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Breathless

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Prologue

A few years. That was all the time I could safely manage to stay in one place without raising suspicion. After crossing the Atlantic some years ago, I quickly learned that Americans—much more so than Europeans—were attuned to the unusual activities of others. I was forced to move more frequently as a result.

Recent realizations had created an urgent need to relocate sooner than I had expected, wanted. Now, brown, double-walled boxes lined every inch of my fourth-floor, New York apartment as I prepared to once again venture into previously uncharted territory—for me anyway.

Moving. My least favorite activity. I was a *creature* of habit, so to speak, and the thought of driving cross-country made me cringe. For the average person, it would take several days to make the long trip. If I kept my wits about me, I could do it in less than thirty-six hours.

Though it had been a long time since I had last attended a high-school session, I imagined not much had changed. The halls would be filled with oodles of self-

deprecating teens whose thoughts could only find faults within their own physical features and emotional shortcomings, too shallow to focus on the disturbing experiences of those who were truly suffering in far-less-attractive situations. Or, those who focused only on their own good fortune based on the fact that they had been blessed with external beauty...I shuddered at the thought of being forced to associate with such intolerable ignorance. However, I was eager to make the acquaintance of *the girl*—the real reason I was once again uprooting my entire existence in favor of life in a small, northern town.

Tape. It was the one thing that was preventing me from maintaining a flawless schedule based on a self-imposed deadline. All of the boxes had been filled, labeled, and sorted, but I lacked the means to seal them shut. Despite the subzero New-York climate, I had hoped to make the most of the trip with the ragtop down, so it wouldn't do to leave the boxes open.

Chapter 1 - Sleep

I woke with a start. Breathless. My dream had been so vivid. The colors, faces, places ...everything was so clear. But now, as I lay dazed, my head foggy with sleep, curled beneath the warmth of my heavy down duvet, I knew it had only been a dream.

The same dream had been filling my head for nearly three weeks. So long that, despite the fact that every moment was deliciously intriguing, it was beginning to feel like a nightmare. I had barely been able to focus on my chemistry labs, English essay, and history debate due to the intense lack of sleep I had experienced.

After waking at around 3:45 each morning, I could never seem to fall back to sleep. I kept replaying every minute detail in my head, over and over again. I wanted to hold on to every detail of the dream, but just as I would start to wrap my mind around the most obscure events, I would lose sight of the outcome. My mind wrestled with the images that fluttered behind my closed eyes as I squinted and concentrated on the same scene. Still, I couldn't seem to put all of the pieces together. There was something disturbing that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

This morning was no different. Only, instead of giving in to the urge to replay the faded memories in my mind's eye, I decided to fight it instead. Slowly, I crept down the stairs, quietly tiptoeing past my mother's room. Not quietly enough though.

"Sweetheart," she called to me in a groggy voice. "Is that you? Is everything alright?"

"Yes, mom. I'm fine. Go back to sleep."

She knew I hadn't been sleeping well. It was all too obvious. I would pass out on the couch the minute I got home from school. And, my grades were suffering. I got Cs on my last two physics tests, and that just wasn't like me. In fact, she talked about sending me to see a doctor, but I managed to convince her otherwise. For now, anyway.

Once I was downstairs, I grabbed a glass from the cupboard above the stove and walked to the fridge. Milk. Cool, refreshing milk. Just one glass, and I would head back to bed. I had barely started pouring the milk when I became abruptly aware that something just wasn't right. I couldn't pinpoint exactly what was wrong. I just knew it

was. A cool breeze blew across my shoulders, and I jumped, dropping the glass in a surprised response.

“Lia,” my mom shouted as she ran full throttle down the stairs. She flipped on the light switch, and I shielded my eyes against the bright glow. They throbbed as they adjusted. “Don’t move. Let me grab a broom. What happened?”

To be honest, I didn’t know what had happened. In fact, I couldn’t remember much of anything. All I knew is that one minute, I had been sleepless and seeking a cool refreshment. Now, I was surprisingly tired. I just wanted to run back upstairs to bed. A strange sensation swept over me at the same time as the cool breeze, but I couldn’t explain it. It was as if the two were connected. I felt settled, at ease. I must have been more tired than I had originally realized. That was the only explanation that made sense.

