal? I guess the temporary cease-fire while I was in California was up already. I hoped it would have lasted until I had my stuff at the apartment.

I walked around the block a few times before heading back to the house. I wouldn't have gone back when I did, but when I stormed out I had left my phone.

Turning the handle to the front door, I was surprised to find it unlocked. It wouldn't be the first time my Mom had locked someone out. Taking a deep breath, I stepped over the threshold and back into the war zone.

I found my Mom seated on the sofa with the television on some soap. She was enthralled with the bad acting and inane plot twist. She didn't even look up or say a word as I grabbed my carry on and headed to my room, turned guest bed.

Laying my bag on the bed, I rummaged quickly through it. Finding my phone in the mess, I took it out and thought about what to do next. I wasn't ready, willing, or able to fight with my Mom again, and that left me with only one option.

It was close to noon so she should be up. I found Tabby's name and called her cell.

"Hello," Tabby said sounding like a hyperactive Chihuahua.

"Hey Tabby," I said trying to match her enthusiasm but failing miserably.

"Oh, Li-Li are you back from Cali, how was your trip?" she asked her enthusiasm spilling over. I could hear the millions of other questions in her voice, but ignored them.

"It was good," I answered honestly. "I actually just walked in the house not long ago. How was your summer?"

“Boring,” she said in a dejected voice. “I had to go down to West Palm and visit my grandparents for two weeks. Then I spent the rest of the summer getting a tan.”

“That sounds like fun,” I lied.

“You don’t have to be sarcastic. Not all of us can pull off the ghost look,” she added in a snide comment.

I laughed. “So, have you moved into the apartment yet?”

“No, I was waiting for you to get back. I thought it would be more fun if we spent our first night there together,” she said in a mischievous voice.

“Thanks, but you didn’t have to wait on my account,” I added, but in truth I was grateful she had. “Do you have everything ready to go?”

“Are you kidding? I’ve been packed and ready to go for weeks,” she said her enthusiasm barely contained.

“Apparently, so have I,” I said in dejected tone.

“No.” Her voice sounded incredulous. “Please, tell me she didn’t,” Tabby, begged.

“My Dad and I told her everything right before we left for Cali. That went about as well as I expected. When I got back today, I walked into my stuff all packed and waiting by the front door.” I did a decent job of keeping the hurt from my voice, but some of it managed to leak out.

“I’ll be right over,” Tabby said. I could hear her rushing around grabbing things.

“Don’t worry about that. I have a car.”

“Oh, right,” Tabby, said. She was still getting used to me having my own vehicle.

I bought a car just before I left to visit my Dad. It was 2000 Honda Civic Si coupe. The car had seventeen-inch rims with low profile tires that stood out against the royal blue custom paint job. The aftermarket body kit gave it an aggressive look that I fell in love with. The fact that the engine was upgraded and it was a manual gearshift didn’t hurt either.

“I just need a place to crash tonight. I’ll look into renting a truck tomorrow so I can get the rest of my stuff out of here.”

“You know you’re always welcome here, Alina, you don’t need to ask. Besides, my parents are in Europe for another week.”

“Why didn’t you go with them?” I asked.

“Are you joking? It’s just Josh and me sans parents. No way was I passing this up. Plus, I still needed to do shopping.” I could hear the smile in her voice.

“Well, I better go. I guess I’ll see you in a few.”

I laughed as I hung up the phone. Relief flooded through me. Tabby always made me feel better, and now I had time to get my plans straight.

I gathered my bags and a few other things as I prepared to leave. Grabbing my keys from the holder near the front door, I was about to walk out to my car but stopped. Turning around I walked into the living room, where my mother was still engrossed in her soap.

“Mom, I’m going to be staying with Tabby,” I said interrupting her show.

“Sounds, great,” she answered without looking up from the television.

“I’ll be by in the next few days to get my stuff.”

“Okay.” She briefly looked up from the television screen to give me an indifferent look. “Have fun.” She then returned her attention to the screen.

I stood still for a moment letting the shock give way to the inevitable disappointment. Even with me leaving so abruptly, she couldn’t be bothered to show any concern for me.

I held firm, leaving the house with my dignity intact. I wouldn’t give her the pleasure of seeing me cry, though I knew the tears would come at some point. Walking out the front door, I threw my bags into the trunk of my car, and left everything else behind me.

The Movies

“Alina, Alina, wake up.”

It took me a few minutes to realize where I was. After a concerted effort, I forced my eyes open. “I’m up.”

“Come on,” Tabby whined, “it’s after five. You told me to wake you up, so you could shower before we left.”

I sat up still half-asleep, “I’m awake.” My voice sounded scratchy and distant. “Give me a few minutes, okay.”

“Alright, but don’t lie back down or you won’t be able to sleep tonight.”

I nodded my head as Tabby started out of the room. She stopped at the door and turned back around. I looked at her rubbing my eyes.

“Do you mind if Josh joins us for dinner?” she asked without making eye contact.

I closed my eyes in frustration. Tabby had already invited her older brother from the way she was acting. It wasn't a bad thing it just made it a little awkward for me.

Josh was a nice guy. He pretty much ignored me, except to torment me on occasion, since we met shortly after Tabby and I became friends at the age of six. It wasn't until the summer I turned seventeen that he took any real notice. Honestly, I had no idea what changed that year other than his graduating from high school. Somehow, I became a much more interesting person. He was careful not to let on at first, but when through unforeseen reasons, I was dateless for senior prom he was only too eager to fill in. Since then, he tried to behave but on occasion, he would slip up.

"That's fine," I said letting Tabby off the hook for inviting Josh, "if you and I don't get going though none of us will be eating."

Laughing, Tabby skipped from the room stopping just long enough to close the door behind her.

I sat on the edge of the bed for another minute before making myself get up. I walked over to window seat where I placed my luggage, pulled out my toiletries, and went to the restroom.

I didn't bother to look in the mirror, figuring that after wearing the same clothes for almost twenty-four hours, and with only five hours of real sleep in the past thirty-six, I was in sad shape. I peeled my clothes off, let them fall in a pile on the floor, and got in the shower.

The hot water felt good. I let it run through my hair and down the drain. I was in no rush to get out, but about a half an hour later, I figured I had to start getting ready. After drying, I brushed my teeth and headed back out into the bedroom.

Rummaging through my bags, I took out a pair of black pinstripe pants and a short-sleeved green cashmere sweater. I didn't bother doing anything with my hair other than drying it. Checking my reflection in the mirror I decided to put some cover up on the dark circles under my eyes. Giving myself a quick once over before walking out of the guest suite, I guessed I was at least passable. I walked downstairs to the living room to wait for Tabby and Josh.

It was a little before seven when Tabby finished getting ready. "How do I look?" she asked making a small turn in the middle of the living room.

She was wearing a white silk blouse with a cowl neck that set her tan off beautifully. The tight fitted pencil skirt made her long legs look even better. Her naturally blonde hair was

draped neatly down her back. Her makeup was applied with great care to highlight her hazel eyes and full dark lips. She looked perfect as usual.

“You look great,” I said stifling the yawn that was tickling the back of my throat. “Where is Josh?” I asked.

“Don’t seem too excited,” she commented at my yawn, “and I told Josh, I would call when we were ready to go.”

“Well, call away,” I said. “I’ve only had an apple in the past twenty four hours. I’m starved.”

We met Josh outside at the front of the house. He was staying in the guesthouse at the back of the property while he was in school.

“Hello, ladies,” Josh said climbing out of the new pearl black Lexus ISF he got a few months ago.

He looked handsome in a pair of khakis and a button up dark blue dress shirt. His muscles bulged as he moved around the car to join us. I was always surprised by how graceful he could be despite his large frame. He was only five nine but he carried himself so confidently that he appeared taller. Then there were his lips just a little too full for his face and the same hazel eyes that he shared with the rest of his family.

“Hello, Alina,” he said holding the passenger door open for Tabby and I. I could hear the way his rough bass wrapped around my name.

I wished he had gotten a four door rather than the two so I didn’t have to accept his courtesies. “Hello, Josh,” I said forcing a smile. Climbing into the back seat, I saw his face fall a little at my formal greeting. This was going to be a long night.

After we were all settled into the car, Josh started driving and the conversation. “How was your summer, Alina?”

“It was good. I spent most of the summer in my Dad’s condo playing games and reading. How was your summer?” I asked returning his question.

He brightened slightly. “It was good. I’m afraid I got to spend my summer interning with one of the law firms here in town. I thought it would be a little more glamorous.”

“Why is that?” I asked.

“Well, it’s nothing like you see on television. I mean you actually have to work.”

We all laughed. As our snickers died down, Tabby plugged in her iPod. With the music blaring out of the speakers, it made further conversation impossible.

Twenty minutes later, we pulled into the restaurant parking lot. There were a few couples and small groups waiting as we walked inside. We didn't have to wait long to be seated, so I assumed either Tabby or Josh called ahead to make reservations while I was passed out.

The meal was very good. I actually ate my entire dinner and a dessert. Normally, I was lucky to eat a full dinner, and dessert after a meal was almost unheard of. The conversation was light and cheerful even with the longing glances Josh would throw my way.

"Did you want to see a movie?" Tabby asked as we walked to the car.

"Which one did you want to see?" I asked. I knew any time she asked if I wanted to see a movie it was her hint that she wanted to see one.

She started in describing the latest romantic movie just released. I cringed on the inside I hated chick flicks. Then there was also the fact that Josh would be there. Even with Tabby to play interference, it still had the possibility of getting sticky. "Sure, sounds great," I said with fake enthusiasm.

"You don't mind, Josh?" Tabby asked as we climbed into the car.

"Whatever you want to do is fine," he said absentmindedly. I tried not to think about where his thoughts had wandered.

The theater was packed, so Josh let Tabby and I out near the entrance to get tickets, while he parked the car. After getting the tickets, we stood on the curb waiting for him to join us.

I was scanning the crowd as we waited, that's when I caught sight of a small group standing a few feet down from the entrance. The three of them seemed oddly serene despite the amount of attention that was directed their way.

The girl had shoulder length honey blond hair that framed her perfect face, with light pink lips, and golden brown eyes. She was as tall as a model, with a dancer's body. It had to be criminal for someone to be that beautiful.

The only thing that gave me any solace was the fact that the guy, who looked like he could lift a small car over his head, had his arm draped lightly over her shoulder. I was curious how she could support the extra weight. He was easily six three to six five with brown hair and light gray eyes. They made an odd couple, but there was no doubt they were suited for one another.

The third member of the party was Samuel Grant, the young man from the plane. I was so shocked by seeing him again I couldn't help but stare. The sun setting behind the horizon cast a glow over him that only made him more perfect. I continued to stare at his profile trying to figure out if I was dreaming when he looked over at me. The deep blue of his eyes seemed to glow in the dimming lights.

Quickly lowering my head, I tried to conceal the blush spreading over my face. I wasn't sure if it was the lack of sleep, but I could have sworn he was just as shocked by my being here as I was by his.

Tabby nudged me with her elbow. "Who is that?" she asked for the second time. She pointed to Samuel with her eyes.

I didn't to follow her gaze. The last thing I wanted was to get caught staring again. Besides, I knew who she meant. Instead of answering her question, I just shrugged.

"He's looking over here again," she added abruptly looking down. She kept looking up from under her lashes to see if he continued to stare. She gave me the play by play of Samuel's every move until Josh arrived.

"Hey, why didn't you go in and get us seats?" he asked joining us again.

Tabby jumped at the sound of his voice. Slightly more recovered, I managed a sarcastic remark. "We thought you would get lost on the way to the theater."

"You could always hold my hand and lead the way," he said with a smug expression offering me his hand. The statement hung in the air like a lead weight.

"We should go inside," Tabby said breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Quickly turning around, she grabbed my hand and pulled me along after her. Josh was left standing on the sidewalk with downturned expression. I might have been imagining it, but I would have sworn I saw a flicker of a smile on Samuel's face as I was dragged through the door. I blushed crimson hoping he had not heard our conversation.

"Do you mind getting us seats? I have to use the restroom," Tabby said as she dragged me through the bathroom door. I caught a glimpse of Josh rolling his eyes as he headed to the theater.

"So what did you think of him?" Tabby asked from inside the stall.

"Think of who?" I asked playing dumb.

The toilet flushed and Tabby exited the stall. “The dark haired guy out front,” she added impatiently.

I shrugged. “He was kind of handsome,” I said trying to downplay my growing infatuation with someone I didn’t know.

“Kind of handsome, that has to be the understatement of the century,” she said washing her hands. “I hope he’s seeing the same movie we are.”

I nodded my head absently. I didn’t want to mention that the likelihood of a single man watching a chick flick was almost non-existent.

After Tabby freshened up her makeup, we made our way over to the theater. We walked into the dimly lit room and looked for Josh. He was saving us three seats about half way up.

As we made our way up to where Josh was sitting, I noticed Tabby scanning the crowd. She looked disappointed as we made it to our row. Josh offered me the seat next to him, but I politely ignored his suggestion for the seat next to the hairy man with bad breath.

Once the movie started, it didn’t take very long for the melodrama to begin. The man sitting to the right of me was sniffing every few seconds, and Tabby was dabbing her face every now and then. By the time the movie was over, her eyes were red and puffy.

Walking out of the dark theater as the credits started, Tabby was chatting about the movie. I tried to pay attention and give her feedback, but in all honesty, I could barely remember who was supposed to be in love with Mr. X, let alone anything else about it. Josh did only marginally better at recalling the specifics. I suspected he paid closer attention to the movie in the hope he could discuss it with me.

Once outside the theater I couldn’t stop myself from scanning the exiting crowds for the small group we had seen earlier. Josh left Tabby and I at the entrance to go and retrieve the car.

“I was hoping we would get to see that guy again,” Tabby said looking through the people searching for Samuel. “Guess he either left or is still in the movie.”

“Maybe next time we should see the action movie instead,” I commented as she continued to look in vain. “Any plans for tomorrow?”

“Nothing concrete right now. To be honest I think we just need to get you home and into bed. You look beat,” Tabby, said concern evident in her voice.

Her words must have hit some magical note because I yawned at the mere suggestion of being tired. “I think your right.”

We all piled into the car and I managed to maintain consciousness on the way to Tabby's house. I mumbled good night to Tabby and Josh in the foyer and made my way upstairs to the guest suite. I left a trail of clothes behind me as I pulled them off on my way to the bed. Climbing under the covers, I fell asleep before my head hit the pillow.

Moving

The night passed in a blur of dreams. I rolled over so I could see the clock, ten in the morning. I glared at numbers and rolled back over trying to remember what my dreams were about and coming up empty.

I forced myself to sit up in the bed. My internal clock was still set to California and all I really wanted to do was go back to sleep. I pushed the covers down to the end of the bed and stood up. Walking over to my luggage on the window seat, I grabbed a pair of jeans and an old t-shirt and threw them on the bed.

I ignored the full-length mirror in the guest room and the bathroom. I brushed my teeth and showered to help wake myself up. After getting dressed and throwing my hair in a ponytail, I went down to the kitchen.

"Good morning," I greeted Tabby who was seated at the breakfast bar eating a bowl of cereal.

"Good morning," she answered. "You're certainly in a good mood."

"It's amazing what a good night's sleep will do," I said looking for something to eat. "So, what are our plans for the day?"

Tabby gave me a mischievous grin. "Well I was thinking that we should head over to your Mom's house and get your stuff."

I took a deep breath. I was dreading this part. "Where I am I going to put it all?" I asked grabbing the cereal from the counter and pouring myself a bowl.

Rolling her eyes Tabby looked at me like I wasn't getting the joke, "At the new apartment of course."

I didn't know what to say. I had originally planned to stay at home for a few weeks before moving. I really didn't want another conflict with my Mom. Then I had an idea.

“Give me a minute,” I said grabbing my phone. I left my half-eaten breakfast on the counter, flipped my phone open, while walking into the pantry for a little more privacy. Scrolling through my contact list, I found my home number and pressed send.

“Hello,” my Mom answered.

“Hi, Mom,” I said trying to sound civil despite the anger I felt.

“Alina, good, I was just getting ready to call you. UPS came by and dropped a package off for you from your father.”

“Oh, that’s good. Thanks for signing for it,” I said reluctantly giving her the pat on the back she was looking for. “I was wondering what your plans are for the day?”

“Well, I was heading out to the gym and then I was going to meet Jeff for lunch.”

I let out a soft sigh in relief. She would be out for the day with her current boyfriend so I wouldn’t have to worry about any melodrama. “That sounds like fun,” I said with fake enthusiasm. “I was planning to come over and pick up my stuff today, if that’s okay.”

There was a pause. I was about to check if we had been disconnected when she answered. “I think that would be a good idea. Just leave your key in the mail box after you’re finished.”

I felt the slap in the face. Even over the phone, it stung. “Don’t worry I will,” I said keeping the hurt from my voice.

“I’ll talk to you later then. I need to get going Jeff is calling in on the other line.”

“I’ll talk to later, bye Mom.” She hung up the phone before I could finish my sentence.

I stood in the pantry with my head resting between the cans of ravioli and spaghetti sauce trying to reconcile the past twenty-four hours. My Mom had pretty much written me off, and I didn’t know how long, if ever, she would speak to me again.

I walked back out into the kitchen. I threw out my breakfast not bothering to finish it. Tabby remained silent throughout my clean up. She just watched me closely with a guarded expression.

“How bad was it?” she asked breaking the silence as I loaded the dishwasher.

“It was bad,” I said with a bitter laugh. I shook my head to clear away the gathering dark clouds. “The good news,” I added in a more chipper voice, “we can get all of my stuff today.”

Tabby smiled gently, while I leaned against the granite counter top for support. She knew I didn’t like to be hovered over, and I had to be in pretty desperate straits to accept a hug. It was probably due to the fact that I was used to taking care of everything myself.

Pushing off the counter refusing to mope any longer, I looked at Tabby, “How long until you’re ready to go?”

“I’m ready when you are,” she answered in a chipper voice.

“Then let’s go.”

The three of us, Josh, Tabby, and I, piled into their father’s Ford F-250. The drive to my house wasn’t unpleasant. Tabby occupied her usual spot in the middle of Josh and me. I worried that when we got to my house my Mom may still be home, but thankfully, she was already gone.

The next few hours flew by in a flurry of boxes. It didn’t take very long with Josh helping us to get all my stuff loaded in the back of the truck. Then the excited ride over to the new apartment with a quick stop by the front office to pick up the keys.

I could feel the butterflies as we backed into one of our two designated parking spots. I hadn’t been here since my Dad and I come too looked at the model. This was the first time I would see the inside of our apartment.

“Are you ready?” Tabby asked. She looked like she might explode. She seemed even more excited than me. She jumped out of the truck and practically dragged me out and up to the door.

I took a deep breath, put the key in the deadbolt, and turned. It made a barely audible click as the tumblers fell into place. The door opened quietly.

The apartment was nicer than I remembered. The floor plan with the kitchen, dining room, and living room all open to one another, made it feel larger compared to similar apartments we looked at.

The dining room was the first room you entered. The small round mahogany table was conveniently placed off to the left of the door, under a contemporary nickel-plated chandelier. There was a spot to the right of the door just big enough to hold a small table so you could drop your keys and purse.

The kitchen had black granite countertops, with rich cherry cabinets, and silver handles. The stainless steel appliances gave it a clean look without much effort. The breakfast bar opened out into the living room.

The living room held an overstuffed dark beige sofa and love seat positioned so you could easily see the television. Dark chocolate hard wood floors connected all the rooms together. The accessories were nonexistent in the rooms, but with Tabby here, I knew that wouldn’t last long.

“I’m home,” I said under my breath to try to make all of this seem real.

“Don’t just stand there, go pick your room out,” Tabby said excitedly from behind me.

I turned to look at her and she was grinning like a Cheshire cat. Then I ran to the back corner of the apartment and tried my second key in the lock on the bedroom. It turned without hesitation. I flung the door open and threw myself across the bed in the middle of the room laughing.

“Freedom,” I screamed enjoying my liberty for the first time. Tabby came in and joined me in the bedroom laughing and squealing with me.

When we finally calmed down enough, I looked around again. The bedroom held the basic furniture required, but lacked personality. The dark wood of the bedroom set gave it a spa like feel, which was nice. The attached bathroom had modern styling’s that made it seem like an oasis. Once I brought in some homey touches it would be a nice place to spend time and study.

“We better get that truck unloaded,” I said thinking about all the boxes waiting down stairs for us.

The rest of the afternoon passed in much the same manner as the previous few hours. The only difference being that after my fourth trip up the stairs I thought my legs must have caught fire. We brought the last box up from the truck at around five, and the three of us sank onto the living room sofa exhausted. Josh found the remote and turned the television on while we caught our breath.

“What do you want for dinner?” Tabby asked sounding drained.

“I don’t care at this point just as long as it comes to us.” I said exhausted.

Tabby started to list different places that delivered with minimal effort and we finally decided on pizza as the easiest option. Grabbing her phone off the kitchen counter she called in the order and joined us back in the living room.

Forty-five minutes later, there was a knock at the front door. Since I was the closest, I answered it. The delivery guy stood in the doorway with the pizza and soda.

“How much is it?” I asked.

As he answered, I tried not to stare at the overwhelming acne that covered his face. I took the money Tabby laid out on the counter and paid him not bothering with the change.

Setting everything down at the table, I looked around for something to pour drinks in. I grabbed our empty bottles from the coffee table and recycled them in place of cups. “I guess cups and plates should be a first purchase,” I said as Tabby joined me in the dining room.

The meal started in silence, all of us too hungry to carry on much of a conversation. It was nice to have a hot meal and even better to have all of my things in the new apartment.

“When did you want to get your things?” I asked Tabby as we finished eating.

“Oh, I totally forgot,” she said swallowing. “Josh and I moved the last of my stuff in this morning while you were sleeping.”

“You should have waited,” I said a little put out. “You know I would have helped.”

“A lot of help you would have been. You would have been on the floor halfway through the morning,” Josh said teasing me.

I rolled my eyes as I started to clean the mess off the table. “Are we going to ride back in the truck tonight and get our cars?” I asked throwing the pizza in the empty fridge. It was either that or Josh would be staying the night, which was a prospect I didn’t want to consider.

“That sounds great,” Tabby, said getting excited. “It will be our first night in our new apartment. I can’t wait.” Her voice was filled with implications.

Tabby was chatty on the way back to her parent’s house to pick up our cars. I listened politely nodding in all the appropriate places. Josh was sulking in silence behind the wheel not paying attention to anything but the road. I didn’t bother to ask what was bothering him. The last thing I wanted was an answer to that question.

When we pulled into the garage the sound of the diesel engine was deafening. All of us climbed out into the gargantuan chamber filled with cars. There was one car for each member of the family to drive on a daily basis, and there were several other specialty cars.

“I have to grab something. I’ll be right back down. Then we can head back to the apartment,” Tabby said running over to the door and up into the house.

I cursed her under my breath for leaving me alone with Josh. I ambled around to my car and waited for Tabby to get back. Josh followed after a moment and was leaning against his Mom’s Audi looking at me from under his lashes.

“Looks like you’re going to have a busy week,” Josh said after a minute.

“Looks like it,” I said pulling my lips into a thin smile. “How about you, do you have any plans this week?”

“No, not really, just going to hang around here until school starts back. I was wondering ...” he started to say as Tabby came bounding through the door.

“Okay, I’m ready to go.” She said pressing one of the buttons to open the garage door behind my car. It hummed into life bringing into to view the neatly manicured lawn and allowing me an escape route.

“Thanks for all the help today,” I said to Josh as I climbed into my car.

Tabby repeated my sentiments as she climbed into her new Civic. Her parents gave it to her after graduation. It was a pearl white hybrid with black leather interior. I would have been jealous but it lacked the aggressive styling’s I enjoyed.

Standing in the garage as we pulled out, Josh looked forlorn. He waved as we stopped to put our cars in drive to head out. I waved back trying not to show my relief.

I made it to the apartment before Tabby. Running quickly into my room, I located the package my Dad sent and got it open. There was a small card on top I read it quickly before digging into the packing peanuts for my present.

I came out with a thin black digital frame and a camera. Plugging the frame in I waited a few seconds as the pictures loaded. I flipped through them one at a time and savored the happy memories. It looked like a compilation of pictures spanning my life so far.

Coming to a stop on one of the pictures, I couldn’t help but smile. My Mom and Dad were huddled around me. We were all backstage before I went on as a sugarplum fairy. It was one of the last times I remember being happy as a family. It was too bad I was only six in the picture.

As I set the frame down on my desk, I heard my Dad’s song playing. Locating my purse, I retrieved my phone.

“Hi, Dad,” I said into the receiver.

“Hello, Alina, how are you doing?” I could hear the concern in his voice.

“I’m good. I just opened your present. It’s perfect.”

“Well, I’m glad you like it.” I could hear the smile in his words. “Why haven’t you called me?”

“I’ve been a little busy. Tabby, Josh, and I got everything moved into the new apartment today, so I’m pretty beat.”

“Wow that was fast. I thought you were going to stay with your Mom for a few days?”

“That was the plan. Mom wasn’t too keen on it though.” I could hear a sharp intake of breath. “It’s alright though. This way Tabby and I will have more time to get settled in.”

“I’m sorry your mother wasn’t better about all of this.” I could hear the disappointment in his voice.

“It was bound to happen sometime, Dad. So, don’t worry about it.

“Now enough about me, how have you been since I left.”

“Busy and not very well fed I may add. It’s amazing you learned to cook at all with your mother and me around.”

“Are you kidding? That’s why I learned to cook.”

We both laughed. I heard someone calling his name in the background. “I better let you go Dad. It was nice to hear your voice.”

“Same to you, take care of yourself, okay. I love you”

“Don’t worry, I will. I love you too, Dad.”

I heard the door to the apartment open as Tabby came in. We sat in the living room in no rush to unpack tonight. There would be time enough for all of that tomorrow.

We savored our newfound freedom staying up late, watching television, talking, and laughing. It was close to two before we made our way to bed.

I rummaged through my boxes until I found my comforter and sheets. I quickly made my bed and got under the heavy blanket. As I drifted off to sleep, I let my mind wander back to my happy memories of sugarplum fairies. I wasn’t sure if the smile was only in my head or on my face as I fell into unconsciousness.

Introductions

“Tabby wake up or you’ll be late.” I said shaking her. She grumbled in response. “I have to go, so if you don’t wake up you’re on your own.” I had to walk down to the bus stop or I would be late for class.

Tabby rolled over and groaned, “I hate mornings.”

“They don’t seem very fond of you either,” I said. Her hair had a rat nest in the back and there was drool crusted to the side of her face.

“Too early to joke,” she said dragging herself upright.

“I have to go or I’m going to be late. Don’t forget to switch your laundry over to the dryer.”

“Yeah, yeah, get out of here,” Tabby said in gruff voice.

I grabbed my keys from the stand by the door and shoved my wallet in my book bag before walking out. I couldn't believe it was already time for school. Between unpacking, getting things for the apartment and school, the past two weeks had flown by in a frenzy of activity.

There were about fifteen people waiting to board when I made it the bus stop. I didn't have long to wait once I was there. I climbed the stairs as the bus came to a stop. On board the crowded vehicle, I looked around for a spot to stand, since all the seats were occupied. I ended up between a guy with black eyeliner and a haircut that looked like he had stuck his head in a blender, and a girl with a tennis skirt and a pink tank top.

The bus managed to pull back into traffic a couple minutes later. I started to get impatient as we stopped every fifty feet to board more passengers. I let my mind wander as the ride stretched longer than normal. I should have planned for the extra time and crowds due to the first day of school. It ended up taking an extra fifteen minutes to get to campus.

I got off the bus exasperated and walked as fast as I could to my first class. My nerves were frayed and the butterflies in my stomach revved up as I made it into the classroom. There were about twenty students in the musty room, but the desk at the front of the class was as yet unoccupied.

Walking over to the center of the room, I went to an empty desk about halfway to the back. Sitting down, I pulled out a spiral notebook and pen. Glancing at the clock in the front of the room, I could see we had ten minutes until class started. The teacher's desk was still empty so I leaned down to grab a book to read.

"Is this seat taken?"

My breath caught in the back of my throat. There was no way he was here. I hesitated before turning to look at the person addressing me. There he was though, standing with his hand on the back of the chair next to mine. Somehow, he was even more beautiful than before. My heart started to beat faster. It felt like it would fly out of my chest. I took a deep breath before answering, trying to calm myself.

"Uh, no," I said my voice sounding flat.

Samuel sat down next to me without saying another word. As he prepared for class, I opened my book and tried to read. I let my hair fall as a curtain between us to try and stop myself from looking at him. My breathing was too fast, and the butterflies fluttering in my stomach made me feel nauseated.

After what felt like twenty minutes, my book lay in front of me still unread. I looked up to check the time. Five minutes until class began.

I took a furtive look around the room again taking care not to stare at Samuel. The room was almost full now, there must have been forty students crammed into it. The teacher was unpacking his laptop in preparation for class. The teaching assistant stood around his desk preparing to pass everything out.

“Hello class my names is Professor Burns. This is ENC 1101. If you are not scheduled for this class, please leave now.”

Some people stood as quietly as possible and excused themselves. There were also some students standing by the door waiting to come in. Professor Burns finished gathering supplies while the room settled again.

“My TA will be coming around with cards. If you would all be so kind and fill them out with the information needed and turn them in at the end of class. If you do not fill one of the cards out, or do not turn it in, then financial aid will not receive notice that you have been here today, and you may not be able to obtain your funds for the semester.”

As the TA continued his progress at the front of the room passing cards to the front row, I tried to pay attention to what Professor Burns was saying. He was speaking so quickly that I found it a little hard to follow him. It didn't take me very long to figure it out, because the student in first row on the far left hand side started giving his name, age and major.

I watched as the cards made their way back to me. Taking one, I passed the stack to the girl seated behind me. She smiled at me revealing a set of braces that were still in place. She looked to be about my age, and I absently wondered why she was still wearing the metal fixtures. I returned her smile before turning around to fill out my card with the correct information.

I barely listened as people gave their information aloud. Not until Samuel spoke, did I pay attention.

“My name is Samuel. I'm twenty, and I'm majoring in art history.”

Whispering broke out in several places as some of the girls exchanged quips about his appearance. Heads craned and some even half stood to get a better look as the next student began giving rank and file. I tried not to laugh at the antics of the other females in the class, but found it hard not to smirk.

“My name is Faith,” the girl with braces said from behind me. “I’m eighteen and majoring in accounting.”

“My name is Alina. I’m eighteen, and I’m majoring in health sciences.” I could feel heat in my face from the blush I couldn’t control. I kept my eyes down to avoid any possibility of eye contact with the strangers in the room.

As the introductions continued around the room, I couldn’t help myself from looking over at Samuel. He was staring forward refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Occasionally, he would look down at his desk or stare at the wall, but never once did he glance in my direction.

I felt disappointment at his obvious disinterest. Promising myself not to let it bother me, I paid unusually close attention to the Professor as class progressed. I couldn’t ignore the strange tension radiating out from Samuel though. I couldn’t even relax. When Professor Burns started to wrap up, I was grateful for the reprieve.

“Well, that’s all for today,” Professor Burns added. “Don’t forget to turn in your cards on the way out of class.”

The sound became deafening in the tiny room as people started to gather their belongings and head for the exit. I started to put my things away drawing the process out so I wouldn’t have to fight the crowd leaving. Faith the girl seated behind me appeared to be in no rush to exit either.

“So, it’s Alina, right,” Faith said a little stilted and awkward.

“Yes. It’s Faith isn’t it?” I asked to be polite.

“That’s right. It’s nice to meet you,” she added her voice a little too high, while offering me her hand. I shook it briefly, and then threw my bag over my shoulder. “So, is this your first semester?”

“Yes,” I answered nodding my head. I watched as Samuel stood to make his way to the front of the room.

Half the class had already left. Some of the remaining students appeared to be waiting to speak with the Professor. They were crushing around his desk blocking the exit, and making it difficult to leave. I noticed several girls looking back over their shoulders at Samuel as he walked slowly to the front of the room.

“This is my first semester too. How do you like Gainesville?” Faith asked from over my shoulder.

“I’m a local.”

“That’s cool,” she tacked on. “I’m from Pennsylvania. This is my first time away from home.”

“How do you like it?”

“It’s a little intimidating. I’m from a small town so…” She trailed off into a nervous laugh.

I nodded my head attempting to understand. With me traveling every summer to Los Angeles though, Gainesville seemed pretty small by comparison.

Samuel was near the front of the class, and there were several girls now lingering just outside the door. I assumed they were waiting to get a better look, or ask for his number if they were brave enough. For some reason I felt like I was at an auction with people eyeing merchandise they could never afford.

“What class do you have next?” Faith asked brining me out of my head and back to reality.

“College Algebra,” I said placing my card in the basket. Samuel was only a few feet in front of us. I must have been paranoid because I would have sworn he was listening to our conversation. It was probably just wishful thinking.

“I have American History next.” I could hear the disappointment in her voice.

Samuel reached the small clumping of girls outside the room. I watched as their faces lit up at his proximity. Some of the girls blushed crimson, while others giggled to each other. None of them approached him as he walked quickly past them.

“Do you know where your next class is? I’m still trying to get used to how big the school is. I keep getting turned around.” Faith commented as we exited the room.

It looked like Samuel slowed his pace to listen. I was definitely having delusions. “Yes. I came in last week and roamed around the campus so I could get my bearings. Which building is your next class in?” I asked trying to be helpful.

Faith dug out her schedule and a map. It took us a minute, but we managed to find the best route to her next class.

“Thanks for all the help. Are you going to be here Wednesday?” she asked stuffing her schedule back into her bag.

“Yeah, I’ll be here. I better get going or I’m going to be late for class.” Waving good-bye, I walked quickly down the hallway. The last thing I wanted was to be late on the first day.

I tried to ignore the half-hopeful whispering in my mind as I made my way across campus. Samuel...I sighed. I would have to keep a close check on myself. There was no chance of anything happening. There were girls who could easily be models in our English class. That's not mentioning his other classes, the college, and city. I didn't have a chance with him and the sooner I convinced myself of that fact, the better.

I made it to math earlier than I thought I would and found a seat. I couldn't help but watch the door hoping Samuel would walk through. He never did.

Math followed a similar pattern to that of English. I found myself easily distracted while the Professor went through the semester's agenda, the usual turn off cell phones, and show up on time to class. It seemed silly with so many students in the class. There was no way he could monitor everyone.

By the time class ended, I was going through the motions. If it weren't for the fact that I needed to be here so I wouldn't be dropped from my classes, I may have left school early. I had never ditched school before, and I knew I wouldn't start now. The thought was pleasant though.

I trudged to my next class through the sauna outside. I walked into the lecture hall just as the professor was calling the class to attention. She glared at me from over the top of her glasses.

The lecture hall dwarfed the rooms from my two previous courses. There looked to be a hundred or more students lined neatly into the room. I made my way to the back of the class as quietly as possible. Normally, I preferred to sit closer, but Chemistry was one of my stronger subjects so I wasn't too worried about my out of the way seat.

The professor sent around her TA with cards to sign and put our information on. I began to wonder if all the professors got together before the semester started and made out first day lesson plans. I was already bored.

"Hello," a smooth baritone said from my side.

I turned to see who was addressing me. I forgot how to breathe while I stared at the young man standing next to me. He was around six two with sandy blond hair. His lips were a light pink and perfectly suited to his angular features. His eyes were the most beautiful bright green I had ever seen, and I could just make out the smooth lean muscles beneath his black shirt.

“Uh, hello,” I said forcing myself to look away. I tried not to stare as he unpacked, but I found myself looking out of the corner of my eye as he did so. This was going to be a long day, class, no semester.

Taking the stack of cards from the TA who suddenly forgot how to close her mouth, he turned and gave me an easy smile. I returned his smile, heat in my cheeks. My stomach knotted making me feel sick.

“My name is Duncan,” he said handing me the small stack of cards, “and your name is,” he prompted.

It took me a minute to catch my breath and clear my head. “Uh, it’s Alina.” I answered, and then turned to pass the small stack of cards to another student a few seats away. When I returned to my chair a moment later, I was careful not to look over at Duncan again.

As the class progressed at its own monotonous pace, I found it harder not to stare at the man seated only a few inches from me. I eventually pulled my hair from behind my ear and allowed it to fall as a dark curtain between us. It helped to control my urge to stare.

“Don’t do that,” Duncan said in a low whisper. “I didn’t sit here so I could look at your hair.”

That did it. I must have looked like a tomato, but I couldn’t stop my head from turning in disbelief. Did he just say he intentionally sat next to me?

He caught me again, like a wild cat, in the sparkling green net of his eyes. I could feel the blush spread from my cheeks to cover my neck and chest. My breath hitched in my throat and my heart thumped too fast.

Breaking his lock on me, I turned to look forward again. I saw a small smile cross his face as I did, but I wouldn’t allow myself to return it. After a few seconds, I gently shook my hair loose to conceal my face from him. I heard a small sigh of frustration escape from between his lips, but he made no other attempt to get my attention. The rest of the class passed in a blur.

“Where are you headed now?” Duncan asked from over my shoulder as I was gathering my things to leave.

“Lunch with a friend,” I said keeping my eyes focused on the zipper of my book bag.

“Any place in particular?” he asked leaning a little closer. Why did he have to be so near? Why did his voice have to sound so enticing?

“The Reitz Union,” I said breathlessly forcing myself not to look over my shoulder.

“Maybe I’ll see you there,” Duncan said close to my ear. I could feel his cool breath on my cheek and forgot how to breathe again.

By the time, I regained enough control over my faculties Duncan was walking down to the front of the room. Several girls were waiting at the bottom of the stairs, eager expressions on their faces.

I watched as he walked through them, without even a glance at their expectant faces, and up to the TA. She took his card apparently unable to speak and he looked back over his shoulder catching me on my way down the stairs. Waving languidly from over his shoulder I found myself returning the gesture. Smiling he left the room leaving several disappointed faces behind him.

Collecting my thoughts, I managed to make it the rest of the way down the stairs and up to the TA. I received several curious looks and few glares when I turned in my card. As I left the room, I was careful not to look back over my shoulder as the whispers began.

Reitz Union

Outside the building, I took a moment to get my bearings. The sun was directly overhead and the heat coming off the sidewalk made it feel like a hundred and five rather than ninety-five. After I figured out where I was and where I was going on the massive campus, I started walking.

Halfway to the Reitz Union my phone started to play a familiar tune. Digging through my bag, I pulled out my phone.

‘Hey where are you,’ it read in texting short hand.

I scrolled through my recently called numbers, found Tabby’s, and pressed send. She picked up on the second ring.

“Where are you?” Tabby sounded stressed.

“I’m on my way, about a block from the Union. What is going on?” I could hear loud voices in the background.

“I’m just walking into the Union,” she yelled to be heard over the crowd. “I’ll wait on the first floor by the stairs.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said picking up my leisurely pace. “I’ll see you in a few.”

“Try to hurry every chance you get,” she was getting a little pouty. “I hate standing around with nothing to do.”

Hanging up the phone, I shook my head. I often wondered if Tabby had attention deficit disorder. She would rather be a few minutes late everywhere she went than to show up five minutes early with nothing to occupy her time. That coupled with the fact that if she sat for longer than ten minutes at one task she would get bored and start the next one. Somehow, she made it work for her though.

“Hey Tabby,” I called as I caught sight of her leaning against the wall. She started toward me a huge smile plastered across her face. She threw her arm over my shoulder as we walked into the food court.

“So how is your first day going?” Tabby asked in a nonchalant voice.

“It’s going,” I replied. “How’s your day been?” I asked turning the conversation to her. I didn’t want to discuss my morning at this point.

“Boring, but my English professor is hot, and one guy in the class isn’t bad either.”

I shook my head slightly. “Did you make it out of the apartment in time to catch the bus this morning?” I asked as we walked over to get a sub for lunch.

She flinched at my question. “I’ll have you know I made it to all of my classes this morning.”

“Were you on time to either of them?” I dug a little deeper.

She scoffed not answering my question. Even though she was a few months older than I was, sometimes I wondered if our birthdates got reversed.

Standing in line to order our food Tabby started to give me more details about her English professor and the guy in her class. She continued talking while we ordered our food and found a place to sit.

I let her go on about her morning nodding my head in all the right places and adding a small comment or question as we ate. The truth was I hoped she would keep going until we needed to leave for our next class. I wasn’t that lucky.

“So how was your morning?” Tabby finally asked.

“Well, it was...”

“Alina,” I heard a small voice over the roar in the food court.

Quickly scanning the large room, I spotted the person calling me. Faith was making her way through a tight group and over to our table. She had a timid smile in place revealing her braces through lips that were just a little too full for her face. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back into a ponytail that swayed as she walked. She had gray blue eyes that suited her rosy complexion well, and there was a light dusting of freckles over her nose and cheeks making her look even younger than her eighteen years.

“Hey, Alina,” Faith repeated joining us at the table.

“Hi, Faith” I returned. Tabby gave me a questioning look.

“Do you mind if I join you? Getting a seat in here is impossible.”