“What happened,” she repeated, an air of urgency in her tone. “Honey, are you okay?”

In the light, I noticed a single drop of blood on my right hand. A small gash spread

across my index finger. I thought I heard a sharp gasp, but when I looked at my mom, she seemed unaware. I decided that if I ever wanted to get back to bed, I should avoid revealing the slight injury. Besides, I couldn't very well tell her that the chill of a mysterious breeze had made me tired and that this same seemingly supernatural sensation had caused me to drop the glass.

"I'm fine mom. I just lost hold of the glass, that's all."

Fortunately, my mom seemed happy with that answer. In her sleepy state, she quickly swept the tiny shards from around me so that I could return to my slumber. Suddenly, I was so tired that I didn't even feel badly about leaving her to clean up my mess. I ran up the stairs to my room, tripping absently over the cat that was lazing in the hall.

Walking in, I sensed a strange calm. It was eerie, and the room felt at least five degrees cooler than it had just a few moments earlier. I shuddered, and crawled under the thick quilt, almost instantly forgetting about the wound on my finger. The wind picked up outside, and I swear it sounded like it was singing me to sleep. I could almost make out the words. My imagination was working overtime. Soon, I was asleep.

The next sound I heard was the bleating of my alarm clock. It had been nearly a month since I had heard that sound. Usually, I was wide awake by the time the morning sun could creep through the slats in my bedroom blinds. This morning was different. I felt good. Really good. My head was clear, my body rested. A refreshing breeze blew through my open window. I hopped out of bed and started about my daily business.

My mom had already left for work, but she had placed a note on the table.

Good morning, sleepy head.

I missed our morning chat, but I'm glad to see you finally got some rest. Hope you're okay and that you didn't cut yourself last night. You looked a little pale. Don't forget, I'm working a double, so I'll be late.

Love you,

Mom

I felt bad for waking up my mom last night. It was hard for her. My dad died when I was eight, and she worked hard to keep a roof over our heads. She had a good job as a nurse at the local clinic, but she took every extra shift she could get her hands on to be sure that I would never go without. She would have been tired this morning, and now, she was working late. I tried not to focus on it, but it was hard not to think of her suffering. I worried about her, but she insisted she was fine. She was my rock, though I would never let her know. She would never let me see her in pain, even though I knew she was sometimes. It had been eight years, but she still hadn't moved on. Dad was her everything. Their love was pure and true. I could only hope to find half of what they had someday. I could still remember the way they would look at each other when they thought no one else could see. A part of her died with him, and I resented them both a bit for that. She and I were never quite the same without him.

My mother had never worked. She was young when she met my dad at college. After graduation, he got a decent job, and they were married right away. I came along less than a year later, and they agreed she would stay home to raise me. I had been ill as a child, and I needed someone who could take me to specialists as needed. Even after I had long outgrown the complications of my early years, my parents decided it was best for her to continue the same path in life. Unfortunately, it became a problem when my father could no longer provide for us.

Soon after his death, my mother knew she would need to find a way to keep us safe. She took what little money they had saved and enrolled at the local university. A few years later, she graduated from the nursing program. She worked like a dog to gain the respect of others in her field.

I crumpled her note and tossed it in the trash, grabbed an apple, and headed out the door. For the past few weeks, I had so much time on my hands in the mornings that I was picture perfect by the time I was ready to leave for school each day. This morning was different. I had quickly tossed my auburn locks back in a low ponytail and thrown on an old pair of jeans and a t-shirt. There was no time for makeup, curling irons, or primping. I was back to my old, average self, and I was running late. Addie was waiting in the driveway as I strolled down the walk. Her fingers were thrumming the top of the steering wheel, showing her displeasure at having to wait for me. She'd become used to having me run out the door the minute I saw her pearly, alabaster mini cooper peel around the corner of our street.

"Wow," she said with a condescending tone. "You look great. Did you have a makeover last night?"