I looked at Tabby seeing if it was okay. She shrugged that she didn’t mind. “Sure. This is Tabby,” I said as making the introductions as she pulled a chair over to sit down. “Tabby this is Faith. She’s in English with me.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Tabby,” Faith said extending her hand. Tabby shook it briefly returning her infectious smile. “So how was Algebra?”

“It was good,” I said. “How was History?”

“It was good, though my Professor lost it when someone’s phone started ringing. I didn’t know the veins in your head could pop out that far.” We all laughed.

“At least he doesn’t spit,” Tabby chimed in. “My Art History professor started lecturing and the first three rows looked like they were getting showered. Though in his defense, I’m not sure if he was sweating or spitting.”

We laughed, again. The conversation was easy and light. Thankfully, it didn’t stray back to me. We continued to chat and get to know each other until it was time to leave for class.

“Well I better get going,” Faith said as we exited the Union. “I’ll see you Wednesday Alina. It was nice meeting you Tabby.”

“Bye,” Tabby and I chimed in unison. Faith waved good-bye from over her shoulder as she walked away.

“She seems really sweet,” Tabby said as we walked away from the crowded front entrance.

“Yes she does,” I replied. Faith was a good three or four inches taller than me and probably had fifteen pounds on me too, but she seemed so small.

“Well, I better get to class,” Tabby said coming to a stop. The look on her face was a mixture of dread and impatience.

“You have Biology next,” I said reading her expression.

“Uh, don’t remind me. I’ll see you later Li-Li,” she said turning to trudge to class. I waved good-bye and continued in the opposite direction shaking my head slightly.

It took me ten minutes to find my class. Coming in through a different entrance than the one I intended, I got completely turned around and ended up in philosophy. Someone in the room was kind enough to give me directions. I made it to History just before it started. The professor was seated off to the side, power point ready to go.

I scanned the room for an empty seat and found one close to the front on the left side of the room. I started to walk over, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone waving. I looked to see if they were trying to get my attention, but a girl came from behind me and ran over to sit with her friend.

The normal class routine started a minute later. The Professor passed out the cards to place our information on. He then began going over our tentative schedule for the semester. My attention started to waiver about fifteen minutes into class. Mercifully, he let us go ten minutes early, and I quickly gathered my stuff and headed for the door.

I debated about going straight home, but knew I needed to get my books for class. The thought of lugging them to the bus stop was not appealing. I decided it was better to get it over with. I made the left turn to head back to the Union.

That’s when I saw Duncan. He was just leaving a classroom a few doors down, several girls hot on his heels. My stomach twisted into knots at seeing him again.

“Excuse me,” someone said from behind me. I didn’t realize I had come to a complete stop in the middle of the hallway. I moved to the side to let the person pass. I glanced over at Duncan to see if he had noticed me. It didn’t look like it, so I was about to go back the other way, and take the long way around.

“Where are you headed off to?” Duncan asked in his silky voice. He was standing right next to me. I wondered how he had gotten over to me so quickly.

“I was going to the book store,” I said fumbling for the words. I glanced around him at the spot he occupied only a moment before. The girls were glaring at me like I had just taken the last piece of cake at a party I wasn’t invited to. Duncan didn’t seem to notice.

“Would you mind if I joined you?” he asked taking a small step closer.

I looked up and our eyes met. I felt the butterflies at the back of my throat. I swallowed to try to push them back down, but my mouth was dry. I was trying to find the answer to his question but kept coming up blank. His green eyes sparkled in the light. I could feel the heat burning my cheeks as he held my gaze.

“Shall we?” he asked our eyes still locked. I couldn’t answer.

Then everything stopped. Duncan was staring over the top of me at something. Finally able to move, I turned my head to follow his gaze, but all I could make out was a tall figure with mahogany brown hair walking away.

I looked back around at Duncan. He was standing very still, a look of unease on his face.

“It seems I’ll have to ask for a rain check,” Duncan said the uneasy expression completely erased. He gave me a gentle smile and turned to go.

I stood there in the hall watching him leave. I felt like I’d just missed something very important.

Choking

I walked into the empty apartment and dropped my bags on the dining room table. I was exhausted from carrying the heavy textbooks from the bus stop, and went into the kitchen to grab a soda. Plugging in my iPod in and turning on one of my playlists, I danced my way back over to the dining room.

Grabbing my newly acquired books, I lugged them into my room. I went through them all confirming I had the required materials for class. When I finished, I started in on my first assignments.

I started off good finishing my History and Algebra assignments in no time at all. English and Chemistry were another matter. I found myself easily distracted. Entire blocks of time would pass without my noticing as my mind drifted between thoughts of Samuel and Duncan. Only through sheer force of will did I manage to get anything accomplished.

I was finishing up when Tabby made it home. “Li-Li, I’m home,” Tabby said in a chipper voice as she came in the apartment.

“I’m in here,” I called from my room. Checking the clock as Tabby came bounding into my room, I was shocked to see it was already six. “What took you so long?”

“I stopped by the book store before coming home,” she said sounding annoyed. “You would not believe the lines. I thought I was going to be calling you to pick me up.”

“Tell me about it. I stopped by the bookstore right after my last class.” I stood up and stretched. After sitting so long, I was stiff and a little sore.

“What did you want to for dinner?” I asked walking out and into the kitchen.

Tabby followed me out of the bedroom. “Whatever. As long as you’re the one cooking,” she said a smile creeping across her face.

“That’s fine as long as you do the dishes.”

“Sounds good, I’m going to go put my books away and wash my hands,” she said walking back to the dining room and gathering her bags.

I rummaged through the cupboards and fridge trying to figure out something for dinner. Deciding on tacos, I gathered the needed supplies. I grabbed a skillet from the lower cabinet, washed my hands, and started to work on cutting up the vegetables.

Tabby put everything away and got ready for dinner while I cooked. We finished our preparations at about the same. We started eating in silence, but it ended all too soon.

“So,” Tabby began, “anything interesting happen after lunch?”

My mind immediately turned to Duncan and his odd behavior in the hall. “No, I’m afraid not. For the first day of school, I would say it was pretty boring. How was the rest of your day?”

Tabby’s cheeks flushed for a moment. “Not too bad. Biology was boring. There weren’t even any cute guys in the class. Math was better. There was a guy named Duncan who sat next to me.”

I started choking on my food.

“Here,” Tabby said grabbing my drink and handing it to me.

I continued coughing for another minute before the spasms calmed enough for me to take a drink. “Thanks,” I said still coughing a little. Taking another sip, I set my cup back on the table.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, just trying to use the wrong tube to swallow. You were saying...” I said prompting her to finish. I decided not to eat while I listened this time.

“Oh, yeah, well,” she said trying to gather her thoughts. “Well, this guy Duncan sat next to me in Math and he has got to be the most gorgeous guy on campus. He has to be a model, or if

he isn't he should be. The best part is his eyes though. They are the most beautiful green. When he looks at you, it's like he's staring right through you. I think even you would be impressed Li-Li."

"Well if he is as handsome as you say I think he might have a shot, although, I probably wouldn't have one." I stood to take my plate over to the sink. I was still in shock from what I had heard.

"Trust me, if you ever get to meet him you will definitely be impressed," Tabby said following me into the kitchen. "I told you I would do the dishes."

"Oh, sorry," I said not realizing what I was doing.

She took over the clean up detail and I went to sit on the sofa. I pretended to watch television, but couldn't get over the idea of Duncan in Tabby's class. He also sat right next to her. I tried to force myself to focus on the flashing images on the screen in front of me, to no avail.

"So, did you talk to him?" I asked trying to sound disinterested.

Tabby brightened at my question. "No."

I felt a little smug that she hadn't talked with him. Obviously, he wasn't as interested in her. I was shocked at the jealous edge of my mental voice. He wasn't worth ruining a lifelong friendship over.

I could see Tabby still smiling as she made her way over to the sofa. That was when I realized how far off my mental processes were. "So what did he say to you?" I asked following her cues.

"He introduced himself. Oh, his voice is just as nice as his body. Then he asked about Gainesville. You know, like where to eat, the best days to go out, and what clubs to go to.

"I think I might ask him for his number on Wednesday. Do you think that would be too soon? I mean I could say it was for class in case I needed help. I always need help in Math so I wouldn't be lying or anything."

I felt like someone had sucker punched me. I must have read too much into my little exchange with Duncan. No, I had read exactly what he wanted me to read into it. How could I have been so stupid? He was so handsome he could have targeted any girl in the class. They would have had the same reaction. He was just a player trying to get what he wanted, or needed without any concern for me.

“Li-Li, well what do you think?”

I had forgotten Tabby was asking me for my opinion on her plan. “Umm, well...I think you should be careful. Maybe play it slow until you get to know him better.”

She laughed. “What would I do without you to look out for me?”

“Be late for school every day, never eat at home, and go out every night dancing.”

She tilted her head to the side contemplating my statements. “Why are we friends again?”

I threw a pillow at her managing to hit her stomach. We both laughed. I knew she wouldn’t take my advice, but there was no point pushing the subject. She was my friend and when Duncan broke her heart, I would be there for her. After all, there was no chance of him breaking mine.

Chance Encounter

Waking up around ten in the morning Tuesday, I felt wet. Lifting my face out of the big puddle of drool, I frowned. The sun was streaming in from under my bedroom door. I rolled out of bed and into the bathroom.

There was crust in my eyes and drool on the side of my face. My hair had a collection of knots that would make a sailor proud. I tried running my brush through it, but gave up and hopped into the shower.

The hot water felt good. With the help of ample amounts of shampoo and conditioner, I managed to get the knots out of my hair. Forcing myself to turn off the water after fifteen minutes, I stepped out into the steam-filled bathroom.

Wrapping my hair in a towel, I grabbed another and finished drying off. I slipped on a pair of jeans and a UF t-shirt before heading out to the kitchen. Making a quick breakfast of some cereal and milk, I turned the television on and watched the news.

There were the usual ‘Go Gators’ slogans. Then there were the horrible tragedies local, domestic, and foreign. I wondered how the world kept turning with everything going on. Maybe the crazy guy with the sign standing downtown was right and the world would end tomorrow.

I turned it to one of the music stations after a little while. Lowering the volume to background noise, I found my book and started reading.

Tabby woke up about an hour later. I heard when she turned on the shower, and thirty minutes later, she emerged from her room looking more like a model than a college student. I frowned slightly as she skipped over to grab a bowl of cereal.

“What are your plans?” Tabby asked after swallowing a large bite of food.

“You tell me,” I answered as I marked my progress in my book before laying it down.

“Well...” she finished chewing.

I spent the rest of the day being dragged from store to store at the mall to get a present for Josh’s birthday. In the end, Tabby decided not to buy anything for him at the mall. I ended up going with the old standby of a gift card at his favorite clothing store.

I did let Tabby know about a gift I had considered getting off of EBay. It was a signed first edition of one of his favorite books. I had debated about getting it, but thought better of it since he might read more into it than I meant. It took her less than three minutes to complete the transaction on her phone.

“Did you want to cook?” Tabby asked throwing her bags into the trunk.

“Not tonight,” I answered slumping into the passenger seat exhausted.

“How about burritos and ice cream?” she asked swerving out of the parking space. I waited for the crunching sound as a horn blared behind us. Tabby looked sheepish as she proceeded down the lane.

“Burritos and ice cream sound nice if we can make it there in one piece.” Tabby gave a sarcastic chuckle at my comment, but was extra careful on our way to the restaurant.

Dinner was nice. We both ate way too much. Walking next door, we ordered two pints of ice cream for later.

“Hello,” a voice said from one of the little patio tables. A small thrill went through me as I realized who the voice belonged to. Duncan was lounging in one of the chairs, computer open.

“Oh,” Tabby said turning to meet the sparkling green eyes he directed at us. “Hi, Duncan, I wasn’t expecting to see you today. How has your day been?”

I could see Tabby fussing with her clothes. I knew she was wishing she had worn something more flattering to her figure. Never mind, that she looked better than all the other girls within viewing distance, including myself.

“It’s been okay, but it is definitely improving. I’m just taking it easy before class tomorrow, how about you?” he asked glancing over at me from the corner of his eye.

I couldn't stop the small blush from showing in my cheeks. I remained silent though. I had never mentioned last night that I had also met Duncan. I didn't want Tabby thinking I was hiding things from her.

"Same. Just had to do birthday shopping for my brother, and get some stuff for our apartment.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Tabby, said turning her gaze to me for the first time since seeing Duncan. "This is my friend Alina. Alina this is Duncan." She did everything but wink at me as Duncan and I shook hands.

"It's nice to meet you," I said not correcting her. I hoped Duncan would play along.

"It is very nice to meet you to, Alina," Duncan returned my address. I could see the mischievous glint in his eye. "Won't you join me for a cup of coffee?" he asked addressing both of us.

Tabby was about to say yes when I interrupted her. "Thank you for the offer," I said smiling, "but we just bought some ice cream and need to get home before melts." I showed the ice cream bag I was carrying for emphasis.

Duncan looked disappointed. It was probably do to the fact that he wasn't used to being turned down. Tabby looked like she didn't care if the ice cream caught on fire as long as she could stay.

"I'll see you in class tomorrow, Tabitha."

"Yes...definitely...tomorrow."

"It was nice meeting you Alina."

I couldn't stop my breath from speeding up at the sound of him saying my name. I would have sworn that his voice seemed to wrap around it. I had to be delusional. From Tabby's reaction next to me though it was more likely that he had this reaction on all the women he came in contact with.

"It was nice meeting you too." I only barely managed to keep my voice level.

I grabbed Tabby's hand and forcibly dragged her away. Once we made it to the car, I demanded the keys. There was no way she was fit to drive.

"You know we could have bought more ice cream later." Tabby started in on me as we climbed into the car. "I mean we can get ice cream anytime, but Duncan..." She trailed off contemplating her own scenario. "Any way what do you think of him?"

“He seems really nice,” I said aloud.

Tabby started in on what she thought about Duncan. It had many expletives about how handsome he was. I tuned most of it out just nodding my head at the appropriate times.

I knew he was player. After his actions today, there was no doubt of that, or the fact that he was smoother than silk. There was something else there though. I couldn’t put my finger on it but...there was something there that was...dangerous.

Seating Arrangements

My alarm was screaming from across the room. I scrambled out of bed and over to the blaring machine to hit the snooze button. I debated about climbing back under the covers and sleeping for a few more minutes. Deciding against it, I flipped the switch, disarming the annoying machine. I then walked into the bathroom to shower.

After brushing my teeth, I dressed in the clothes I laid out the previous night over my computer chair. I prepared my breakfast as quietly as possible so as not to wake Tabby. I knew she slept like the dead, but it was better to be safe than sorry. She had stayed up long after I went to bed.

It wasn’t until I was ready to walk out the door to the bus stop that I poked my head into her cluttered room. “Tabby, it’s time to get up. I have the coffee on for you. I’m heading down to the bus stop,” I said waiting for some response.

“Uh...” she groaned from under her comforter. “I should have signed up for afternoon classes,” she mumbled.

“”I’ll see you after class,” I said leaving the door to her room open. I hoped that the smell of coffee would help get her up.

The bus ride to school was easier than my previous trip. I came prepared with a book in hand. I tried not to think about the days coming stresses and relax, while standing between the preppy girl in a white cami and jean shorts that left little to the imagination, and the guy with a blender haircut and skin so white it looked like the sun was his mortal enemy.

I made it to class earlier than I expected. There were about ten students in the room preparing for class and talking quietly amongst themselves. I had to stop from laughing when I

saw my seat. Several girls surrounded Samuel's vacant chair and taking up all the others in the area.

Shaking my head slightly, I scanned the room looking for another place to sit. I found Faith smiling at me from near the other side of the room. I returned the gesture and made my way over.

"It appears we've been evicted," Faith said as I sat down.

I shrugged. "I'm only surprised we weren't shoved out of our seats last class." We both laughed.

"What have you been up to?" she asked as we got our things ready for class.

"Nothing much, just school. What about you anything interesting?"

She shrugged, "Same."

We drifted through a couple of topics before landing back on the new seating arrangements. "It's pretty sad to see women acting like that. What do you think he'll do when he gets here?" Faith asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know, but it looks like we are about to find out."

Samuel had just walked into the room. I had to stop myself from laughing. The girls stopped talking as they stared at him. They started subconsciously preening while they waited for him to join them. I couldn't be sure, but I would have sworn he was frowning.

Not paying any attention to the group of girls, he walked past his seat from the previous day. Choosing a spot across the aisle and a few chairs back from me, he sat down without saying a word. Faith and I exchanged a knowing glance and tried not to laugh.

The girls across the room looked confused and disappointed. They obviously had not considered their actions as being anything other than acceptable. I had to agree with them. Not many guys would find the attentions of so many attractive females disagreeable.

Shortly after Samuel's arrival, Professor Burns joined the class. He started around a sign in sheet as he gave the assignment for the day. We had to write a paper about a defining moment in our life, at least one page in length, due at the end of class.

"Come on people we are all adults here." Professor Burns' said about the moans and various other complaints at the assignment. "Plus, whenever you finish, you are free to leave." That appeared to brighten some of the faces in the class.

The noise level rose for a brief minute as people took out their needed supplies or asked to borrow them from another student. I began writing as soon as I came up with an appropriate topic. It didn't take me long to fall into a steady rhythm, and I soon had my paper completed.

As I gathered my things, I couldn't help noticing that Samuel was doing the same. I thought I saw him glancing at me on occasion but I was too chicken to check. He walked passed me as I zipped my bag close. I couldn't hold back the sigh that escaped through my lips. He was just so handsome and there was no way I had a chance.

"Are you done?" Faith asked as I threw my bag over my shoulder.

"Yeah," I whispered back not wanting to disturb the other students around us.

"Are you eating lunch at the Union, with Tabby again today?" I nodded my head yes as one of the guys looked up from his paper to glare at us. "We should be there at about the same time as we were Monday if you would like to join us." Faith appeared to brighten at my offer. She nodded her head yes and we waved goodbye.

I dropped my paper on top of Samuel's as I made my way out of the room. I noticed how neatly his paper was written and felt a little bit jealous. I always prided myself on my neat and even handwriting, but I had to admit his was much nicer.

Leaving the room twenty-five minutes earlier than normal, I expected to find the halls empty. I was in for a shock. As I walked past a small sitting area about halfway down the hall, I found one of the seats occupied. Samuel was lounging in one of the chairs, his feet propped up on another reading a book.

I missed my next step and nearly ended up on the floor. I caught myself on one of the empty chairs to prevent the fall. I flushed bright red as I righted myself. As I walked away as quick as I could without running, I thought I heard a small chuckle from behind me.

Playing

"And how has your day been thus far," Duncan asked from over my shoulder.

I was standing in line to sign in. The girl in front of me turned to see who the silky voice belonged to. I watched as her eyes opened a little wider when she saw Duncan standing behind me.

“It’s been good,” I said, careful not to look at him. I could feel his cool breath as it brushed against my cheek. I was struck by how sweet it smelled. “How about your day,” I asked continuing the conversation.

“I have to admit, it has been pretty boring up to now.”

I swallowed hard against the knots in my digestive track. After signing in next to my name, I turned to face the room. Looking back at my seat from the previous class, I couldn’t help but be annoyed. It was occupied.

“It appears your chair has been confiscated.”

I could hear the laughter in Duncan’s voice, and narrowed my eyes at his slight. I was careful not to turn and glare at him. I didn’t want to become incoherent if I could avoid it.

“Yours appears to be empty,” I said making a turn to walk to the other side of the room, Duncan a few short feet behind me. He chuckled as we walked up to a seat near the back of the room.

“Not that into crowds,” he said as we sat in our new seats.

“Do you prefer to work one on one?” I asked raising my eyebrows.

He gave me a mischievous grin before answering. “I find many things are much nicer on a one to one basis.”

I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I turned away. “So, how do you like your Math class?” I watched him carefully to see his reaction.

“It has its interesting moments, but I find Chemistry much more stimulating.”

I tried to stop the slight blush at his comment, but it was useless. The frown pulling down at the corner of my lips, I did nothing to halt. I faced forward as the Professor walked into the class.

“I think you should focus on Math. You wouldn’t want to strain yourself by over reaching,” I added after a moment.

“What would be the fun in that?” His voice was playfully needling.

I glared at him briefly as the teacher called the room to attention. He held my gaze for a moment as I felt my stomach flip. I refused to be taken into his game, and that was exactly what this was, a game. A small smile flickered at the corner of his mouth as I returned my focus to the front of the room.

Duncan was far too much of a presence to be completely ignored as the class progressed. Just a few minutes in, I let my hair fall as a divider between us. It was easier to pay attention and pretend he wasn't there without the temptation to look at him.

Not very long after, I felt my hair pulled up and out of the way. His long slender fingers tucked it gently behind my ear brushing my skin gently. I couldn't believe how cold his hand was, but where his fingertips brushed my skin instead of goose bumps, it burst into flames.

I turned to glare at him both breathless and angry at his assumption that it was all right to touch me. The breathlessness won out. His expression was so intense the whole world could have disappeared and I wouldn't have cared.

"Please," he said in a barely audible whisper, "please don't cover your face, promise?"

All I could do was nod yes. I knew I was giving him what he wanted, but I just couldn't stop myself. It wasn't right for him to have so much power over me. He smiled apparently pleased by my reaction. He turned forward again and I mimicked his movement.

I kept my hair tucked safely behind my ear the rest of the day.

The Night Off

"Tabby is that you?" I asked from inside my bedroom.

"Yeah," she said coming around the corner. She threw herself across my bed with a loud sigh. "Thank god that's over," she added in a contented voice.

"We still have several months to the end of the semester," I reminded her.

She stuck her tongue out at me in response. "What are you doing?" she said looking at the stack of books piled on my desk and wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"A paper for English," I said grabbing my book from her that she was holding in between her thumb and index finger like it was toxic. I stopped working. "What is it you want?" I asked getting a little annoyed.

"Dinner," she said in chipper voice. I glanced at the clock on my dresser. It was seven thirty. I didn't realize it was so late.

"Well," I said getting up from my chair and stretching, "what do you want?"

"Depends," Tabby, said getting excited. "Do you have plans tomorrow?" she asked in cryptic tone.

“No,” answered raising my eyebrow in questioning look. “I wanted to get a little more work done for English, or maybe work ahead in Algebra.”

“Great,” Tabby said even more revved up, “then get ready. We’re going out, my treat.”

My shoulders sagged. The last thing I wanted to do was go out. Tabby was rambling on about how much fun it would be. I was about to tell her that I just wanted to stay home and relax, but then I saw how excited she was and I didn’t have the heart.

I smiled weakly, “Sounds great. What time did you want to leave?”

“I was thinking around nine. Faith should be over around then and that would give us enough time to get ready and get something to eat. Was there any place in particular you wanted?”

“If you’re paying I think you should pick.” I hoped I sounded happy.

“That sounds good in theory, but,” she added in a side note, “I’ll eat pretty much anything. You on the other hand, are so picky I wonder how it is you can even survive.”

“I’ll think about it then.”

“Good,” Tabby said jumping up from my bed.

“So what exactly do you have planned for tonight?” I asked curious as to what torture I would be enduring.

“You’ll have to wait and see,” she said in a devious voice. “Trust me Li-Li. I’ll make sure you have a good time. Just make sure you wear something nice, no jeans and t-shirts.”

“What is so wrong with jeans and t-shirts?” I asked her knowing if she had her way, I would be in skirts, blouses, and high heels on a regular basis.

“Just humor me,” she pleaded giving me her doe eyes.

I pointed her out the door to my bedroom. “No, promises,” I said closing the door behind her. I could hear her protest as she walked away.

I leaned against the door and contemplated everything. It was Friday the end of the first week of school. I should be ecstatic ready for the weekend, but all I could think about was how much work I still needed to do.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts as I walked into my closet and started rummaging through the things I owned. I moved past the jeans and shirts looking for something dressier. I finally decided on a pair of three-inch strappy sandals, a knee length black skirt, and a satin lilac tank top with a black lace overlay.

I glanced at the clock on top of my dresser as I laid my clothes across the bed. It was already seven thirty and I still needed to shower, put make up on, and do something with my hair. I ran into the bathroom, stripped down, and climbed in the shower. I let the hot water run down my back and into the drain taking with it all the stress of the day.

I opened the shower curtain and stepped out into the steamy room. After drying myself, I opened the door to allow the mirror to clear, and the bathroom to cool enough for me to finish getting ready. I didn't take me long to get done. The most time consuming part was drying my hair. I used a clip to pull the top of it back from my face and it fell in soft curls over my shoulders and partly down my back.

I picked up the mess I made and went out to the living room. I would need to do laundry this weekend and give the apartment a good cleaning. Tabby was still in her room so I sat down and surfed through the channels waiting for her. There was a knock on the door a little before nine.

"Coming," I said walking over to answer it.

Opening the door, I found Faith standing outside looking very small. She was wearing a short silky green dress that set off her skin and hair beautifully. Her hair was loose for the first time since we had met. It cascaded down over her shoulders in perfectly straight lines.

"You look great," I said stepping aside so she could come in.

She seemed relieved by my assessment. Standing a little taller, she walked inside giving me a big smile. "I was worried I had over dressed." She said glancing down at her wardrobe.

"Trust me, if you are going anywhere with Tabby you can never be overdressed." We laughed together as we walked to the sofa to wait.

"You look really nice," Faith said as we sat down.

"Thanks. I'm kind of like you. I'm not really into the whole dress up thing. I have to admit that it is nice every now and again though.

"Can I get you anything while we're waiting?" I asked trying to be a good hostess.

"No, I'm good. Do you know what the plans are for tonight?"

"Tabby wouldn't give me all the details. As soon as she's finished getting ready, we're heading to dinner. That's all I know."

"That's good. All I've had to eat since lunch is a banana. I'm starved."

"I opted for an apple," I said. We both laughed.

“Alina,” Tabby screamed from in her room.

I stood up and walked over to Tabby’s door. “What do you need?” I asked through the closed door.

“It’s unlocked,” Tabby yelled from inside.

Opening the door to the room with its familiar furniture and layout, I went inside. The room was unkempt with clothes and shoes thrown haphazardly around it. I shook my head at the mess as I rounded the corner to see what she needed.

“Faith is here.” I let her know.

“Good, she’s right on time,” Tabby, said from in the bathroom. “Would you mind finding my black heels with the rhinestones? I think there over by the closet.”

“How can you tell?” I asked picking my way across the minefield to get over to the closet. I found one under a black pair of yoga pants and the second under a pink tank top. It was a miracle some creature hiding in the mess hadn’t swallowed them.

“Thanks you’re a life saver,” Tabby said taking the shoes from me. She was wearing a flirty little black halter dress that stopped mid thigh. With the heels on, it made her gorgeously tan legs look even better.

“Oh, we better get going,” Tabby, exclaimed grabbing my hand. “Why didn’t you tell me it was so late?”

“I need to get my purse,” I said wresting my hand from her grasp.

I grabbed my purse from in my room and joined Faith and Tabby in the living room again. I sighed and contemplated going back in and changing. They both looked ready, willing, and able for anything the night had to offer. I looked more like I was going for a job interview.

“Smile Li-Li, you look like I’m taking you to a funeral,” Tabby said sounding annoyed.

“I thought you were,” I said sarcastically.

“Come on,” Tabby pleaded with me, “I want us all to have fun. Promise me you’ll try,” she said her hazel eyes growing big.

“I promise,” I said trying to sound chipper.

“Great,” she said growing excited once more. “Have you decided what we’re eating?”

“Just head over to Archer Road, we can decide on the way.” I said climbing into the back seat of her car. Tabby and Faith sat in the front.

“Didn’t you want to sit up front?” Faith turned to ask me.

“No, you’re taller than me. I don’t mind sitting in the back.” She smiled buckling her seat belt.

Making it over to Archer, we picked one of the big name restaurants, and turned into the overcrowded parking lot. We waited thirty minutes for a table, and once seated it took another thirty to get our food. By the time it arrived, we were ravenous.

The conversation was good and much easier than I thought it was going to be. Maybe Tabby was right, I just needed to go out. Faith was a nice addition to our small group as well. She had a very similar temperament to my own, but Tabby had a way of dragging our fun sides out for some air.

“You ready to go?” Tabby asked as she handed her debit card to the waitress.

“Yeah,” Faith and I chimed in together. “Where are we going by the way?” we both asked at the same time and chuckled together.

“Downtown,” Tabby answered as the server returned her card. “Where else would we go looking this good?” We all laughed easily and walked outside.

After piling into the car, we made our way downtown. The streets were packed with people. We ended up parking near the clock tower and walking over to the clubs. I felt self-conscious surrounded by all the beautiful people that seemed to multiply as we walked.

The lines outside the clubs were already forming as Tabby pulled me into one. I was acutely aware that I did not belong among the tall thin women in their barely there outfits. All of the sudden I had the sudden urge to run. Faith didn’t look any better than me. Tabby must have seen the panic on our faces because she took our hands and refused to release them.

“Don’t worry I won’t leave your side,” she said trying to reassure us.

Faith seemed comforted. I smiled weakly in response. The butterflies in my stomach were moving around so much I felt like they would push my dinner back out. This was a bad idea. The line moved forward. With Faith and Tabby, there by my side we made our way up to the bouncers.

“ID,” the smaller of the two men asked. He had a t-shirt with the clubs name and logo on it stretched over his ample muscles. We handed him our licenses for his approval. He briefly glanced at the tiny plastic cards and handed them back to us. He took out three bands circling the paper around our wrists.

Smiling he looked down at me and I shifted to a different foot, uncomfortable under his glare. He glanced over his shoulder to the other bouncer and the two men exchanged a knowing look.

“You three have a good time,” he said scrutinizing us further. The larger man opened the door and waved us through. I was thankful once the door closed behind us and the darkness inside the club concealed us from the men’s view.

The room was starting to fill with people. I was dragged over to one of the tables scattered around the room. The main feature in the darkened space was the dance floor which we currently sat one level above. There was a round staircase to the left of the bar that led to a second floor VIP section that overlooked everything.

“What do you think?” Tabby asked over the blaring music. I just smiled and shrugged, not sure what to make of everything. She rolled her eyes, and started to leave.

“Where are you going,” I asked. Faith was seated across from me looking a little scared.

“I’ll be right back. I’m just going to get us all something to drink.” Tabby walked away and over to the bar.

I scanned the room taking in everything. It was a little overwhelming. There was an electricity in the air though that bled into everything around us. I couldn’t help feeling excited.

Tabby returned a couple minutes’ later drinks in hand. My eyes about popped out of my head when I saw them. They were real drinks. She passed them out one to each of us.

“How did you get these?” I asked.

“I used my feminine wiles,” Tabby playfully added. I glared at her. “Okay and a very convincing fake ID.” I shook my head and Faith just let her mouth fall open.

“Are you going to make me drink alone?” Tabby asked her pouty face in place. “On the count of three then, one, two, three...”

Both Faith and Tabby turned their glasses upside down consuming the shot in less time than it took Tabby to count. I continued to stare at my drink like it was going to bite me. Faith sputtered and coughed. Tabby just laughed.

“Come on Li-Li, it won’t bite you,” she said reading my mind.

“I know that,” I said still staring at the shot.

With a shaky hand, I raised the shot to my lips. Tilting my head back, I let the liquid run into my mouth. It burned the back of my throat as it made contact and I felt a warm sensation as it made the rest of the trip down to my stomach.

“Welcome to the dark side,” Tabby said leaning over to scream in my ear.

We all laughed.

Saved

A little while later, and after Tabby grabbed a second round, we moved our party onto the dance floor. I was thankful for the drinks I had consumed. I wasn't as nervous about people staring and I didn't feel quite so awkward dancing. Faith seemed of a similar opinion.

The dance floor was hot and over crowded with bodies pressing together moving to the music. Faith and Tabby looked beautiful under the dim spotlights. I felt the pangs of jealousy as they twirled around the floor with ease.

“I'm going to get a bottle of water,” I screamed over the music to Tabby and Faith a couple hours later.

“We'll come with you,” Tabby yelled back her words slightly slurred. Tabby and Faith had a few more drinks after our initial rounds. Tabby was even more exuberant than usual and Faith was no less so.

We danced our way off the floor, and made our way over to one of the bars. The counter was filled with people vying for the attention of the bar tender. Rather than all of us trying to squeeze up to the bar, Tabby volunteered. Giving her our money for water, she disappeared into the crush.

“I have to use the restroom,” Faith screamed into my ear over the music.

I nodded. “You want me to come with you?”

“No, you should stay and wait for Tabby.” Faith turned and ambled in the general direction of the bathroom.

I found a comfortable place to lean while I waited for Tabby and Faith to return. I looked out at the dance floor and swayed along to the music.

“Are you having a good time?” I stiffened at the sound of the voice behind me. It had a playful lilt to it, but there was no mistaking the menace masked in the deep bass.

I turned around and was face to face with a wall. The man looming over me was probably six four or five and built like a Mac truck. The way he looked at me sent warning bells screaming inside of my head. “Yes, thank you,” I said trying to sound nonchalant.

I had my back against the railing separating the gyrating bodies on the dance floor from the bars and tables only a few feet above them. I stepped to the side as discreetly as possible trying to put some distance between my unwanted admirer and me.

“That’s good to hear,” he said his smile broadening as he slid gently to the side to cut off my escape route.

This is all in my head I started to tell myself. He was just being overly eager. I smiled weakly back at him hoping it would give me a little time to come up with an escape plan.

He took a small step forward. Where were Tabby and Faith?

“There you are,” a familiar voice called from behind the mountain in front of me.

I had trouble believing it was him. It had been so long since he had even spoken, I was sure I was hallucinating. The figment must have been brought on by wishful thinking. So, I was shocked when the man in front of me turned revealing Samuel looking more like a god than any mortal had the right to.

I stepped from behind the mountain and took the hand Samuel had extended to me. A thrill went through me as our skin met for the first time. His hand was cooler than I would have expected, but his skin was as smooth as satin and I could feel the muscles lying just underneath. It was better than I had imagined.

He did not look at me though as I turned to examine his perfect features. He was focused completely on the man in front of him. I shuddered involuntarily. The expression on his face was pleasant, he was even smiling, but there was something behind it. It was more dangerous than the look the man had given me just a second before. I began to wonder if I wasn’t safer standing in my previous position.

“Is there something I can help you with?” the hulking man asked in slightly slurred speech. He took a step forward hoping to intimidate Samuel.

“No,” Samuel replied not backing down, “if you will excuse us.”

The inebriated mountain mumbled something under his breath as we were walking away. I felt Samuel tense up, but he made no attempt to answer the insult. He kept a firm grip on my hand and led me over to an empty table.

“Are you okay?” he asked as soon as I was seated. I nodded not trusting my voice. “Can I get you anything?” I shook my head.

After a few moments of awkward silence, I managed to find my voice again. “Thank you for the help.” Samuel nodded and we lapsed back into silence.

“I’m Alina,” I said recalling we had never been officially introduced. I offered him my hand. He just stared at my hand for a moment. I began to wonder if I had done something wrong and was about to pull it back when he took it in his.

“Samuel,” he said just above the noise of the crowd. The clear baritone of his voice helped to speed my already fluttering heart. Shaking my hand, he released it all too soon. The silence we fell into again was even keener after hearing the sound of his voice unmarred by concern for my safety.

I was gathering the courage to start a real conversation with him when another voice stopped me. “Li-Li there you are,” Tabby said as she stumbled over to where I was.

“Hey,” I said feeling a little awkward and uneasy. Standing up to meet her, I was dreading the introductions already. In the past week, I had yet to mention Samuel. When I glanced over my shoulder to make the introductions he was not there.

Tabby handed me a bottle of water and took up position in the seat I had just vacated. “Thanks,” I said a little distracted.

“Where is Faith?” she asked fanning herself.

“She went to the restroom. Do you think we should go check on her?” I asked a little anxious. Tabby considered it for a moment and stood up.

We walked over to the restrooms to find Faith. I couldn’t help scanning every face I could see in the dim lighting as we progressed through the crowd. Some of the men, and even a couple of the girls, gave me appraising looks and smiles of invitation, but none of the faces I could see was the one I was looking for.

Spotting Faith a little ways from the restroom, I was a little shocked. She was in the company of the mountain who had cornered me earlier. They appeared engaged in a conversation and she was smiling, laughing, and even flirting with him. I blushed for her forwardness, even though I knew it was due to the alcohol.

“Faith,” I yelled over the music. She didn’t seem to hear me. I ended up catching her eye as we progressed through the crowd and she waved us over.

“Hey where did you go?” Faith asked when we were closer. “I thought you were waiting by the door for me.” She didn’t appear serious, but I felt awful for the misunderstanding and leaving her by herself.

“Sorry,” I said coloring a little. “Come on let’s go,” I grabbed her hand and pulled her over with Tabby and I.

“No, wait I want to introduce you to someone,” Faith said taking back her hand. “Alina, Tabby this is Jeff. Jeff this is Alina and Tabby.” A smile spread over her face covering it from ear to ear.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Jeff said slurring his words together. I couldn’t help catching the glint in his eye when he focused enough to recognize me. “I was just going to introduce Faith to a couple of my buddies. What about it ladies, you want to meet some nice guys?”

Tabby responded before I could gather my thoughts enough to say anything. “Thank you Jeff, but maybe another time.” She grabbed Faith’s hand and ignored her open mouth and one-syllable noises. Jeff was only slightly less astonished as his second conquest for the evening slipped through his fingers.

“That’s it Faith, no more drinks for you,” Tabby said as she forced a bottle of water into her hand.

“I’m fine,” she said slurring her words so badly they sounded more like mush than anything recognizable.

“I think it’s time to go,” I said looking from Faith to Tabby.

“You grab the left and I’ll get the right,” Tabby commented as we helped Faith onto her feet.

“No, I want to dance some more. Hey where did Jeff go?” Faith asked letting her head roll to one side.

We made it to the door without further incidence and spilled out onto the sidewalk. I was thankful for the fresh air after the smoke and crowd inside. Taking a deep breath, I let it clear my head.

“Do you think you can walk to the car?” I asked Faith who was leaning against the wall.

“Sure,” she said a little louder than necessary.

Taking a step forward she started to wobble. Tabby and I managed to catch her before she actually fell. Returning to our previous positions, we half-dragged, half-carried Faith to the car.

“Here,” Tabby said handing me the keys to the car after we loaded Faith into the back seat.

I hesitated. "I trust you," she commented buckling in next to Faith. Rolling my eyes, I took the keys and climbed behind the wheel of the car.

"Next time we take Later Gator," I said starting the car and pulling into the street.

Bother

I ran into English just as Professor Burns was calling the class to attention. I tried not to pay attention to the other students as I walked over to my seat, but I couldn't help noticing the look on Samuel's face. He seemed relieved by my late arrival.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to show," Faith said as I took my seat.

"I almost didn't," I answered a little breathless.

"What happened?"

"I overslept. Are you feeling any better?"

Faith colored slightly at my question. She spent most of Saturday sleeping on the sofa in our living room. When she did wake up it was to a major hang over. She spent the rest of the day with her head in my toilet.

"Yeah, I'm better. Thanks again for letting me stay," she whispered as Professor Burns gave us a warning glare.

Class dragged despite my late arrival. Finally, after what felt like eternity Professor Burns let us go.

"I'll see you at lunch," Faith said as we gathered our things to leave.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?" I asked knowing the answer already. Blushing bright red, Faith made no reply.

"I'll see you later."

"Later," Faith said as she rushed off down the hallway.

As I ambled down to the stairs, I noticed Samuel a few feet in front of me. I was careful to stay behind him so I could admire his physic without being seen. The view from behind was almost as nice as the front.

Reaching the stairs before me Samuel held the door open. I bit my lip slightly as I walked passed him. I managed to squeak out thank you as he joined me in the stairwell.

"How was your weekend?" I asked trying to start a conversation.

“It was good,” Samuel, answered. “How was yours?”

“It was good,” I said miming his reply. “I wanted to thank you for your help Friday. You left so fast I, uh, I don’t think I got to tell you that.”

“You’re welcome,” he said then reverted back to his usual silent state.

“So, how are you enjoying school so far?” I asked as we rounded the corner to the next flight of stairs.

“It’s good,” he gave me his patented two-word answer.

“Am I bothering you?” I suddenly blurted out as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

His eyes seemed to unfreeze, turning into deep liquid pools. I forgot how to breathe.

“What? No, no you’re not bothering me. Why would you think that?”

“Well it could be the three syllable answers, or maybe it’s the fact that you ran off so fast Friday night I thought I imagined everything, or it could be that almost every time you see me you pretend I don’t exist.” I knew I was rambling but I just couldn’t stop myself.

Samuel was staring at me. A crooked smile spread across his lips. “Alina,” I felt a shiver run down my spine at his saying my name. “You could never bother me.” The liquid blue of his eyes seemed to catch fire.

“I don’t understand,” I said looking down so I could speak again. “Then why did you leave so quickly on Friday? No offense, but you’ve hardly said anything to me since...” I let my sentence trail off. There was no way I could let him know that I had actually been keeping track of how many times I saw him. I laughed playing my lack of coherent speaking off to my embarrassment. “Never mind it’s not important.”