“Ha. Ha,” I said with a hint of sarcasm in my voice. “I just got a good sleep, that’s all.”

She looked puzzled. I could understand why. It was no secret I hadn’t been sleeping well. In our bedroom community, it didn’t take long for news to spread. Pretty much everyone knew I had been having a difficult time lately. Addie, being my best friend, had the inside scoop on the whole story. She looked at me expectantly, waiting to hear the rest.

“I don’t know what happened. I had the usual dream. When I woke up in the wee hours, I went to get a drink and broke a glass. Then, I fell asleep,” I explained quickly. “Into a deep sleep.”

“What’s that,” she asked, pointing at the gash on my finger.

“Oh. I’d forgotten about that,” I said, holding my finger up in front of my nose to examine more closely. “It’s nothing.”

Now that I had remembered, I could feel the painful sting. The wound was still open, and another drop of blood oozed free. Again, I thought I heard a low gasp in the distance, but Addie was silently focused on the road as she backed out of my driveway.

“Did you say something?”

She just shook her head as she turned up the radio and sped down the street.

“Thanks to you, sleepy head, we’re going to be late,” she said before breaking into song.

Chapter 2 - *Him*

I was feeling great when we arrived at our first class. It was a few weeks before the end of the first semester, and the weather was just starting to turn cold. If I could keep up my new sleep pattern long enough to ace my next few assignments, I would be back on track to finish senior year with top honors and a slew of premiere universities vying for my attention. I crossed my fingers and said a silent prayer.

Luckily, only first bell had rung, and we made it to class with moments to spare. It was hard not to notice that all eyes were on me as we entered the room. I knew everyone wondered why I was looking less than stellar. I heard a few whispers and saw a couple of notes exchange hands. I guessed my glory days were over. But, I didn't care, so long as I got a few winks every night.

Addie was laughing with some of the other girls in the corner, shooting glances my way every now and then. I was sure they were chatting about how they could get me on track to becoming one of the popular people. I had been so close to having it all, meaning—as Addie had told me when we pulled into the parking lot earlier—popularity and brains. She knew I had been suffering, but my sleepless regime had opened so many doors for us. We were on the cusp of greatness, as she put it.

Despite the fact that her family had more money than the Hiltons, she just couldn't manage to catch the attention of the "in" crowd. Personally, I thought they were intimidated by her. She was pretty, poised, and filthy rich, after all. Regardless, if I stopped wearing all the right clothes and spending extra time on my looks, she feared we would blend back in with all the others. She cringed as she said the word "blend." But, it was never my goal. Truly, the only reason I had given my otherwise ordinary appearance any thought as of late was because I had been sleep deprived and rising before the crack of dawn each day. Now, that I was sleeping through the night again—or so I hoped—I simply wouldn't have the time to spend primping and fussing over my pale and uncontrollable curls. Addie didn't find the notion acceptable. I didn't care.

Now, as we chatted idly while waiting for first period English to begin, I felt another chill run along my spine. I pulled my jacket tight around my shoulders and looked to see who would dare to open a window in mid-November. But, no one had moved, and the windows were closed. That's when I noticed *him* sitting at the back of the room. Addie must have seen him too because at that exact moment, she shot me a look. Without a single word, she said so much. Seconds later, Mr. Sheppherd called the class to order, and my head snapped back to the front of the room. My attention didn't follow. I was still thinking about our mysterious new classmate, while trying to keep my teeth from chattering in the cold. He'd left me breathless.

It was all I could do to sit through class without stealing another look. I had waited for Mr. Sheppherd to make the usual “new kid” introductions, but I was out of luck. He didn’t say a word. Instead, he clambered on for at least 45 minutes about Lady Macbeth’s need to get the blood off her hands. Rarely did anyone escape the embarrassment of being hauled up in front of the class to tell us who they were, where they came from, and why they were here, and for once, I was disappointed by this. When the buzzer finally rang, I sneaked a quick peak back, hoping *he* might not notice. But, he was nowhere to be seen. The rest of the class was still collecting their things, and he was gone.