He held the door for me again as we exited the building. “Well I better get to class,” I said turning around to look at Samuel’s perfect features in the sun. It was like a spotlight was directed at him highlighting every gorgeous detail.

“Would you mind if I walked with you?” Samuel asked as I was about to take off.

I stopped dead in my tracks. “No,” I blurted out, “that would nice,” I tacked on trying to cover up my over eager answer. He just smiled and started to walk next to me.

“It’s a nice day,” Samuel commented lightly.

“Yeah, it is,” I said looking up at the cloudless crystal blue sky. “So, how do you like Gainesville?”

“It’s nice. I’ve been living in Washington for a while and it was pretty much gray skies and cold weather.”

An involuntary shiver ran down my spine. “I’ve lived in Florida and California all my life. If it drops below eighty I’m reaching for a jacket.”

Samuel laughed. The sound was enchanting. “Why did you choose UF?” he asked after bringing his laughter under control.

“It seemed like a good choice at the time. What about you?”

Samuel shrugged coming to a stop. “What time does your class start?” he asked ignoring my question.

I checked my phone to see what time it was. “In five minutes,” I said a little unnerved. I was sure it had only been a few minutes since English had let out. “I better get up to class.” I couldn’t stop from biting my lip. I was seriously considering playing hooky.

“It was really nice talking with you Alina.” Samuel’s voice seemed to wrap around my name like a caress.

“Yeah, same. So, I’ll see you in class on Wednesday?” I asked unsure if he would cease to exist after today. After all, he was far too beautiful to be real.

He smiled a crooked little grin. “Yes, I’ll be there.”

I was about to turn and go inside the building when Samuel grabbed my hand suddenly bringing me up short. “Don’t be late on Wednesday.” His voice was intense and his eyes had turned back to liquid ice.

I was surprised by how cold his hand was compared to the temperature outside. “I won’t be,” I managed to whisper.

Giving me a crooked smile he let my hand fall and strolled off back the way we had just come from. I watched him go enjoying the view. Sighing as he disappeared into the crowded campus, I went inside.

Awkward

Math passed in a blur of numbers. I tried to focus but I could still feel Samuel’s hand gently holding mine. My imagination was running in all directions. Keeping it in check was nearly

impossible. All myself doubt and pessimism couldn't stop the images the other half of my brain kept throwing up at me.

When class was dismissed, after what felt like a few minutes, I remembered Duncan. My stomach started to knot as I walked over to Chemistry. I knew better than to be attracted to him, but I couldn't deny that I was at least physically attracted to him. I tried to calm my nerves as I made my way into the lecture hall.

I received a few glares and envious stares as I walked up to the back of the class. Duncan wasn't there yet. I began to wonder if he would make it to class as the room filled to bursting with students. As I was contemplating about how I would feel if he missed, he showed up making his way across the room and into the seat next to mine.

"How was your weekend?" Duncan asked pulling his chair closer to mine.

"It was good," I said as my heart tapped out an unsteady rhythm. It was so frustrating to have such a physical reaction to him when I was determined not to. "How was yours?"

"I enjoyed myself. I went out to the clubs Saturday with some friends. Got to see that new movie about the end of the world, it was pretty good. I didn't really do much else. What about you, where did you go?"

"I was dragged out Friday, spent Saturday nursing my friend Faith's hangover, and Sunday was a chore day." I didn't bother to elaborate on anything.

"Sounds like a very full weekend. So what are you doing today?" he asked after a momentary pause.

"Nothing," I said narrowing my eyes slightly. I couldn't help wondering what path he was leading me down.

"You still don't trust me?" he asked in an angelic voice.

I simply looked at him incredulously. I was about to respond when another student turned and glared up at us, ending any further discussion.

"Remember labs are tomorrow and Thursday. If you do not come to lab you will be dropped from the course," our professor reminded us as she dismissed class.

I packed my stuff and threw my bag over my shoulder.

"Since you're not doing anything today, I was wondering what time I should come over tonight." Duncan asked catching me off guard.

“What?” I said a little too loud drawing the attention of several people. “You do realize that I live with Tabby?” I asked after regaining my composure.

“That’s what would make it so much fun.”

“Fun for you, you mean.” I mumbled.

“Of course, who else would I mean?” he added playfully.

“Don’t you have someone else you can annoy?” I asked turning on him. I ended up nearly crashing into his chest. His cool sweet breath washed over me making my head spin.

“Not until three,” he answered barely controlling the laughter in his voice.

I looked up to glare at him, but that was a mistake. His usually easy smile was replaced by an intense expression that made my breath accelerate. His green eyes had caught fire burning the forest hidden there.

It felt like an eternity that we stood there everything else forgotten. Slowly, so slow I knew I had to be dreaming he started to lean down. A blush spread over me that had nothing to do with nervousness or embarrassment. Stopping just a few inches from my face his cool breath washed over me again clouding my already muddled thoughts. I waited for the inevitable.

“You should go,” he said straitening up. “Tabby will be wondering where you are?”

It took me a minute to gather my scattered thoughts. Did I do something wrong? Why did he pull away so quickly? Maybe my breath smelled bad. I discreetly checked to make sure there weren’t any offensive odors coming from me. My breath smelled like the cinnamon gum I chewed during Math, my hair smelled like my shampoo, and I was pretty sure I had remembered underarm deodorant, even though I was running late this morning.

I turned to leave the room again feeling a little awkward. I shouldn’t care that Duncan had just blown me off, but the truth was I did. The fact that he had ended our all too close encounter so abruptly left me off balance. Shaking my head slightly I told myself not to think about it again.

Walking up to the all too crowded Union building, I found Tabby waiting impatiently at our usual meeting place. She didn’t look pleased as I made my way over to her.

“Did you forget how to answer your phone?” she asked clearly annoyed with me.

“What are you talking about?” I asked fishing my phone from my bag. Flipping it up it showed four missed calls and several missed text messages. “Sorry, I was...” I left my sentence unfinished. “Well I’m here now, so what did you need?”

“Hey, Sis,” I heard from over my shoulder.

Tabby gave me an apologetic look before answering. “Hey, Bro,” she answered stepping around me to give Josh a hug.

I felt like someone had taken a peek inside of my head and decided to play a game of spin the wheel and see which dream it lands on. Right now, it was near showing up to school naked and having a date with Josh.

“Hey, Josh,” I said giving him a quick wave and smile.

“Hey, Alina how are you doing?”

“I’m good. How about you, how is school going?”

He was about to answer when Faith came bounding up the sidewalk. “Hey guys,” she said a little breathless. “My professor kept us ten minutes late so he could finish his lecture. It was that or he would take ten minutes before our test on Wednesday. Oh,” she said finally noticing the addition to our little group.

“Faith this is Josh, Tabby’s brother,” I said making the introductions.

She gave him a quick appraisal as she extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you Josh.”

“Same,” Josh said giving Faith a once over.

“Are you joining us for lunch?” I didn’t miss the fact that she was only addressing Josh. Tabby and I exchanged a hopeful glance.

“Yeah,” Josh answered giving Faith his nicest smile.

She blushed slightly as he stepped back to allow her to lead the way. Tabby and I lagged behind to give them some time alone. We watched as they walked in front of us engrossed in their own conversation. Tabby and I were thankfully forgotten.

Chemistry

Walking across campus the wind picked up, blowing the fluffy white clouds across the sky that would turn into a thunderstorm by this afternoon. Right now, the humidity made it feel like I was caught in a sauna.

Tabby was still sleeping when I left the apartment. I leaned in to check on her before I left. She was oblivious to the world, snoring ever so slightly when I shut the door. I wished I could

have slept half as well. I spent the night tossing and turning waking up from frequent nightmares. By this morning, I looked like the victim of a vampire attack.

My usually pale skin had the appearance of flat white wall paint, and I could feel a zit threatening to breakthrough just next to my hairline. I tried not to touch it after I put spot treatment on it. I had considered skipping lab for a fraction of a second after I rolled out of bed, but the fact that I would be dropped from the class if I didn't show up made me change my mind.

Making my way into lab, I scanned the room and found an empty table near the back. I was in no mood to be front and center for anything today.

At the back of the class, I took out a notebook and my novel before leaving my bag in the large pile of other bags. Then slinking over to a table near the back of the room, I took a seat. I managed to avoid detection by the girls who kept looking at the door periodically. I assumed they were checking to see if Duncan was coming.

"Hey," an overly chipper voice said from next to me. I had noticed her coming over as I read my book, but kept hoping she would get the hint before addressing me. It was a vain hope.

"Hey," she said again in a slightly put out tone this time.

I took a deep breath, placed my makeshift bookmark, and put my novel down. The girl leaning on the table next to me reminded me of the generic cheerleaders that seemed to infest high schools.

"Yes," I said barely able to conceal the contempt I felt toward her interruption.

"I was just wondering if you and Duncan were dating. I mean, I noticed you sit next to him all the time and was just curious. You know, because if you're not..." the generic copy allowed the open ending to finish her statement, because if you aren't dating him, I want to. She stood there with a frozen smile awaiting my answer.

"No, I'm not dating him," I answered her inane question. I found her grasp of the English language annoying and wanted her to leave.

"Okay good," she said allowing her breath to escape in a huff. "I'm sorry I didn't even ask your name," she said trying to make up for being rude with a fake attempt at an interest in knowing something about me.

"It's Suzan," I lied.

“It was really nice meeting you Suzan,” the generic cheerleader said as she turned to leave without offering her name in exchange. I reached for my book to block the unpleasant exchange from my memory.

“Oh, hi,” she said in surprise catching my attention. I refused to give into the urge to see what Duncan’s reaction was to the generic girl as she scurried away.

“You know it’s not very polite to lie,” Duncan said taking the seat next to me.

“It’s also not polite to interrupt a good book just to pump someone you don’t know, and have no intention of getting to know, for information.” The sarcasm followed thick.

Laughing Duncan placed his notebook on the table. “You’re right, that would be quite rude. What information did she want?” he asked.

“As if you don’t know,” I said rolling my eyes. Looking at the one eyebrow he raised in a question, I began to wonder. “Oh, come on false modesty doesn’t suit you.” My comment only seemed to confuse him more. “You have to have noticed the fact that almost every girl in the class is staring at you.”

“Oh, that. So what?” he questioned. “It doesn’t matter if the whole world notices you if the one person you want to notice you, doesn’t.”

That’s when our professor called class to order. I found myself pondering the unusually deep statement that Duncan had just made. Forced to pay attention, I focused on class and let my other thoughts fall to the wayside.

The professor went over the rules for lab, the safety equipment that would be needed before our next lab, and a brief overview of our first few projects. “Now for the time that everyone enjoys, it’s time to pick lab partners. Since we are all adults here at least in age,” the professor said in an aside, “I figure you all are perfectly capable of picking partners yourself. I’ll pass around a roster if you would write your name below that of your partners. Please print legibly. Once you have finished you are free to leave.”

I waited in nervous anticipation as several heads, including the generic cheerleader’s, turned to look longingly at Duncan. A few of the faces gave me a quick glare; the cheerleader gave me a plastic smile. Her friends watched her progress back to the table Duncan and I occupied. Their expressions looked more suited to a red-eyed tree frog, with their eyes the same vivid color and about to pop out of their heads.

“Hi,” the generic girl said in a chipper voice with an edge of barely concealed hysteria. I choked back the laugh that was threatening to explode from me.

“Hello,” Duncan said turning to address the girl.

The cheerleader’s face went blank. I disguised the chuckle that escaped my lips by coughing. She didn’t seem to notice my slip, though, I was sure Duncan caught it. After a few moments, she seemed to remember how to speak again.

“Oh, sorry, I didn’t get the chance to introduce myself earlier. My name is Kristy with a “K,” she said blushing as she looked down. I tried to cool the anger that flared inside me at her playing shy.

“Well, I was just wondering,” she said looking up at him through her lashes, “if you wanted to be lab partners. I’m not the best when it comes to chemistry and you seem to be so much better at than I am. So, I thought that maybe you could help me.”

As she finished her speech, she reached over to Duncan’s hand that was resting on the table trying to stroke her fingertips over it. I made myself sit on my stool. I wanted to hear his answer to her query, and see his reaction to her advances.

It felt like forever before Duncan finally made a move. Just as the generic girls fingers were about to make contact with his skin he lifted hand to grab the back of his neck. The move was so smooth it looked like he was taking a little extra time to contemplate her question. I made myself face forward, telling myself that I didn’t care what he said in response to her advances, but I kept a close watch out of the corner of my eye.

“Thank you very much,” Duncan said, “but Suzan has already asked me.”

My head snapped around to stare at the back of his head. Turning to look at me from over his shoulder, I could see the laughter sparkling in his green eyes. In front of him though, I could see the jealousy written in red on the cheerleader’s face. It looked like she was trying to set me on fire with her thoughts alone. I turned to face forward again controlling my expression.

“Oh,” Kristy with a K said as she attempted to hide her dismay, jealousy, and anger before Duncan turned around again. She managed to plaster a smile in place just in time as he gave her his full attention.

She continued after a brief pause. “Ah, sorry I thought...,” she stumbled trying to regain her composure. “Okay, well maybe we can plan something else. I mean we could set up, like a study group or something.”

I had to give her credit on her persistence as well as her ability to regroup so quickly. I wondered how Duncan would react to this change of tactics.

“Maybe,” he answered in a polite tone.

I wished I could see his face then to see if he was really considering her offer, or if he was simply giving her a polite brush off. Instead, I had to study Kristy’s reaction to see how she interpreted his answer. She didn’t look as crest fallen as I hoped she would.

“Great, I’ll talk to you later so we can set something up.” Kristy turned and bounced away happily.

“I should pick a different lab partner,” I said as Duncan turned around chuckling to himself a little.

“Who would be my partner then?” he asked false hurt coloring his words.

“I’m sure bouncy up there would be happy to oblige,” I said just as Kristy turned to look back at our table to check the reaction her visit caused. Duncan frowned at my dig.

He recovered quickly as the list for lab partners made it into his hands first, delivered by yet another cheerleader clone. “So do you want to be lab partners or not?” he asked giving me his mischievous grin, pen in hand.

“Are you asking me now? I thought we had already settled this. At least that’s what you told bouncy.” I gave him a sarcastic smirk.

“Partners or not?” he asked again his green eyes smoldering.

My breath caught in my throat, and it felt like I would choke on it. “Partners,” I managed to squeak out in little more than a whisper.

“There, now was that so hard?” he asked releasing me from his gaze. Writing my name under his without allowing me a second chance to change my mind, he passed the paper to the next table.

I felt a little heady as the oxygen flooded into my lungs again. I hated when I did that. I couldn’t understand why it was so difficult for me to maintain a set breathing pattern when I was around him. I gathered my books and headed for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Duncan asked catching up to me as I found my bag in the jumble of others on the back table.

“Are we playing twenty questions today?” I asked shoving my books in my bag careful not to make eye contact.

“I don’t know. Are we?” he asked in a flippant tone.

I couldn’t stop the smile that spread pulled at my lips as I threw my bag over my shoulder. I tried to cover it up by letting out an exasperated huff and shaking my head. I didn’t fool him one bit. He was getting ready to say something when we were interrupted for the second time in the past hour and a half.

“Duncan,” the overly bubbly voice came from behind my shoulder. “Oh, hey Suzan,” Kristy said to me in such a way, that made it apparent, I was not to be part of this conversation.

“It was nice talking to you,” I said to Duncan ignoring the flames I saw flare behind the jungle green of his eyes. “It was nice meeting you,” I said to the generic Kristy and made my way toward the door.

I heard Kristy start in as I made it to the small group of girls glaring at me in mass. “Me and some of the rest of the class are going out for lunch. We were wondering if you’d like to join us.” From the sound of her voice, she was sure of victory.

“No,” Duncan said causing me to skid to stop on the threshold of the door. “I have plans with someone else,” he said in a flat tone. I fought the urge to turn around and see the scene for myself. Instead, I made myself put one foot in front of the other and cross the threshold.

“A rain check then?” she asked, refusing to accept a no.

“I don’t think so,” he answered leaving no room for her to maneuver.

I wanted to run down the hall and outside as fast as possible. It felt like time was moving at an interminably slow pace. I didn’t turn to look behind me, even as I saw several females along the hall turn to look behind me. I could see the awe in their eyes and was sure my own often reflected the same thing.

“Are you just going to leave me to the wolves?” Duncan whispered from over my shoulder.

“Didn’t you hear?” I asked keeping my face forward. “I didn’t leave you anywhere.”

“How do you figure that one?” Duncan asked playing into my hand.

“It wasn’t me,” I said holding back my laughter, “it was Suzan.”

“Oh, that’s cold,” Duncan, said coming to a stop in the middle of the hall.

I turned to look at him from over my shoulder to see his expression. The laughter I was just barely holding back burst forth. One of his eyebrows was held high and his mouth was curled into a mischievous grin that would have made Dionysus jealous.

Walking swiftly to my side still smiling he asked, “And what my dear lady have I done to deserve your wrath?”

The playful light behind his wild eyes sent a thrill down my spine. “I don’t know,” I said. “There was something about me asking you to be my lab partner. You might as well have thrown me into a nest of harpies.”

“Like you said, ‘it wasn’t you, it was Suzan.’ Besides, I would say they are more like sirens than harpies,” he answered in a matter of fact tone.

“Maybe to men, but beauty soon fades,” I added taking a step forward.

“You’re good,” Duncan said smiling at me, mischief still in his eyes. I rolled my eyes in response. “We should get going though,” he said holding the door for me.

“Thank you,” I said in response to his chivalry, “but exactly where are we going?” I asked my voice heavy with sarcasm. “I don’t remember being asked anything.”

“Mm, you know I think you’re right. So, is there any place in particular that you would like to eat?”

“Did I hear a request in there?” I asked raising my eyebrows in a question. He laughed in his musical lilt. I couldn’t help but join him. “You’re incorrigible,” I said shaking my head.

“Guilty as charged,” he said with a slight bow.

We continued our walk in an awkward silence, at least on my part. I should have had some destination in mind, like home or the library. Instead, I was content to walk by Duncan’s side and be quiet, but it couldn’t last forever.

“I should get going,” I said glancing up at the darkening thunderheads.

“Where are we headed?” he asked offering me his arm.

I stubbornly shoved my hands in the pockets of my blue jeans. “I could have sworn I said, ‘I should be going,’ not we,” I said walking past him on my way to the closest bus stop.

Grabbing my arm and turning me around to face him, I felt my breath catch. I could see the playful gleam smoldering behind his green eyes. “Has anyone ever told you that you are incredibly stubborn?” His sweet breath washed over me wreaking havoc with my thought processes.

I tried to free myself from his cool embrace. “It may have come up a time or two,” I said smiling in spite of my annoyance. Shaking his head slightly at me, he didn’t appear to be the least bit deterred by my feeble attempts at subterfuge.

“Come on,” he said abruptly releasing me from his embrace and grabbing my hand. He pulled me along behind him like an impatient parent trying to drag their child out of the toy store.

“Where are we going?” I asked trying to concentrate on not tripping over my feet.

“You’ll just have to see when we get there,” he teased.

Thrills

After a minute, Duncan came to a stop on the edge of the sidewalk. Pulling a black and white leather jacket out, he handed it to me. “Put this on,” he ordered.

I raised my eyebrows in a question and narrowed my eyes in suspicion.

“What you don’t trust me?” he asked.

“Well...” I said looking at the jacket like it might turn around and attack me.

Rolling his eyes in frustration he was about to take the jacket back when I pulled my bag off and put the jacket on. The smell was amazing. A mixture of leather and adrenaline, it was intoxicating. Pulling the too long sleeves up, I grabbed my bag from the ground and looked down at the effect of my wardrobe change.

Duncan must have been doing the same thing because he suddenly blurted out, “Even better than I imagined.”

I felt the heat in my face at his comment and the way his eyes seemed to smolder behind the green. The smile on his lips didn’t help my erratic breathing and heart rate.

Grabbing my hand again, he pulled me out into the parking lot filled with scooters. Looking around I thought the jacket was a little over kill for a vehicle that could go forty miles an hour if you were lucky. Walking through the sea of never ending mopeds, I began to wonder how you could even tell them apart. Did people just keep trying their key in each one until they hit the jackpot? That’s when I saw the reason for the jacket.

“There is no way,” I said balking at the intimidating black white and silver Honda appearing like a shark in a sea of minnows. I stood stalk still and refused to move another inch. The motorcycle looked fast even in stillness.

“Come on, Alina. I promise to keep you safe,” Duncan assured me. I took a few steps forward at his assurance.

“I don’t know,” I said biting my lip. “Will I even be able to fit on it?”

Duncan laughed. “I wouldn’t have brought it if I thought you couldn’t. Now come on,” he said pulling me the last few steps up to the intimidating machine.

“Just one more thing,” he said reaching around to the other side of the motorcycle. He brought back a matching full-face helmet.

“I know this isn’t the most flattering accessory, but I promised to keep you safe,” he said holding the helmet. He was about to give me the safety equipment, but instead, he reached around behind my head to pull the tie out of my hair. Smiling as my hair fell around my shoulders, he took a deep breath.

Giving me the helmet, I began to place it over my head when Duncan reached up and ran his fingers across my cheek. I could feel the heat as blood rushed to where the tips of his fingers had briefly touched my skin. He frowned as I finished placing helmet over my face. In that moment, it looked like he might try to remove it.

Inside the helmet, I felt a little claustrophobic. The muffled sounds coming from the outside world didn’t help with the slight sensory deprivation.

“You ready,” Duncan asked a little smug in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans.

Nodding my head a little awkwardly Duncan appeared amused. I felt like a child who raided her father’s closet and was playing dress up. “After you,” I said pointing to the sleek machine. My voice came out muffled through all the padding and reverberated in my ears slightly.

Throwing his leg over the bike, I became even more nervous. The last thing I wanted to do was fall on my butt trying to mount the machine. With the added oversized gear, I was pretty sure that I would be getting to know the asphalt in a more intimate way. Patting the small section of seat behind him encouragingly, I cringed.

Gabbing Duncan’s shoulders for support I took a deep breath. Lifting my leg over the bike, I focused on not catching my foot on the raised section on the back. Hugging the fiberglass and molded leather seat with my thighs, I felt a slight thrill at just sitting on the powerful machine.

It took a moment to adjust myself to this new experience. I realized after a second or two that was clutching Duncan’s shoulders a little too tightly. Releasing my grip, I tried to find another place to hold on as he turned the key starting the engine. Reflexively, I leaned forward grabbing around Duncan’s waist as the engine roared to life. I could have sworn I heard him

laugh, but with the sound coming from the bike and the slight vibrations coming through the frame, I couldn't be sure.

"Do you mind a little walking?" he asked taking the helmet from my waiting hands.

"And if I do?" I asked back playfully. It was easier to keep everything light and superficial.

Shrugging his shoulders a playful glint was in his eyes, "I guess I could carry you."

Pulling off his jacket, I reluctantly handed it back to him. "I think I can manage."

"Suite yourself," he said putting his jacket away.

"Will you tell me where we're going now that you've dragged me downtown?"

"You don't like surprises, do you?" he asked giving me a playful look. I rolled my eyes in response.

"I tried this little pizza place on the corner of main and fourth street last week. It was actually, pretty good. Not quite on par with pizza in New York, but definitely worth the trip," Duncan said as we crossed the street.

"Sounds great," I said relaxing a little more.

I knew the place he was talking about. We walked into the one time house that was now converted into a pizzeria, just before it started to rain. The loud drumming added to the noisy room.

The little restaurant was cozy. A small bar that stretched down the left side of the wall was crowded with people ordering pizza by the slice. Small groups stood huddled close together at the front waiting to be seated in the crowded dining room. The place was filled as much with people as with tables and chairs. It was a wonder how the food ended up on the table rather than the customers half the time.

"Can I help you?" a server asked addressing Duncan. She was about average height and weight, with dyed black hair. I had to admit she was pretty in an unusual sort of way.

"A table for two," he answered smiling.

Turning to look at me, I received a dismissive glance. "If you'll just follow me," she said addressing Duncan only. Turning, she led the way to a table at the back corner of the small dining room.

Pulling the seat out for me Duncan missed the longing stare our server gave him. She left us alone for the moment to let us look at the menus. I sat with my back to the wall facing the

crowded room. Taking up his position across the table from me, Duncan slid smoothly into his chair despite the close quarters.

“So what’s your favorite pizza?” Duncan asked.

“Cheese,” I answered, “with extra cheese and a side of cheese.”

Raising his eyebrow at my unorthodox response, he laughed. “I take it you like cheese,” Duncan commented. I only smiled and bit my lower lip in response.

Returning from her errand on the other side of the room the black haired server asked Duncan for our order. I didn’t miss the hopeful gaze directed at his profile.

“I’ll have a coke,” he answered looking to me for what I wanted.

“I’ll have the same,” I said looking down.

“Two cokes then,” Duncan corrected. “And a medium pizza, half extra cheese, and half meat lovers.”

Not bothering to write down the simple order the server left with a disappointed look on her face. I had a feeling it was due to the lack of interest shown her by Duncan.

“So, exactly where are you from?” I asked Duncan after a few moments of silence.

“Originally from England, but I traveled a lot after I came of age.”

I raised my eyebrow at his odd answer. I didn’t think anyone said ‘came of age’ anymore. “I thought you had a little bit of an accent. So why did you come here? I mean why didn’t you stay in England or a bigger city?”

The black haired sever returned with our drinks then. Placing them on the table, she smiled and batted her lashes at Duncan. He didn’t seem to notice.

“It was time for a change,” he answered with a shrug after the server left.

“School had nothing to do with it then?” I asked genuinely curious.

“Not really,” he said with a chuckle. “It makes the day pass, I get to meet interesting people, and it’s better than having to work for a living.”

I laughed. It was exactly the answer I thought he would give. When my phone started to play Tabby’s familiar ring tone a moment later, I had to fish it out of my bag.

“Who is it?” Duncan asked leaning back waiting for me to finish reading her message.

“It’s Tabby. She was wondering what I’m up to.”

I sent a text back letting her know I was out with some people from chemistry. I didn’t bother to tell her I was out with Duncan. I didn’t want all the questions or accusations that

would come with that revelation. I knew she was still interested in him despite my many warnings that he may not be what he appears. Yet here I was, out with the very man I was telling my friend she should avoid. I felt like a hypocrite.

The server returned with our pizza while I was texting Tabby. She used the opportunity to her advantage.

“Would you like me to get anything else?” she asked completely focused on Duncan. I could hear the other meaning in her words and tried not to think about it.

“Just a refill,” he said pointing to both his and my glass.

She looked a little crest fallen as she collected the almost empty glasses. She gave him a longing glance as she walked away. When she caught me watching her she gave me a quick nervous smile and walked a little faster.

“Sorry about that. Tabby was checking to see if I needed a lift home,” I said flipping my phone closed.

“That was nice of her,” he said nodding a thank you to the server as she left us our refills. She threw him a few more glances he ignored, but the black haired Goth girl did not linger this time.

“That’s Tabby,” I shrugged.

“How long have you two known each other?”

“Since, we were six. What’s so funny?” I asked as Duncan chuckled lightly.

“Nothing, it’s just explains a lot.”

“What does?” I asked starting to get a little annoyed.

“It’s nothing bad,” he said trying to soothe my temper. It didn’t work very well considering it was taking all his effort not to burst out laughing. “The two of you are just very different people. I was curious how you met and hit it off so well.”

“We’re not as different as you think. We have a lot of similarities. Don’t get me wrong Tabby is far more trusting than I am, and much more outgoing, but we have a lot of the same values.”

Duncan just smiled.

The pizza was good and the conversation was light and easy. The rain had stopped for the time being, so we decided to attempt an exit.

“Do you think we can make it before it starts up again?” Duncan asked looking up.

I studied the clouds for a moment. They were still a threatening dark gray. The wind was whipping my ponytail around to lash my face. The temperature had dropped from the earlier downpour. With the steam coming from the street, it felt more like a steam room than a busy downtown area.

“How fast can you go?” I asked as we started walking again.

Duncan gave me an evil grin that actually made me nervous.

Evasions

“Where have you been?” Tabby said a little shocked at my appearance. “I thought you said you had a ride home. What did they do drop you at the entrance? Did you take the bus home after I told you I would pick you up?” She glared at me suspecting that I had. One question flowed directly into the next leaving me no time to answer any of them.

“Are you done?” I asked shivering so hard I could feel my teeth clicking together.

My arms and legs were numb from the rain pelting me. Duncan had gone insanely fast to try and beat the rain. I was actually surprised we weren’t a smear on the side of the road with the way he was weaving in and out of traffic. It didn’t matter though. The rain had started again shortly after we left the restaurant. It was only a light drizzle, but by the time we made half way to my apartment, it was coming down in sheets. I would have asked him to pull over, but by then I was already soaked through.

“I did get a lift home, but they drove a moped. I didn’t know until it was too late to back out.” The uncontrolled shaking added to the believability of my fictitious account.

Tabby sighed. “You know being irresponsible is my thing. You always know better.”

I shrugged trying to smile but it was more of a grimace. “I’m going to shower if you’re done with the interrogations.”

Running through the apartment as quickly as I could, I made it to my bathroom. After nearly falling over several times, I managed to peel my clothes off. Leaving them in a wet mess on the floor, I hopped into a hot shower. It took a few minutes, but eventually the hot water stopped the shivers that kept racking my body.

“So what have you been up to all day?” I asked joining Tabby on the sofa.

“You’re looking at it,” she said grinning.

“You’ve been watching television all day? Don’t you have a paper due in English next Monday?”

“Yes.”

I rolled my eyes. “And you say I’m the irresponsible one?”

Tabby chuckled softly as she reached for the bag of chips sitting on the coffee table. “How was your lunch?” she asked looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

“It was good.” I tried to sound nonchalant.

“So, who did you go with?”

“Just some other students in my class, they’re starting a study group.”

“Are there any cute guys in the group?”

I swallowed. “You know there is more to life than guys.”

Tabby looked at me like I was speaking Greek. “That’s your opinion, and you didn’t answer my question.”

Trying to buy some time to think, I took a couple chips from the bag Tabby was holding and quickly shoved them in my mouth. “There may have been one, but really I didn’t pay close attention. There was another girl in the class who was trying to hook up with him.”

Tabby shook her head. I was the only girl she would ever believe, would ignore the only cute guy in a room. “Speaking of hooking up, I need your help.”

I raised an eyebrow in a question.

“I’m going out to dinner with Duncan tonight and I need... Are you okay? Li-Li... talk to me.”

I could feel the points of the chips digging into my throat as I tried to cough them up. A full minute passed before the coughing spasms started to dissipate.

Tabby brought me a glass of water to help sooth my throat. I could taste blood in my mouth. Every time I swallowed, I could feel the cuts in my esophagus. It would be raw for the rest of the day, at least.

“Are you okay?” Concern dripped from her words.

“Yeah, I’m fine, just trying to breath in my food instead of swallowing it. You were saying,” I prompted.

She gave me a questioning look, not sure, if she should ask for my help. Her excitement won out. “I was wondering if you help me pick out something.”

“Sure.” I cringed on the inside. This was going to be a very long afternoon.

Tabby finally decided on a flirty little sundress and a pair of basket weave wedge sandals. I helped to fix her hair leaving it in soft curls that fell around her shoulders. Pulling back a couple strands, I held them in place with some bobby pins. She looked gorgeous as usual.

“Are you going to change before Duncan gets here?” She asked giving me a quick once over frowning.

“I didn’t realize he was coming here to see me.” She missed my biting sarcasm. I left her alone so she could finish getting ready.

When the bell rang a minute later, Tabby stuck her head out of the bedroom. “Is that Duncan?”

“Are we expecting other guest?” I asked going to the front door.

She rolled her eyes. “If its Duncan, tell him I’m still getting ready,” she then ducked quickly back into her room to finish her makeup.

The bell rang a second time just as I made it to the door. “Just a second,” I said unlocking the deadbolt.

Swinging the door back, I found Duncan standing there. He had changed since lunch. In place of the t-shirt and blue jeans, he was wearing black slacks and a white dress shirt with blue pin stripes. He had rolled up the sleeves leaving his lower arms exposed. He looked like a model getting ready to pose for a photo shoot.

I could feel the pangs of jealousy gnawing at my stomach. “Tabby will be ready in a minute.” I held the door open waiting for him to come inside.

“Thanks,” he said crossing the threshold.

I walked over to the sofa and grabbed a throw pillow to hold in front of me. I didn’t bother to start a conversation or offer any refreshments while he waited for Tabby to finish getting ready. I managed to ignore him for the most part, but he kept staring at me like he was trying to figure out some strange puzzle.

“What are you staring at?” I asked my annoyance boiling over.

“I’m trying to figure out if I liked you better soaking wet or in your pajamas.”

I blushed red. “In case you forgot, you are here to take out my best friend.” I glared at him from my seat on the sofa.

He gave me one of his smirks in response to my glare. “I’ll let you know what I decide.”

Tabby came out joining us, so I didn't have time to respond to his comment.

"Hello," Duncan said standing up. "You look beautiful."

I clenched my teeth together in frustration. When he leaned over to give Tabby a brief embrace, I was surprised by the gnawing jealousy I felt. Releasing her from his arms, I could see the effects of her all too short encounter written on her face.

"You look really great yourself," Tabby said blushing and a little breathless. I tried to focus on the television.

"Where is your restroom?" Duncan asked.

Tabby quickly threw me a glance. The only bathrooms in the apartment were located in our respective rooms. Having just exited the disaster area in her room I knew what she wanted. He was probably only using this as an excuse to give Tabby and I time alone. I couldn't help feeling there was another motive as well.

Looking at Tabby, I gave Duncan the directions to my bathroom. "Through the door," I pointed behind me. "It is on the left as you pass the dresser."

"Thank you," he said giving me a sly grin. It took all the control I had not to react. As soon as he was out of earshot, Tabby joined me on the sofa.

"Oh, isn't he gorgeous." She traced the path he had taken into my room with her eyes. "So what do you think of him?" Her face was expectant.

"He's attractive," I answered. She looked at me like I was I had a screw loose. "I still think he's a player and you should be careful."

"First of all, he is a lot more than just attractive, and," she said glaring at me, "you don't really know if he's a player. Besides even if he is," she shrugged her shoulders dismissing any concerns I had.

I shook my head. I really had no right to say anything to her. Hadn't I just returned from lunch with Duncan a few hours ago? In truth, Tabby just didn't care if he was a player. To her the fact that he was the most beautiful man she had ever seen was enough to erase all faults. I sighed.

"Shall we go?" Duncan asked joining us again.

"Certainly," Tabby said accepting his hand with a look back at me. She quickly mouthed, "Oh my god," to me before looking forward again.

I stood up and followed the happy couple to the door so I could lock it behind them. Duncan threw a smirk my way as I held the door for them. Locking the deadbolt, I leaned my head against the cool hard surface, letting all of the air out of my lungs in an exasperated sigh. I turned back to the apartment exhausted by everything that happened today.

I didn't know how I was supposed to feel. I was probably reading too much into everything with Duncan. He was obviously much more interested in Tabby than me. That or he was just playing the game on different courts to suit our personalities.

As I walked back to the sofa, I remembered that Duncan had been in my room. I knew I was just being paranoid, but I went into my room. Nothing looked out of place or moved as I checked. I shook my head feeling stupid. Turning all the lights off I returned to the living room to relax until Tabby got home.

* * *

My legs felt like jell-o as I made my way over to turn the buzzing alarm off. I glared at the bright numbers telling me the time. The last thing I wanted was to be reminded how little sleep I had gotten.

Tabby had gotten in a little after midnight. I had fallen asleep on the sofa waiting for her to get home. I knew, even though she had said not to wait up, that she would want to talk. I didn't realize how long it would take. When two o'clock rolled around I finally said, "Good night."

Hopping into the shower, I tried not to think about yesterday. Today was a new day and it would have its own share of disappointments. At least I would be able to see Samuel in English. I was a little nervous about that though, because I wasn't sure which side of him I would see.

Turning off the steaming water, I stepped out of the shower. Grabbing my towel, I began to dry off. It wasn't until I was getting ready to wrap my hair up to help absorb the extra moisture that I noticed the note on my mirror.

I started at the reflective surface trying to make the words disappear. Someone had obviously used their finger to leave the message. They knew I wouldn't be able to see it until the room was filled with steam most likely after a shower. I had to give him credit for creativity.

‘I decided. I like you better in this.’ The message was written at the top of the mirror leaving my nude form blurry, but visible through the fog. I could see Duncan’s smiling face as I stared at his handy work.

Shock

I was still fuming when I got off the bus at school. I wasn’t sure if was supposed to be creeped out, mad, flattered, or maybe happy. The indecision about what I should feel, and the fact that I couldn’t even tell my best friend left me irritated.

Walking into English I scanned the room. Samuel was nowhere to be seen. So much for him showing up to class, I sighed. Disappointed, I was about to walk to my seat when a beautifully silky voice stopped me.

“Good morning,” Samuel said from over my shoulder.

I felt my stomach flip at the sound of his voice. “Good morning.” I watched as the heads in the room turned and followed our progress.

“How was your day off?” He asked as we turned down our respective aisles keeping pace with one another.

I couldn’t stop the heat from reaching my cheeks. “Um, I didn’t get the day off. I have Chem. lab on Tuesdays. What about you?” I turned to look at his perfect features unwilling to lose the opportunity.

He studied my expression for a moment before answering. “No labs on Tuesday. I’m afraid I didn’t do anything exciting though.”

I reached my seat all too soon. I let my bag fall from my shoulder to the floor. I didn’t want my conversation with Samuel to end, but his seat was three back from mine. So, I was shocked when I saw him preparing to sit across from me. I sat down feeling a little unsteady. There was no way I would be able to pay attention to Professor Burns with him so close.

“You mentioned you lived in Florida and California, how did that happen?”

“Well,” I said biting my lip absently while I tried to think about how to explain it. “I lived in California until I was four. My Mom wanted to move to Gainesville to be closer to her Father. He was a professor here at UF. So, my Dad decided he could practice here just as easily as in California.”

“Your Father is a doctor then?” he continued questioning me.

“Yeah, he’s a neurologist at the UCLA medical center.” I blushed a little at mentioning my Dad’s profession.

A crooked smile was Samuel’s only response to my all too easy blush. “So your Father is back in California.”

“Yes. My parents divorced when I was eleven. He stuck around Gainesville for a year until he was offered the position in Los Angeles.”

“You didn’t go with him to California.” It was a statement not a question.

“My friends were here in Gainesville. The thought of having to start all over when I was twelve was not very appealing.”

I was about to ask Samuel a question, but was interrupted. Faith was waiting to pass. I sat up ignoring the open-mouthed stare she was directing at me. I knew that lunch was going to be a minefield.

I didn’t get the chance to renew my conversation with Samuel after Faith’s arrival. Professor Burns started class and further speaking was not an option. He assigned a short story to read from our book and a one-page paper due at the end of the class.

I took my book out and attempted to read. The story wasn’t very long but with my frequent glances over at Samuel, it took me more time than usual. I eventually let my hair fall as a divider between us. With the temptation to stare, if not under control at least in check, I managed to finish my paper.

I gathered my things and tried to leave as quietly as possible. Samuel appeared to be doing the same thing. I was pretty sure he had completed the assignment several minutes before me.

Walking to the front of the room, Samuel turned in his paper. He waited by the door for me to join him. In my rush to get out, I managed to kick someone’s book bag. I was about to apologize to the owner, but thought better of it. If she had the ability to kill at will, I was pretty sure, I would be top of her hit list.

I mumbled, “Thank you,” to Samuel as I walked through the exit. He followed me out of the room and let the door swing silently closed behind him.

We walked in silence for few moments. I was still in shock that I was actually standing next to him. The sudden urge to reach out and touch him came over me. I just wanted to make sure he was solid, not a mirage brought on by stress.

“How is your paper going?” he asked breaking the silence that hung in the air.

“It’s coming along,” I said biting my lip. The truth was I had finished it last night while Tabby was out with Duncan.

“Is everything okay?” Samuel asked a hint of concern in his voice.

I realized I was frowning. Thinking about Duncan, in any way today, was not a good idea.

“Yes, it’s fine. I’m just trying to figure something out,” I answered brightening a little.

“Is it something I can help with?”

“No,” I answered too quickly. Samuel gave me an odd look. “No, I mean... it’s... okay, I’ll figure it out. Thanks though,” I added awkwardly on the end.

Samuel laughed under his breath. I could feel blood pooling in my cheeks.

“Well, if there is anything I can do...”

“Thanks,” I said my cheeks growing hotter.

We continued in an awkward silence for a while. It felt like he wanted to say something, but neither of us spoke. After a little while, I made an attempt to start up the conversation again.

“Did you leave your family back in Washington?” The image of the couple with him at the theater came to mind.

A dark cloud seemed to pass over Samuel’s features. “My family passed away a long time ago.” The pain in his voice echoed with years of grief.

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” My words felt woefully inadequate. From his entire demeanor it appeared the loss was very hard. There was something else in the sound of his voice that made it seem like he wasn’t just grieving their loss.

“It’s alright; it was a long time ago. Do you have any other family besides your parents?” Samuel asked leading the subject back to me.