I saw Addie look to the back of the room, and she seemed as confused as me. She dashed to my side.

“Did you see him? He was real, right? I mean, I didn’t imagine that there was someone new in the back of the room, did I?”

Addie continued on with another anxious round of questions as we walked out into the hall. I was ready to tell her that he must have been a figment of both of our imaginations, when I saw him leaning against the lockers across the hall. He looked

casual, but intense. His emerald eyes were burning a hole in my own. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. Something about him held my gaze. The next thing I knew, he was gone. I stared down the hall, but he had disappeared into the mob of students that were madly scrambling to reach their next classes. It was clear to me that Addie hadn't noticed him standing there. In fact, she hadn't stopped talking. Not once. It felt like my eyes had been locked with his for minutes, but it must have only been seconds because when I returned to the conversation, Addie was just finishing the same sentence she had started when I first caught sight of him.

"Earth to Lia. Did you hear me? I was asking what you're planning to wear to Hannah's party. Do you know yet? It's going to be very important that you wear just the right thing."

She'd already forgotten about him, but I couldn't. His face was ingrained in my mind. I tried to act normal, but I couldn't focus, and Addie knew it.

"Lia," she snapped. "Are you listening to me at all?"

I turned quickly to her, seeing the pleading expression in her eyes. She had a

magazine open to the center spread, where several very chic outfits were displayed across the pages.

“Which one do you like best,” she asked. “I like the third, but I’ll have to put it on special order to make sure it comes in time.”

Addie was from money. Her great grandfather was an inventor, and he was known to hit on a few successes now and then. His children invested their claims to the family fortune wisely, and their children, Addie’s mom and aunt, were set for life without ever lifting a finger themselves.

“I was thinking of treating you to the fifth outfit. You know, for being such a good friend and all. Do you like it?”

Despite the past few weeks, I typically wasn’t all that interested in fashion. Addie was thrilled with my recent transformation, but she didn’t seem to grasp that it was directly related to my lack of sleep and the excess prep time that I had each morning as a result. Now that it looked like things were back to normal, she would have to get used to the idea that I would also be going back to the old routine. Although today, I

was kind of upset that I hadn't taken the time to at least smear some gloss across my creamy lips. Especially with the mysterious, yet hauntingly lovely, new student.

"Come on, Addie. You know I can't accept such a lavish gift. It drives me crazy when you do that. I'll just wear my black dress."

Addie knew better than to argue. We'd been best friends since second grade, and she had made one too many missteps in this area to test her luck again. Her last attempt ended with me mailing the Betsy Johnson mini dress she'd bought as a gift for my birthday to her cousin in Toledo when Addie refused to take it back. I knew Cecilia would appreciate the frock that was hot off the runway. When she called Addie to thank her for the gift—which I had, of course, suggested it was in a brief note—Addie threw a tantrum. We didn't talk for a week. That was the longest we had gone since she moved to Evergreen a decade earlier. She didn't want to go for round two, I was sure.

"You can't blame a girl for trying, can you? Never mind, don't answer," she said looking a little glum. "But seriously, you can't wear that dress again. You wore it to the last three parties. It's so last year."

We were polar opposites. Addie was all about appearances, and I wasn't sure I cared either way. Sure, what girl didn't want to look nice sometimes, but I knew there was more to life. Before my dad died, I felt differently. But now, I had my priorities straight.

"What if *he's* there," Addie asked, breaking my train of thought. "Did you see everyone staring at him? Even Rob looked jealous."

I could only assume Addie was referring to the mysterious stranger from our first period class. I was beginning to think I had imagined the entire thing, so I was glad to be reminded that she had seen him too. For a minute, I wondered how he would even know about the party, but then I thought twice. What if he did? There was definitely something about him, and it took a lot to stir up the green-eyed monster in Rob's eyes. Rob Masterson was the most-sought-after boy in our year. He was quarterback of the varsity football team and captain of just about every other sport's team, too. He wore the right clothes, had sandy blond hair, crystal blue eyes, and a body that would make Mr. Universe jealous. He got above average grades and was perfect in just about every way. Or, so most girls thought. Addie had been seeing him on and off for a few years, so she knew otherwise. Rob definitely had his faults. Jealousy was just one of them. Still, no other girl had ever caught Rob's eye or piqued his attention. Yet another reason why Addie found it so difficult to mesh with

the popular crowd. Currently, Addie and Rob were taking a break, but she was eager to rouse his interest and rekindle the flame.

“Why would I care,” I asked Addie.

The look on her face made it clear that she was in shock.

“Why would you care? Who wouldn’t? There is going to be serious competition for that boy. But, he didn’t take his eyes off of you the entire class. He didn’t even pick up a pen to take notes. It was very strange, intense,” she said. “I was planning to make my move, but I don’t think there’s much point. Judging by his fixation with the back of your head in first period, I would just be wasting my energy. Besides, it’s about time I give Rob another chance.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I told her, and I believed it. “With all the beautiful people in this freakishly attractive town, why would anyone like him even give me a second glance?”

Addie just shrugged, gave me a knowing look, and skipped off to her next class. I wouldn't see her again until lunch.

Chapter 3 - Jealousy

The rest of the day dragged on. I hadn't seen him again, but the buzz about his presence could be heard everywhere. Weak descriptions filled the room around me. From what I recalled, they didn't do him justice. But, my memory was fuzzy.

In Biology, I could hear Rob Masterson complaining to Max Bigwell that the new guy had rained on his parade. No one had noticed Rob's new hair cut thanks to the fact that they couldn't take their eyes off of "Mr. Cool," as Rob had called him. I chuckled, and both Max and Rob shot me a dirty look. I just shrugged. Britney and Lainie wouldn't stop gushing about his brooding stare and black leather jacket. I smiled wryly when they began swooning over his tight behind. He'd disappeared so quickly both times I'd seen him that I didn't have the privilege of watching him walk away. But I was sure that it was a privilege.

"Did you see him," Stella finally asked me. "It's a shame if you didn't. He was only here for a half day today, but I hear he's going to start full time."

"Yeah. I saw him," I said, trying to sound casual. "He was okay, I guess."

I knew it was a completely ridiculous understatement, and I would almost have been disappointed if Chloe hadn't taken the opportunity to ream me out for it. By now, she had joined our small gathering and looked like she was ready to explode.

"No way, Lia. I can't believe you said that," Chloe started in on me slowly, her temper rising with each word. "He was to die for. I mean, he didn't even come close to any of the guys around here."

That, I couldn't deny. He wasn't anything like the other boys, but I couldn't quite pinpoint why. Though I only saw him for a few fleeting moments, I could see that he was beyond beautiful. Even Rob didn't compare. Truly, they couldn't be compared—they were so very different, but I couldn't say for sure why. There was something more, but it all seemed a bit hazy.

We kept chatting this way until Miss Krazinski started handing out our assignment. And even then, giggles escaped before we were organized into groups for our lab. Just as we were about to begin, I felt a cool breeze blow through the room. Before I could grab my sweater, I saw *him* standing in the corner. My heart paused, and I

couldn't take my eyes away.

"Look," Chloe whispered, nodding in his direction. "He's here. How do I look?"

"Why does it matter? You have Elliot," Stella exclaimed. "He seems to think you look just fine."

I laughed along with Britney and Lainie. They, too, had delicious boyfriends that most girls would be thrilled to even get a glance from. That didn't mean they couldn't comment on the new guy, they just had to decide if a shot at him was worth giving up what they had.

"I'm going to talk to him," Stella said confidently. Before we knew it, she was gone. As she scurried across the room, she looked back once with a teasing smile. We were in awe. Stella was beautiful and single. I was sure he would bite. Few guys could resist her long blond hair and big blue eyes. Until now, no one at Evergreen High had been good enough for her. We were in shock when we realized someone had finally struck her fancy.

We were even more shocked when he didn't even to turn talk to her. In fact, as she drew near, he turned and walked swiftly out of the room. Suddenly, the room got warm, and I had to take off my sweater to cool down. Stella looked awestruck. Never had a boy blown past her without so much as a mild stare. We tried not to laugh, but it was hard. I couldn't wait to tell Addie.