I felt like he was hiding something. I was probably just being paranoid. He just didn’t want to talk about a subject that obviously caused him pain.

“No, it’s just my parents and I. My Dad’s brother died of a brain tumor when he was twelve, my Mom was an only child, and all of my grandparents have passed.” I shrugged not knowing what else to say.

“Is that why your Dad became a neurosurgeon?”

“Yeah, he loved his brother a lot.”

We stopped at a little pavilion in front of the building that held my Math class. I checked the time. Class would start in a little over five minutes. It didn't feel like that much time had passed.

"What are you doing for lunch?" Samuel asked in a rush of words.

"What me?" I asked looking around in shock. There had to be someone else he was talking to, but no one was around us and there was no phone pressed to his ear.

Samuel chuckled, the gentle melody wreaking havoc with my thoughts. "Yes."

"Uh... I'm meeting Tabby and Faith at the Union after Chemistry."

"What time is that?"

"In about two hours," I answered.

"Do you think your friends would mind terribly if I joined you for lunch?"

I stared at Samuel like I was an idiot. It looked like he was getting ready to ask if I understood, or worse take back his offer so I answered quickly. "No. I think that would be okay."

"Good, I'll see you at lunch." He then turned and waved good-bye from over his shoulder.

Annoyed

I was late to Math. It took me a few minutes to remember I even had a class. When I did remember, I ended up on the opposite end of the building from my room.

Walking in ten minutes late to class, I tried not to interrupt my professor. I blushed, deep red as I took my seat and ignored the rest of the lecture. The commotion from the students standing and gathering their things to go let me know class had ended. I quickly grabbed my books and made for the exit.

Halfway to Chemistry, I remembered the incident from this morning. I debated whether I should skip or not. I didn't make up my mind until I was walking into class. Duncan was nowhere to be seen. Maybe he had skipped.

"Hello, beautiful," the smooth baritone drifted to my ears. It didn't sound quite so sweet today.

"Hello," was my only reply. I still hadn't decided how I felt about everything yet. I needed more time I didn't have.

“You smell very nice today. Are you using a new shampoo or body wash?” The two girls in front of us turned back to stare. I blushed red. I was sure Duncan was smiling.

“No,” I answered his not so subtle question. I decided to take a preemptive strike before his questions could get any closer to the mark. “How was your date with Tabby?”

A slight frown pulled at the corners of his mouth before bouncing back into his ever-present grin. “The food was good. The company was good. It was good.”

“That’s good,” I said smiling in spite of myself. “Tabby said it was one of the best dates she’s ever been on.”

Duncan shrugged, as he pulled my chair out. I pulled out another and sat down. A slight chuckle escaped his lips as he sat down in the chair he had intended for me.

“Really Alina, how long are you planning to play this game?”

I pretended like I didn’t hear him. Maybe if I ignored him he would go away.

“Tabby is a nice girl, but not exactly what I am looking for.”

“And what exactly are you looking for?” I turned to ask him playing into his hand.

His eyes smoldered when he answered, “More of a challenge.”

I had to take a moment to gather my thoughts. I knew I had a good reply but staring into the fire that was burning the forest in his eyes, I forgot it. “I’ll tell Tabby to start playing hard to get.” My words came out in little more than a breathless whisper.

“Excuse me,” the overly chipper voice of Kristy came from behind me.

I sat up. I hadn’t realized I was leaning toward Duncan. I was thankful for the interruption, even if it was Kristy.

“Oh, hi again,” she said sounding like a cheerleader on helium. “It’s Suzie, right?”

It took me a moment to place the name, “Uh, no it’s actually Alina,” I answered. She stared at me confused. I didn’t bother to help her. I knew she was second guessing herself.

“Well, me and some of the other girls in the class were wondering if the two of you wanted to join us for lunch.” Kristy stood there staring at Duncan every few seconds to judge his reaction.

I knew this game from high school. They didn’t want me with them at lunch, but they did want Duncan. If it meant inviting me to get him there, they would. Once we were out to lunch, they would make sure he never wanted another thing to do with me. Needless to say, I wasn’t a fan of the petty game play.

“That would be great,” I said doing my best impression of cheerleader. “Unfortunately, I have plans for lunch. I’m sure Duncan would love to go,” I said turning around to give him my best interpretation of his evil smirk.

He didn’t miss a beat. Looking straight at me, he answered her. “Thank you so much Kristy. As I said during our last conversation, I have plans. In fact, I’m sure Alina and I will be unavailable for the duration of the semester.” He turned to look at her for the first time giving her a liquid honey smile.

“It’s okay. I understand,” she said giving Duncan a slightly disappointed look. She didn’t appear as crest fallen as I thought she would. I received a dagger like smirk. “If you change your mind,” she said leaving the ending up to him. She was definitely still hopeful he would lose interest in me, or at least that he would change his focus to someone more in line with her type.

“What are you doing for the rest of the semester?” I asked once Kristy was out of earshot.

Duncan only laughed refusing to answer my question.

We turned out attention to the front of the room as the Professor called class to order. I found it hard to focus as she ran through some of the familiar points on the periodic table. It was a relief when she finally dismissed us.

“Where are you running off to in such a hurry?” Duncan asked as I quickly shoved my books into my bag.

“To lunch,” I said as if that was obvious.

“Where are we eating today?” he asked throwing his bag over his shoulder.

“Well, I’m eating at the Union. As for you, well... where do you eat?” I asked as we headed for the exit amidst longing stares and bitter green-eyed glares.

“I guess I can always try the Union. I heard it isn’t too bad.”

“You have fun with that,” I said taking a quick right into a crowd of people.

* * *

“Are you stalking me?” I asked after exiting the restroom and finding Duncan waiting.

“No. Do you want me to?” he asked giving me a wicked grin.

Sighing heavily, I rolled my eyes. “What are you still doing here?” I asked trying not to get annoyed.

“I’m taking you to lunch.”

“I’m meeting Tabby and Faith for lunch at the Union.”

“And,” he said raising one of his eyebrows in an almost irresistible invitation.

Glaring at him from the corner of my eye, I had to control the urge to stick my tongue out.

“And, my best friend likes you.”

“What does that have to do with us going to lunch?”

I let out exasperated huff. “I’ll see you in class Friday.” I said speeding up before I did or said something stupid.

Frustrated

Walking up to the Union, I scanned the crowd. Tabby texted me she was going to be a couple minutes late, but Faith should be here soon. A face near the entrance caught my attention. I couldn’t stop the smile that spread over my features at seeing him.

I waved hello, as I walked over to meet Samuel. He returned the gesture, but seemed reluctant to smile. He looked frustrated or confused I couldn’t be sure which. It looked like he might bolt at any moment.

“Hello,” I said coming up next to him. I bit my lip to help relieve some of the nervousness I felt.

“Hello,” he answered his eyebrows pulled in at the center.

“How was class?” I asked trying to start a conversation.

“It was good, how about yours?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered my brow furrowing. “To be honest I didn’t really pay attention. I think they were okay.”

He appeared to relax a little at my sad attempt at a joke. A crooked smile played at the corner of his perfect mouth.

“Did you want to head inside and try to find a table? My friends may be a little late.”

He was about to answer when Tabby’s voice caught me off guard. “Li-Li there you are,” she came running up and threw her arms around me. I was a little overwhelmed by her enthusiasm. “Look who I ran into on my way here. Oh,” she said noticing Samuel standing next to me.

My eyes focused on the face standing behind her. This had to be a scene out of one of my nightmares. An evil grin was in place on Duncan's face. I had to control the urge to be rude.

"Hello Duncan," I said in a barely civil voice.

"Hello again," he said playing along.

"Tabby, this is Samuel," I said making the brief introductions.

"Hi, Samuel," Tabby said giving me an approving glance out of the corner of her eye.

"It's nice to meet you," Samuel said with warm civility as they shook hands briefly.

"And this is," I began but was interrupted quickly by Duncan.

"Hello, Samuel. How have you been?" His voice sounded playful.

Samuel stiffened at Duncan's familiar address. I couldn't help notice his hand clenched in a tight fist. The tension was palpable in the air.

"Hello Duncan." The effort it took for Samuel to remain civil was evident in every muscle in his body. The two men glared at each other from across the few feet that separated them. I wondered for a moment how long it would be before they actually came to blows.

"The two of you know each other," I asked trying to break the stalemate.

Neither of them took their eyes off the other. "Yes," Duncan answered in his smooth baritone. "Samuel and I go way back. Isn't that right Samuel?" I could hear the playful tone in his voice.

Samuel turned to me abruptly. "If you will excuse me Alina," he said before abruptly walking away. I stood in shock as he started down the crowded walkway. What had I just missed? I turned quickly around to confront Duncan.

"What is your problem?" I said glaring at him. He looked genuinely shocked by my reaction.

I turned around so fast I almost ran into Faith as she walked up unaware of anything that had transpired. "Hey Alina," she said smiling.

I didn't answer.

"Alina, wait," I heard Duncan say as I was walking away. I scanned the crowd for Samuel's retreating figure. "Alina," Duncan's voice was closer instead of receding.

"What Duncan?" I snapped. He looked hurt by reaction this time.

"Don't go after him," he said in a firm even tone.

I closed my eyes in frustration. “You made your choice.” I looked back at Tabby standing some twenty feet away looking confused.

“I’m not allowed to make a mistake?”

“I’m not the one you need to ask.” I could feel my temper getting the better of me. Doing a quick about face, I went after Samuel before he could get to far away.

“Samuel,” I yelled at his retreating figure. Several heads turned around to see what was going on. However, Samuel’s pace didn’t appear to slow. “Samuel,” I yelled a little louder. He finally came to a stop about ten feet in front of me.

“Thanks,” I said feeling awkward as I came up beside him. I waited for him to respond. He didn’t say anything.

“Please don’t go,” I pleaded.

“Alina,” it looked like an effort just to say my name. “You should go back with your friends.”

It felt like someone had knocked the wind out of me. “What?” The hurt in my voice was just underneath the surface.

“I really shouldn’t have asked to join you for lunch. It was a mistake.” The hits just kept coming. “Your friends are waiting for you.” He glanced back over his shoulder. Duncan was standing in the same spot I had left him.

I couldn’t stop the shock from showing on my face. How had everything gotten so twisted around today? “What do you mean it was a mistake?” I felt like such a fool. I should have known better than to believe he wanted anything to do with me. After all, he’s a Grecian god and I’m just a pitiful mortal.

“It’s not important,” he said shaking his head and turning his back on me.

I stared at his back for a few seconds before turning around. I slowly started back the way I had just come from. My legs felt like jell-o and my stomach was tied up in knots.

“Alina,” Samuel’s voice drifted over to me. I stopped, but made no other acknowledgement that I heard him. “I know I don’t have the right to ask you for anything. I mean we barely know each other. If you could just do me a favor though,” he paused, glancing back at Duncan who was still waiting for me, “be careful around him.”

My temper flared. “You’re right. You don’t have the right to ask me for anything.” I felt a twinge of regret as shock registered on Samuel’s angelic features. I stormed back up the way I had come, fighting the urge to look back.

Argument

Lunch was a test in ancient torture methods. Duncan was so pleased at having chased off his rival he could barely contain himself. Tabby kept looking at Duncan and me trying to figure out if something was going on. Faith was oblivious to everything going on as she giggled over her phone. I was sure Josh was on the other end of the line.

I almost ran to history at the first possible opportunity. I sank into my chair as soon as I walked through the door. Closing my eyes, I rubbed my temples trying to forget everything that had happened today.

I was thankful for the distraction when class finally started. I paid unnecessarily close attention to the material. At least while my professor was talking I was able to forget. When class was dismissed, I was left alone with my troubled thoughts again.

I should have known something was up as I was gathering my things to leave. The whispers and giggles coming from the girls in the class should have warned me. I was so distracted by my own racing thoughts that it wasn’t until I looked up and saw Duncan waiting that I clued in. This day was never going to end.

“Hello, beautiful,” he said as I approached.

I couldn’t stop my body’s reaction to his voice. Why did he have to be so gorgeous? I kept walking refusing to acknowledge him. Smiling, he fell in next to me keeping pace without trying.

“Are you still mad?” he asked incredulous.

Clenching my jaw, I wouldn’t let myself answer. The women in the hall were looking at me like I was insane. Refusing to answer the green-eyed god walking next to me had to be a crime.

“If I apologize will you speak to me?”

I raised an eyebrow. I was pretty sure Duncan had never apologized for anything in his life. He wasn’t likely to start now. The shock I felt was visible on my face as he walked in front of me and stopped. I had no choice but to stop as well.

“Alina,” he started his eyes smoldering underneath his lashes. My breath caught in my throat. “I am so sorry for acting like a jerk earlier. I should have taken your feelings into account before acting the way I did. Can you forgive me?” He held my eyes with his not letting me look away.

I resisted the urge to answer him, but not for very long. “I’m not the only person you need to apologize to.” We started walking again.

“I promise the very next time I see Tabby, I will beg for her forgiveness.” I could hear the playful lilt in his voice. The only thing missing was him down on his knees groveling. Despite all this, he looked sincere enough though.

“What about Samuel?” I asked not letting him off that easy.

“What about him?” he asked innocently.

“Are you serious?” I retorted. “You run him off without a second thought and you think he doesn’t deserve an apology.” My voice was sharp without my intending it to be.

“You’re pretty concerned about someone who walked off without even giving you an explanation as to why.” His voice was a mixture of anger and incredulity.

“You made it pretty clear he wasn’t welcome.”

“I didn’t force him to leave.” He was clearly getting angry.

“At least he asked to join me for lunch instead of using a back door invitation.”

“I tried the front, but you just keep slamming it in my face.”

“Then take the hint.” I stomped off down the path to the bus stop. How could one person be so annoying?

“Alina wait,” he said catching up to me.

“What do you want from me Duncan?” I asked exasperated.

“You.”

His eyes caught fire burning me. I could feel the blood flooding my cheeks. My heart stuttered out an unsteady rhythm. My will power crumbled for one brief moment. It would be so easy to be with Duncan. I could feel his arms around me. Our bodies pressed together, his lips against mine.

“You made your choice,” I said through clenched teeth.

“That wasn’t my choice. It was hers.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said feeling foolish. “I need to get to the bus stop.” I started walking again not really paying attention to where I was going.

Offer

The heat was oppressive as I walked to English. It should have started to cool off by now. It was nearly Halloween and there didn’t appear to be a reprieve coming any time soon.

There was no reprieve coming for me either. Faith was deliriously happy since she and Josh had begun dating. He had made sure I didn’t mind before beginning his pursuit in earnest. I had gladly acquiesced.

Tabby was happily going out with several guys, Duncan among them. He made it very clear that he was not interested in a relationship. She had moped around the apartment for a couple days before recovering fully. She still hoped he might change his mind so she was reluctant to commit to anyone else.

Duncan took on the role of the patiently waiting friend. He had become a staple at lunch and occasionally at the apartment. I thought it might be awkward having him around, and it was a little bit, but he was surprisingly good at being patient.

Samuel had barely spoken to me since the beginning of September. The occasional hello in class was about it. I would sometimes imagine that I caught him looking at me or that he was about to say something. When I would check though, he appeared to be just as indifferent to me as he was to everyone else.

I trudged through the outdoor sauna hoping a small breeze might stir the stagnant air. I shook my head trying to clear the gloomy thoughts that were plaguing me more often than not these days.

When I looked up, I only had time for my eyes to widen in fear. There was no way I would be able to get out of the way of the car speeding down the road. I absently wondered if it would hurt much or if I would be unconscious before the pain set in.

I was surprised, with my impending death, how clear everything was. The driver was leaning down to pick up the cell phone that had fallen from her ear, and had not even noticed me stepping into the crosswalk. To be honest I hadn’t remembered stepping into it either.

When something cool wrapped around my arm I barely registered it. I felt myself pulled backward off my feet. As the car breezed past me, it showed no sign of stopping.

“Are you okay?” Samuel asked his eyes burning into me.

Being so close to him and still in shock from my close call, I had trouble answering. “Um, yeah, I think so.”

He let out a deep sigh of relief his sweet breath washing over me. He slowly released me from his cool embrace.

“Where did you come from?” I asked baffled. I was sure I had been alone on the sidewalk.

“I was walking to class,” he said in a matter of fact tone.

“Oh, uh, well thanks for the help.”

My heart was thumping out an unsteady rhythm. I felt like such an idiot. Not only had I nearly killed myself, but I also did it right in front of Samuel.

“You’re welcome.” His voice was little more than a breath.

I adjusted my bag and tried to think of something else to say. My mind came up blank. “Well, I guess I’ll see you in class.” I slowly turned to leave not really wanting to.

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” Samuel inquired in a low voice. I wasn’t sure if he meant for me to hear him.

“Sure,” I answered to fast blushing crimson. It had been over a month since we spoke and I didn’t want to pass up this small opportunity.

He smiled at my too quick answer. I bit my lip and turned my head to the side trying to hide my embarrassment.

“So how have you been?” Samuel asked as we slowly ambled to class.

“I’ve been good. How about you?”

“I’ve been, well,” he said getting hung up on the last word.

I wanted to question him about his answer, but thought better of it. “How are your classes going?”

“They’re going good. How have they been for you?”

“Time consuming,” I shrugged.

Silence descended, as it so often did between us. I studied him from the corner of my eye. He looked like a model for the angels. His eyes looked so sad though. I wanted to do or say something to make him smile, but felt entirely inadequate to the task.

“So, do you have any plans for Halloween?” I asked picking a safe topic.

The corner of his lip twitched slightly at my question. “Not at the moment.”

“Oh.” I bit my lip while debating how to proceed. “Well, my friend Tabby is throwing a party at her parent’s house. It is a few miles outside of Gainesville on ten acres. Knowing Tabby, she probably went a little over board on everything, but it should be fun. I have a couple extra invitations, you know if you wanted to come.” I stared straight ahead avoiding any eye contact after my impromptu offer.

Samuel chuckled lightly. “Are you asking me out?” he asked his beautiful crooked smile in place.

A light dusting of pink colored my cheeks. “Well, I would really like if you came, but if you don’t want to its okay.”

His smile broadened slightly at my response. “Is it a costume party?”

“Of course, it is Halloween.”

“So, what are you going as?”

I blushed again at his question. “You’ll just have to come if you want to know.”

The blue of his eyes steamed. I had to remember how to breathe.

“Are you going to come?” I finally managed to ask.

Looking up at the clouds, he considered my offer. “Who else will be there?”

I knew he was asking to see if Duncan would be there. “There’s supposed to be around two hundred and fifty people. That’s not including the ones that will probably just crash. The house is seven thousand square feet and the deck will be set up as well.”

“Alina,” he said in cajoling tone.

“Really you probably won’t even see each other.”

“Alina,” he said shaking his head. “If you’re there then we will see each other.”

“I promise Duncan will play nice.”

Samuel laughed without humor. “He doesn’t know how to play nice.”

I frowned. “Then he’ll just have to learn,” I said determined.

On the verge of laughter at seeing my face, he smiled only managing to control his mirth. “Give me the invitation.”

A huge smile spread across my face. I fumbled with my bag trying to get it opened so I could recover Samuel’s invitation. I handed it to him trying to control my enthusiasm.

“I’m not promising anything,” he said taking the black envelope with silver script in hand.

“I understand,” I said knowing I would be crushed if he didn’t come. “Make sure you RSVP. It’s all online so you don’t have to worry about sending anything by mail. Just make sure you do it soon. I think Tabby has the invite list closing tomorrow.”

Halloween

I checked the party’s list every chance I got to see if Samuel had accepted my invitation. At the last minute, before the list closed, his name appeared. I nearly screamed.

That was two days ago, and now we had about an hour before guests were to start arriving. Josh was down stairs making sure the last minute things were handled to give Tabby, Faith and I time to get ready.

Tabby was going as a fairy with a barely there green skirt, corset, and wings. Faith was dressed as Jane to Josh’s Tarzan in a leopard bikini top and skimpy skirt. I was pulling on my apron to complete my Alice costume.

“What is that on your pockets?” Tabby asked giving me an odd look.

“This is the symbol for Jupiter and this is the one for Neptune,” I answered pointing to the corresponding symbol.

Tabby rolled her eyes. “I still think you would have looked great in that belly dancer outfit.”

I blushed at the remembered outing to pick a costume. I would have felt more clothed in a swimsuit than the costumes Tabby wanted me to wear. My final outfit was a dark interpretation of Alice.

“I think you look very nice,” Faith chimed in.

“Thank you Faith, so do you.” I answered. Tabby stuck her tongue out at us. We all laughed.

By the time we finished getting ready and headed down stairs, people were starting to arrive. There were already thirty or so people wandering around the house and a line forming out front. The bouncers, dressed like agents from Men in Black, were checking invites and letting people through. Looking around the room, I saw a few familiar faces, but not the one I was looking for.

“I’m going to find Josh,” Faith said after a few minutes. She headed toward the deck bouncing as she went with her excitement.

Tabby introduced me to a group from her English class. They were all really nice, and had some very eclectic costumes. My favorite was the girl dressed as Pippy Long Stocking.

I weaved through the party guests as it became more crowded. At some point, Tabby and I became separated. She was talking to one of the guys she had gone out with a few times and didn’t really notice when I ducked out.

I walked over to the bar set up inside the house to get something to drink. The water felt good as it ran down the back of my throat. Most of the girls were probably thankful for the heat. Their skimpy outfits would not have offered much protection if the weather had cooled. The heat just made me thirsty.

The room suddenly went dark. I managed not to hit the person who had just placed their hands over my eyes.

“Are you having a good time?” Duncan asked barely controlling his laughter.

“Well I was,” I answered in a sarcastic voice

Dropping his hand from my eyes, I turned around to glare at him. I came up short when I saw him. His sandy blonde hair was gently tousled accentuating his angular features perfectly. He wore a beautiful black tux that set off his green eyes. I tried to hide my reaction even as my heart tapped out an unsteady rhythm.

“Let me guess, James Bond.” I kept my voice acerbic.

“I thought it was fitting. Do you like it?”

“It’s okay, I guess.” I shrugged my shoulders dismissively hoping he would believe my lie.

Duncan smiled. There was no fooling him. “So, how many people are coming?”

I breathed a sigh of relief at his not calling me out. “We planned for around three hundred.”

“So, of the three hundred how many did you invite?”

“I invited a few people.” I tried to control the blush that was starting.

“You came,” I heard Tabby scream over the crowd and music. She came bounding over and threw her arms around Duncan leaving her previous companion standing by the wayside. I would have felt bad for him, but I was thankful to for her interruption.

“I told you I would be here.” Duncan returned Tabby’s enthusiastic embrace. I took the opportunity to quietly escape without the usual awkwardness that accented my departures.

Another fifteen minutes passed as I mingled with our guest making sure everyone was happy. I was tempted to sneak out the back to find a quiet place, but every time I was about to, I would see Duncan looking at me from the group he was with. He would be after me as soon as I made a break for it. I sighed in frustration.

“I take it the party isn’t going to your plan.” Samuel’s voice sounded like a chorus of angels.

I managed to control myself enough not to react the way Tabby had with Duncan. “No, but it is starting to look up. How long have you been here?”

“Just a few minutes,” he said giving me a heavenly smile. “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I said blushing. “You look very nice.” I tried not to choke on the understatement. “But what are you supposed to be?” He was wearing normal street clothes without even an attempt at a costume.

A large grin spread across his face, “A vampire.”

I frowned slightly. He was certainly handsome enough to be a vampire, and his skin was definitely pale enough. “That seems a bit like cheating. Besides, you don’t have any fangs or blood dripping down your mouth.”

He laughed causing several heads to turn and stare. “What makes you think vampires have fangs? And the last time I checked, most people don’t let their food or drinks drip down their face while they eat.” His blue eyes sparkled in play.

I bit my lip as I considered his answer. “Well, I guess I can agree with that.”

Walking outside onto the deck, we found a quiet spot to talk. If I had to describe paradise, I would have to say I was pretty close to it. The conversation flowed easily and Samuel smiled and laughed more than I would have thought possible. I wanted to touch him so badly, but I was careful to keep my hands at my side or clasped in front of me. I noticed after several minutes that he was doing the same thing.

“Do you mind if I ask you a question?” He stiffened slightly before I continued. “What is all this about? Not that I mind,” I added quickly. “It’s just, well, I’m a little worried.”

“About what?” he asked without relaxing.

“I’m worried that,” I regretted bringing this subject up. The last thing I wanted to do was show him exactly how much I was interested in him. “Well, I’m just worried that tomorrow

you're going to go back to ignoring me." My voice was little more than a whisper. I could hear the pain hidden in my words.

Samuel didn't make a sound. He seemed frozen. "I'm very sorry," he started. "It was wrong of me to act the way I did. Being around you is very hard for me sometimes. I'm trying to be better, but I can't promise you anything."

"What do you mean, it's hard for you? Is this because of Duncan?" a hint of petulance leaked into my voice. I knew it wasn't a fair question. Samuel clenched his jaw. "You're not going to answer me are you?"

He sighed heavily. "It's complicated."

"I've got time." I set my jaw.

"You're not going to drop this are you?" I shook my head slightly unwilling to give in this time. He sighed again.

"Duncan and I go way back. He and I were friends from pretty much infancy. It wasn't until..." he took a moment before continuing. "...a girl came along that we also became rivals.

"She was beautiful, intelligent, and as sweet as an angel." I felt a pang of jealousy as he talked about someone I didn't even know. "We both competed for her affections. It wasn't fair to make her choose, but that is exactly what we asked her to do. After a few months she chose, Duncan.

"To be honest I wasn't really surprised. He has always had an easier time with women than I do. Despite his having won her heart, he didn't treat it with the delicacy I felt she deserved. I couldn't watch her trust him knowing the entire time he was so unworthy of it. So, I left.

"I traveled for a year. I went to Rome, Paris, Madrid, and so many other places I lost track of the names. When I was about to set out for America though, I became ill. I returned home just before I was unable to travel.

"By then Duncan and her were engaged to be married. His then fiancé sat by my bed and cared for me. In the process, she contracted the disease I had. I managed to pull through it, but she wasn't as lucky.

"Duncan blamed me for her death. He blamed me for living. It was a very dark time. We both managed to pull through it in our own way. It ruined our friendship though. It was hard enough that we both wanted and loved the same women. It was impossible when we lost her."

I sat in silence staring at Samuel. I could see the strain of telling me the story written all over his face. I had a million questions to ask him. Instead of thinking it through, the way I should have, I simply blurted out the first one that came to my lips.

“What was her name?”

“Lily.” His voice was a whisper on the breeze.

I wanted to touch him, to hold him, but something stopped me. There was something nagging at the back of my mind. “How old were you when all of this happened?”

“I was nineteen and Duncan was twenty,” he said coming back to the present.

“Is that the reason you chose to come to Florida?” I knew I was prying but there was something there. It felt like he was hiding something from me.

“No,” he seemed perplexed by my question.

I was just as confused by his answer. “I don’t understand. You were okay staying there after everything that happened?”

“No, I stayed with some friends for a while. In fact, they are same ones you saw me with at the movie theater my first night in town.”

I blushed at his bringing up that night. I didn’t think he had noticed me. After all, there were plenty of attractive girls and women vying for his attention, and most of them were wearing far less clothing than I was.

“I have to admit I was just as surprised seeing you there as you were at seeing me. It didn’t help that Emma saw how focused I was either. She hasn’t given me a moments rest.”

I couldn’t stop from biting my lower lip out of nervousness and embarrassment.

“I love when you do that,” his voice was smooth as silk.

He reached across the distance between us placing his hand gently under my chin. Applying a small amount of pressure, he lifted my face so that I was looking into his eyes. They smoldered under his lashes burning into mine. He ran his thumb across my bottom lip.

My breathing was picking up pace to match my rapid heart rate. Samuel was breathing harder as well his sweet breath washing over me making my head spin. I could feel the heat coursing through me as he leaned closer. When only a few inches separated us, my eyes fluttered closed. I waited anticipating his lips against mine.

The seconds ticked by in slow agony. Then suddenly, he pulled away. I nearly fell out of my chair. I could feel the sting from his abrupt rejection. I looked at his empty chair wondering

how he had gotten up so quickly. He was now standing several feet away in the shadows his back to me.

“Did I do something wrong?” I asked. The hurt in my voice was evident even to me.

Samuel didn’t move. He didn’t make a sound or show any sign he had heard me. I was about to stand up and walk over to him or walk away. I wasn’t sure which.

“I just need a minute.” His usually silky voice was low and rough.

Time trudged slowly forward as I watched him standing like a statue at the edge of the deck. I held my breath waiting for him to move. Finally, after what felt like an eternity he turned around.

“I’m very sorry about that. It won’t happen again.” His voice was back to normal again, but his movements were stiff as he walked back over to his seat. He tried to give me a reassuring smile, but it just didn’t feel right.

I felt like such a fool. Obviously, I must have done something wrong. It wasn’t like I had a lot of experience when it came to this type of stuff. I wasn’t a very big dater in high school, preferring a good book to dealing with the drama of a relationship. The couple of guys I did date were much more into the whole thing than I was. It would figure the one time I actually care everything goes wrong.

“Alina, look at me.”

I turned my head away. I was on the verge of tears, and the last thing I wanted was for Samuel to see them. “I should really go make sure Tabby is okay. She can get a little rambunctious at parties.” My voice was cracking.

“Alina, please,” his voice was strained as he pleaded for me to look at him.

I turned around. He was standing only a foot away. I wanted so badly to close the distance between us. “You said you would try, and you did. Honestly, it’s okay.”

He was about to say something when another voice interrupted him. “Li-Li, where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.” Tabby had to have the worst timing in the world. It took what little control I had left not to snap at her.

I suspected that Duncan must have convinced her come check on me. He was standing some fifteen feet away trying to appear disinterested. I was sure that he was not pleased by the fact that Samuel was here at the party. He was probably even less happy that we were together.

“I’ve been right here,” I answered with only a short delay.

“Forgive me,” Samuel said catching Tabby off guard. “I’m afraid I’ve been monopolizing her time.”

“Um, it’s not a problem,” she said looking down so as not to stare. “Well, if you’re doing okay...” she added looking at me. I could see the approval in her eyes.

“I’m fine,” I said, “thanks for the check in.”

“Okay, well, then... I’ll see you later.” Her voice held implications I didn’t want to think about. She would be drilling me at the first available opportunity.

“Yeah, have fun,” I said glancing over her shoulder at Duncan.

“Don’t I always.” She laughed as she skipped back to his side.

Borrowed Time

Samuel pulled into the parking spot cutting the engine. I tried to calm my breathing, but was having trouble getting it back to a normal rhythm. It had taken us only five minutes to get to my apartment from the park.

We had slipped out of the party unnoticed earlier in the evening and gone for a drive. Samuel had my dream car, a Nissan GT-R. Cruising around Gainesville, we talked for I didn’t know how long. Eventually, he pulled over and let me drive. It took all of my control not to slam the gas pedal to the floor.

“We’re pretty lucky that deer jumped.” I finally managed to get the words out in a breathless whisper.

Samuel laughed again. It sounded so effortless. “It had nothing to do with the deer jumping. It is all about the driver’s skills.” We looked at each other and burst into laughter.

When I finally managed to stop giggling, I looked around outside. The apartment complex was dark and quiet. There were no lights on in any of the windows. Sighing heavily, I debated about what to do next.

“I should have asked you to drive me back out to Tabby’s parent’s house. I don’t have my keys to get into my apartment.”

Samuel chuckled under his breath. “Do you have a spare?”

“Yes,” I answered.

“Do you know where it is?”

He looked ready to laugh again as I tried to remember where Tabby and I had hid the key. She wanted it on the doorjamb over the door. Considering that was the first place someone would look, we decided that wasn't the best idea.

"Oh, I remember we put it under the bumper on our cars in one of those hide a key things."

"You put your house key under your car?" His face was a question mark.

"If you were going to break into someone's house where would you look for a key?"

"Not on the car," he answered smiling. "You have a very unique way of thinking."

I returned his smile blushing slightly. "I guess I should probably get going. If I don't call Tabby soon...ugh, no, I left my cell at Tabby's house."

"Here, you can use mine." Samuel handed me his sleek black phone.

I stared at the receiver blankly. When I started to laugh Samuel gave me a quizzical look. "I don't know her number. It's programmed in my phone so I didn't bother memorizing it. I guess I'll have to try the landline and keep my fingers crossed."

The voice mail picked up on the fifth ring. I left a very brief message, letting her know I was at our apartment and going to crash here. I didn't bother with any details. I was sure to be interrogated thoroughly as soon as she got home.

"Thanks," I said after ending the call and handing the phone back to him.

"You're welcome."

"I had a really great time tonight." I was trying to draw out my time with him for as long as I could.

"Me too," he answered.

I wanted so badly to lean across the consol and press my lips to his. My breath was speeding up just as my mind raced forward to areas I had never visited before. After his earlier reaction this evening, I knew better than to press my luck and I managed to restrain myself. The last thing I wanted was to give him a reason to run, and I wasn't sure if I could hold up to a second rejection.

Samuel had his hands balled into fists on his lap. The skin over his knuckles almost shimmered in the light that filtered into his car from the full moon. His breath seemed to match pace with mine. I knew he couldn't possibly want the same thing I did. So why was I still sitting in his car?

“Thanks for the ride and letting me drive. It was really fun. I guess... I’ll see you in class on Monday.” I put my hand on the door to open it.

“Let me get that for you,” he said opening his door and exiting the car before I could protest.

I tried to get the passenger door open before he could make it around. I wasn’t fast enough, or he was too fast, I didn’t know which. The door swung open as I was about to pull the handle. Samuel’s hand waited for me as I started to exit the vehicle. I would have snubbed the assistance, but I wanted so badly to touch him that I didn’t protest his act of chivalry.

My heart rate picked up as I took his hand. I whispered a thank you as he released his grip all too soon.

“Which is your car?” he asked after shutting the door.

I pointed out my Civic parked next to us. A smile flickered across his lips as he quickly appraised my vehicle.

“I know it’s not a GT-R, but it gets me from point A to point B.”

“Where did you place the key?”

“Don’t worry about it Samuel, I can get it,” I said advancing toward my car.

“No, I’ll do it. I won’t have you ruin your clothes, because I forced you to take a ride with me.”

“You didn’t force me to do anything,” I stubbornly replied setting my jaw.

Walking up to me again, he stopped only inches away. Refusing to budge, I was forced to look up into his hypnotic blue eyes. His breath was sweet as it washed over my face. Part of my mind wondered if he chewed mints non-stop. The main part of my focus was on the way his eyes seemed to search for the answer I was unwilling to give.

“Are you going to tell me where the key is, or will I have to come up with a creative solution?” He gently tucked my hair behind my ear letting his fingers trace the rest of the way down my jaw.

All coherent thoughts left me. I found myself answering his question without meaning to. “It’s on the back bumper left hand side.”

Cupping his hand under my chin, a small smile played at the corner of his perfect mouth. He leaned closer causing my head to spin. “Now was that so hard.” He pressed his lips to mine, and my eyes fluttered closed.

I was in heaven. It was like I had never been kissed before. His lips felt like satin, cool and smooth. They were so gentle it was almost maddening. I threw my arms around his neck pressing my body closer to his. My breath was coming in ragged gasps as I ran my fingers up into his hair. He released his hand from under my chin, running it behind my back to pull me even closer to him.

I forgot about everything else. The only thing that mattered was the warmth building between us. As the intensity increased, something changed in the urgency of his lips against mine. He started to lift me off the ground, pressing me closer to the smooth wall of muscles hidden beneath his shirt. My head was swimming.

Then he stopped. Pulling his head back, he drew in a ragged breath. His jaw was clenched together tightly in restraint. Slowly, he looked back down at me. His features were a mask, but his eyes were wild. Loosening his grip on me, slowly my feet touched ground again.

My breath caught in my throat. Goosebumps stood up on the back of my neck. For a split second, it felt like my heart stopped. My head started to swim from lack of oxygen. Samuel closed his eyes breaking the connection between us. My lungs started to fill with air as I remembered how to breathe.

"I should probably get that key for you." His voice sounded low and rough, but all the more enticing for it.

"Um, yeah..." My voice was barely above a whisper.

Moving to the back of my car Samuel returned with the key to my apartment. Even with the light from the full moon, I was surprised by how quickly he found it.

"That was fast," I said as he handed me the key. We stood in awkward silence for a moment as I played with the small piece of metal.

"Umm, would you like to, uh, I mean do you want to come up?" The simmer in my cheeks burst into flames again as I made my offer. I could feel my stomach doing somersaults as I waited for his answer.

The storm that had raged in his eyes so many times before renewed itself. He appeared torn. It looked like he wanted to run. I hoped he would stay.

"I don't think that would be a good idea." The war still raged in his eyes, but his expression seemed resolved.

"Oh, well, maybe next time." I couldn't keep the disappointment from my voice.

“That would be nice.” It sounded like he meant it, but I was far too insecure to believe it. “I should get going. I’ll see you in class on Monday.”

“Yeah, I’ll see you then.”

Leaning down he quickly placed a soft kiss against my cheek. Flames erupted where his lips touched my skin.

“Flash the lights when you get in your apartment,” he ordered.

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll be fine, go ahead and go.”

“Humor me,” he said returning the driver’s side of his car.

I made my way up to my apartment, looking back occasionally. Samuel never left the side of his car. Once I made the landing, I waved down a goodbye. Returning my wave, he opened the door to his car, but remained outside of it. I rolled my eyes again at his concern.

I put the key in my lock and it turned with a loud click. Cringing internally at the loud noise so early in the morning, I made my way inside.

The apartment was dark the only sound was the humming of the refrigerator. Going into the kitchen, I fumbled around for the light switch. Flicking it on and off a couple times, I chuckled silently.

Confused

I made my way into my room. It was close to five in the morning. I was physically exhausted enough to fall asleep on the floor, but my mind kept replaying the last few minutes with Samuel. I decided to take a hot shower in the hopes it might help relax me enough to get some rest.

I was just about to hop in the shower when the doorbell rang. Maybe Samuel had changed his mind. I thought about what to throw on before running to answer the door. When the bell rang a second time, I decided just to throw on a t-shirt and shorts.

“I’m coming,” I said hoping it would stop him from ringing the bell again. The last thing I wanted was my neighbors getting annoyed. Fumbling with the lock, it took me a couple seconds to get it right. My mouth fell open when I saw who was standing on the other side of the threshold.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Duncan asked. He was still wearing his tux from the party without a hair out of place. I stepped to the side allowing him into the apartment. It was so early I didn’t want our conversation to wake anyone in the complex.

“What are you doing here?” I asked as I closed the door.

“Well, I tried calling but you never answered your phone.” He was leaning against the kitchen counter.

“I left it at Tabby’s parent’s house, and you didn’t answer my question.” I walked passed him to the fridge to grab a soda.

“You didn’t come back inside after walking out with Samuel. I became concerned when you didn’t answer your phone, so I came to check on you.”

“Thank you for your concern,” I said keeping my voice controlled, “but I’m a big girl. I can take care of myself. Now if you don’t mind, I would like to get a shower and some sleep.” I walked back over to open the front door so he could leave.

“Are you in that big of a hurry to get rid of me? Can I at least get a cup of coffee?”

I let out a sigh. I had already been awake since noon the day before. What difference did a few minutes really make? I walked back into the kitchen to start the coffee.

“So, what is it you see in him exactly?” Duncan asked as I placed the filter in the machine.

“Do you really want to know?” I asked raising one eyebrow in a question. He waited silently for my answer.

“He’s different. He’s kind, sweet, and a little shy. He seems a lot older than twenty, but in a good way. It just feels right... which for me is very unusual.”

Duncan remained silent. The only sound was the water starting to run through the coffee maker.

“And you’re sure he’s the one?”

“I don’t know it isn’t like we’ve known each other that long,” I answered absently playing with the spoon in my hand.

A small smile played at the corner of Duncan’s mouth. “Have you ever been with anyone else?”

“I dated a couple guys in high school, but it wasn’t anything serious. Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious.” He paused for a moment while I grabbed a mug for his coffee. “Are you serious about him?”

“I don’t know, maybe.” I was starting to feel a little flustered by Duncan’s line of questioning.

“Do you think he’s serious about you?”

“I don’t know. Why should any of this concern you?”

“That should be pretty obvious by now, Alina.”

He was staring at me from across the few feet that separated us. I could feel the blood flooding my cheeks. Even with the distance that separated us my body still reacted to him. I turned around to pour him a cup of coffee, and try to distract myself.

“We’ve been over this before Duncan.”

His next words came from directly behind me. His sweet breath saturated the air around me. My head started to fog slightly in spite of my efforts to remain focused.

“I just want you to know you have other options.” His voice was a breathy whisper that sent a shiver through me.

I refused to turn around. “You say this after accepting an invitation to stay with my best friend for the night.”

“I only accepted it so I could make sure you were safe. As soon as you drove off with him, I left.”

My head was spinning. I was trying to think clearly, but I kept drawing a blank. Why did he have to be so close? It was maddening for him to be mere inches away from me and knowing nothing could happen.