We took turns passing the scalpel around our little group, slicing pieces of the mushroom away and identifying its tiny parts. My mind was on other things when Lainie passed the knife my way, and my index finger took another gash in the exact same place as the night before. I winced at the pain, and as the blood started to flow, I heard a low gasp. I looked to see who made the shallow sound, but no one was nearby. Lainie was on the verge of crying, and Britney was screaming for the teacher. Panic ensued until I was able to convince the class that I was fine. Max ran to the nurse's office and grabbed a large bandage. Once I was wrapped up tight, everyone relaxed and went back to work. Still, I couldn't help but think something just wasn't right. I felt fine, but there was something strange about this wound and the sound that I kept hearing in my head each time the blood began to flow.

When the bell rang signaling lunch, I dashed out of the room. I couldn't wait to see Addie, and I ran to the cafeteria without stopping at my locker to grab my bagged

lunch. Over the next twenty minutes, I told her everything, but she didn't seem surprised.

"I'm telling you, he only has eyes for you," she said smugly. A teasing grin crossed her lips, and I knew she wasn't going to let this go.

Chapter 4 - A New Day

The next four days passed in much the same fashion. The school was abuzz with theories and stories about *him*, but no one seemed to know the truth. Of course, he was there every day now. He hovered in the background, only lingering as long as he had to in each class. He was never seen at lunchtime, and he seemed invisible between classes. He was a true enigma. I'd never paid much attention to the boys at my school, but I had to admit that it was hard to keep him out of my head.

On the upside, I was sleeping great. Though I couldn't keep the chilly draft from breezing through my room at night, I managed to drift quickly into a sound state. I stayed there for hours, until the sun crept through the cracks in my blinds. Despite the voice in the back of my head telling me that I should dress to impress, I awoke from my dreamless slumber far too late to beautify. I bounded out the door each day just in time to ensure Addie and I would make it to school before the first bell rang. Still, the look of disgust on her face never eased as she realized I was wearing sweats, torn jeans, and wrinkled shirts.

"Can't you just try," she finally asked on Friday morning. "Why do you have to be so difficult? It's just not natural for a teenage girl to behave this way."

Before she could finish, she pulled a large box from the backseat and placed it in my lap.

“Now, don’t say a word. It’s vintage, so it cost next to nothing, and it’s non-refundable. No one I know will like or want it, so you can’t get rid of it. Just promise me you’ll consider.”

I began to open the package, when Addie lifted one hand to halt me. She shook her head once. I immediately understood her silent gesture. I put the box inside my schoolbag, and we drove the rest of the way without saying another word. I didn’t have to see inside the box to know what it was. Addie hated the idea of me not having something new to wear to the hottest party of the season. She would never say it, but she thought I was wasting my potential, and she wanted to help. Her heart was always in the right place, but she just didn’t understand what it was like to struggle. I was okay with wearing the same clothes time and again because it was all I could afford. Her life was just so different, and she wanted to share her wealth. I knew she meant well, never wanting to hurt me, but she didn’t realize that it made me feel pitied, like a charity case. She would cringe if she knew the truth, so I kept my mouth closed. I knew I would have to wear whatever was inside that box to keep

from hurting her feelings.

The day passed quickly. I didn't see *him* once, but it didn't mean he wasn't there. Supposedly, we had three classes together on Fridays, but I rarely saw him leave or enter a room. It's not that I wasn't looking, it was more that he had a way of moving around a room with such ease and grace that you might miss him if you blinked. He also preferred to lurk in the shadows at the back of the room. It would be difficult to catch a glimpse without making it painfully obvious that I was looking for him. That didn't always keep me from trying.

After school, Addie dropped me off at the bakery on the corner of Upper Bear Creek Road. It was a mom and pop shop that needed an extra hand on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Their son was a junior at Red Rocks Community College, and he refused to miss out on Friday night events to work at the shop. Late nights out meant that spending early mornings in bed were out of the question. I had taken over his role about a year ago. We didn't get a lot of business any more thanks to the new Starbucks that had taken over much of our clientele a few weeks ago. It would be a quiet night.

I pushed through the swinging door to the staff room and tossed my bag on the

shelf. I slipped an apron around my waste and started back through to the front. Something made me stop dead. First, I felt a peculiar chill. I wished I'd worn a long sleeved shirt, but all I had was a flimsy tee. I shrugged it off and peered through the circular window on the door from the backroom to the cafe. I could barely see through the condensation, but I could hear. A soft voice with a British lilt chimed through the door in perfect clarity. Though he spoke low, I could hear every word as he ordered a latte with extra foam. His head was angled slightly downward, but between the water spots on the little window, I could see him shoot a look up from beneath his brow. He caught my gaze for just a moment. It felt like an eternity, and try as I might, I couldn't look away until he put his focus back on the task at hand. He paid, and left without his drink. Instantly, my body warmed, and I sucked in air fast. It was then that I realized I hadn't exhaled in what seemed like minutes. He had, quite literally, taken my breath away.

The rest of the night was pretty normal. I sat behind the counter reading *Of Mice and Men* while waiting for the odd customer to come in. All told, I served about eight people on my three-hour shift. I wasn't sure how much longer the bakery could keep up with the lack of business before it would be forced to shut its doors. I felt bad for the Olsen family that their shop would likely close soon, but the thought of their pending doom wasn't enough to keep my mind from wandering. I kept thinking about *him*. Despite the fact that my eyes had lingered over every line, every pore, every perfect inch of his skin time and time again, his face was never clear in my thoughts.

I had heard others describe him with ease, but for some reason, the picture was fuzzy in my head. I tried to remember exactly how he looked and what he wore, but there was no point. When Addie arrived, I was less eager than she had hoped to get ready for the party.

We were already late. Most guests would be arriving around 7 p.m., and I was just getting off work then.

“Hurry,” Addie yelled as I ran to the door of her waiting car. She was a good friend. She knew I would never have enough money to get my own car, and so she took it upon herself to always drive me to and from work. She never missed, even when she had mono last February. Before she got her license, she always sent a driver, Ian. I could rely on her for anything, but sometimes, it was a bit much. Normally, I liked to go to a good party. I enjoyed dancing with friends and acting like a kid. At home, I had a lot of responsibility. My mom was always working, and when she wasn’t, she did a ton of volunteer work. For a while, I helped too, but in recent years, I had outgrown the need to be by her side at all hours. When my dad died, we were a team. Two peas in a pod. And I knew she counted on me to keep her sane. At some point, I knew I had to move on. I wasn’t helping her by acting as a crutch, so I got a job and started doing normal kid stuff. I knew it was better for both of us, but it was a bit of a strain on our relationship. She would never say, but I think she was a bit

resentful of Addie because we spent the better part of our waking hours together.

Tonight when we arrived at my house, my mom was sitting in the living room watching Grey's Anatomy re-runs and crocheting a baby blanket for one of the girls at the teen pregnancy clinic where she gave freely of her time on Saturday mornings.

"Hi girls," she said with a forced cheer as we walked through the door. "Off someplace fun tonight?"

"No time, mom. We're super late," I hollered as we ran up the stairs to my room. Addie stayed back to tell my mom our plans, while I quickly plugged in my curling iron and tore the package containing what I could only assume was a fantastic dress from my schoolbag.

"Addie. Get up here now," I shouted down the hall as I pulled the most amazing emerald green cocktail dress from its tissue-paper wrapping. "You are in such big trouble, young lady."

“Oh, oh,” I heard her say before the sound of her feet thudded up the stairs. She was pleading when she burst through the door to my room. “I swear, Lia. It was nothing. I saw it in the window of the second-hand shop downtown, and I knew it was perfect. I paid next to nothing despite the label. You have to believe me. You have to wear it.”