“You don’t know if he’s serious about you. There are times that you look at him and it seems like he’s ready to run. He’s already run once. It’s only a matter of time before he does it again.

“I’ll never run from you, Alina,” his voice wrapped around my name like a caress. I held on to the counter for support. “I’ll admit I’ve made mistakes, but not again. You’re far too important to me.”

His words sounded so honest, so sincere. He was starting to lean closer to me, his breath picking up speed brushing against my neck. I wanted so badly to feel his body pressed against mine. I felt myself wavering.

He ran one of his hands through my hair picking it up, and letting it fall across my other shoulder. I held onto the counter for dear life as he let his fingers trail down my neck sending

shivers through my body. I could feel his breath caressing my skin as he ran his lips across my exposed throat from my shoulder to my ear. Reaching slowly around, he his hand under my chin. Applying the smallest amount of pressure, he turned my face to meet his. I felt my will power crumbling.

The jungle hidden in his eyes was on fire. My heart took off at a frantic pace. As he leaned closer, I tried to recall why it was I shouldn't do this. As our lips met, I stopped trying.

My body reacted to his touch and his lips without me having to think. It was like breathing. I twisted around to face him, letting go of the counter I had been clinging to for dear life. My brain kept screaming no even as he pulled me closer crushing me against his body.

After a few moments, my higher cognitive functions regained control. I reigned in my body, and slowly started to push away from him. For an indeterminably long second, it felt like he may not respond to my touch, but slowly he started to pull away.

His lips no longer touched mine, but he still had me pinned against his body and the counter. A triumphant smile was in place as he stared down at me. I could hear the blood pounding in my ears keeping time with the unsteady rhythm of my heart.

"You should go," I said in a breathless whisper.

He seemed taken aback. "What?"

"You should go," I repeated my voice a little more confident this time.

I walked across the kitchen on shaky legs to the front door and opened it for him. He made no sign of following me. As I looked out onto the landing, I saw why Duncan was frozen in place. Samuel stood outside looking in at both of us confusion and hurt evident in every feature.

Revelation

I nearly fell out of bed as the second knock echoed through the apartment. It took me a few seconds to get my bearings. My dream had been so real. I could still feel Duncan's lips pressed to mine.

I checked the clock to see what time it was. I had been asleep for a little over five hours. A third round of knocking helped to remind me why I was awake.

"I'm coming," I screamed from the middle of my bed. I tried to figure out how I was tangled in up in my comforter. It took me almost thirty seconds to get free of my cocoon.

I didn't bother checking the mirror as I stumbled out the room. It was probably Tabby coming back from her parent's house with her hands full. I stared at the door as I tried to remember how to unlock the deadbolt. When I finally got it open, I was sure I had to still be dreaming.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Duncan asked. He wore a pair of designer jeans and a vintage t-shirt.

"Sure," I said opening the door a little wider. Self-consciously I tried to run my hand through my hair. It was so knotted I only succeeded in getting my hand caught in the snarls.

"Would you mind giving me a few minutes?" I asked as I closed the door behind him.

He chuckled lightly under his breath. "Take as long as you need."

I walked quickly back into my room and locked the door. Leaning up against the hard surface, I tried to calm my rapidly beating heart. It was a futile attempt.

Running into the bathroom, I gave myself a quick once over in the mirror and let out a groan. My hair was knotted and sticking out in every direction. There was drool crusted on the side of my face along with a very large red mark from sleeping too hard in one position. The t-shirt and shorts I had worn to bed were wrinkled in odd places making them ride up and hang off of me in odd ways.

I grabbed my brush and tried pulling it through my hair with little success. I suppose it was payback for going to bed with wet hair. After a minute, I gave up and climbed back in the shower. Usually the steaming hot water helped to relax me, but I was far too wound up at seeing Duncan this morning to really enjoy it.

After finishing my second shower in the past few hours, I quickly toweled off. I didn't bother drying my hair after managing to brush it out. I slipped on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before heading back out to the living room.

"Sorry about that," I said joining Duncan in the living room.

He was lounging on the sofa. He looked like Dionysus laying down awaiting grapes. The television was turned to one of the music stations with the volume at background level. I walked into the kitchen and grabbed a soda out of the fridge.

"Can I get you something to eat or drink?" I asked before leaving the kitchen.

"No, I'm good," he said from his seat in the living room.

"I'm afraid Tabby hasn't made it back from her parent's house." I was sure he already knew that she wasn't home, but I tried not to think why he was here. I walked out to the living room with my drink so I wouldn't have to talk as loud.

"Oh, I know. I was just coming by to make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine," I said raising my eyebrow inquisitively. "Is there some reason I shouldn't be?"

Duncan just smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Do you have any plans for the day?"

"No," I answered in a guarded voice.

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

* * *

I kept asking myself why I said yes to Duncan's request. In my apartment, it hadn't seemed unreasonable. I figured I owed him that much. Now that I was climbing off his bike at Bolens Bluff, I wasn't so sure. His bike was the only vehicle in the small parking area and that meant there was no one else on the trail.

"You ready?" he asked as he locked his bike down.

I nodded my head yes not trusting my voice. My legs were still a little shaky from the ride. I should have brought my car, but my purse was missing in action along with everything in it.

I waited patiently for Duncan to lead the way as we started down the trail. The noise from the highway started to fade into the distance as we progressed through the thickening trees. The sounds of the road were replaced by birds chirping and the occasional rustling of the leaves. It had been a long time since I had been on the trail, and I had forgotten how peaceful it was.

"So what is it you see in him?" Duncan asked as we progressed.

A small chuckle escaped before I could stop it.

"Did I say something funny?" he asked raising one of his eyebrows in an irresistible gesture.

"No, I just had a very weird dream last night." I managed to reign in another nervous laugh.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"No," I answered too quickly. The last thing I wanted was to add fuel to the fire. This time it was Duncan's turn to laugh.

We fell back into silence letting the forest carry the conversation. Every few seconds Duncan would look over at me, studying my face. I wasn't sure what he was looking for, and it started to make me self-conscious.

"I guess he told you about Lily." His voice sounded nonchalant as he mentioned the girl who only a short time ago was his fiancé.

"Um, yeah," I said a little shocked at his bringing the subject up.

"She was very beautiful with a sweet disposition. She was also very intelligent. She had the best laugh. In fact, you remind me a lot of her." His eyes smoldered when he glanced over at me again, but I could hear the hurt in his voice.

I blushed at the comparison. "It sounds like you cared for her a great deal." I wanted so badly to reach over and stroke his arm to comfort him. Instead, I shoved my hands in my pockets.

A genuine smile pulled up the corner of his mouth. It was soon replaced by a frown that reached into the depths of his eyes. "He took all of that away from me though." His voice held a menacing edge I had never heard before.

I felt my stomach flip at his accusation of Samuel. "People get sick all the time Duncan. I don't think it is fair to blame him."

A bitter laugh escaped through his lips. "How like him to leave out the most important part of the story."

"He didn't leave anything out. He told me that got Lily sick taking care of him. He also told me that you blamed him for it, which I had a hard time believing. I guess I was wrong about that. I couldn't understand why he was blaming himself about everything, but now I do."

I stormed forward trying to leave Duncan behind. I made it only a few steps in front of him before he reacted. Without missing a beat, he grabbed my wrist, and turned me around so I was forced to look at him. Shock was evident on my face as I looked up at him, but my eyes burned with anger.

"Samuel has taken the blame for many things that he shouldn't, but Lily's death is not one of them."

I wrenched my wrist free from his grasp. "You were his friend, how can you even say that?"

"Very easily, he infected her the same way a rabid animal infects the next one."

I couldn't close my mouth. The comment felt like a slap to my face. I had heard my parents argue before and after their divorce, but I had never heard anything close to the venom in Duncan's voice.

"I want you to take me home Duncan." I could feel the anger welling up at the back of my throat. It felt like it would choke me.

"No. Not until you listen to me." He stubbornly set his jaw refusing to move.

"Fine then," I said balling my fists up. He relaxed ever so slightly. I started walking back up the trail toward the entrance.

"Where are you going?" he asked as I walked past him. It didn't sound like he was following me.

"I'm going back to my apartment, even if I have to walk there." I kept my head down and continued marching forward.

"You can be so stubborn," he said. It sounded like he was in front of me.

I looked up to confirm where he was. I was surprised to find him a few feet in front of me leaning against a large scrub oak. I glanced back over my shoulder trying to figure out how he had gotten there. I hadn't heard him following behind me. I shook my head refusing to let myself be distracted from my anger. Raising my head slightly in defiance, I continued forward.

"He's not what you think Alina. For that matter, neither am I."

I tried not to say anything, but my temper got the better of me. "You don't know what I think."

"He's infected."

I came to a dead stop just as I passed Duncan for the second time. Reluctantly, I turned around to face him. "What do you mean?"

"He's infected... and so am I."

Disbelief

I just stared at Duncan in disbelief. My head was spinning as I stood in the middle of the path. I tried to remember how to breathe.

"Infected...with what?" My voice sounded like it was coming from a million miles away.

"It's a virus," Duncan said from beside his tree.

My head was swimming. “I need to sit down,” I said collapsing to my knees. It felt like I was going to throw up. I could taste the bile in the back of my throat. I put my head between my knees hoping to calm my nerves.

Duncan joined me on the ground. Sitting next to me, he was careful to maintain a no touching space. He waited while I regained some control over myself.

“What virus?” I finally managed to squeak out.

Duncan remained silent long enough that I was forced to look up to make sure he was still next to me. It looked like he was trying to decide which end of the snake to grab.

“It’s called the lamiavirus. Though to be honest, I think they should rename it.”

I sat in stunned silence trying to grasp what he was saying. I knew enough of Greek mythology to know who Lamia was. I was also familiar with at least some viruses just from being around so many doctors growing up, and I had never heard of the lamiavirus.

“You shouldn’t worry though,” he said, as my silence deepened. “We’re not contagious. Well not unless we bite.”

“Bite?” I asked incredulous. Duncan smiled at my reaction his teeth flashing briefly in the light streaming through the trees.

My initial shock was slowly starting to wear off, being replaced by disbelief and even fear. Discreetly I started to check for my phone. It wasn’t until I reached into my pocket that I remembered it was at Tabby’s parent’s house.

I stood up hoping to put a little more distance between us without making him nervous. Obviously, he was mentally unstable. Though I couldn’t be sure that the virus didn’t exist, I was positive about one thing. The only virus I knew of that was transmissible through a bite was rabies. Any way that I looked at my situation made the sick feeling in my stomach worse.

“Um, what exactly does the virus do?” I asked trying to keep him talking while I came up with a plan.

“You don’t believe me, do you?” he asked standing up in a quick fluid movement. “I can’t say I blame you, it does sound a little crazy.”

Keep him talking. Someone is bound to come along. “No, it’s not crazy.” I hoped the slightly hysterical edge to my voice was only in my head.

He chuckled slightly under his breath. “How are you with blood?” he suddenly asked catching me off guard.

My heart stopped as I thought about how to answer his question. I was still too close to have much of a chance of out running him, and even if I did, there was no guarantee that I would find help in time. The truth was, that unless someone happened by, I was on my own.

“Fine I guess. I mean I don’t pass out or anything if that’s what you’re asking. Why are you asking?” A nervous laugh escaped through my lips as I continued to take small half steps backward while praying that another hiker would come up the trail.

“Good then this shouldn’t freak you out too much.”

With that, Duncan pulled out a pocketknife and flipped it open. Light reflected off the blade as he twisted it in his hand.

It took all the control I had not to bolt. I was still too close to him, and if I turned my back, I would be even more vulnerable. Taking another step backward, my foot found an exposed root and I started to fall. I grabbed at one of the trees within my reach trying to keep on my feet, but all I managed to do was rip one of my nails and scrap up the palm of my hand.

I closed my eyes as I waited for Duncan to spring. My heart was threatening to jump out of my chest and I was breathing in ragged gasps. I hoped the end wouldn’t hurt that much. After a few moments when nothing happened, I opened my eyes.

Duncan had an amused look on his face at my distress, but had made no move to either help or hurt me. “Are you okay?” he asked moving closer to me as I tried to get quickly back on my feet.

“I’m fine,” I said scrambling upright, while ignoring the pain in my hand

Duncan shook his head in amusement. “It would probably be better if you stayed down there. You know, just in case.”

My thoughts were scattered as I stared at the knife in his hand. He was now within easy striking distance, and what little opportunity I had of escape was now gone. I waited for an opening, hoping he might drop the knife or I might have another opportunity to make a break for it, but the little voice in the back of my head was already planning my funeral.

Slowly he brought the knife up. I flinched away closing my eyes. I heard as Duncan took a deep breath in preparation. I waited for the pain. It didn’t come.

Opening my eyes, I was shocked to see the knife pressed against Duncan’s left wrist. The knuckles, tendons, and muscles of his right hand strained as they wrapped around the handle of

the knife. The fear I felt for my own well being diminished slightly as I realized what he was doing.

“Duncan,” I said keeping my tone even. “What are you doing?”

His jaw was tightly clenched together. His eyes, focused on the knife pressed to the soft skin of his wrist. “I’m making sure you’re watching.”

I started to feel dizzy as I watched the scene in front of me unfold. Drawing the blade across his wrist, he made no sound. At first it looked like nothing had happened, then the blood started to slowly leak out of the wound.

Rather than running away, I ran toward him. I fumbled at my belt trying to free it from around my waist to use as a makeshift tourniquet. As I reached Duncan’s side, I had formed a loop to place around his arm.

“Not that I mind you taking off your clothing, but that isn’t really necessary.” I could hear the laughter in Duncan’s voice and for the first time I looked up at his face.

His face was smooth with a slightly amused look on it. The green forest hidden in his eyes appeared unconcerned with the devastating injury he had just inflicted. He wasn’t breathing hard, nor was he turning any paler than usual. There was no perspiration on his brow either and no evidence that he may be going into shock.

I started to put everything together. My fear and anxiety melted away. Anger was the only emotion I had room left for.

“You are absolutely the biggest jerk I have ever met. Seriously, I thought the guys in high school were immature, but you take the cake Duncan. No, you know what I take that back. You’re not the biggest jerk I’ve ever met; you’re the biggest jerk on the planet.

“Did you honestly think dragging me out here and lying to me was going to make me go out with you? I have to admit, the virus thing was a nice touch. But scaring me and faking an injury is just lame.”

Duncan looked torn between amusement and annoyance. It was clear after a second that the annoyance was winning.

“You think I was lying?” he asked incredulity evident in every word.

“You honestly expect me to believe there is a vampire virus. I may not be a virologist, but I’m not a complete idiot.”

Duncan looked taken aback by the venom leaking into my voice. “How do you explain this?” he asked flipping his wrist around so I could better see his wound.

I looked down at the slash mark against his wrist. Blood was still oozing from the wound, but the flow was now slow enough for me to see everything more clearly. Leaning closer I searched for the seam where his real skin met the latex gash. The overlay point wasn’t easily visible so I switched tactics.

I examined his arm searching for the tubing that allowed him to pump the fake blood. Tracing my finger up one of his veins, his skin felt cool and all too real.

“Would you like me to remove my shirt?” he asked as I reached his sleeve.

Without waiting for my answer, he withdrew his arm from my hands and carefully removed his shirt. I had dreamed during the day and night about what was beneath his clothing, but it left me ill prepared. The muscles rippled on his chest and abdomen. The snowy skin was unmarred by any blemish. Despite my knowing he was completely insane, I couldn’t stop the reaction I had to seeing his perfectly sculptured body. For several seconds, I lost track of what I was supposed to be doing.

Shaking my head, I gathered my scattered thoughts and looked carefully for any signs of deception. Swallowing my doubt and nerves, I let my fingers trace his chest and arm not trusting my eyes. My hands were trembling as I came back to the cut on Duncan’s wrist.

Without a word, he handed me the shirt he had removed not even thirty seconds before. I quickly felt it making sure there was nothing concealed in the clothing that could account for what I knew was impossible. Nothing was there.

Taking a small corner of the shirt, I wiped the blood gently from the back of his hand. Slowly turning his hand, I continued to clean the blood from his palm. I was surprised by how little blood there actually was. Even more shocking was the fact that the blood flow from his wrist had completely stopped.

My mouth was suddenly dry. I tried to swallow without any effect. Gently, I traced the line on his wrist trying to comprehend. The wound inflicted only a few minutes before was nearly healed. A small cut was the only sign that anything had occurred. I watched in disbelief as it finished closing and eventually disappeared.

“What are you?”

Interrogation

It felt like the world had been turned upside down. My head was spinning in a million different directions. I tried to make everything make sense again. Everything I had ever believed was suddenly called into question. It was like I was suddenly thrust into a middle of a dream.

“Immortal? I don’t understand. How is that even possible?”

“It’s one of the side effects of the virus,” he said shrugging his shoulders.

I took a moment to gather my quickly scattering thoughts. “So, the healing thing, is that one of the side effects as well?”

Duncan nodded his head yes.

“Is that something all of you can do?” I asked. I couldn’t bring myself to say Immortal again. It just sounded so hokey, like one of the old movies or television shows.

“No. The virus affects everyone differently.”

“How did you get it?” My brow felt like it was going to get stuck in permanent question.

“I was bitten,” he said chuckling.

An audible gasp escaped before I could stifle it. It took me a second to recompose myself before I could continue my interrogation.

“So... are you a vampire?” I asked biting my lower lip. I could feel the heat under my skin as I started to blush. I knew it was a stupid question, but it was the only thing I could think of that seemed even remotely plausible.

This time he really laughed. I would have been distracted at seeing him so free, if it wasn’t for my embarrassment.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said putting his finger under my chin and raising my head so he could see my face. I avoided eye contact by keeping my eyes focused on his shoes. “And to answer your question, no we’re not vampires. Though, we do share some of the characteristics that humans seem to associate with them.”

My skin still burned but my curiosity forced me to continue. “Like what?”

“Obviously, there’s the immortality thing. Then there is being the same age for eternity. Our body temperature is much colder than yours is. Also, there is the way the virus is transferred. We can only infect someone through a bite.”

It was nice to know I hadn't imagined his skin being so much cooler than it should be. "But wait that only covers some of the traits. What about the others?"

"What are you curious about?" he asked sitting back down. I followed his example sitting across from him.

Taking a moment, I tried to recall the movies I had seen, and books I had read. There was so much conflicting information. Some of the books made vampires out to be little more than monsters or demons, plagues on humanity. Others made them out to be beautiful creatures whose capabilities were only slightly lower than that of mythical gods.

"Um... obviously the sun doesn't bother you." Duncan shook his head no, a slight smirk holding up the corner of his mouth.

"What about garlic, or crucifixes? Or, how about stakes through the heart? Does your heart still beat? Do you drink blood? Can you read minds or influence people's decisions? What about shape shifting? Do you sleep in coffins?"

Duncan started to chuckle again bringing my list of questions to an abrupt stop. The blush that had just faded returned with a vengeance.

"Well let's see. I like Italian food. I used to attend church regularly, and I've been known to pop into one every now and then. Yes, my heart still beats, but at a much slower rate than yours. No, I can't shape shift, so I'm afraid bats are out of the question. I don't drink blood either, though I do like my steaks rare. I wish I could influence people's minds." A mischievous glint in his eye kept the blood in my cheeks from completely fading. "I use a bed at night. And the last time I checked if you shove a big piece of wood through anything's heart, it will usually die. Did I get all of them?" he asked raising his eyebrow.

I nodded my head yes, as I contemplated all the information he had just given me. My brain was still a little scrambled, but a question kept pulling at the back of my mind that I couldn't ignore.

"How many of you are there?"

"Not very many, though to be honest, I'm not sure of the exact number. The survival rate after infection isn't very good. Most people just can't fight the virus off. Others pull through the initial illness, but they aren't themselves anymore."

I could hear his voice stick when he talked about the others. "What happens to the others?"

“You can’t expect something that should by all accounts be impossible to occur without a price. One out of every ten million people might have a chance of surviving the infection.”

I waited for him to continue. When he didn’t I asked again. “You didn’t answer my question, Duncan.”

He let out deep sigh closing his eyes before beginning.

“Everyone is affected by the virus differently. Usually there is a hard fast line, you survive the infection, or you don’t. The Cast Outs don’t die, but they don’t really survive either. The virus ends up turning them into the nightmares and monsters humans have feared since we first crawled out of the ocean.

“Every culture calls them something different demons, gods, vampires. The myths started because of the Cast Outs, the undead rising from the grave to feed on unsuspecting humans, demons killing children in their cribs while they slept. They became a plague.

“The other Immortals had to take action. A small council was formed, the Archons. The strongest were sent out to hunt down the Cast Outs, and destroy them. It took centuries to bring them under control. Every now and again, there is a new outbreak. Most of the time people just assume it’s a serial killer. When the council finds out about it they send the Hunters out.”

My heart was thudding in my chest. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. It was like being plunged back into childhood again, where every shadow was a monster, and angles and demons were real. So which was Duncan, which was Samuel?

“Why did you tell me about all of this?”

Duncan shrugged his shoulders. “I thought you should know. I was pretty sure Samuel would never tell you.

“I should get you home,” he said standing up and stretching his legs.

“But I have more questions.”

Duncan snickered lightly. “Tabby will probably be getting home soon.”

“Oh, I completely forgot about Tabby,” I said jumping up too fast. The world started to spin, and went black for a brief second as I lost my balance.

“Whoa,” he said catching me before I fell over.

I could feel his smooth skin, and perfectly sculpted muscles as he held me up. I found myself leaning my head against his chest as I waited for the blood to stop pounding in my ears. His skin, so much cooler than mine, felt nice against the throbbing in my head.

“Are you okay?” he asked from close to my ear.

I felt my heart dancing out a faster rhythm that had nothing to do with my dizzy spell. His breath was sweet as it swept over me. I had to control the urge to tilt my head so I could see his face.

“I’m fine, just a little dizzy. Um, we should probably get going,” I said pushing myself gently away from his cool embrace.

Walking back to the parking area was a quiet affair. I was thinking about everything I had learned in the past hour. I was also trying not to think about how it felt to be in Duncan’s arms. Why did he have to be so enticing?

“Aren’t you going to put your shirt back on?” I asked as Duncan threw his leg over the bike.

Opening it up, he exposed the splotches of blood all over the material. “I really don’t want to have to explain this to anyone.”

“Well don’t you have your jacket?” I was reaching for straws. How was I supposed to hold onto him?

“If you would like you could drive and I could hold on.” He couldn’t conceal the smile he was holding back any longer.

I took a deep breath before climbing on the bike behind Duncan. Closing my eyes, I wrapped my arms around the smooth planes of his stomach, and tried not to think.

Confirmation

The rest of the weekend was test in ancient torture methods. It wasn’t until Tabby made it back to the apartment, only fifteen minutes after Duncan dropped me off, that I found out what happened after my abrupt departure.

“He just turned me down Li-Li,” Tabby said as she shoved another cookie in her mouth.

“He just walked over to the window and said something about having to be up early and left.

“There has to be another woman, or maybe he’s gay. Do you think that’s what it is? I mean if that’s what it is I could understand that. If it is another girl, you know, it’s not like I’m asking for a commitment right now. I can handle competition.”

I winced internally as she spent the rest of the weekend vacillating between every imaginable scenario. At one point, I thought about telling her, and then she started another

tirade. That coupled with the idea of me ending up committed to insane asylum kept my lips sealed. I simply offered a shoulder, ear, and tissues when she needed them. My one relief was she never asked about Samuel, or why I never returned to her parent's house.

As the bus came to a stop for the tenth time in a couple miles, I barely noticed. The passengers filed on flashing their passes and found a place to stand as the bus pulled away.

"Well this interesting," Duncan said making me jump.

"What are you doing here?" I asked in a harsher tone than I intended.

"Good morning to you too," he said smiling at my aggravation. "I decided it is much better for the environment that I take public transportation to school."

I rolled my eyes, as I let an exasperated sigh escape.

"So, how was the rest of your weekend?" he asked continuing the conversation.

I glowered at him as I remembered the past couple of days. "Thanks for the heads up on the mine field you left for me." I could feel my annoyance building.

"Oh, sorry about that," he sounded remorseful. "Tabby can be very persistent."

I wanted to hold it against him, but it was a lost cause. "It's okay. If you could just do me one favor?"

"Your wish is my command," he said smiling broadly.

The smile was infectious, despite my not intending to, I found myself returning it. "No more using Tabby to get to me. I don't know how much more she or I can stand."

"I'll promise, as long as you promise, to come out to dinner with me tonight." There was a mischievous glint in his eyes.

It would be easy to turn him down as I had before, but he was being so nice. I couldn't understand the change. He was still playful, but there was something in his eyes, really in everything about him that seemed more genuine. It was like there had been a wall between us before, and I was only just now getting to see him for the first time.

"As long as it's just friends, and you promise to behave."

He smiled brightly as he accepted my terms. We spent the rest of the bus ride hammering out plans to meet later. It wasn't until the bus started to empty that I even remembered where I was going.

Stepping off the bus with Duncan right behind me, I was shocked to see Samuel waiting there. Butterflies threatened to choke me as he caught my gaze. He had a lopsided smile that

sent my heart into palpitations. I waved hi, as I started to blush. I felt like a little kid caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

As Duncan stepped off the bus, Samuel's smile became a grimace. He made no attempt to hide the animosity he felt as he had on previous occasions.

"Hey," I said to Samuel as I tried to ignore the tension radiating out of both Duncan and him.

"Hello," Samuel answered back focusing his attention on me. Quickly leaning down he placed a gentle kiss on my lips causing my heart to tap out a faster rhythm. "You look beautiful today."

I could almost hear Duncan's teeth grind together. "I'll see you later tonight Alina," he said landing a quick jab as he turned to leave.

I clenched my jaw together against the curses that threatened to come out. Samuel looked down at me studying my face. I could feel the heat spreading through my cheeks as I took a deep breath to calm myself.

"What was all that about?" he asked giving me a quizzical look.

I shrugged my shoulders. "I should ask you the same thing." I said trying to avoid his question.

Samuel gave me a sly smile. We started walking toward class attracting more than a few stares. "How was the rest of your weekend?" he asked dropping the previous subject.

I could feel his eyes studying my face as I answered. "It was very... informative."

Samuel raised one eyebrow in a question. I tried to think about how to bring the subject up, but everything I came up with just sounded crazy. It wasn't like I could just come out and ask if he was an Immortal. What if Duncan was lying?

"How do you feel about playing hooky?" I asked.

* * *

After walking around long enough to make Samuel nervous, we found a secluded spot under a pavilion. I still wasn't sure how to begin. Taking a deep breath, I tried to start.

"Is everything okay?" he asked as I made three attempts to talk, but came up short.

“Um, yes,” I said letting a nervous laugh escape. “I’m just having trouble figuring out where to start.”

He gave me a patient smile. “You can always try starting from the beginning.”

“Yeah,” I said with a sigh.

I focused on his hand resting on his lap. Turning to the side so I could look at him easier, I reached across the few inches that separated us and took his hand in mine. It was so cold compared to the blistering temperatures around us. I let my fingers trace the veins on the back of his hand. It felt like silk.

“Your skin is so cold,” I said in a whisper. I watched as he stiffened slightly at my comment. I pressed further. “Why is that?”

He remained silent. I looked up to study his expression. I could see his breathing was coming slightly faster. His eyes looked torn and his jaw was clenched tightly closed. It was painful to watch as he struggled with my simple question.

“I have a heart condition. It causes poor circulation so my skin doesn’t get very warm.” His voice was steady though the storm raging in his eyes was far from over.

“Oh,” I said disappointment leaking into my voice.

Sitting on campus with people walking past, my time in the forest with Duncan seemed more and more improbable. Maybe I had dreamed the whole thing. Even though I wanted so badly to ask Samuel if everything was true, I just couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

“I’m sorry for asking you to skip class. This was really stupid.” I said shaking my head. “I don’t know what I was thinking.” I started to stand up so I could just get away. Samuel refused to release my hand.

“What did you want to talk about?” His eyes were curious, but they didn’t appear impatient.

I was torn. “I, um,” I couldn’t get the words out and kept looking everywhere, but at Samuel trying to find them. “It’s really not that important.”

“Alina, just talk to me.” His voice was soft and low.

I looked directly into his eyes. It felt like I was drowning. It wasn’t an unpleasant feeling. It was actually kind of peaceful.

“I heard something, but it sounds a little crazy.” He waited for me to continue. “I heard that you’re infected with a virus.” He stiffened again, but I couldn’t bring myself to look up at his

face. It was easier for me to say what I needed to if I didn't have to look him in the face. "That the virus has some unique side effects."

I forced myself to look up then. Samuel's face was a blank mask his jaw clenched tightly shut. His eyes were solid ice, cold and unfocused. If I didn't know better, I would swear he was in shock.

"Samuel," I said trying to call him back to me. He remained frozen.

"How exactly did you hear this?" he asked not looking at me.

Looking down, I bit my lip not really sure how to proceed. "Is it true?" I asked my voice barely audible.

Placing his finger under my chin, he slowly lifted my face so I was forced to look at him. In his eyes, I could see that the storm was raging again. He studied my face closely. I could see as the waters started to settle.

"I suppose I should thank Duncan." He closed his eyes and shook his head slightly.

"So, he was telling the truth?" I asked in disbelief. Even after everything I had seen, to have it confirmed out loud was a shock.

He looked at me truly relaxing for the first time since we had met. "You're telling me you didn't already know?" He raised his eyebrow in a question.

"Well, it's a little hard to believe, even if the person telling you can walk away from a head on collision without a scratch."

Answers

We were walking around the campus without a destination in mind. "When were you infected?" I asked as we ambled along one of the sidewalks.

"Shortly before my twenty-first birthday."

"How long ago was that?" I asked after a few moments of silence.

Indecision clouded his eyes. "How much did Duncan tell you?" he asked after a few seconds.

"Enough so that I believed him, and enough questions left over to keep me up at night."

Samuel let a small sigh escape. "It was 1815. I was bedridden for about two weeks with consumption. The doctor let my friends know that I was not going to pull through."

I managed to keep my face composed, but I could feel my head spinning. He was just over two hundred years old. It made it easier if I just pretended it wasn't real.

"Why didn't you go home?" I asked.

"My mother died shortly after giving birth to my youngest sister. My father died of consumption just two years before I was changed. He managed to fight it off long enough for me to come of age and take control of our estates. I had two sisters. My elder sister was married three years before and moved to the Americas, and my youngest sister," he paused for a moment. I was sure she was the person he remembered most vividly. "She had always been weak, prone to infections and colds. I lost her the month before I left for my travels."

I could see the sadness in his eyes, and I wanted so badly to comfort him. "By the time I returned home I was too ill to run my own home. So, I stayed with Ethan and Emma. At the time, I didn't know what they were. They had purchased a home only five kilometers from mine three years before. They were good people and even came to visit for a month when I was in Madrid."

"Is that when it happened?" My voice was a whisper.

"After the doctor left, I think Ethan and Emma discussed it. I wasn't very lucid by that time. All I really remember was something cold smoothing back the hair from my face. There was pain at my wrist," he said grabbing his right wrist rubbing it. It was like her could still feel the pain. "I don't remember much after that. My fever was raging, and I had trouble staying awake. It took about a week for the fever to subside. When it did, everything was very different."

I could see the dark clouds gathering in his eyes, and I tried to circumvent them. "What did you do after everything?" I asked. I still couldn't bring myself to say Immortal.

"I traveled for several years," a small grimace turned down the corners of his mouth. "I'm not really sure where I went. I would wake up and decided to leave, walk down to the port or nearest coach, discover which was departing the soonest, and make reservations. I didn't really care where it was going.

"When I came to my senses about five years later, I found my way back to Ethan and Emma. We've all stayed together off and on since then."

I thought about everything he was saying and something occurred to me. "How long do you plan on staying here?" I wasn't really sure if I wanted to know the answer.

He sighed heavily looking up at the sky. "I had planned on staying long enough to finish my degree. With everything around us changing, and the fact that we stay the same, it can be very isolating, not to mention dangerous, to stay in one place for too long. It's better if we just move on after a short while."

"Oh," I said. I hoped he didn't hear the hurt that had leaked into my voice. Four years was the only time I would have with him. It was far too short, especially when compared with eternity.

"I'm not really sure what to do now," he said coming to a stop in the middle of the sidewalk. "Usually, I just go to school, get a degree, and move on. This is the first time since, well, in a really long time that I've felt like this."

"What happened the last time?" I asked in a whisper. I could only imagine the broken hearts he left behind him, and wondered if any of them ever recovered.

To my surprise he laughed. "She got engaged to my best friend and I ran away."

I could feel the heat in my cheeks as I realized what he was saying. "You expect me to believe that you haven't had feelings for anyone in all this time." My voice was skeptical.

He chuckled. "Well, not until recently." He gave me a quick glance out of the corner of his eye. My heart skipped along a little faster and my cheeks burned hotter.

"What about you? Have you had any suitors?"

I crinkled my nose at his old-fashioned word. "No, no suitors. Tabby had more than enough for the both of us." Samuel gave me a skeptical look. "Really," I said giving him a wide-eyed innocent look. "I went out on a few dates, but it really wasn't my thing. Any ways I'm not likely to cause a car accident if I walk down the street."

Raising one eyebrow in a question, he gave me a quizzical look. "Do you even look in the mirror?" he asked.

"No more than most people," I answered in a flippant tone. "And if anyone is likely to cause an accident it would be you."

"Not likely, I at least look before walking into the street."

My face colored with chagrin. "I had a lot on my mind that morning. And you know that's not what I meant. Girls are falling all over themselves to get to you, and don't act like you haven't noticed."

He shrugged his shoulders. "It doesn't matter. I'm only interested in one girl."

“Who?” I asked looking around us at the scantily clad co-eds walking past. When I turned my head around to face Samuel again, he was only inches from me. My heart and breathing started to accelerate.

Placing his hand against my cheek, he brought his face closer to mine. His breath smelt like jasmine on a warm summer morning. I closed my eyes and leaned in closer without my meaning to. I would have sworn I heard him stifle a small laugh right before our lips met.

I forgot where we were. All I could feel were his lips against mine. My head was spinning as I pulled in a ragged breath. Parting my lips, I ran my tongue along the smooth silk of his bottom lip. A small moan escaped as he started to pull away. I stood on my tiptoes to keep my lips pressed to his. Both of us were panting as he ended the kiss.

A group of guys walking past whistled at our very public display. Blushing deep red, I buried my face in the smooth hard contours of Samuel’s chest. He kissed the top of my head gently brushing my hair down my back.

Then suddenly, I felt him stiffen. I tried to turn to see what was wrong, but he held me tightly to him. When I heard a familiar voice, I understood his reaction.

“We need to leave... now.”

Time to Leave

Duncan was behind me so I couldn’t see his expression, but his voice was firm and unyielding. Samuel hadn’t relaxed and his face was tense. I could tell he was trying to hide his anger at being interrupted.

“I promise you Samuel, if you don’t let her go, I have no problem making you.” His voice was a snarl. I knew even without seeing his face that he meant what he was saying.

“I’ve been more than accommodating, Duncan, but Alina has made her choice.” Samuel loosened his grip enough so that he could slide in between Duncan and me. “I’m telling you right now if you come near her again, without her permission or mine, it will be the last thing you do.”

A shiver ran down my back as I heard the menace in Samuel’s words. The tension was so stifling it was hard to breathe. I looked around at the faces passing by. Some were curious others were fearful.

“No one is going to do anything,” I said from behind Samuel’s back. Both of the men straightened out of their slightly crouched positions, but the tension barely ebbed. “What’s going on Duncan?” I asked ignoring the look on Samuel’s face.

“There really isn’t time to explain,” he said looking around.

“You need to make time if you want me to go anywhere with you.” Samuel’s mouth dropped open in disbelief. Duncan was wary, but seemed pleased by my statement.

“It’s complicated. Could we at least talk about it while we walk?” His eyes were pleading.

“Only if Samuel comes with me,” I conceded.

He let an exasperated breath out through clenched teeth. “Fine as long as we...”

“There you are,” a melodic voice called from off to our right. Duncan stiffened in response. Samuel was no less affected.

I turned to see a lithe figure, with a dancer’s physique gliding our way. Her skin was a pale olive tone that most women would kill for. She had an oval face with high set cheekbones. Her nose was a little upturned at the end giving her a snobby appearance. The deep pink of her full lips seemed to shimmer in the sun, and her eyes were the same black as night color as her waist length hair.

“If I didn’t know any better I would think you were trying to avoid me,” she sliding up next to Duncan, and letting her hand glide gently over his cheek. He remained frozen, but the hair on the back of my neck stood up in response to her touching him.

The tension in the group was palpable as she turned her attention to Samuel and me. For the first time I noticed that, he wore the same tense expression Duncan did. Who was this woman that had them both on edge?

“Is this the one you were telling me about?” she asked Duncan. He said nothing in response to her query. I could feel her gaze on me as I tried to hide behind Samuel once again. Anger was seeping out of him, as he glared at Duncan and the woman standing next to him.

“I have to say she is quite beautiful.” The smile that parted her lips left me frozen in place. It was like someone had thrown cold water down my back.

“What are you doing here?” Samuel asked the woman across from us. I could hear the venom in his words, but she seemed unaffected by it.

“I just came for a visit. I was hoping for a better reception than this though. Duncan runs off before I can even say hi, and neither of you have introduced me to your little friend.” She turned her smile on me and gave a small wave. Both Samuel and Duncan bristled at her request.

“I’m Alina,” I said forcing myself to step around Samuel. He quickly put his arms around my waist preventing me from advancing further.

“I’m Lucina,” she said extending her hand. I could hear Samuel almost growl as I extended my own. Duncan looked like he might try to rip her arm off. “It’s very nice to meet you.” She smiled again, but I was only able to nod my head. “I’ve heard so much about you.” A quizzical look crossed my face as I considered how she could have heard anything about me. “Don’t worry it’s all been good.”

“Thanks,” I hesitantly answered. I wasn’t really sure what else to say. The hostility in the air didn’t allow for much of a reply. “Where are you from?” I asked trying to relieve some of the tension.

“Oh, all over, but I was born in Spain. That’s actually, where Duncan and I met. Isn’t that right handsome.” She looked at him for confirmation.

“Shouldn’t you be going?” he asked instead. “I wouldn’t want you to be late for your appointment.” He spoke the words through tight lips.

“Oh, you’re right. Thanks for reminding me sweetness.” Placing a small kiss on his cheek, Lucina turned to leave. “I’ll catch up with all of you later. It was really nice meeting you, Alina.” Her words hung in the air as the three of us watched her dwindle into the distance.

“It’s time to leave, Alina,” Samuel said repeating Duncan’s words from earlier.

“What’s going on?” I asked suddenly anxious.

“We’ll explain on the way,” Duncan added as we started to walk.

Panic

Samuel put his arm around my waist dragging me across campus. I could feel the anxiety leaking out of him, as he tried not to or draw extra attention to us. Duncan was on my left side, keeping pace. He kept his face forward, but somehow I knew he was making sure no one was following us. I wanted very badly to question them about what was going on, but I waited until we made it to Samuel’s car before speaking.

“Alina, get into the back and keep your head down,” Samuel ordered as he unlocked the doors.

“No. I want to know what’s going on,” I said looking between Samuel and Duncan. The two of them exchanged a glance.

“Lucina is a Hunter,” Duncan said from the passenger door. I felt a chill run up my back at his words. He opened the door for me to get in.

“You told her about the Hunters?” Samuel said glaring at Duncan.

“She asked about it,” he answered shrugging.

“If she asked you to bite her would you?” Samuel snarled. It looked like the two of them were about to jump across the car, and start trying to kill each other.

“Wait, I thought the Hunters only went after the Cast Outs?” I asked bringing their focus back to me.

“That’s only part of it,” Duncan answered.

If looks could kill, I was pretty sure Duncan would have been lying on the ground in a puddle of blood. “This is not the time or place to discuss this,” Samuel growled.

“I’m not going anywhere until someone explains what is going on.” I crossed my arms in front of me refusing to budge.

“I could just throw her in the back,” Duncan suggested to Samuel.

I glared at him. “You wouldn’t dare.” He only smiled a mischievous glint in his eye.

Samuel remained silent, torn about what to do. “Lucina doesn’t just hunt the Cast Outs, she hunts for... possibilities.” I could feel anger rolling off him in waves.

The pieces of the puzzle fell into place creating a disturbing picture. “I’m a possibility?” My voice was a breath. Samuel clenched his jaw tightly together at my words.

I tried to swallow, to regain my balance, but my mouth was suddenly dry. I couldn’t think clearly. “I don’t understand. Why do we need to leave?”

“Lucina can be very persistent.” Samuel said through clenched teeth.

It took a moment for his words to sink in. For the first time I was afraid.

“Are we going now?” Duncan asked snapping me out of my dark imaginings.

I took a deep breath walking around to the passenger side. “We’re going,” I said climbing into the back of the car.

“Make sure you keep your head down,” Samuel reminded me as he climbed into the driver’s seat. He started the car as Duncan jumped into the passenger seat shutting the door just as he backed quickly out.

“You might want to keep it within the speed limit while we’re on campus,” I said as Samuel sped out of the garage. He glowered at me briefly as he slowed to the rather tedious crawl that was enforced on the campus streets.

“What are we going to do?” I asked after a couple minutes. I couldn’t believe how calm my voice was. Shouldn’t I be running away screaming?

“We’ll go by your apartment and get some of your things. Then we’ll get out of here. Do you have a passport?” Samuel asked as he started to pick up speed.

“Yes,” I answered tentatively. “Why?”

“Just make sure you grab it,” he said pulling into an empty parking spot at my apartment. “Get whatever you want. You need to be quick though. I have to swing by my house and get some things.”

“What are you doing?” I asked Duncan.

“I’ll help you pack,” he said opening his door so I could get out of the back. Samuel gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes,” Samuel said as I scrambled out from the back seat. His eyes smoldered behind his lashes. I tried to remember how to breathe. “Keep her safe,” he growled at Duncan.

I watched as Samuel pulled quickly out. Panic was starting to take hold. If it wasn’t for the fact that Duncan was with me, I would have fallen to pieces.

“We should get going,” Duncan said pulling me out of my spiral. I nodded my assent heading up to my apartment.

Once inside, I ran for my room closely followed by Duncan. He grabbed a suitcase from the shelf in my closet. I was spinning trying to figure out what I needed to do.

“Where’s your passport?” he asked as I ran into my bathroom to grab some toiletries.

“In my top desk drawer,” I answered running out of my bathroom and dropping my load into the bag on my bed. “Can you grab my laptop? It fits in the compartment in my book bag.” I ducked into my closet grabbing an arm full of clothes, flinging them into the suitcase. By the time I finished, my suitcase was so full Duncan had to zip it closed.

“Should we head over to your apartment before Samuel gets back?” I asked.

He shook his head no.

“Do you know where we’re going?”

He shook his head no again.

I was about to ask another question, when Duncan put his finger to my lips. “What are you doing?” I asked shaking his finger off.

“Shh,” he said quietly putting his hand gently over my mouth. Slipping behind me, he wrapped his arms around me, and dragged me into my closet. I struggled with him for a moment trying to free myself, until I heard the front door creek open.

“Stay here,” he ordered. His breath blowing across my ear made my already frantic heart rate skip out of control. Leaving me in the closet, he made his way back out into my bedroom.

“Hello, Jonathan,” I heard Duncan say. Jonathan? I tried to place the name, but came up blank.

“Hello Duncan,” a voice I assumed was Jonathan’s drifted over to me. He sounded friendly enough.

“What brings you into town?” Duncan’s voice was very blasé. I crept closer to the door so I could see what was going on.

“Lucina wanted some company. You know how she can be.” His voice held a smile in it.

I swallowed hard at the mention of Lucina’s name. Looking out from my hiding place, I could see the two men standing near the entrance to my room. Duncan’s back was to me, but Jonathan was facing my direction scanning the room.

“Are you going somewhere?” Jonathan asked focusing on the luggage scattered across my bed. A cold chill ran up my spine.

“Yes, I was thinking about it. The neighborhood is getting a little too crowded for my taste.”

“Are you traveling alone?” he asked trying to step around Duncan.

Duncan deftly moved to the side cutting off Jonathan’s attempt to move forward. Jonathan smiled, but his eyes seemed to burn.

“Actually, no, an old friend and I are traveling together.” I wished I could see Duncan’s face, but Jonathan appeared somewhat rattled by his proclamation.

“Is it anyone I know?” he asked trying to sidestep Duncan again.

Taking up position in front of Jonathan, Duncan kept him from advancing. This time Jonathan's careful facade fell. He glared openly at Duncan. "You know how this is going to end Duncan. You can either play your part like a good boy, or," Jonathan gave him a truly evil grin, leaving the ending open for interpretation.

Looking back over his shoulder, Duncan's eyes locked with mine for a brief second. I felt my breath catch in the back of my throat. He slowly stepped to the side allowing Jonathan pass. I crouched in the back of the closet hoping this was all a dream.

Then everything happened very quickly. Jonathan was in front of the closet pulling open the door. He smiled and offered me his hand. I watched as Duncan came up behind him and wrapped his arm around his throat. The seconds ticked slowly away as I watched Jonathan's wild thrashing slow, and eventually stop. Blood was streaming down Duncan's arm from Jonathan's attempts to free himself.

I stood in mute silence watching everything unfold. I could hear someone screaming for Duncan to stop. It took me a moment to realize it was me screaming. Duncan laid Jonathan out on the floor. I was sure he was dead. His chest wasn't moving. What was I going to do?

"Alina... Alina, get up. We have to get out of here." Duncan was pulling at me trying to get me to stand.

"No, get away from me!" I screamed backing up into the corner of the closet. "You killed him! Get away from me!"

"Stop it Alina. He's not dead," Duncan, said grabbing my wrist and pinning them to my sides. I was still trying frantically to break free. "Alina," he said in a soothing voice wrapping his arms around me and pulling me close to his chest.

The tears started to spill over. Duncan was softly rocking me back and forth as the sobs continued. I wasn't sure how long we were there for, but eventually they stopped. I looked up at Duncan seeing the fear and hurt in his eyes for the first time.

"I'm sorry," he said his voice breaking with emotion. "I'm so sorry."

I noticed for the first time that we were no longer in the closet. The door was pulled to, concealing the horrible event that had just taken place.

"Who was he? What was he doing here?" I asked my voice weak and hoarse from sobbing.

Duncan looked torn as he thought about what to tell me. "He came with Lucina to help with any issues. There are probably a couple others, so we should really get out of here."

I nodded my assent. “We should get you cleaned up first.” I looked at his arm. The wounds Jonathan inflicted were almost healed, but the blood was still evident.

Walking out to the kitchen, I grabbed some paper towels and cleaned Duncan’s wounds. “Is he going to be okay?” I asked indicating my bedroom.

Duncan let a hard laugh escape. “Yeah, he’ll be fine. He should be coming around soon, so we should get going.”

Gathering my luggage, we made our way to the front door. I came to sudden stop realizing I had forgotten something very important. “What about Tabby?” I asked becoming more scared as I started to realize it wasn’t just me caught up in this mess.

Flight

I grabbed my phone from out of my purse, and quickly found Tabby’s number. I wasn’t sure what time it was I was just hoping she wasn’t in class. She picked up on the third ring.

“Where are you Li-Li?” Tabby asked not bothering to say hi. I nearly burst out laughing. I was probably becoming hysterical.

“I’m heading out of town,” I said as Duncan signaled me not to tell her where I was going. It wasn’t like I knew anyways.

“What?” I could hear the millions of questions in her voice.

“Something came up. I can’t explain right now, but...” I scrambled for the right words. “Tabby I have to ask you to stay at your parent’s house for the next week or two, and if you could get Faith to do the same thing.” I added remembering how much time all of us had been spending together.

“What Alina, I don’t understand.” Fear was starting to leak into her voice. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t explain,” I said. “Just promise me you’ll stay out at your parents. Don’t come by the apartment for anything.”

“Alina you’re scaring me.”

“Tabby, I promise to call when I can, but it may be a while.”

“Are you mixed up in something bad? Just let me know so I can help. I don’t care what it is.” Her voice was pleading.

I wanted so badly to tell her everything, but Duncan shook his head no. “It’s safer if you don’t know. Just stay at your parent’s house for the week, and don’t call the police. I promise I’ll be safe.”

“Li-Li, Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.” I could hear in her voice that she was giving up the argument. She knew me well enough. It was fruitless to try and change my mind once I was determined to do something.

“I promise. And you and Faith won’t come by the apartment for the week.” Silence greeted me. “Tabby, promise,” I ordered.

“I promise. Please stay safe.” I could hear the tears in her voice.

“I will,” I lied. “Bye Tabby.” I hung up the phone before she could say another word.

Duncan took the phone from my hand and opened the back of it up. “What are you doing?” I asked as he took the SIM card out.

“It’s just to be safe.” He placed the phone in my purse, but put the card in his pocket.

“Samuel’s here. Are you ready to go?”

I took one last look around my apartment. It felt like I had just moved in a few days ago. Now I was leaving, and didn’t know when or if I would be back.

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

* * *

“I thought I told you to keep her safe,” Samuel spat at Duncan as we made it to the car.

Looking down I realized for the first time, that both my and Duncan’s shirts were spattered with blood. “He was protecting me,” I said digging through my bag for a clean shirt. “Some guy showed up.” I swallowed my unease at the all too clear and recent memory. He looked to Duncan for confirmation.

“One of Lucina’s friends paid us a visit. He wanted Alina to go with him instead.” Duncan added in a matter of fact tone. I couldn’t hide the shiver that ran through my body. Samuel gritted his teeth. “He should be out for a little while longer, but we should probably get out of here before he comes around.”

Samuel nodded his head. He reached into the trunk and threw something at Duncan before closing it. “You’ll need to change before we get to the airport.”

Walking around to the driver's door, Samuel opened it for me. Climbing into the too small back seat, I could see Duncan remove his bloodstained shirt. The smooth planes of his chest and stomach were all too clear in the bright sunlight. It was painful to watch as he slid the new shirt over his bare chest concealing his body from view.

I turned around to wait for Duncan and Samuel to join me. It sounded like they were discussing something. I tried to make it out, but their voices were too low for me to hear anything. I was just pulling on my new shirt when they finally joined me in the car.

"Are you ready to go?" Samuel asked before turning the car on. His eyes looked so sad.

I nodded my head, not sure, if my voice would work. I was really leaving, and I didn't know if I would ever get to come back. I hoped that Tabby would keep her promise and everyone would be safe, but in a world where monsters were not just possible, but real, could they ever be safe.

Samuel started the car and we left everything and everyone behind. I said nothing as we made our way out of Gainesville. Staring out the window, I tried to hold back the tears that sprang to my eyes as we drove through the city. This had been my home for most of my life and I couldn't help being sad at this goodbye.

The trip down to Orlando was quiet, each of us lost in our own thoughts. Shortly before we arrived at the airport, I finally broke the silence.

"What's the plan?" I asked.

"You're going to go with Duncan to Ethan and Emma's in England," Samuel said looking out the windshield.

I couldn't stop my mouth from falling open. "You're not coming with me?" I asked the shock evident in my voice.

"Duncan will keep you safe until you get to Ethan and Emma's." I could see his mouth set in a hard line.

"I don't understand. Why aren't you coming?" I tried to keep the panic I was starting to feel from leaking out.

"It's safer if we split up, and someone needs to stay here to keep an eye on things."

"I understand that, but why can't I stay with you?" I could hear the desperate edge in my words.

"It's just safer," Samuel, said setting his jaw.

I knew there was no use pushing him. He wasn't going to tell me anything else. Besides, I would have the long flight alone with Duncan, and I knew he would give me the answers I wanted.

"Why are we flying to Atlanta? It's only a few hours until the other flight leaves." My voice was on the verge of trembling.

"The sooner, and farther, we can get you from Gainesville the better off we'll all be," Duncan said.

"You're coming with us to Atlanta, right?" I asked Samuel hopeful.

"I should really get back to Gainesville so I can keep an eye on Lucina," Samuel said. I could hear the waiver in his voice though.

"Please come to Atlanta. You can catch the first turn around flight and get back to Gainesville in a few hours. Everything should be okay until then," I pleaded.

I knew I was being selfish, but I had so little time with him. I didn't know when we would get to see each other again. It didn't take much encouragement before Samuel caved.

Once we made it through security, we had to run to make our flight. My heart was pounding out an anxious rhythm in my chest. Everything was happening so quickly. As the plane started to pull away from the gate, I could feel the nausea setting in.

"Is everything alright?" Samuel asked. I had to swallow hard before I could answer.

"I'm not that big on flying," I answered half lying.

It was hard enough for me to fly without out the added stress of being chased by a psychotic Immortal. The color was starting to drain from my face as we taxied over to the runway. Duncan chuckled lightly. I could feel Samuel glaring at him from over my head.

"Look at me Alina." Samuel was whispering in my ear. I couldn't bring myself to open my eyes or turn my head. The last thing I wanted was to throw up on him.

I felt Samuel's hand under my chin. He slowly turned pulled me around to face him. Brushing my hair behind my ear, I could feel my heart pounding out a new rhythm. His cool breath washed over me making my head swim.

"Are you still worried?" he asked. I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Worried about what?" My voice was a whisper. He leaned closer a soft smile on his lips. We had forgotten about everything else. Just before our lips met, someone clearing their throat called us out of our little world. Samuel frowned.

“Could I get a glass of water?” Duncan asked one of the passing flight attendants.

“Sure,” she said in a breathless gasp. Never mind that we had only just become airborne, and it was against the rules for her to get him a beverage.

Humming a little song to myself, I got as comfortable as I could for our quick jaunt up to Atlanta. Occasionally, I would feel Samuel’s lips pressing gently against the top of my head. I would have turned my face to meet his lips, but even with our imminent separation, I didn’t want to maim Duncan any more than I already had.

All too soon, we were starting our decent into the Atlanta airport. I could feel the butterflies in the back of my throat. Holding me closer Samuel helped to stop the world from spinning. Duncan kept his head turned, ignoring the two of us the best he could.

“How long until our flight leaves?” I asked as we gathered my bags.

The corner of Samuel’s mouth pulled down, “Not very long.” It felt like time was speeding up. Taking what little of it I had away.

Duncan went to check the status of our flight, leaving me alone with Samuel. His flight back to Orlando was already starting to board.

“Will I ever get to see you again?” I could feel the tears threatening to spill over.

“Of course, you’ll be in my arms again before you know it,” Samuel said pulling me close.

I shook my head, “Don’t lie to me.” The tears I had been holding back started to overflow.

“I promise, Alina, I’ll come back for you.” Leaning down he pressed his lips to mine.

There was a desperate edge to this kiss I had never felt before. Reluctantly, he pulled away from me.

“Keep her safe,” Samuel said.

Turning around, I was surprised to see Duncan standing behind us. Pressing his lips to my forehead Samuel quickly turned, and walked away without another word. It took all the control I could gather to stop from running after him. Staring out the floor to ceiling windows, I watched as the plane slowly pulled away from the gate and started to taxi to the runway.

“We need to head over to our gate,” Duncan said interrupting my silent watch. I wiped the tears from my cheeks not saying anything and let him lead me.

Options

Seated on the plane bound for England I tried not to think about anything. Staring out the window, I watched as the stars and moon replaced the sun. The lights inside of the cabin dimmed as night started to fall.

“Why did Samuel stay?” I asked Duncan.

Duncan remained silent. I was forced to turn away from the window and look at him. He appeared to be thinking how to answer my question.

“We discussed it, and thought this was the better option. After Samuel’s reaction earlier, Lucina would assume you’re with him. That coupled with the animosity between he and I, she would never believe he would leave you with me.”

I could understand that. I too had been shocked when Samuel mentioned I would be traveling with Duncan. Something else came to mind as I thought about everything that had happened in the past few hours.

“How do you and Lucina know each other? From what that guy was saying in my apartment you and her... well, the way she was acting on campus... it just seems that you two know each other.” I chewed my bottom lip as I waited for a response.

“I thought I told you,” he said a crease in between his eyes. “Lucina is the one who changed me.”

My mouth fell open with a slight pop. It felt like someone had sucker punched me in the stomach. “I’m confused. I thought that Samuel...” I said leaving the end of my sentence open. I couldn’t bring myself to finish it. It had never occurred to me that someone else had infected him.

“You thought that Samuel changed me,” Duncan said finishing my broken sentence.

I nodded my head looking down in embarrassment.

A soft chuckle escaped through Duncan’s lips. “When I realized what happened, I asked him to change me.” A hard edge was embedded in his voice. “Samuel of course refused. At the time, I thought he was just being selfish.”

“How did you find out about everything?” I asked truly curious. I had never suspected anything in the past few months. I wondered how he had discovered everything when they all blended in so seamlessly.

“I lost my temper after Lily’s death. I waited for Samuel to get better, which was surprisingly fast after being on his deathbed. Then I picked a fight. Even after punching him in

the stomach, he just stood there. He didn't even try to defend himself. I ended up breaking several fingers on my right hand after landing a blow that should have broken his nose.

"Shortly after that I got good and drunk, and confronted him. I didn't ask for the particulars. I just wanted him to change me, give me a fair fight. He refused to do it. I called him a coward, and left to find someone who would do what he wouldn't.

"It took me almost two years to find Thanos. I didn't know the rules, so I observed him for a couple weeks before approaching him. He always had several people with him so getting close was a little difficult.

"I got myself invited to a party he was attending, and discussed the matter with him personally. He agreed to my proposal, and Lucina changed me."

"Why didn't Thanos do it himself?" I asked furrowing my brow.

"He's a member of the Archons. He tries not to dirty his hands with any task he can get others to do. He also has a very virulent strain of the virus. There's only been one person he changed himself who managed to survive unscathed."

"Who?" I asked completely engrossed by Duncan's story.

"Ethan," he answered.

My head started to spin again. Everything just became more and more surreal the longer I stayed in this world. I turned to stare out the window again. I contemplated everything I had learned.

I was starting to nod off, when I heard Duncan asking for a couple pillows and blankets. Turning languidly to look at the woman, I nearly laughed. It appeared she had lost the ability to speak. She nodded her head in response to his question, and walked down the aisle in daze. I had very serious doubts she would actually remember what she was supposed to get.

"You really shouldn't do that," I said frowning at Duncan.

"Do what?" Curiosity burned in his eyes.

"Put every woman in a stupor."

"I can't help it." I gave him a skeptical look. "Really," he said throwing up his hands. "It's one of the side effects of the virus."

"Sure it is." The sarcasm dripped heavy from my words.

"I can't say that it isn't a pleasant side effect at times, but it is not something I can control." I glared at him briefly before rolling my eyes.

“You can blame it on the virus all you want, but I know you better than that. You enjoy the attention, and play it up every chance you get.” A quick smirk on his face confirmed my suspicion.

I watched as a different attendant headed up the aisle. She clearly had the requested items in her arms and an overly excited expression on her face. It looked like the other attendant had informed her friend of Duncan’s presence, and she was coming to see if she had exaggerated. She didn’t look disappointed as she handed us our supplies.

“Is there anything else I can get you,” she said interrupting our conversation.

“No thank you,” Duncan said politely returning her smile.

“Well my name is Cindy. If you need anything just press the call button.” Maybe I was imagining it, but it sounded like there was a double meaning in her words. Cindy gave Duncan a smoldering glance from over her shoulder as she walked back the way she had come.

Keeping one of the packages for himself, Duncan handed me the other. I wasn’t sure who opted for the first class seating, but as I leaned my chair back to its fullest extent, I was thankful. I rolled over trying to get comfortable enough to sleep, but somehow it eluded me.

“Are you asleep?” Duncan asked.

“No,” I reluctantly answered. I kept thinking about Lucina, and if she had taken the bait. The thought of her chasing after me was frightening enough, but the thought of her chasing Samuel, or anyone else I cared about, was terrifying.

“You said Lucina finds possibilities.” I made sure to whisper. Duncan nodded his head yes. “So... am I a possibility?”

Duncan rolled over on his back, and stared up at the ceiling. Propping myself up on my elbow, I looked at him waiting for an answer.

“Why do you ask?” He sounded distant and refused to look at me.

“I’m just curious,” I said trying to play it off.

The silence started to drag. “You have to understand Alina, it’s just a possibility. There are no guarantees.”

I swallowed back my discomfort before speaking again. “Is that why Samuel and you wanted me to leave?”

Duncan nodded his head.

I thought about this for a minute. “Shouldn’t that be my choice?”

Glaring at me from the corner of his eye, he asked his own question. “What would you choose? This isn’t something you can take back if it doesn’t work out.”

“You and Samuel seem to be doing well.” I could hear the accusation in my words.

Clenching his jaw tightly, I watched as the green of his eyes caught fire for a brief moment. “So you’re willing to give up your life to be like us?” His words were strained. “You would be willing to risk your friends, your family, everything for a chance?”

I had trouble remembering how to breathe. Duncan appeared truly upset by the prospect of me taking such a risk. I could only imagine how Samuel would react to me considering such a prospect.

“That’s definitely something to consider,” I managed to say before flopping back down on my back.

Duncan pulled himself up on his arm, and leaned over me. “Are you even listening to me?” he asked. “There’s a chance it could kill you.” I could hear the annoyance in his voice.

“So could crossing the street,” I fired back.

“That’s completely different. That would be an accident.”

“I don’t see the difference. I made a choice to cross the street, and accept the risk associated with it. It’s the same thing.”

Flexing his jaw, I could see that he was getting upset at my persistence. “It’s a moot point. Samuel and I would never agree to change you.”

For one brief moment, I faltered. Then another route occurred to me. Glaring up at Duncan, I let a smile play at the corner of my mouth. “You know you’re not the only Immortals I’ve met. I’m sure Lucina would be happy to attempt it.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Duncan said in a menacing whisper.

“If it means protecting the people I care about,” I said through clenched teeth.

Glaring down at me, Duncan refused to waiver. “That’s not your place.”

“It is if I say it is,” I stubbornly refused to budge.

“So you would risk dying, and leaving us all here without protection.” Duncan said changing tactics.

“That’s not fair. You and Samuel would be a whole lot safer if I wasn’t around.”

“True, we would probably be okay, but what about Tabby or your father?”

“They would be fine,” I said not really wanting to consider that side of the argument.

“They would be fine never knowing what happened to you.” The skepticism was evident in his words and expression.

“They would get on with their lives eventually. It’s not like I would be able to stick around for forever. They would be fine.” I hoped my lie sounded convincing, but Duncan didn’t seem to buy it.

Leaning back into his seat he started in again. “I’m sure they would move on and never think about you again. I mean, I’m right here with you and I can’t even recall your name. What was it again? I’m having trouble remembering.” The sarcasm was thick.

I rolled over, turning my back on him. I knew he had won the argument, but I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of hearing me say it though. Closing my eyes, I tried to make myself fall asleep this time. Sooner than I thought possible, I felt my consciousness slipping away.

Welcomed

“Alina we’re here.” Duncan’s words tickled my ear.

I rubbed the back of my hand across my eyes. Squinting I tried to orient myself. Sun light was leaking in from a window in front of us. “What time is it,” I asked stretching.

“It’s nearly eight.”

Having the sun up was disorienting. I knew we had been in flight for nearly eight hours, but with the five-hour time difference, it felt so much longer. The cabin was slowly coming to life around us. People were being awoken by their friends, family, or the flight crew.

“Where are you going?” Duncan asked when I stood up.

“To ask if they offer sky diving lessons. To the bathroom, where do you think?” My voice was unintentionally sharp. I grabbed the small bag of toiletries I had packed, and went to brush my hair and teeth.

Looking in the mirror, I was shocked at the reflection staring back at me. My eyes were puffy, and surrounded by black circles from a night of tossing and turning. I cringed as I felt the film covering the inside of my mouth. In the back of my mind, I wondered if I had been snoring.

“I was beginning to think they took you up on the sky diving lessons,” Duncan said as I rejoined him.

“Ha, ha,” I said lamely as I fell back into my seat. I could feel the pressure in the plane start to change as we began our approach to the airport.

Soon we were ready to disembark. I had managed not to puke again. Maybe I was starting to get used to the take offs and landings. When I stood up from my seat though, I quickly dismissed that idea.

“I’ll get your bags,” Duncan offered. For the first time I didn’t argue with him.

Walking through the overly crowded airport, we made our way through customs. The process was much faster than the last time I traveled to England when I was fourteen. On any other occasion, I would have been excited. With everything going on, I was just anxious to get out of the crowded area.

I started to get curious as to how we would be leaving, and where we were going exactly. A familiar couple caught my attention near the information desk. The tall lithe blond was being held by the mountain behind her. I had only seen them once before, but I knew it was Ethan and Emma.

“It’s good to see you again Duncan,” Emma said in a melodic voice. He shook the hand she extended toward him. “It has been far too long since our last meeting.”

I was surprised by how cordial she was. It was obvious that despite how Samuel felt, Emma at least, did not share his feelings. Ethan extended his hand to Duncan as well, but he appeared much stiffer than his female counterpart did.

“You must be Alina,” Emma said crossing the short distance between us, and embracing me. I turned to stone in her cool embrace. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you,” she said misinterpreting my reaction. “I forget how hard it is to have everything turned upside down in such a short time.”

I returned Emma’s dazzling smile with a weak one of my own.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said. “Samuel has told me a lot about you.”

“I hope it was good,” Ethan said in a cool bass. “Hello Alina. I’m Ethan. It’s nice to finally meet you. I only wish the circumstances could be happier.” His hand engulfed mine as I gave him the same weak hello and smile.

“We should get moving. I don’t think Lucina knows we’re in England, but it’s better to be safe when it comes to her.” Ethan took one of my bags from Duncan and the two of them led the way from the terminal.

“How was your flight?” Emma asked as we loaded our things in the car. She sounded like picking up a stranger from the airport was an everyday occurrence.

“It was fine,” I answered as Duncan started to chuckle. I glared at him briefly.

“Did I miss the joke?” Emma asked confusion evident in her golden eyes.

“No,” I answered before Duncan could. My attempt to cut him off only made him laugh harder. Confusion darkened Emma’s brow further. “I’m not that fond of flying,” I finally confessed to stop Duncan from drawing further attention to me. I slid into the back seat trying to hide the blush coloring my cheeks.

I waited as the three of them discussed the seating arrangements. Duncan wanted to keep his position next to me until we arrived at Ethan and Emma’s home. Ethan wasn’t very keen on the idea. Finally, Emma managed to get heard over the warring men, and she joined me in the back seat. Ethan took up his post behind the wheel, and Duncan slid into the passenger seat after throwing me a longing glance that made my cheeks burn.

“Where are we going?” I asked after we made it out of the parking lot.

“We have a little place in Tarvin,” Emma answered. I nodded my head even though I had no idea where she was talking about. “It’s a little ways outside of Manchester.”

“Oh,” I said still a little confused, but at least I knew what direction we were heading.

The drive was quiet, and pleasant as we made our way north. I tried not to think about everything that had transpired in the past twenty-four hours. Instead, I chose to stare out the window. The leaves on the trees were beginning to change into their brilliant fall colors. The contrast between the still green grass, and the bright oranges and reds was breath taking. It always seemed a little magical seeing the changing seasons.

At some point, I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew we were pulling up to a beautiful brick house. As we drew closer, I would have described it as a mansion. There was ivy crawling up the walls giving it a stately appearance. I was a little shocked when we stopped right in front of the main entrance.

I remained silent as we unloaded my and Duncan’s bags. The grounds were well manicured with rolling pastures stretching as far as I could see. Beautiful trees bowed low framing different gardens that held their own charms.

“So what do you think?” Emma asked curiosity evident in her voice.

“It’s gorgeous,” I said in awe.

“I was a little worried you might not like being this far out. It was safer than staying at our flat in London though.”

“How could anyone not like this?” I said shivering slightly as a cold breeze blew in from the north.

“Let’s get you settled, and maybe we can find you something a little warmer to wear.” Emma wrapped her arm around me. I reluctantly let her lead me into the house.

My shock from the outside didn’t dissipate once we were through the door. The original wood floors were still in place in the entrance room as was much of the original detailing. I could smell the mixture of scents both old and new. There was also another smell drifting in from somewhere that made my stomach twist into a knot.

“Ethan do you mind showing our guest to their rooms while I go check with Beth to see when lunch will be ready,” Emma asked her husband.

“Of course,” he said letting Emma attend to other duties in the house. With a reassuring smile she left Duncan and I in the care of her husband.

Refusing to let me carry my own bag, Ethan led Duncan and me upstairs to our rooms. I nearly laughed when he put me in a room only two doors down from Emma’s and his. Duncan’s room was in the furthest corner on the floor. If he threw him out of the house after lunch, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

“If you would like to freshen up the bath is just through that door,” Ethan said pointing to the door next to the closet.

“Thank you, that would be nice,” I said in a wispy voice.

“I know this is really hard for you, but I want to thank you for coming here,” Ethan said catching me off guard. “Lucina is more dangerous than she appears, and I don’t know what Samuel would have done if you had refused to do this. So thank you, Alina.”

I was floored as I watched Ethan leave. I didn’t have time enough to say anything. Standing in the middle of the room, I was truly lost. To make matters worse my best friend was thousands of miles away in possible danger, and I had no way of contacting her. How was I ever going to figure this all out?

Hurt

It was a couple hours after lunch and I was trying to figure out what to do. I tried reading a book, but it was useless. I couldn't concentrate on anything. I really just wanted to go for a walk, but I didn't have a jacket. I didn't want to ask Emma if she had one I could borrow either. I don't know how long I was staring out the window at the neatly manicured garden, but a light knock drew me from my thoughts.

Opening the door, I found Duncan waiting there holding a coat. "Would you care to come for a walk with me," he asked a smile in place that didn't reach his eyes.

"Sure," I said taking the jacket from him. It smelt wonderful, a mixture of scents I couldn't find names for. "Thanks," I said pushing the sleeves up.

Leaving by the back stairs through a door that lead directly out into the garden, we managed to miss everyone in the house. Picking a path, we started walking through the variegated flowers and bushes. We strolled in silence until we were in the pastures surrounding the home.

"I'll be leaving in the morning," Duncan finally broke the silence.

"What? Why?" I asked incredulous.

"Ethan and Emma will keep you safe. I kept up my end of the bargain with Samuel. There isn't really a reason for me to stay." I could hear the pain buried in his words.

"Is it Ethan?" I asked. "I could talk to him. Maybe he'll let up."

Duncan came to a stop. "That's only part of it." I waited for him to continue. "As soon as Lucina leaves, Samuel will be on the first flight here. What am I supposed to do? Wait around for him to show up and say 'thanks for the lend'."

"That's not fair Duncan." Some of the hurt I felt leaked into my voice despite my efforts to stop it.

He let a bitter laugh escape. "But it's fair for you to ask me to stay? You know how I feel. But you want me stay here, and wait for him to show up so I can hand you over to him."

It felt like someone had punched me in the stomach. But I knew everything he was saying was correct. What right did I have to ask him to stay? I was just being selfish wanting to keep him close. That was the problem though, that I wanted to keep him close.

I should have been anxious for him to leave, offering to help him pack, anything to get him away from here, away from me. The truth was that the thought of him leaving made me anxious. I knew I would be safe with Ethan and Emma, but still... I wanted Duncan here too. It was

probably due to the fact that I was alone, in a dangerous situation, without anyone I knew or cared about to lean on.

“You’re right. I shouldn’t ask you to stay.” My voice was a whisper. I couldn’t hide the hurt I felt. “We should head back to the house.”

A small moan escaped from Duncan. “That’s it... that’s all I get.”

“What do you want from me Duncan?” I asked exasperated. “You want me to hurt you worse than I already have?”

“I want to know how you feel about me. I want to know the truth.” His words cut into me.

“I don’t know how I feel. I care about you. I don’t want you to leave. I want you to stay even though I know I shouldn’t. I ...” my words faltered.

Before I realized what was happening, I was in his arms. Duncan pulled me close to him. The tears I had not known were there started to spill over, even as I tried to stop them.

Without a word he leaned down, his face only inches from mine. His breath washed over me. It was unbearable being so close to him. I wanted to run away, but I remained rooted in place. He leaned closer.

As our lips met, a small moan escaped from his throat. It was like a dream. The one I had only a few days ago. My body reacted to him without thinking. For one brief moment, everything else was erased. Then something inside of me screamed.

“No,” I moaned pushing away from him. He didn’t try to stop me. I saw the pain in his eyes for a split second before I turned, and ran. I didn’t care which direction I was heading. I just needed to get away. I didn’t hear him following as I made my escape.

How could I have been so stupid, letting myself get into a situation like this? I had never been in a relationship before, well not a real relationship. I didn’t consider the few dates I had with a couple of guys in high school a relationship. I had never had serious feelings for anyone before.

Now I had feelings for not just one guy, but two. How was I supposed to choose between them? I absently wondered if everyone went through this. Looking around for the answers I couldn’t find in my head, I realized I had no idea where I was.

“Great,” I mumbled under my breath. I grabbed my phone from my pocket. It wasn’t until I turned the power back on that I remembered. Duncan had my SIM card. I sat down on the moist ground in defeat. How could things get any worse?

The temperature was starting to drop. Shoving my hands into Duncan's over sized jacket, I felt a little piece of plastic in the bottom of it. Pulling my hand out, I nearly jumped for joy. It was my SIM card. I didn't know how it got into the pocket, but I was ecstatic to find it.

Opening the back of my phone, I put the card in place. A minute later, I was using international minutes that I didn't have. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I wondered how high my bill would be this month.

"Li-Li," Tabby answered her excitement spilling over. I was almost in tears at the sound of her voice.

"Hey Tabby, how is everything?" I asked trying to sound upbeat.

"It's good though I'm a little mad at you." She was in full pouty mode now.

"Why?" I asked knowing she had every right to be upset.

"You should have told me you were sick. Do you think I would have ditched you?"

"What?" I asked confused.

"Lucina told me you came down with some weird virus. That everything in the apartment has to be disinfected before we can go back. I know I can be a little selfish some times, but I would have gladly gone with you to Atlanta."

My blood froze. What was I supposed to say? "I'm sorry Tabby. Your right I should have told you. I just didn't want you to worry, or risk getting you infected."

"That's stupid Li-Li. You know I would have done anything to help." Genuine concern was in every word.

"I know," I said in a weak whisper. "Um, is Lucina with you? I was trying to get a hold of her so I could give her an update, but her phone just kept going straight to voice mail."

"Yeah, she's here. She's been keeping us posted on how you're doing. Did you want to talk to her?"

"Sure, if you don't mind," I said trying to stop my voice from trembling. I listened intently as the phone was exchanged.

"Hello, Alina. Are you feeling any better? I was starting to worry that I might not hear from you," Lucina said fake concern dripping from her words.

I swallowed hard before I could say anything. "What are you up to?" I asked my rage starting to simmer.

“I felt it was important to keep everyone posted on how you were doing. You left so quickly that we were all concerned, though it was very thoughtful of you to consider our safety.” Her voice was sweet like honey, but I could hear the threat just beneath the surface.

“Don’t hurt them,” I ordered.

“I wouldn’t dream of doing that. We were just trying to figure out when to head out to meet you, but we weren’t sure how many people could come up and visit.”

I felt like I was in the middle of a nightmare. “Leave them alone, I’m the one you want.”

“I can’t promise that. There is a possibility that Tabby could have gotten exposed. It might be safer if she came with me,” she whispered.

“No, don’t... I’ll do what you want. Please, just don’t hurt her,” I pleaded.

“I think that would be the best option. How many people do they have taking care of you?”

I swallowed down the bile in the back of my throat, “Three.”

“It sounds like they’re taking good care of you then. What wing did they move you to?”

I played along with her game, knowing what it could mean if I didn’t. “I’m in Tarvin, just outside of Chester in England.”

“Well that’s certainly convenient. Are they going to keep you there?”

“Yes,” I answered wavering between anger and nausea.

“I thought for sure they would put you into the London suite. They’ll probably move you there tomorrow,” she said lowering her voice.

“Where should I meet you?” I asked playing into her hand.

“They have this lovely picture of the British Library over the nursing station. It’s from right in front of the building.” I couldn’t believe how easy it was for her to sound like she was having a normal conversation.

“What time should I meet you there?”

“The doctors come by around nine. That’s good at least you get to sleep in a little. The phone is starting to break up. Alina... are you there?” I could hear voices in the background as Lucina hung up the phone.

Lost

I don't know how long I sat there on the ground. The sun was painting the sky its beautiful pinks and purples. I kept kicking myself over and over. If I hadn't been so selfish, if I hadn't asked Samuel to fly up to Atlanta with me, Tabby would be safe. I was still beating myself up when I heard footsteps approaching. Quickly turning my phone over, I removed the SIM card and placed it in my pocket.

Duncan came over the top of the hill, surprise and discomfort mixed on his face. "What are you doing out here? I thought you headed back to the house."

"Sorry, I got turned around. I would have called but my phone doesn't work," I said waving the now useless instrument.

Rolling his eyes, Duncan covered the rest of the distance between us, relief coloring his face. "We should get you back to the house. Ethan and Emma probably think I've kidnapped you."

The walk back was awkward. I wanted to say something, but didn't know what to say. Should I tell him about the call? About Lucina? What was I going to do? I didn't even know how I was going to get to London.

"What time are you leaving?" I asked bowing my head in guilt.

Duncan didn't answer right away. "First thing in the morning. Unless there's a reason for me to stay?" he asked. The hopeful edge to his voice made my heart ache.

I could feel my cheeks burning. "Where will you be going?"

"I don't know," he said shrugging his shoulders. I felt like crawling under a rock.

"I want to ask you something," Duncan said coming to a stop. We were close to the house now, but still far enough away that we wouldn't have to worry about being over heard. "Do you love him?"

I wasn't sure how to answer. I hadn't even thought about it. I had feelings for Samuel, I was sure of that, but love? I had nothing to compare it to. Why did life have to be so difficult?

"I don't know," I whispered. I could see the hurt and pain my words caused as they reached him. He flexed his jaw grinding his teeth together. "What do you want me to say?" I could feel the tears threatening.

He looked up at the darkening sky. "I don't know what I wanted you to say." He let a small huff escape. "I wanted to hear something different. I'm not used to this," he said looking back down at me. The hurt in his eyes was visible, but he appeared in control of it.

We finished making our way back to the house in silence. All of the lights were on inside, and I could hear a couple voices muffled. It felt like I was trying to sneak back into my parent's house after being grounded. I put my hand on the knob to open the door, when it was suddenly ripped from my grasp. I nearly fell into Ethan standing on the other side looking very angry.

"What's all the commotion about?" I asked a weak smile in place.

Relief flooded over Emma's face. "Where did you go?" she asked looking over my shoulder. I could feel Ethan glaring at Duncan.

"I went for a walk and got lost. Duncan found me though," I said trying to lessen the obvious anger Ethan felt. He looked doubtful of my explanation, but said nothing.

"Thank you for finding her," Emma said. Duncan shrugged his shoulders. "You shouldn't wander around. We're pretty sure only Samuel knows we're here, but it would be better if we knew where you were," she scolded.

I nodded my head. "Sorry, I just needed some space to think." I felt like a child being reprimanded.

"Next time just let us know so one of us can come with you," Ethan added. I thought about arguing, but what point was there. I would be gone before they woke in the morning.

"Dinner will be ready soon, if you want to get cleaned up," Emma said.

"To be honest, I'm really tired. I just want to get some rest." I let a yawn escape.

"Are you feeling okay?" Emma asked in an overly concerned voice. I wondered absently if that's what most mothers sounded like.

"It's probably just jet lag."

"We'll save a plate for you in case you get hungry later."

I turned to Duncan before heading upstairs. "Thanks for finding me, and everything else. I'm going to miss you." I stood in front of him for brief moment fighting back tears. I couldn't bring myself to look up at him before making my escape.

Running up stairs, I stopped at the top of the landing out of sight. I could hear enough of the conversation to know he was telling them he was leaving. Tears were welling up in my eyes, but I refused to let them spill over.

I quietly searched the upper floor until I found a room with a computer. Shutting the door, I made sure it was locked before proceeding. I turned on the machine and waited for it to boot up. It was a top of the line model, so I didn't have long to wait.

I searched for a way to get to London by tomorrow morning. There was a train leaving from the station at six thirty in the morning. I hoped Duncan wouldn't be leaving until later. I had to book everything over the internet since I didn't have any money.

Hearing footsteps coming down the hall, I quickly switched the computer off. My heart was racing as I heard them pass. Cracking the door, I looked out to see who it was. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like Duncan. When he was far enough down the hall, I opened the door a little further and crept out into the corridor.

When I was halfway to my room, Duncan appeared behind me. "Where are you sneaking off to?"

"Oh, well... I tried lying down, but my stomach started growling." A nervous laugh escaped.

"Would you like me to keep you company?" he asked.

"No, I'm good. I'm just going to grab a sandwich and then get to bed." My hands were slick with sweat. "Will I see you in the morning before you go?" I asked lowering my head.

"Do you want to?" he asked. I could hear the hopeful ring to his voice.

I thought about it for a moment and decided to answer honestly. "Yes." As soon as the word passed my lips, I regretted it. Hadn't I hurt him enough already? I couldn't bring myself to look up at him. I turned, escaped down the hall, and out of sight.

I took my plate out of the refrigerator, and threw it in the microwave. I tried not to think about everything as I watched the plate turn in circles on its pedestal. I wanted so badly to call Samuel, to hear his voice, to tell him everything. It was impossible though. If I called him, he would be on the phone with Ethan and Emma as soon as I hung up, and on the next flight to out.

I ate my dinner in peace, cleaned up my mess, and headed back upstairs. The house was a little foreboding as I made my way through it. Most of the lights were out, and the wind buffeting the side of the house played havoc with my imagination. Every shadow was a monster ready to grab me, and every sound was a creature calling out to me.

I lay down on my bed trying to sleep. Every creak and moan of the centuries old house frazzled my nerves, not that they needed much help. It was close to four in the morning when I finally gave up on sleeping.

Placing the letters I had written earlier in the evening on the nightstand, I prepared to leave. Gathering my book bag and a few belongings, I left the bulk of my things behind. As quietly as I could, and with my heart pounding, I made my way down stairs, and out the door.

Meeting

The three mile hike from Ethan and Emma's was exhausting. I was frozen by the time I finally got to the train station. I had a half an hour to wait before the train was scheduled to arrive. I sat down on one of the benches as far from the other passengers as possible.

Every minute that ticked by felt like an eternity. The door opening or someone sneezing would make me jump, and almost send me into convulsions. When the train finally pulled into the station, my heart was pounding out a staccato. I made sure I was one of the first people seated.

I stared surreptitiously out of the window expecting Duncan, Ethan, or Emma to come marching across the platform, and drag me off the train. When the conductor made the last call and the train started to slowly pull forward, I breathed a sigh of relief. It was short lived.

"Where on earth do you think you're going?" Duncan asked sitting across from me.

My mouth fell open but I couldn't speak. I could see the look of betrayal and hurt in his eyes. It took me a few seconds to stutter out a response.

"Where are Ethan and Emma?" I asked blushing with shame.

"They're not as fast as me, and you did not answer my question."

I considered lying to him, but thought better of it. I decided to try and deflect. "What are you doing here? I thought you were still sleeping."

"Samuel called." I could feel myself choking. "Lucina left Florida a few hours ago on a private plane. He said he's catching the next flight to Manchester, but that won't be until the morning. Now it's your turn." Duncan refused to be misled.

"I called Tabby yesterday." I waited for his anger to subside before continuing. "Lucina was with her. She threatened to infect her if I didn't meet her in London. I didn't have a choice."

Flexing his jaw, he took a slow breath in and out before saying anything. “Yes, you had a choice. You could have called Samuel or told me. Instead, you decided to give Lucina what she wants. What makes you think she’ll keep up her end of the bargain?”

I felt cold again. This time it had nothing to do with the weather outside. I tried to think through everything logically, but my emotions kept getting in the way.

“It was the best choice I had at the time. If I hadn’t agreed, what would have stopped her from infecting Tabby? Not only that, what if there was a struggle? You said it only takes one bite. What if Samuel didn’t get to Tabby in time? All I can do is hope that Lucina keeps up her end of the bargain.”

Duncan shook his head. “We’re getting off at the next stop.”

I set my jaw and shoulders. “You can do whatever you want, but I’m staying on this train.”

Glaring at me from underneath his perfect brow and lashes, Duncan didn’t seem likely to back down. So I was surprised by his next comment. “Then I’m coming with you.”

“What?”

“I’m coming with you,” he said more slowly.

“You can’t. She told me to come alone. If she sees you I don’t know what she might do to Tabby.” I could feel the panic starting to rise.

“Okay, okay, I’ll stay out of sight then,” he said trying to calm me down. “Where are you going to meet her?” I chewed on my bottom lip considering my options. “If you don’t tell me, I’ll just follow you.”

I sighed in defeat. “I’m meeting her in front of the British Library at nine.”

Duncan checked his phone for the time. “I hope we don’t run into any delays,” he said raising an eyebrow.

I sighed. There were earlier trains, but all of them arrived at the same time in London. This one at least was a more direct route to my destination.

“You look exhausted. You should get some rest,” Duncan said moving into the seat next to me.

“I’m fine,” I said yawning. It was eleven o’clock back in Florida. The sleep I had managed to get since my departure only the day before wasn’t very restful. Still, I was far too wound up to close my eyes. Instead, I opted for staring out the window at the scenery.

Before I knew it, we were pulling into the Euston station. It took me a few minutes to put everything together. I must have fallen asleep at some point.

“How are you feeling?” Duncan asked.

“Nervous,” I said stretching. I wasn’t sure if it was my upcoming meeting with Lucina or my lack of sleep, but my stomach felt like it was doing back flips.

“You don’t have to do this,” Duncan reminded me.

Despite the nausea I felt, I shook my head. “No. I have to.” Tabby, Faith, Josh, my Dad, they were all counting on me, even if they didn’t know it.

“I could stop you,” Duncan said. I could hear the serious edge to his voice.

I shook my head again. “You won’t. You know I’m right. This is the only way.”

“What am I supposed to tell Samuel?”

It felt like iron bands were being pulled tight around my chest. “You can tell him... I’m sorry.”

A heavy silence descended as we made our way over to the library. I kept reminding myself why I was doing this so I wouldn’t bolt. With Duncan right next to me, I knew the slightest hesitation or misstep on my part, and he would have me on the first train back to Tarvin.

With only a few minutes to spare, we arrived at our destination. I was thankful that I didn’t have that long to wait. I wasn’t sure how much more my nerves could take.

“I’ll be on the other side of the statue. If you change your mind just whisper my name.”

Duncan looked hopeful. It was a vain hope. I nodded my head, unsure if I could trust my voice.

One minute dragged into the next. My heart was trying to make a run for it, but my legs felt like jell-o. It reminded me of stage fright.

After what felt like an eternity, I spotted a familiar figure heading towards me through the morning crowd. Lucina created a striking figure flanked by a gorilla-sized brute on her right. I tried to concentrate on slowing my breathing and heart rate down so I didn’t pass out.

“Hello again,” Lucina sounded like she was meeting an old friend for coffee. “Did you have any trouble getting here?”

I tried to squeak out a no, but came up empty. Clearing my throat, I tried again. “No.” My voice was trembling. “Where is Tabby?” I managed to make my voice sound firm.

Lucina frowned. “You don’t trust me?” I shook my head. “She’s in Gainesville without a scratch on her. Are you ready to go?” She smiled. I took a deep breath and nodded my head.

“Where’s Jonathan?” Duncan asked as he stepped around the statue.

Lucina’s face darkened. “I wasn’t expecting to see you,” she said glaring at the both of us. Her companion bristled as he sized Duncan up.

“Answer the question Lucina,” Duncan ordered refusing to back down.

“He’s keeping an eye on things,” she answered in a smug tone.

“Call him, tell him to leave them alone, and catch the next flight back.” The tone in Duncan’s voice didn’t leave any room for negotiation.

Much to my surprise, Lucina did as he asked. She even handed the phone to Duncan so he could talk to Jonathan. His face was a mask as he handed the phone back to her.

“Are you satisfied?” she asked raising one of her perfectly sculpted eyebrows. He nodded his head. “Shall we go then?” she asked.

“Lead the way,” he said smiling.

“Always the gentleman,” Lucina said before turning on heel, and leading the way through the crowd.

My heart was pounding in my ears as we approached a silver Mercedes parked next to the curb. The driver leaning against the sleek vehicle was nearly as tall as the gorilla walking next to Lucina. With his lighter frame, he appeared to be built more for speed than brawn. He moved quickly to open the door for her, as he eyed Duncan flames burning in his eyes.

Duncan ignored the obvious hostility and danger, as he climbed into the vehicle before me. It was hard to think straight with the sound of blood rushing in my ears, but somehow I gathered the courage to get into the vehicle. The car door closed behind me with a soft click. It had an air of finality to it. There was no turning back now, and no way out for me.

For the first time since everything began, I felt truly afraid. As we pulled into the flow of traffic, I could feel the panic I had managed to keep under control up to now, breaking loose. Looking out the window, the tears started flowing silently down my cheeks.

Betrayal

“I’m surprised to see you,” Lucina said to Duncan. The hostile tone in her voice drew my attention.

Duncan shrugged his shoulders. “I wanted to come along personally this time.”

Lucina raised her eyebrow in a skeptical look. “You should have asked. You know I always enjoy your company.” The look she gave him made me blush. I could also feel the pangs of jealousy I knew I had no right to feel.

“What about Jonathan?” Duncan asked in a tone filled with implications.

Lucina shrugged. “He’s a nice distraction, but nothing serious.”

I couldn’t help but feel sorry for the young man left behind in my closet.

“I’m still upset with you though,” Lucina, said continuing. “If you had asked to come along everything could have gone much more smoothly.”

Duncan shook his head. “You know that’s not true. Samuel would have fought to keep her. Even with the three of us there, we couldn’t have guaranteed getting her to Thanos unharmed.”

Something half remembered started to tug at the back of my mind, but I couldn’t drag it out. Lucina smiled. There was something in her look that reminded me of a comment she made during our first brief meeting. ‘Is this the one you were telling me about?’

I could feel shock setting in as the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. I couldn’t catch my breath. The walls of the vehicle started to close in. The air was too heavy to breathe. Fear and panic were threatening to overtake me.

How could I have been so stupid? I felt like the biggest fool on the planet. How could I have believed anything he ever said? I was like a lamb for the slaughter letting myself be led down the path to my own destruction without a concern. If I had just listened to Samuel, if I had just stayed with Ethan and Emma, if I hadn’t called Tabby, this wouldn’t be happening. None of it mattered now. I would never see my friends or family again. Even worse I would never feel my lips pressed to Samuel’s again, never feel his cool skin sliding against mine setting it on fire.

The tears, that had stopped shortly after our drive began, were threatening to spill over once again. I could hear the voices mumbling from somewhere close by. I tried to concentrate on them, but they were so far away. A cool hand stroked the side of my face brining back to the reality right in front of me.

Focusing on the face so close to mine, overwhelming anger flowed like acid in my veins. Before I could stop myself, I felt my hand come down on the side of Duncan’s perfectly sculpted features. My skin burned and I could feel the ache as I injured two of the fingers on my right hand.

“How could you!” I yelled as I continued to hit him landing blows wherever I could.

I could feel restraining hands grabbing my wrist pinning them to my side. Tears fell down my cheeks as I continued my verbal assault. “You’re a monster. How could you! Let me go. Don’t touch me. You’re not human.”

After what felt like eternity, my anger started to ebb. I crumpled against the seat, and curled into a ball sobbing. My hands were stinging from the blows I landed on Duncan’s iron hard body. The index and middle fingers on my right hand were starting to change colors. There was also a dull ache in my left wrist.

I lost track of everything else, as I drowned in a lake of pain and self-pity. I could hear people talking about something. I knew I should pay attention to what was being said, but I didn’t have the energy. It wasn’t like any of it mattered now.

After an interminable amount of time, I felt the smooth swaying of the car come to a stop. Slowly, I came out of my catatonic state, and looked out the window. The light reflecting off the water burned my eyes. Looking around I tried to figure out where I was, but I couldn’t see any signs.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked Lucina. My voice was a hoarse whisper.

“We’re taking a ferry over to Calais and from there we will head to Lille.”

“France?” I asked my voice flying up three octaves.

I could feel the panic threatening to take over again. I realized I was hoping to stay in England. Samuel would be on a plane headed for Manchester by now. If I stayed in England, I might have a chance of him finding me. I realized it would be hopeless once we were in France.

“Don’t concern yourself with the details. It will only be a couple more hours and then we’ll be at the chateau. Besides you should consider yourself lucky,” Lucina said drawing my attention back to her. “You’re the first possibility Thanos has invited to meet with him in nearly a hundred years.”

I could hear the awe in her voice when she spoke about Thanos. Lucina felt I should be flattered at meeting her master. All I felt was nausea and anger.

“What happened to the last person who came to visit?”

Duncan laughed at my question. When I looked at him though, any amusement he felt quickly disappeared from his face.

Lucina smiled. “There’s no reason for you worry about it,” she said bringing the conversation to an end.

I didn't believe her.

Once we were on board the ferry, we had to get out of the car. Lucina appeared wary. I could only guess what I looked like. My eyes were swollen from crying. The two fingers on my right hand were bruised, and I couldn't move them without pain shooting up my arm. My left wrist was about one and a half times its normal size. The pain, both emotional and physical, didn't help my naturally pale skin. All of this coupled with the motion of the ferry left me ill equipped to moving around on the vessel.

"Would you care for something to eat or drink?" Lucina asked.

Maybe she was trying to be nice, but I didn't have time to decide. I ran for the edge of the boat and started to heave over the side. A brief moment of insanity gripped me as I continued to spew the few contents in my stomach down the side of the boat. I briefly considered letting go of the railing, and attempting the short swim back to shore. Luckily, my delusion was cleared by the mist spraying up the side of the boat. The water had to be close to thirty degrees. I would be in hypothermic shock within a couple minutes, and with two injured extremities, there was no way I could fight even the relatively small waves.

As I finished dry heaving, Duncan came over to help me away from the railing. I shook him off of me, but was too weak to make it any farther than the floor.

"Is everything okay?" an attendant came to ask. We were the last car to board, and as such, the deck was nearly empty.

"We're fine," Lucina said turning to face the young man. I could tell by his reaction that he didn't stand a chance of refusing the bronzed beauty standing in front of him.

"Okay... um... just wanted to make sure. Let me know if you need anything." A dreamy smile was on his face as he stared at Lucina.

"Thank you Justin, we will," she said reading the name off of his tag. It looked like the guy might burst as he turned to leave.

Duncan leaned down to help me up from the deck once the attendant was far enough away. I swatted his hand away sending a new wave of pain and nausea through me. For an all too brief moment, I would have sworn that he looked hurt by my reaction, but he didn't try to help me up again. Instead, the gorilla scooped me up in his arms and carried me off the deck. He was lucky that I had already emptied my stomach.

"Would you like to rinse your mouth out?" Lucina asked after a few minutes.

It made me nervous that she was being nice, but the taste of the bile in my mouth wasn't helping to calm my stomach. I nodded my head. The gorilla I was leaning against helped me stand, passing me off to Lucina. She helped me to the bathroom, where I proceeded to rinse my mouth out. I should have asked for toothbrush and toothpaste, but I didn't think she would comply.

"I have to say you look like something dragged in by a wild animal," she said as I attempted to get some of the vomit out of my hair.

"Thanks," I said sarcasm flowing thick.

"Don't mention it," she said giving me a snide smile.

After I finished cleaning myself up as best I could I looked in the mirror. Lucina was right. I looked like something a killer might toss into the trunk at the beginning of a movie.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked.

"Doing what?" Lucina evaded.

I couldn't stop the hard laugh that escaped. "Let's start with you taking me, threatening my friends, and just being a bitch."

It was Lucina's turn to laugh. Taking a step forward, her face was mere inches from mine. I wanted to take a step back, to put some distance in between us, but I managed to hold my ground.

"I'm doing it because Thanos asked nicely, the job benefits are excellent, and I enjoy it." I swallowed hard. The look on her face sent a wave of fear coursing through me. The other questions I wanted to ask were suddenly forgotten.

Once we were back outside, the breeze off the ocean caused goosebumps to breakout all over me. It did dull my headache, and the throbbing pains shooting up from my injured hand and wrist. I wanted to head inside to the warmth of the restaurants, but I wasn't sure my stomach could handle the smells.

As we got closer to the port in France, the other passengers started to join us on deck. With a gorilla, a runner, two models, and me looking more like a wild animal than a human, I wasn't surprised when people started to stare. There were several hushed whispers and individuals pointing in our direction. I thought about asking one of them for help or simply screaming, but the thought of everyone I cared about kept me from saying a word.

Hopeless

My hopes about us being held up in port were dashed. I stared off into the distance, as I was rubber stamped into France for the first time. The stark contrast between the way I felt, and the way I should feel, made me want to go into hysterics.

The only sounds as we drove through the French countryside were the gentle hum of the car's engine and Lucina's voice. She pulled out a phone shortly after we left Calais. I couldn't be sure because she was speaking in French, but it sounded like she was making arrangements for our arrival.

The drive through the countryside would have been nice. People were harvesting their various crops, the trees were in full regalia, and the fields were dotted with sheep and goats in their shaggy winter coats. I should have been happy. Under different circumstance I would have been. With a psychopath seated across from me and a traitor seated next to me, all I wanted to do was cry as every mile we drove deepened my depression.

It could have been an hour or maybe half the day, but eventually we slowed and exited the motorway. After winding through several streets and several more miles, I was sure that any attempt at escape would be useless. I would have become lost in short order. I cursed myself again for getting caught up in this mess.

We turned off of the streets and onto a private drive. It looked as if time had stopped as we passed through the gate. Duncan stiffened as a large chateau came into view. I couldn't help but be impressed. The large stone building was surrounded by perfectly manicured lawns that brought to mind the fairytales of my childhood. I knew that unlike my stories, there was no happy ending awaiting me in the castle.

Pulling up to the front of the house, we came to a stop. A gentleman appeared as if from nowhere and opened the door for us. Duncan hesitated for a moment, but soon exited the vehicle. Turning around he offered Lucina his hand as she slid across the seat to the door.

"Always the gentleman," she said smiling up at him. He didn't say anything in return. Bowing slightly he gave her one of his playful grins that a few hours ago would have made my heart skip faster. Without waiting for me to exit the car, the two of them began walking toward the house arm in arm.

The gentleman holding the door offered me his hand as I reluctantly scooted across the seat to exit the vehicle. I refused to accept his assistance. As I stood up though, the world started to spin tortuously out of control. Warm supple arms wrapped around me supporting my weight.

When my sight cleared, I found myself looking into the attendant's face. I was surprised to find that he was human. The fact that his skin was warm, and gave easily under my weight attested to that fact. Keeping his arm in place around my waist, and throwing my arm over his shoulder, he helped me into the house.

Stopping in the foyer, I could hear people speaking quickly in French. I tried looking around, but I was having trouble focusing. Shaking my head, I attempted to stand on my own power. It was a mistake.

The attendant said something I couldn't understand, and the next thing I knew I was being passed off to a burly maid that assisted me up the stairs. I wanted to stay in the foyer to see what was going on, but I was too exhausted to protest. It wasn't as if it mattered. Everyone was speaking French, and I couldn't understand a word they were saying.

I was led, or really carried, into an opulent bedroom and placed on the bed. A second maid entered the room, and it wasn't long before I heard water running close by. The burly maid said something I didn't understand, and then proceeded to try and remove my clothing.

"What are you doing?" I said holding my shirt down.

In broken English, she tried to get me to understand. "You bath," she finally managed to get out.

"I can do it myself thank you," I answered fully awake again. I wasn't a child, and the last thing I wanted was for these strangers to see me without clothing.

"Don't be difficult," Lucina said. I hadn't seen or heard her enter. "They're just doing their job."

I glared at her from around the burly maid's arm. "I can bathe myself."

"This is not up for discussion," she said menace coloring her words. "Now you can either let the servants assist you, or I can have your clothes ripped off, parade you out back to one of the stables, and have you scrubbed down."

I swallowed. Gritting my teeth, I released the bottom of my shirt. My hand was throbbing from my all too brief struggle with the maid.

“Now that wasn’t so hard,” Lucina said turning to exit the room as the maid removed my shirt. “Think of it as a spa day,” she said closing the door.

My discomfort didn’t start to ebb until I was out of the bath, and covered in a plush robe. It didn’t seem possible, but as the second maid brushed my hair out and dried it, I was starting to relax. For a few brief seconds, I almost forgot where I was.

After exiting the attached bath, I found a change of clothing that didn’t belong to me draped over the bench at the bottom of the bed. I checked the room, but there was no sign of my belongings anywhere. I attempted to ask the two maids where my things were, but they simply shook their heads. I contemplated staying in the robe, but the thought wasn’t appealing.

As I finished dressing, I heard a light knock on the door. The burley maid went to the door and opened it a crack. After a brief exchange, she opened the door wider and a tall slim man caring a bag entered.

“Hello,” the gentleman said in a crisp British accent. “I’m Dr. Williams.”

“What can I help you with Dr. Williams?” I asked.

“I was told you injured your hands on the way here. I was simply coming by to examine them and make sure nothing is broken.”

“I’m fine,” I said sliding my hands behind my back. “Really, I’m more tired than anything else.” As I spoke the realization of how tired I was, struck me.

“I won’t examine them if you do not want me to, but if I don’t it could cause permanent damage. Is that what you want?”

I thought about my options. It wasn’t like I had anything to lose. I pulled my arms from behind my back, letting the doctor look at them.

Without a word, he took my right hand gently in his turning the appendage over to examine it from both sides. Placing my hand back on my lap, he repeated the procedure with my left wrist. I couldn’t hide the flinch as he turned my arm over.

“Sorry,” Dr. Williams said giving me a reassuring smile, as he continued to examine my wrist. Clearly, it was the worst of my injuries.

I decided to talk to the doctor in order to distract myself. “So, you’re one of them,” I said trying not to think about the pain shooting up my arm.

A smile flicked at the corner of the doctor’s mouth. “Yes,” he answered.

“Are you really a doctor?”

He laughed. “Yes, I’m really a doctor. I hold several degrees in internal medicine as well as a recent degree in orthopedics. I try to keep current on medical breakthroughs and current treatments.”

“Oh,” I said looking around the room for another distraction.

The doctor placed my arm gingerly back on my lap, and began to dig for something in his bag. I watched as he pulled out a small-unmarked bottle. The unmistakable sound of pills clanking around inside the plastic container made me suddenly wary.

“Do you have any allergies Miss Taylor?”

“No,” I answered honestly.

Dr. Williams turned to the burley maid who had assisted me up into my room and said something. I hated not being able to understand what everyone was saying. The women ducked into the bathroom and came back with a tall glass of water.

Turning his attention to me, he attempted to give me two pills. “What are they?” I asked eyeing Dr. Williams suspiciously.

“They’re Tylenol to help with the swelling and pain.”

I took the tiny oblong capsules and examined them closely. “How do I know you’re not lying to me?”

Dr. Williams laughed. I was surprised by how soothing the sound was. “You don’t. I can only give you my word.”

I looked at the medicine weighing my options. Placing the pills in my mouth, I took a drink of water, and swallowed. Finishing the drink, I handed the empty glass back to the waiting maid.

“Hello, Dr. Williams. How have you been?” Lucina asked as she entered without permission. She crossed the room till she was standing at the foot of my bed. I couldn’t hide the frown that crossed my face at seeing her.

“I’ve been well Lucina.” The doctor didn’t appear any more pleased by her presence than I was.

“How is our patient?” she asked ignoring the obvious disdain of Dr. Williams.

Not looking at her, he gave a quick rundown of my ailments. “She managed to dislocate the index and middle fingers of her right hand, and possibly sprain her left wrist. She may have broken it, but without an x-ray, I can’t be sure. I should take her for one in the morning after she’s had some rest.

“How is that she was injured in the first place?” Dr. Williams asked checking my pulse.

“She attacked Duncan,” she answered the doctor in a flat tone. “Is there anything else I need to know about her condition?” Lucina walked over to the window and peered outside. A slight frown pulled down the corner of her mouth.

“No. She should be fine in couple weeks.”

“Are we finished here then?” Lucina asked turning back to face the Doctor.

“I just need to put her fingers back into place, put a brace on her wrist, and take a blood sample.”

“Good. I’ll let you finish up.”

Without a sideways glance or good-bye, Lucina glided from the room. A heavy fog had started to descend as I had listened to the conversation. I began to suspect that there was something else in the pills than just Tylenol.

“I’m sorry for the interruption,” Dr. Williams said returning his full attention to me. “It looks like the medicine is starting to work. I’m going to have to put the fingers on your right hand back into place.”

“What did you give me?” I asked as the world started to grow fuzzy around the edges.

“It’s Tylenol three.”

“I’m having trouble focusing,” I added slurring my words together.

“I’m not surprised. It looks like you haven’t slept in a few days, and the medicine can make you groggy.”

I nodded my head and nearly fell over.

“I’m going to put your finger back in place now. It will probably hurt for a few minutes, but then it should feel better. Okay?” Dr. Williams asked.

“Sure,” I said not really caring any more.

Taking my hand in his he held it much more firmly than before. With a brief pull on one finger then the next, he set the dislocated appendages back in place. I gritted my teeth as pain shot up my hand and arm. Then pulling out a needle, and several collection tubes, he gathered some of my blood. Lastly, he wrapped my left wrist in a brace.

“Dr. Williams,” I said sliding beneath the covers. “What happened to the last visitor that came?”

I could hear his breath catch for a moment before picking back up. “How do you know about that?”

“Lucina,” I said in a whisper. The venom I tried to put into the one word was lost as my consciousness started to slip away.

“Get some rest Miss Taylor. You’re going to need it.”

I wanted to argue with him, to demand an answer, but my lack of sleep combined with the medicine and soft bed, wouldn’t allow me. As dreams started to engulf me, I hoped the medicine would keep the nightmares from taking root.

Escape Plan

I woke the next day when the shades were pulled back. The room flooded with early morning light. I pulled the covers over my head with a groan.

“Pardon,” the maid said.

I could hear her going around the room gathering things and cleaning. I tried to ignore it, but the sound combined with the throbbing in my head and arm, wouldn’t let me. Sitting up slowly, I stumbled into the bathroom.

It was hard to focus as I looked into the mirror. I felt like I’d been hit by a truck, and then they backed up and ran over me again. I rummaged through the drawers and medicine cabinets for some sort of pain reliever, but I came up empty. Taking the brace off my throbbing wrist, I decided to get into the shower hoping it would help with the pain.

The shower was a nice distraction. The hot water helped a little with my headache, but it did little to alleviate the pain in my arm. I threw on the same robe I had used the previous day.

When I exited the bathroom, I was surprised to see the maid still cleaning. The room looked spotless. I wondered if she was sent to keep an eye on me, and make sure I was behaving myself. I rolled my eyes as I looked around for my bag. I checked in the closet, under the bed, and even if my belongings had been stored in the dresser. I still couldn’t find my things, but there was plenty of other clothing.

“Um, excuse me,” I said getting the maids attention. “Do you know where my bag is?” I asked.

“Je ne comprends pas,” the maid said.

“My bag,” I asked again using hand gestures hoping she would understand. She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head. I let out a huff in frustration.

After looking through the clothes, I found a shirt and pants in my size. There was even a pair of boots that fit. As I was finishing up, a knock on the door caught my attention.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s Dr. Williams.”

I opened the door a crack to double check that it was the Doctor. He smiled at my slight paranoia. I opened the door wider letting him come in.

“How are you feeling this morning Miss Taylor?”

“I’ve had better days,” I answered my voice falling flat.

“How’s your arm?” he asked sitting down next to the large window.

“It hurts. Would you happen to know where my belongings are?” He shook his head no.

Examining my arm for any changes, I winced as he rolled it over. It was still swollen and there was some slight bruising on the underside of my wrist. I’d never broken anything before, but I was pretty sure I’d managed it this time.

“We should head down to breakfast. I’ll give you a couple more Tylenol once you’ve had something to eat.”

“I’m not really hungry.” Just the thought of food made my stomach roll.

Dr. Williams gave me a reassuring smile, and his hand. I took it, feeling I didn’t really have any other choice. The two of us left and made our way downstairs to the breakfast room.

The table was loaded. There was coffee, tea, and several different kinds of pastries. My stomach growled audibly, as I smelled the enticing aromas. Dr. Williams chuckled.

“Please, help yourself,” Dr. Williams said pulling the chair out for me.

“Thank you,” I said blushing slightly as I sat down. I surveyed the table again and decided on a muffin. Picking at it, I tried not to think about the past forty-eight hours. As I reached for a second muffin and cup of tea, Duncan and Lucina sauntered into the room.

“Good morning Dr. Williams,” Lucina said sitting down in the chair Duncan held for her. “How is the food this morning?”

“It’s wonderful, as usual,” Dr. Williams, answered without inflection. “What time will we be leaving this morning? I would like to get Miss Taylor to my office as early as possible.”

“I was thinking about leaving after we’ve finished breakfast, if that meets with your approval Doctor?” I bristled at her condescending tone. Dr. Williams ignored it.

“That would be fine.”

The rest of the meal was quiet. Tension filled the small room. I soon lost my appetite. Staring out the window, I prayed for a miracle I knew wouldn’t come.

Soon after finishing breakfast, we were driving to Dr. Williams’ office. The back of the car was crowded with the four of us squeezed in. I stared out the window trying to ignore everyone else. I felt a small bit of relief as the chateau fell out of sight.

It didn’t take us long to arrive at the office. It was a quaint unassuming building. If someone had told me it was a doctor’s office, I wouldn’t have believed them. The sign on the front door stated the office was closed, but listed a number to contact in case of emergency. Pulling a set of keys from his pocket, Dr. Williams opened the door.

The driver and guard stood just inside the front door, keeping watch to assure we were uninterrupted. Duncan and Lucina followed the Doctor and I back to a small room. Heavy aprons hung on the wall, and there were several large machines positioned around the room.

“If you wouldn’t mind waiting outside,” Dr. Williams said as he gathered the necessary supplies for the x-ray.

“Actually, I do mind,” Lucina said leaning against the wall.

“I am perfectly capable of keeping an eye on my patient without your assistance.” A hint of petulance leaked into his voice.

“Then a little added security shouldn’t bother you,” Lucina snapped back.

She wasn’t going to back down. Dr. Williams glared at her briefly, but made no move to forcibly remove her. He didn’t even appear to notice that Duncan was standing by Lucina’s side.

Placing one of the heavy vests over me, Dr. Williams put my arm in the right position. The familiar buzzing noises let everyone know the picture was being taken. After repositioning my arm, he took another x-ray.

“It will just take me a few minutes to develop these,” Dr. Williams said with a reassuring smile.

I nodded my head in understanding. Regardless of what he was, I couldn’t help but be impressed by the Doctor’s bedside manner. He left the room leaving me alone with Duncan and Lucina.

“Did you hear that?” Lucina asked abruptly.

I didn’t bother to answer. I hadn’t heard anything, but I doubted she was asking for my opinion.

Duncan shook his head no, appearing unconcerned. Lucina wasn’t as assured. She turned, and walked to the door. Without a sound, he approached her from behind. It wasn’t until everything was over that I realized what was happening.

The door started to open, Lucina’s eyes widened in surprise. Wrapping his arm around her throat in a chokehold, Duncan began to squeeze. She struggled against his grip trying to escape, but it was pointless. Eventually, her movements became less urgent, and finally stopped. He held his grip for another minute before releasing her. She fell to the floor with a soft thud.

I remained frozen in place. It all happened so quickly that I didn’t have time to process what was happening. All I could look at was Lucina’s body lying on the ground.

“Alina,” the voice of an angel called. I knew I must be dead, because that was the only way I would be able to hear that voice again. “Alina,” the voice called again from next to me. I tore my eyes away from Lucina’s lifeless form.

“Samuel,” I gasped disbelief coloring my words.

In a moment of pure ecstasy, his lips found mine. Everything, that happened in the past few days melted away. The only thing left in the world was the two of us. He crushed me against the smooth plains of his chest. It made it hard to breathe, but I wasn’t going to complain.

A noise I couldn’t place called me back to earth, and the unbelievable reality that was waiting. Duncan cleared his throat again.

“This is all very touching, but we should get going,” he said drawing my focus.

“Go where?” I asked.

“We’re getting you out of here,” Samuel said in a matter of fact tone.

“No,” I said refusing to move.

“What?” Samuel and Duncan asked in unison.

“I can’t go with you.” Both men stared at me in disbelief.

“I’ll keep you safe. I promise, but we need to leave before they wake up,” Samuel said trying to allay my fears.

“I’m not concerned about me,” I said shaking my head.

“I don’t understand,” Samuel, asked worry etched on his face.

“I know you’ll keep me safe, but what about my family, my friends? Am I supposed to sacrifice them? What about you and Duncan, or Ethan and Emma? They would come after them too.”

“Ethan and Emma can take care of themselves. Duncan and I are more than a match for most of Thanos’ men. We’ll make sure Tabby, Faith, and your parents are looked after. Lucina isn’t the only person with friends. They’ll be safe.”

I shook my head again. “You can’t guarantee that. It would only take one slip, one moment, and they would be gone forever. If I stay... if I meet Thanos... if I do this you’ll all be safe.”

It was Samuel’s turn to shake his head. “I won’t let you do this.”

I swallowed hard before beginning again. “If I run now, I’ll never be able to stop running. Thanos and Lucina have forever to find me. I only have this one life. Don’t make me spend it looking over my shoulder worried about everyone I care about.”

Samuel ground his teeth together. “Don’t do this,” he said his voice agonized.

“Bite her,” Duncan added suddenly. “Thanos would have no reason to hunt her or anyone else if you change her.”

My mouth fell open at Duncan’s suggestion. Samuel was no less shocked, but his shock quickly turned into anger.

“Are you insane? I could kill her.” Samuel’s eyes burned with fury.

“It’s the only other option. Either you can bite her or I can. But if you want to protect her from Thanos, she can’t leave here uninfected.”

“I won’t put her life at risk, and I won’t let you either.” Venom saturated his words.

“My life is already at risk,” I interrupted. “Whether it’s you or Thanos...I’m not getting out of here without someone biting me. If I have a choice though, I would prefer it was you who did it.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Samuel said pain clearly evident in his voice.

“I know more than you think,” I said taking both of his hands in mine. “If the virus kills me or worse... if I don’t convert fully. You’ll feel responsible for my death, just like Lily’s.”

Samuel said nothing. The muscles in his jaw flexed grinding his teeth together, confirming my assumption.

“Would you feel any less responsible if Thanos kills me?”

I could see the shock on Samuel and Duncan's face. Both of them were unable to speak.

"You're not going to die," Duncan said breaking the silence.

I shook my head. "You're wrong. It's just a matter of when I die. If we run and somehow manage to get away, eventually I'll die of old age or some accident. The only chance I have is somehow surviving the virus. Even if I don't survive, at least it won't be a meaningless death."

"Stop talking like that," Samuel said suddenly angry. "You're acting like it's already been decided."

I stared up into the deep blue of his eyes. The storm was raging threatening to overtake him. I put my hand on the side of his face gently running it down his cheek. "The decision was made the day I chose to be with you."

"I won't let you do this," he said but his voice was resigned.

"We should really get going," Duncan said. "Lucina and the others will be waking up soon."

I could feel the panic that had overtaken me yesterday starting to climb up my throat. "I promise, if I survive... I'll find you."

"No," Samuel shook his head. "I'm not leaving you again."

I swallowed the panic back down. "You can't stay. They'll kill you."

A hard laugh escaped his throat. "They can try."

Noises started to drift in from the hall. It sounded like someone was trying to break down a door. A small moan came from the floor.

"Please, both of you have to get out of here." Neither of them made a move to leave.

"Duncan, please you have to make him. You have to go. I don't want... I can't..."

The thought of losing Samuel or Duncan was overwhelming. They had to leave. They had to run. What would any of this mean if they were killed?

"She's right. We should go," Duncan said.

"You could do that. Just leave her here for the wolves," Samuel accused.

Duncan flexed the muscles in his jaw grinding his teeth together. "It's the only way to protect her and everyone else. If we stay, we're all in jeopardy."

I leaned my head against the hard muscles of Samuel's chest. Tears I could no longer hold back, slid down my cheeks and onto his shirt. "Please... you have to go. I can't watch you..." I couldn't say die. "I love you," I whispered.

Samuel placed his hand under my chin forcing me to look up at him. Conflict raged in his eyes. Leaning down, he pressed his lips to mine.

“I love you, Alina. I won’t let you do this alone,” his voice cracked with emotion.

The sound of something breaking came from outside the door. “Please... go. I promise... I’ll find you.”

I could see he was torn. “I’ll survive. I promise.”

“I’ll come back for you.”

“We both will,” Duncan added.

Samuel pulled me to him. Crushing his lips to mine, I could feel my will starting to falter. Duncan pulled him away from me, and they headed for the door. Another moan drifted up from the floor where Lucina lay.

“Keep him safe,” I said looking at Duncan.

I could see the pain cross his face as my request reached his ears. He regained control quickly answering me. “I will.”

His words gave me some comfort. Even if I didn’t make it through this, at least Samuel and Duncan would be safe.

Samuel said nothing as Duncan dragged him out the door. I could see it all reflected in his eyes. The pain, anger, and love all clouding his expression.

“I love you,” I whispered as they vanished around the corner.

Stand Off

Another moan came from the floor, and Lucina’s eyes flicked open. They were glazed over, but it only lasted for a moment. As she started to lift herself off the ground, a fire suddenly burned bright in them.

The noises from outside grew louder, and the room reverberated as something crashed into the walls. I could hear the echo of feet as the guards ran down the hall to where Lucina and I waited. They burst through the door looking around the room.

“You should have run while you had the chance,” Lucina spat out.

“I’m not going anywhere,” I said sounding stronger than I felt.

“You two go after Duncan. Bring him back and whoever else is with him.”

I could feel the panic and fear taking hold of me as the guards turned to follow after Duncan and Samuel. I looked around the room for something I could use. On the cart, not three feet from me, lay a scalpel. Taking a step to the side I wrapped my fingers around the thin piece of metal.

“Wait,” I said stopping the men before they made it out of the door. I put the blade against my throat.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Lucina asked.

“If you go after them you’ll be dragging my dead body back to Thanos. I don’t think it would make him very happy.”

Lucina laughed. It was a hard humorless sound. “You wouldn’t do it. Go after them and bring them back anyway you can,” she gave orders to the guards. “I’ll deal with this pest.”

The guards started to move off again. Lucina started towards me. I pressed the tiny blade harder to my throat. Pain shot through my injured fingers, and my throat burned where the skin broke open. I could feel the blood trickling down my neck. Everyone came to a stop again turning to stare at me.

“What happened to my office?” Dr. Williams asked calling our attention to him. He stood in the doorway, apparently oblivious to the tense situation within. Shaking his head, he crossed the room to a light panel on the wall.

“Well, Miss Taylor you got lucky. It’s a bad sprain, but you managed not to break your wrist.”

I just stared at Dr. Williams in disbelief. He didn’t appear to notice, or care, that I had a scalpel to my throat, or that Duncan was missing. His calm oblivious demeanor had a strange effect on the confrontation.

Lucina had her hands balled tightly into two fists. Blood was starting to trickle from where her neatly manicured nails were digging into her palms. She made no move to stop me or send the guards after Samuel and Duncan.

“Well unless there is something else, we can return to the chateau,” Dr. Williams said. “Is there anything else we need to deal with?” he asked turning to look at Lucina.

“No,” she replied through clenched teeth. The look on her face would have frozen a grown man in place, but it had little effect on Dr. Williams.

“I don’t think that will be necessary anymore Miss Taylor,” Dr. Williams said eyeing the blade at my throat. He crossed into the middle of no man’s land, and held out his hand. I placed the scalpel into his upturned palm.

“I should take a look at that before we leave, if we have the time?” He looked to Lucina for approval.

“Do whatever you want,” she said turning on heel, and exiting the room. Most of the anger, and tension left with her.

Dr. Williams let out a relieved sigh. “That was certainly close.”

I looked at him incredulous. “Why did you help me?”

“I wasn’t helping you. I was helping myself. If anything happens to you, I would have a lot of explaining to do. Now, if you wouldn’t mind following me. I really do need to look at your neck.”

I winced as the antiseptic burned and prickled at my throat.

“Next time might I suggest that you not put a scalpel to your throat,” Dr. Williams said as he placed a bandage over my new injury.

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” I answered blushing.

“So, are you going to tell what was going on?” Dr. Williams asked looking up.

I considered whether or not I should tell him anything. “Some of my friends didn’t feel I should stay here.” I didn’t want to tell him anything he didn’t already know.

“Why didn’t you go with them?”

I couldn’t stop the hard laugh that escaped. “If I had gone with them, how far would we have gotten before Lucina, and every guard, was after us?”

Dr. Williams returned my laugh. “Not far enough,” he said shaking his head.

I waited in silence as Dr. Williams cleaned the room. I was anxious to join Lucina and the guards again, to assure that she was not pursuing Samuel and Duncan. He didn’t appear to be in a rush to rejoin the rest of the company. After what felt like an eternity, he finally finished.

“Are you ready to leave?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered jumping down from the examination table.

We walked out into the corridor. It looked like a small explosion had occurred. The doors separating the waiting room from the back offices were splintered, and hanging from their hinges. Pieces of wood and drywall littered the floor, and a fine powder covered everything.

Lucina and her guards waited outside for us. She didn't look very pleased, but said nothing as we all climbed into the car. The short trip back to the chateau was quiet, and tense. I felt like I was suffocating.

As we neared the chateau, I was surprised to see several servants, waiting for us to exit the vehicle. I couldn't help feeling nervous. Lucina had more than enough time to get the message here, and send others after Samuel and Duncan. I tried to appear unconcerned as we made our way into the main house.

The place was alive as people buzzed around. I wondered if it was normally like this. I was so tired and distracted when I arrived. I had not paid attention to the activities the previous day.

"Take her up to her room," Lucina ordered.

The burley maid from the day before stepped forward to carry out her directions. I took a few steps back feeling anxious about being locked up in a room again.

"Thank you for your concern, but that won't be necessary," a voice said from somewhere I couldn't see.

A young man around twenty-five, appeared from out of nowhere. His skin was pale. He was around six foot, and dressed in casual suit that accentuated the lean muscles underneath his clothing. His sandy blond hair was gently tousled framing his face perfectly. His eyes, a similar blue to Samuel's, caught and held mine.

"I am sorry to have disturbed you sir. I did not realize you had returned already," Lucina said making an excuse.

He didn't even appear to hear what she was saying. "You must be Alina," he said extending his hand to me.

I nodded my head, unable to speak, as I held my hand out. He wrapped his around mine. It was the same cool temperature I had come to expect from everyone infected with the virus.

"I'm Thanos," he said after a moment.

"Alina," was all I answered. What else was there to say? I had been forced to come here against my will. My trip was anything but enjoyable, and I was waiting to be infected with a virus that would more than likely leave me dead.

"I am sorry your trip wasn't pleasant. It was not my intention to frighten you, or make you uncomfortable." He looked over his shoulder acknowledging Lucina for the first time. The expression on her face reminded of child that was being reprimanded by her father.

“You must be tired after your ordeal at Dr. Williams’ office. Why don’t you go up stairs and rest?” Thanos suggested.

He already knew about Samuel and Duncan. I tried not to panic. “No, thank you. I’d like to know why you brought me here.” I kept my voice even. If I could remain calm, maybe he would forget about them. After all, I was still here. Had he really lost anything?

Thanos smiled at me. It was an easy unassuming gesture, but it did little to comfort me.

“I’m afraid that will have to wait. This is neither the time, nor the place for such a discussion. If you will excuse me, I only just returned from my trip, and there are some matters I must attend to. Lucina see to it Miss Taylor is comfortable.”

Turning his back on me, Thanos walked away. Several of the people in attendance followed after him. Lucina gave orders to the servants still standing around, and quickly followed after her master.

I felt uneasy as the foyer cleared. Soon even the noises faded away. I felt like a lost lamb. Where was I supposed to go? What was I supposed to do? I had been left without an escort or guard. Did they feel so assured that I wouldn’t run?

I quietly walked back out the door I had just entered. There was no one watching me that I could see. I circled around to the side of the house. I had seen a garden from the window of my room.

Walking on the winding path, I tried not to think about everything that happened. I didn’t want to see the pain, and hurt reflected in Samuel’s eyes when he was forced to leave. I couldn’t even help them. They were completely on their own.

Everything that transpired since my meeting Lucina, started to play on a reel in my head. All I could see were the people I cared about being hurt by my actions. If I ran, they would be hunted down, and possibly killed. If I stayed, they would always wonder what happened to me. Worse, they may even suspect Samuel or Duncan had something to do with my disappearance. The only option I had was to survive this ordeal. That was the only way I could protect everyone.

My arm started to throb, and I felt suddenly drained. I sat on a small bench under an arbor. The wind was gentle, but held a chill. I pulled the jacket I was wearing closer around me. I was getting cold, but I didn’t feel like returning to the warmth of my prison.

I don't know how long I sat there. At some point, the sound of footsteps caught my attention, and I looked for a place to hide. Throwing my legs over the opposite side of the bench, I ducked behind the hedgerow hoping to go unseen.

"Are you enjoying the garden?" Thanos asked me as he rounded corner.

I was shocked, and embarrassed to see him. I could only imagine what he was thinking. The path lay on the other side of the hedges, and it was the quickest way back to the chateau. He must have known I was trying to avoid him.

"It's very nice," I answered automatically.

"Would you care to join me?" Thanos asked inviting me to go with him.

I wanted to run back to my prison cell, but I remained rooted in place. Was he really asking? Did I have a choice? I took a deep breath and changed the direction I was facing.

We walked in a tense silence for a little while. Thanos finally spoke breaking the quiet, though the tension remained.

"How are you feeling?"

I looked at him dumbfounded. "Are you serious?" I asked anger leaking into my voice. "You have Lucina threaten everyone I care about, drag me across the ocean, and keep me prisoner for some unknown reason. How do you think I'm feeling?" By the time I finished I was yelling.

It looked like Thanos was trying not to smile. "Forgive me. I was not intending to upset you further."

"Just what are you intending? What do you want from me?"

The silence dragged.

"How would you feel about becoming one of us?"

I couldn't repress the shock I felt at his question. The thought of being able to stay by Samuel's side for eternity was very appealing. "Do I really have a choice?"

"Of course you do," he answered a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

"What will you do if I say no?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "It's your choice Alina, but everyone may not be as understanding as I am."

"What do you mean?"

“You know far too much about us. There are those on the council, and in our world that would see you as a danger.”

I could feel my temper starting to flare again. “The only person in danger if I say anything would be me. I’d end up committed to an institution.”

Thanos chuckled. “You’re probably right. It doesn’t change the way most of our kind would feel. The only thing that keeps us safe is secrecy, and there are only two ways to assure you remain silent.”

I swallowed hard as his thinly veiled threat hit home.

Acceptance

Thanos escorted me back to my holding cell. I tried lying down, but I was too wound up to fall asleep.

I already knew the answer to his question, but was hesitant to give it to him. It felt a little like signing my own death warrant. There was really no other option though. Too many people I loved, and cared about were depending on me for their safety. I had no doubt that the vague threat I may pose, would be all the excuse some would need to end my life. There was also the risk that they may not stop with just me.

I stared out the window, and watched as the sun progressed toward the horizon. Its rays held no warmth as they washed over me. A light knock on the door pulled me out of my gloomy thoughts.

“Are you getting settled?” Lucina asked walking in without waiting for me to answer the door. The hard edge to her voice startled me more than it should have.

“What do you want Lucina?” I attempted to return her hostility, but mine wasn’t as impressive.

“It seems like he’s taken quite a liking to you.” I looked at her confusion pulling my brow into a question. She allowed a hard laugh to escape. “You appear to have that helpless quality that they all want.”

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

“It doesn’t matter. Soon you’ll just be another body. Maybe I’ll get lucky and he’ll let me finish you off. That is if the virus doesn’t do it for me. Oh, well... for now at least you’re untouchable.

“Get cleaned up,” she said addressing herself to me again. “Dinner will be ready shortly. I’ll be back to escort you.”

Lucina glided out of the room. I was left standing by the window confused, and disoriented. I may not have understood some of what she was talking about, but one thing was clear. If I survived the virus, I would have an enemy that wanted me dead. I shivered at the prospect. Never in my life had I been hated like I was now.

I went to the bathroom, washed my hands, and splashed some water on my face to help clear my head. My clothes were rumpled from the long events of the day, but I didn’t bother to change. I waited in my usual spot, staring out of the window, for Lucina to return.

Another knock sounded. I waited for Lucina to burst into the room without an invitation. The door remained closed though.

“Come in,” I said not bothering to see who it was.

“Good evening Miss Taylor,” Dr. Williams said.

“Good evening Doctor. What are you doing here? I thought Lucina was taking me down.”

“Forgive me, I hope you don’t mind, but I asked for the privilege. I wanted to see how you were doing.”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I’m sore and tired.”

“That’s pretty normal. You’ve been through a lot in the past few days.”

“That’s the understatement of the century.”

Dr. Williams laughed. I could only manage a small chuckle. “I’ll leave a couple of Tylenol for you, so you can take them before you go to bed.”

“Thanks,” I said offering him a weak smile.

Silence engulfed the two of us as we began to walk to the door. A question occurred to me before we made it out of my opulent prison.

“What happened to the last guest who came?” I asked realizing he had never answered my question the previous day.

Dr. Williams stiffened, and missed his next step. I turned around to look at him. His expression was strained. He quickly recovered himself, and we continued a few more paces before he came to a stop again.

“You have to understand Miss Taylor that was over a hundred years ago. Medicine was more myth, assumption, and trial by error than the science it is now.”

I wanted to interrupt him. To let him know I already suspected what happened that there was no reason for him to feel anxious or upset. I already knew what was going to happen, and how slim my chances were to pull through. But I didn't say anything. I waited patiently as he struggled for the right words.

“Her name was Cassandra. She was around your age. I did everything I could to save her, but the virus was too strong. That was the last time Thanos tried.”

I swallowed hard before asking my next question. “Did she become an Outcast?”

Shock spread over Dr. Williams' face. It was apparent I should not know about this particular outcome of the infection. As the shock melted away, it was replaced by guilt. He couldn't bring himself to say it, but the answer was spelled out on his face.

“I gave her a week to try and come back, but it was useless. She went completely insane. I promise it won't be like that for you though. I'll be by your side the entire time. Besides, I have a fully equipped office here on the premises. You'll be different.” He drifted away growing silent.

I managed a weak smile, but remained silent. There was no way he could assure I would make it out of this nightmare alive. Still, I couldn't bring myself to crush the furtive hope he was pinning on me.

After a minute I asked, “Why are you trying again? Why now? Why me?” My voice was a whisper. Fear clawed through my body tearing everything to shreds.

“I don't know,” he said barely audible.

We fell back into an uncomfortable silence as we continued our walk. Both of us lost in our own thoughts.

Entering the dining room, I realized I was woefully undressed. I hadn't even noticed that Dr. Williams was wearing a suit and tie that many celebrities would be jealous of. Lucina wore a slinky red dress that clung to her curves, and left her back completely exposed. Thanos, standing

at the head of the table, wore a simple button up dress shirt and slacks. There was something in his air though, that made him appear dressed for the red carpet.

“Alina, thank you for joining us,” Thanos said as he caught sight of me. Lucina’s mouth pulled down in a frown when she saw what I was wearing. “Please have a seat anywhere you would like.”

The table held four place settings grouped together on one end. I was tempted to sit at the far end of the table, but thought better of it. With three of seats already spoken for, I proceed to the only available plate. As I approached my appointed seat, Thanos pulled the chair out for me.

“Thank you,” I said sitting down.

The dinner was rich, and decadent. The conversation was carried by Lucina for the most part. Occasionally, Dr. Williams or Thanos would join in. I tried to be civil but my heart wasn’t in it.

“Was the food not to your liking?” Thanos asked as the butler cleared away my plate still filled with food.

“I have a lot on my mind,” I said. “If you’ll excuse me.” I couldn’t sit at the table any longer.

I got up, and walked out of the room. Dr. Williams looked concerned, Lucina looked annoyed, and Thanos’ expression was unreadable. I didn’t stop at the hall, or any room in the chateau. I kept going until I was outside.

I didn’t hear anyone following after me. There was nothing to stop me from running, nothing to keep me from finding Samuel and going to him. I stared down the drive considering dreaming of escape.

“Are you finding the answers you’re looking for?” Thanos asked.

I jumped. I hadn’t heard him approaching. “I already know the answer. Just wishing I didn’t.”

I turned around staring back at him. His eyes sparkled in the moon light. I felt like I was in a dream. He moved closer to me brushing my hair behind my ear. My breath caught in the back of my throat. He leaned closer letting his fingers trace their way down my arm. goosebumps rose everywhere his skin-touched mine.

Wrapping his fingers tight around my wrist, he pushed the sleeve of my shirt up with his other. My heart started to thunder in my chest. Slowly, he raised my arm up to his mouth. I knew what was coming next. I closed my eyes and waited for the pain.

I felt his lips brush my skin. My eyes shot open. I tried to jerk my arm away, but Thanos held it firmly in his grasp. The pain dissipated as quickly as it started. After a moment, he lifted his head from my wrist. Blood stained his lips, and trickled down my arm. The flow was much slower than it should have been for the wound inflicted. He released my wrist.

“How long will it take?” I asked pulling my sleeve down, and placing pressure over the wound. Though the blood continued to trickle down my arm there was no pain.

“Everyone is different, it maybe a few days or a month.”

I nodded my head. “If you don’t mind, I’ll need my phone so I can get my affairs in order.”

“I’ll see to it one is provided for you.” I nodded my head again. “We should get you back inside.”

I looked back over my shoulder down the drive. There was no going back now. I allowed Thanos to lead back to the house.

Goodbye

Three days had passed since Thanos had bitten me. I didn’t feel any different. Dr. Williams was cautiously optimistic. All of my vitals remained normal. I wasn’t eating very much, but it was probably just the stress of dealing with everything.

Scrolling through the numbers on my phone that had been returned to me two days ago, I found my Dad’s number. It had taken me two days to come up with a plausible story. Even still, I was sweating as I pressed the send button.

“Alina,” my Dad said picking up the phone on the second ring. I could hear the stress and worry in his voice.

“Yeah Dad, it’s me,” I had to laugh to keep from crying at the sound of his voice.

“Oh my, you had me so worried. Tabby called me a few days ago saying you ran off. Then she called saying you were at the CDC in Atlanta. I called the hospital, and they said you were never a patient there. What’s going on?”

The stress and concern in his voice made me want to break down. I wanted to tell him the truth no matter how insane it sounded. I wanted to comfort him, but I knew I couldn't. I knew the lie I had created would hurt him even more, but it was the only way to keep him safe.

"Alina, are you there?"

"Yeah Dad, I'm still here." I swallowed hard before continuing. "I didn't go to the hospital, that's why you couldn't find my name. It was actually a friend of mine. He's getting better, but something else came up." My mouth was suddenly dry.

"What is it?" he asked. The sound of relief at my not being ill, and the worry at what other tragedy was playing out, was evident in his voice.

"I'm in France," I blurted out. "I'm getting married. You'll really like him Dad. He's a lot like you." Tears were spilling down my face. "His name is Samuel Grant."

"I don't understand. You're engaged," my Dad asked in disbelief. "How... Why... What were you thinking?"

"I love him Dad."

"I'm not doubting that," he said changing his tone. "But can't the two of you wait a little while longer. I mean you just graduated from high school and started college. It's the middle of the semester. You have the rest of your life in front of you."

I had to control the urge to laugh hysterically. "I know Dad, but we want to spend the rest of our lives together. We don't really see a reason to wait. So, I'm going to take the rest of the semester off, but I'll be back to school in the spring."

"What's the rush? You're not pregnant are you?" I could hear the panic in his voice.

"No, Dad," I said blushing. I didn't really feel like discussing my sex life, or lack of one with my Dad, even if he was a doctor.

"Well at least you're not making me a grandpa yet." A half-hearted laugh was all I could manage in response. "So, when will I get to meet the lucky man?"

"It'll be a few months. We're staying with his parents for a little while. I'll try to call again soon, but the reception here is atrocious."

"Are you going?" The panic in his voice was enough to break my heart.

"Yeah, I need to call Tabby. Um... Can ask you for a favor Dad?"

"Anything."

“Would you call Mom, or if she calls would you tell her what’s going on. I tried calling her a few weeks ago, and she still won’t talk to me.”

“Sure. Alina just be careful, and call if you need anything, or if you just want to come home.”

“I’ll call Dad. I promise. I love you.”

“I love you too.”

“Bye Dad.”

“Bye Sugarplum.”

I hung up the phone and sobbed. So many promises I would never be able to keep. So many lies just to keep them safe. It hurt so much, and knowing I still had another call to make only made it worse.

I took a few minutes to compose myself before making the next call. Tabby was even faster than my Dad, picking up before the phone even rang.

“Li-Li,” she screamed in my ear. “I was so worried. You’re Dad said he couldn’t find you at that hospital. I’ve been going out of my mind. Lucina just up and left saying something about going to see you. Duncan is gone too. Where are you? What are you doing? Are you okay? Why haven’t you called me?”

I had to stop the hysterical laughter clawing its way up the back of my throat. “I’m fine,” I said answering the most important question first.

I gave her the same story I gave my Dad with a few modifications. Duncan became the sick friend in the hospital, and Samuel and I had taken him home to France. I was still getting married to Samuel. Her reaction to everything was a little different than my Dad’s was.

“You’re getting married!” she screamed. “Oh, and in France. Where are you getting your dress? When is it going to be? I can fly over and be a bridesmaid. Faith and Josh can come too. Oh, it’s so romantic. You’re so lucky.”

“Yeah lucky,” I parroted back. “Don’t worry about coming, at least, not right now. It will probably be a few months before everything is finalized.”

“Well then you have to promise me you won’t pick out a dress until I get there.”

“I promise.”

I gave her the same excuse I had given my Dad about not being able to call. She wasn’t quite as accepting of my explanation.

“There is no way. How can you not call me? They have to have a landline, or internet access. You’re planning a wedding, and I’m your best friend, you have to call me.”

“I promise to try, but his family is pretty old-fashioned.” I laughed on the inside. His family and friends were all over a hundred years old, so it was a pretty safe assumption.

“You better call me, Li-Li.”

“I will,” I finally acquiesced. “You be careful, and try not to party too often.”

“Are you kidding me? You never went out and still you managed to get a guy, and engaged in just a few months. I promise that I’ll have lots of fun, but I promise to be safe. Is that good enough?” she asked.

“Sure. I love you Tabby.”

“I love you too, Li-Li. Bye.”

“Bye.”

I hung the phone up, and threw it across the room. It crashed against the headboard. The guard stationed outside flung the door to my room open to see what the sound was. I didn’t say a word as I pushed past him, and ran down stairs to the garden.

I wandered the grounds trying to compose myself. My mood was swinging between angry and depressed, in rapid succession. My cheeks were becoming chapped as the tears spilling down them were scrubbed away by the biting wind.

“There you are,” Dr. Williams said finding me. “How long have you been out here?” he asked concern dripping from his voice.

“What did I agree to?” I asked ignoring his question. “I’ll probably never be able to see anyone I love or care about ever again. I’ve had to lie to everyone, and for what. So, I can be an experiment.”

“Come sit down,” he said completely unfazed by my rant.

I walked over to the bench, and sat down next to the Doctor. Without saying anything, he took my wrist in his hand and measured my pulse.

“I know this is hard for you. You’re a kind person Miss Taylor, and it pains you to lie to those you love, but it is the best option you have. The truth will only hurt them further, and worse it will put them in danger unnecessarily.”

My shoulders slumped. I already knew all of this, but hearing it aloud made it seem even more hopeless.

“Thank you Dr. Williams. If it’s all right with you, I’m going to go for a walk. I just need some time.”

“Try not to over exert yourself.”

I nodded my head. As I walked away, I got an uncomfortable feeling. Dr. Williams was pretty good at concealing his emotions, but I couldn’t help noticing the worry in his voice.

Cold

When I made it back to the chateau, I was feeling tired. I knew dinner would be served soon, but I had no appetite. I was looking for Dr. Williams when a question caught my attention.

“What is it you see in her?” Lucina asked.

“She’s beautiful, intelligent, and sweet.” The voice that answered her question made my heart jump.

“Are you saying I don’t have those qualities?” she asked indignant

“I’m sure you did at some point,” he teased.

I finally remembered how to use my legs. There was no way my ears could be right. I had to be dreaming. The only way I could be sure was to go into the study. I took a step forward, and slowly opened the door.

My eyes focused on the Lucina first. She was seated facing the window in a comfortable armchair. Her legs were draped over the arm as she stared at the figure outlined by the sun streaming in through the window.

I knew who it was seated by the window casually leaning against the frame. I just couldn’t believe it. It had to be a hallucination brought on by the infection. There was no way he could be here.

“Duncan,” I breathed.

Both heads turned to look at me. Shock was evident on Duncan’s face. He had clearly not expected to see me.

“Is it... What are you doing here? Where’s Samuel?”

The room was starting to spin. I grabbed the bookshelf trying to stay on my feet. I quickly lost my grip. Just before I hit the floor, a pair of cool hands caught me.

“Get the Doctor. Then get out of here,” Lucina said.

I tried to focus, but I couldn't get my body to cooperate. I felt as I was passed to a new set of hands.

"Duncan where's Samuel? You promised... You promised to keep him safe."

"It's me Dr. Williams. Alina, can you hear me. The fever is starting. We have to get her to the room. Everything is set up."

Fever? What was he talking about? I felt so cold. I could feel my body shivering uncontrollably. I tried to form a question, but I could feel my consciousness slipping away from me.

I felt myself drifting. I was lost somewhere between unconsciousness, and the real world. It was hard to figure out which one was which. The only thing that differentiated them was the cold.

"We have to get her fever down," someone was yelling. "She's having another seizure. I don't know how much more her body can take."

"If she dies you won't be far behind her," another voice threatened.

"You knew the risk. If she dies it's as much your error as mine."

"Alina hold on. Please don't leave me."

The voices started to mush together, until they became unintelligible noise. I was so cold. I let myself slip away. Time stopped. The scene changed. Everything felt fuzzy around the edges.

"Hello beautiful," a young man with striking blue eyes said from under an arbor.

I could feel myself blush. His dark brown hair was tousled slightly with the strands falling down to frame his perfect face. I felt like I knew him, but I couldn't think of his name.

"Won't you join me?" he asked. His smile was inviting. I tried to think of his name, but I felt it slipping further away.

I took a step toward him when another voice called to me.

"Alina." It was a distant whisper.

I took another step toward the blue-eyed angel.

"Alina, can you hear me?"

If I could just make it over to him, I was sure I could remember who he was. Just a few more feet that was all that separated us. I tried to move, but the ground turned into a marsh sucking at my feet, and making it impossible to move. I reached out to the angel, but his face

was changing. I was horrified as it changed to an equally beautiful face, but the bright green eyes burned with a fury that was close to insanity.

“Alina.”

I felt someone shaking me. There was a strange noise filling the blackness. I covered my ears trying to block it out, but it only changed pitch. Only when I drew in a breath did the noise stop. It was then I realized it had been my own screams.

“Alina,” the desperate voice called to me again.

I forced my eyes open. Everything was hazy, and glimmered in the light. It was like looking through an unfocused lens. Slowly, the blurry lines started to focus.

“She’s coming around,” someone said to my left. “Miss Taylor, how are you feeling?”

I stared at the gentleman speaking to me. He was wearing a rumpled dress shirt and slacks. Concern was etched in every line on his face.

“Who are you? Where am I?” I asked. I felt a little panicked at not being able to remember the answers to such simple questions.

Somehow, he seemed relieved by my questions. I couldn’t understand why. I scanned the other faces in the room. None of them seemed familiar, until I reached a face staring at me from a chair situated near my bed. He reminded me of someone, but I couldn’t find his name.

“Miss Taylor,” the same gentleman spoke. “I know it can be very disorienting. Just try and stay calm.”

My heart started to hammer in my chest. The panic I felt at not being able to remember where I was became overwhelming. I sat up quickly pulling the lines connected to me out of my skin. Blood ran from the wounds on my arms. All too quickly, much faster than should be possible, the blood flow stopped.

“What did you do to me?” I demanded my voice rising as the panic took hold.

“Alina,” the voice from in my dreams called me. I turned toward the sound. It was the young man seated next to me. “It’s okay. No one will hurt you. Dr. Williams just wants to make sure you aren’t having any abnormal side effects from the infection.”

I looked at him confused. “What infection? Where am I? Who are you?” I could feel myself losing control.

“What’s my name?” the green-eyed gentleman asked me, confusion pulling his brow up in a question.

I looked at him trying to focus. I felt like I should know the answer to his question, but I couldn't find his name. As I stared at him, I could feel different emotions warring inside of me. Some of them were pleasant, others were confusingly aggressive, but all of them were strong.

"I don't know," I finally muttered in defeat.

The expression on his face was impossible for me to read. He looked at the man I assumed was Dr. Williams. The Doctor looked at me understanding dawning on his face.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Alina Taylor," I answered trying to stay calm.

"What is the last thing you can remember?"

I tried to recall some concrete details. I could remember coming back from Los Angeles the argument with my Mom, and the new apartment with Tabby. I knew I started school. As I tried to recall more information, the details became fuzzy. I could see different faces, but they only made me more confused. Some of them brought up curiously strong emotions, and I couldn't understand how they fit together.

"I don't know," I answered. I could feel my own fear and alarm growing. "What's going on? Why can't I remember anything?"

"I was afraid this might happen." Dr. Williams appeared more relieved than worried at my lack of recall. "As it goes though, you came through everything remarkably well."

I felt like every comment brought up more questions than answers. I didn't like feeling confused. I could feel a new emotion taking center stage, anger. "What happened? Came through what?"

The room fell quiet.

"I think it would be better if Mr. Michaels explains. The rest of us will give you some privacy. If you need anything Miss Taylor don't hesitate to call." Dr. Williams and the rest of the small group left the room, leaving me alone with the green-eyed model.

"You and I met when school began. We were in Chemistry together," the gorgeous young man, prompted.

He moved from his chair to the edge of my bed. I shrunk away from his proximity, but I could feel a part of me wanting to pull closer to him. His words also struck a chord bringing snap shots of half-remembered events.

"What's your name?" I asked after trying to recall it.

“It’s Duncan Michaels.” I could feel that same sensation again both pulling and pushing me.

“How did I get here?”

“You were attacked and infected with a virus. I brought you here hoping Dr. Williams may be able to stop it before it progressed. We didn’t make it in time.

“You’ve been in a coma for over a week. You were hallucinating, and having seizures. I thought I was going to lose you.”

Duncan reached out to take my hand. I pulled it away still unsure. The pain on his face and in his voice was real enough, but I felt uneasy.

“What was his name?”

“Whose name?” Duncan asked in return.

“The guy who attacked me. What was his name?” I asked again studying his face.

“Samuel Grant.”

The name had an oddly familiar ring to it. I couldn’t put a face with it though. Maybe I had blocked it out due to the trauma.

“What did he infect me with?”

Duncan appeared reluctant to tell me. “It’s called the lamia virus. The virus normally kills whoever is infected with it, but you managed to pull through. There may be some strange side effects though.”

“Like what,” I asked.

“Well, you saw how quickly your wounds healed after removing the IVs.”

I looked down at my arms. The puncture wounds, and usual bruises that accompanied them, were nowhere to be seen. In fact, even as I removed the catheters I hadn’t felt pain. There was a slight discomfort, but no pain.

“What did he do to me?” I felt afraid.

“Something he should never have done without your consent. The virus has one other side effect. Anyone who survives the infection is essentially immortal.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “That’s impossible,” but something inside of me told me I was wrong. “How do you know all of this?”

“I have the same virus,” he answered after a pause.

I got up and walked to the window. Duncan allowed me some space, but was still close enough that if I needed anything he could get to me. I didn't feel like I had been sick let alone on my deathbed. I actually felt stronger than I had at any other time in my life.

Proposal

The next few days were insightful. Duncan was my constant companion. He made sure every question I had was answered, and I wanted for nothing. He was patient as he waited for me to regain the trust we had before my attack. Somehow, I wasn't able to get comfortable.

My nights were a test in endurance. I would sleep for about twelve hours. During those times, I couldn't escape the nightmares. The scenes changed, but players remained the same. Lucina was there threatening me. Thanos was a king seated on his throne. Duncan took turns playing both the villain, and my rescuer. The last person in them was a dark haired angel I could never get to.

"What are you thinking about?" Duncan asked as we strolled through the garden.

"Just a bad dream I had," I said shaking it off. "How long do you think it will be before we can go back?"

"It shouldn't be much longer. Lucina said that Samuel doesn't appear to be in the area anymore."

"What about Tabby, she's there all by herself. What if he comes back?"

"I told you there are two Hunters in town. If anyone tries to hurt Tabby, they'll be there to take care of them."

I nodded my head. I was anxious to get back home. I didn't like having Tabby in possible danger with me so far away. Duncan knew more about Samuel though, and the risks that waited for us.

"I should really call Tabby and make sure she's alright."

"I talked to her yesterday. She's doing well. She's just a little freaked out with finals coming up, and she has a paper due in English next week."

It wasn't a surprise that she was freaking out, but Tabby not answering her phone seemed impossible. "I'd still like to try."

Duncan took out his phone, and handed it to me. It didn't take me long to find Tabby's number. It went straight to voice mail though.

"Hey Tabby, I was just calling to see what you were up to. Give me a call when you get this. I lost my phone so you'll have to call Duncan's number. Talk to you later."

I handed the phone back to Duncan disappointed. I hoped she would call back soon. It would make me feel better if I could hear her voice, and know she was all right.

"Do you think I could call my Dad?" I asked after a few minutes. "Heaven knows what he must think. I can't remember the last time I spoke with him. He must be worried out of his mind."

Duncan looked taken aback by my request. "Do you know your Father's number?"

"Yes," I said chuckling lightly. Without my cell, there were only two numbers I knew for sure. One was Tabby's parent's number and the second was my Dad's.

"Do you want to call him now?"

I thought about it for a moment. "Yes," I answered a little nervous. "I should make sure he hasn't given himself a heart attack."

Duncan laughed. It was a light airy sound. I couldn't help joining him. He handed me his phone again.

"Would you like some privacy?" he asked.

I thought about it for a moment. "If you don't mind, I'm not sure how upset he's going to be. If you could just stay close, you know, in case he asks a question I can't answer."

"I'll be right over there." He pointed to a small arbor covered in climbing roses. "Just scream if you need me."

I nodded my head thankful for his offer. I didn't know how I was going to explain this to my Dad. The only reason I hadn't called sooner was to give myself time to think of an excuse for my actions. I was sure Tabby had called him concerning my behavior. I looked back at Duncan before attempting the call.

It took me a few tries to actually get the number right. I waited with nervous anticipation as the phone began to ring. I tried to calm my racing heart.

"Hello Dr. Taylor," my Dad answered. It took me a moment to realize that this number wouldn't show up as mine.

"Hey Dad," I said a little apprehensively.

“Alina, hold on one minute let me get some place private.” I could hear as he moved down the noisy hall. I realized he was probably just arriving to work. Maybe I should have waited to call.

“So how are you doing? How’s France?” he asked.

It felt like someone had sucked the air out of my lungs. How did he know I was in France?

“Alina, are you still there?” he asked worry leaking into his voice.

“Yeah, Dad, just a little confused. How did you know I was in France?” I asked.

“Are you joking? You called me about a week ago saying you were there. Is everything alright?” The pitch of his voice changed showing his concern.

“Oh, yeah everything is fine. I just wanted to check in, and see how you were doing.” I didn’t want to alarm him.

“I’m good. How are the wedding plans going?”

“Wedding plans? What are you talking about?” I was becoming more alarmed the longer I stayed on the phone.

“Alina, are you sure you’re feeling alright?” I could hear the worry in his voice.

“Never been better, just confused.”

“I should say so. Is your fiancé there?”

“Um... Sure.” I lied a little breathless.

I covered the receiver with my hand and turned to look at Duncan. Before I could even say anything, he was by my side. It was still a little unnerving when he moved so quickly.

“My Dad wants to talk to my fiancé. Do you know anything about this?” I said in a rushed whisper.

Duncan shook his head a worried look on his face. “Let me talk to him.”

I handed him the phone to him. I didn’t know what else to do.

“Hello sir,” Duncan said.

“Yes sir. She’s was sick last week. We had to take her to the hospital. She’s feeling much better now.”

I couldn’t help feeling anxious at hearing only one side of the conversation. I wished I had asked him to put it on speakerphone, or taken the call in the house.

“She caught a virus, and was running a high fever. She’s been resting comfortably for the past few days.

“Yes sir. I promise to take good care of her. We’ll come to see you as soon as we get back into the country. I look forward to meeting you too sir.”

Duncan turned around and handed the phone back to me. I couldn’t hide my nervous expression. “What did he say?”

“He just wanted to make sure I was taking good care of you.”

I breathed a sigh of relief before putting the phone back to my ear.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Why didn’t you call to tell me you were sick?” he scolded me.

“Sorry, I was a little out of it,” I laughed.

“Has Samuel been taking good care of you?”

My heart stopped. Surely, he must have gotten the names mixed up. “Um... you mean Duncan, right?”

Silence greeted me on the other end of the line. “Dad, are you there?” I took the phone away from my ear to check if there was still a connection. Sure enough, there was no signal. I let a frustrated huff escape.

“Is everything okay?” Duncan asked.

“I got disconnected.” I said staring at the phone helpless.

“I’m sure the signal will come back in a little while.”

I nervously bit my lower lip. I knew he was right; it was just frustrating not being able to get an answer to my question. I tried the phone several more times before giving up. I reluctantly handed the phone back to him.

We headed into the house, and I tried the landline. It went straight to my Dad’s voice mail. I left a message asking him to give me a call back.

“Did you mean what you said to my Dad?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered cautiously. “What exactly are you concerned about?”

“Well, I was wondering if you really meant what you said about us going to visit him when we went back stateside.”

“Of course,” he answered more enthusiastic this time.

I worried my lip for a moment before continuing. “Would you be opposed to us going to visit him now? I mean we can’t go back to Gainesville just yet, and all we’re doing here is waiting so... Maybe we could wait there instead.”

Duncan's face was drawn as he considered my request. "I don't see why that would be a problem. Is there any reason why you're in such a rush? Is my company that atrocious that you can't wait to be rid of me?"

I lowered my head as a heavy blush suffused my cheeks. "Won't you be coming with me? I mean I have a few gaps still, and it would be nice to have someone there to fill in the blanks."

Duncan took a step closer to me. I could feel his cool breath brushing against my bare skin. He placed his fingers gently beneath my chin, and lifted my face. I tried to avert my gaze. I felt like I was lost in a great forest every time I stared into his eyes.

"Is that the only reason you want me there?" he asked his face hovering above mine.

I lost my train of thought for a moment. My heart accelerated to an embarrassingly fast pace. "My Dad is expecting to meet my fiancé. It might look a little odd if I show up by myself," I whispered breathlessly.

"Are you saying I'm your fiancé?"

"I... um..." The truth was I didn't know what I was saying anymore. My head was spinning.

Duncan closed in stopping just before our lips touched. "If I'm going to play your fiancé I think we should do something about that finger." Before I could think about what he meant, his lips met mine.

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Forever

Sequel to Immortal

Reunited

I was trying to finish packing before heading to bed. I couldn't help feeling anxious about my trip. It wasn't that I thought my Dad would react badly, I was just nervous about lying to him.

The ring Duncan had purchased felt like a ten-ton weight on my hand. I told him not to go overboard since we weren't really engaged, but he didn't listen to me. It was a beautiful stone in

an antique setting that fit me perfectly. To be honest I didn't think I could have picked out a better ring if I tried.

"Are you ready?" Duncan asked coming in to check on my progress.

"Almost," I answered sighing.

"Is everything alright?"

"Just nervous," I said trying not to focus on anything in particular.

"I'll be right there with you. If you'd like I can always stay with you tonight, and help you finish packing," he said raising his eyebrow in invitation. "I mean we are engaged after all."

I swallowed hard and tried to glare at him. "Thank you so much for the offer, but I would at least like to try and get some sleep."

Duncan sighed. "I guess I can understand that. Besides, we'll have the entire flight to your Father's to get reacquainted." He gave me a mischievous grin. I couldn't stop the blood from leaving its mark on my cheeks as he sauntered back the way he had come.

It took me several minutes to recover after Duncan left. I finally finished packing, and set everything by the door for the morning. After bathing, I decided to try and rest. Tomorrow would be stressful enough without me being exhausted.

I was just drifting off when I heard the door creak open. I rolled my eyes beneath my lids.

"I thought I told you I wanted to get some sleep," I said trying not to sound annoyed.

It took only a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dim light coming from the digital clock on the nightstand, but that was all the time he needed. Cupping his hand over my mouth, he whispered, "Don't be scared it's just me. We don't have much time. We have to get out of here." The smooth baritone sounded oddly familiar.

His eyes burned in the darkness. I felt confused. There was something about his voice. It was like a half remembered dream, and I couldn't tell if it was real. That was probably the reason it took me a moment to come to my senses.

"Who are you? What are you doing in my room?" I asked in harsh whisper.

The ragged figure in front of me looked confused by my question. He sat back on the bed, and stared at me. "What did he do to you?" he asked venom leaking into his voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about, but if you don't answer my question I'm going to scream."

Why didn't I just go ahead and scream? He clearly had no business in the chateau, and especially not in my room. His clothing hung in tatters around him. They were dirty, covered in blood, and debris. He looked and smelled like he hadn't bathed in over a week. But something stopped me from sounding the alarms.

I could see the pain reflecting in his eyes. "It's me Samuel." His voice sounded confused and hurt.

For the first time since he entered my room, I felt fear. I tensed in anticipation for a struggle. I thought about screaming, but that nagging voice in the back of my head stopped me. I swallowed my fear down before saying anything.

"Get out," I said in a firm voice. "I don't know what made you think I would forgive you for what you did to me, but you're wrong. Just get out, and don't come back. I promise I won't tell Duncan you were here. Just stay away from me and my family. I promise if stay away, that the Hunters won't look for you."

"Alina..." the hurt in his voice was excruciating to hear. "I don't understand." He looked like a lost child. He tried to say something else, but no sound came out.

He slowly backed up. Putting his hand on the dresser to steady himself, he knocked a figurine to the floor. The sound of it shattering was deafening in the late night. There was a pause, then I could hear feet running, but he made no attempt to hide or get away. He reminded me of a deer caught in the headlights of a car bearing down on him.

"Please, Samuel, go." I was surprised by the emotion in my voice. Something was tickling my cheek. I reached up to wipe it away, and was in shock by the tears running down my face. Still he remained motionless.

I grabbed his arm and dragged him to the closet. He didn't resist. "Stay in here. I'll let you know when it's safe to come out."

I shut the door, returned to the dresser, and started to pick up the shattered remains of the figurine. Duncan flicked on the light as he entered my room.

"Is everything alright?" he asked concern evident in his expression and voice.

"Yes," I said my heart thundering in my chest. "I got up to use the restroom, and accidentally knocked the figurine off the dresser. Is everything okay?" I asked trying to sound nonchalant.

"Yes," he answered clearly more at ease. "I'll call one of the maids to clean it up."

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m perfectly capable of cleaning it.” I said grabbing a trash can, and throwing the pieces of shattered ceramic away.

Duncan waited as I finished cleaning.

“Do you need anything else?” he asked.

“No I’m good. Right now, I really just want to get back to bed.”

Duncan gave me an evil little grin. “Would you like me to join you?” he asked quickly wrapping his arms around me and pulling me to him.

I had to resist the urge to pull away. I hadn’t felt that sensation since waking up after my infection. “Thank you, but no. Like you said, we have the whole flight to my Dad’s to get reacquainted.”

“How about a good night kiss?” he asked changing tactics.

I wanted to run and hide. I couldn’t understand why I was feeling like this. A few short hours ago, I would have jumped at the opportunity to kiss Duncan. Now, I felt like I was cheating just being in his arms.

I looked up into his eyes, and tried to forget my misgivings. They sparkled with anticipation. I stretched up to meet his waiting lips. As soon as they touched, I forgot my worries. I let myself be swept away by sensations coursing through my body.

Duncan chuckled as he pulled away ending the kiss. “You better get to bed,” he said his voice, and eyes, filled with implications.

I smiled up at him, but it felt hollow. As soon as the kiss ended, all of my mixed emotions were there to greet me. All I could think about was Samuel locked in the closet.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he said turning to leave the room.

“In the morning,” I repeated climbing into my bed.

He turned the light off as he exited the room. I remained in the bed listening to the sounds. He stood by my door for several minutes before returning to his room. I could hear my heart hammering in my chest, as I waited to be sure he didn’t return. Every second felt like a minute, and every minute ticking past felt like an hour. Finally, I decided it was worth the risk.

Getting up I headed to the closet. Opening the door, I turned the light on. Samuel was slumped in the back corner his head hung in defeat. He looked even more pitiful in the light.

“I don’t know how you got here or how you found out where I was, but if you got in you should be able to get out.” I squatted down across from him being careful to maintain an escape route. “Here’s some money. It’s only a few hundred dollars, but it’s all I have.”

“I don’t want your money,” he said. I couldn’t tell if he was angry or insulted.

I waited in silence unsure of how to proceed. I wanted to help him, to comfort him, but I didn’t know how or why.

“Can you ever forgive me?” he asked looking at me for the first time.

I let out an audible gasp when I saw his face. I had to be dreaming. That was the only explanation for it. I had the sudden urge to reach out and touch his face.

“I’m dreaming, right?” I asked unable to tear my eyes away from him.

“Not unless it’s a nightmare,” Samuel answered.

I leaned closer to him forgetting that I shouldn’t be here. He had attacked me, infected me with a virus that nearly claimed my life. I reached my hand out to touch his face. Just before my fingers made contact, I pulled back hesitating.

In my dreams, I could never touch him. Every time I was about to, the dream would end. I would wake up with tears streaming down my face. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to wake up this time. Maybe if I didn’t do it, I could stay here with him, my archangel.

I couldn’t stop though. I had to know the truth. Samuel remained completely still as a storm raged in his ocean blue eyes. The breath brushing across my hand seemed real enough. I couldn’t control the trembling in my hand as I touched his cheek.

I fell back in shock. “You’re real.”

He didn’t say a word. Staring at me slowly he raised his hand. I remained motionless, my breath coming in ragged gasps. He hesitated before touching me. I was in agony. I could already feel his hand setting my skin on fire. With trembling fingers, he traced his way down my jaw.

“As real as you are,” he said.

Applying the slightest pressure under my chin, he tilted my head up. In a moment of pure ecstasy, his lips found mine. I didn’t hesitate. There were no conflicting emotions. It was perfect.

I threw my arms around his neck, forgetting everything else. Nothing else mattered. Samuel was just as eager pulling me on top of him as we fell to the floor. I barely noticed the

sound of fabric tearing as I ripped his tattered shirt off him. Rolling me over onto my back, he pinned my arms above my head. He pulled away from me, his breath coming in wild gasps. His eyes were ablaze as he studied me.

“As much as I want to finish this, I don’t think this is the time.”

I stared up at him dumb founded.

“Duncan will probably find out I slipped out of my cell. We can’t be here when he does.”

I swallowed down my desire. “How did you get in here?” I asked trying to figure out how we were going to get out unnoticed.

Samuel looked up. I followed his gaze. I had been here for over a week, and never once noticed the small door in the middle of the ceiling. We exchanged a conspiratorial smile.

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