The dress brought new meaning to the words belle of the ball. I knew that’s what I would be in this splendid frock. As angry as I was, I couldn’t stop the urge to feel the silky fabric as it slinked along my body. I quickly stepped into the opening and pulled it up into place. I stole a glance in the mirror and was thoroughly impressed with my reflection.

“Since you don’t seem too upset,” Addie said, pulling another box from her oversize bag, “I got you these, too.”

I should have known she would have thought of everything. I would never have shoes to match a dress like this, but that didn’t matter now. I opened the box to find a pair of gold kitten heels staring me in the face. I grimaced to show my disapproval, but slipped the perfect shoes onto my feet and sat silently on the chair in front of the mirror. Addie knew the gesture meant that I was giving up. I wasn’t going to put up a fight as she continued to work her magic on my hair and face. I was surprised she

hadn't called in a professional to meet us at my house. It wouldn't be the first time.

When she was completely satisfied with her masterpiece, she spun around my chair so I could see for myself.

"Well," she asked wincing.

I lingered for a while, letting her stew. Then, I jumped up and hugged her. I knew she would be happy, and truly, so was I. It was fun to look and feel so good. We raced down the stairs, did a quick spin for my mother, and ran out the door before she could tell us what time to be home. She knew I would never stay out past midnight, so she had no need to worry.

Addie was beyond excited at the promise the night offered. She and Rob were talking again after their latest upset, and she was hopeful that they would patch up their relationship tonight. I was happy for her. She wanted this, and I wanted it for her, too. I could tell she was going to get what she wanted when Rob was waiting out on the porch for us to arrive. It was 7:57 p.m. We were only an hour late, and it seemed the party was just getting started.

Chapter 5 - The Party

As we guessed, everyone was already inside. I felt awkward walking through the room. I knew people were staring. All week, I had been a mess. My hair was matted, my clothes sloppy. Tonight, I was a vision in green. We couldn't take two steps without someone stopping to talk to us. I felt silly, but good.

Addie was thrilled. Rob couldn't take his eyes off of her, and they walked hand-in-hand throughout the crowded room. Hannah's house was huge. Not quite as big as Addie's, but close. People streamed from the front room through the large double doors leading outside. The weather was nearly too brisk for an outside party, but Hannah's parents had placed special heaters throughout the yard and around the pool so that we could enjoy the evening.

Our community was small, so it was clear the entire school must have been invited when I stepped through the doors and saw at least 100 people gathered in groups around the bright blue pool. It shone like the moonlight from the center of the yard; its reflection lighting the nearby cobblestones. It was like a scene from a movie. Twinkle lights and patio lanterns dotted the thick trees that hovered behind the large yard, shielding the view from outsiders. A small group of kids shuffled their feet on the

makeshift dance floor. Another group lingered awkwardly by the refreshments.

My eyes scanned the yard, looking for familiar faces. Immediately, I landed on Chloe and Elliot, Britney and Josh, and Lainie and Zach. Stella was playing the room, trying to get the attention of the basketball team. That girl had gusto. I had to admire her.

I skipped over to the others, who raved about my new look. I flashed a few model poses for fun before turning again to take stock.

“Looking for someone,” Zach asked with curiosity.

“Oh, I can guess *who* she’s looking for,” Lainie said, shooting me a knowing look while playfully punching Zach in the arm.

“Huh,” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you are,” Britney winked. I wasn’t sure what had given the others the

impression I would be looking for anyone in particular, especially *him*. But, I couldn't hide my thoughts any longer. A smile crept across my face.

"I don't get it," Josh said, looking puzzled. "What's going on?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, Lia, but I haven't seen him," Britney said.

"Who," Josh demanded. "Who is she looking for?"

We all ignored him and went on talking about our preparations for tonight's events. Just then, the DJ started spinning some great tunes, and we all took to the dance floor. We spent about an hour taking turns getting snacks and drinks while jumping around to our favorite beats. I was having a great time, until I realized that the bodies on the dance floor were suddenly thinning. Stella and I kept the beat with the freaks and geeks, while the couples found their own private places around the garden. Most cooed and cuddled; some kissed passionately. At around 10:15 p.m., I decided I'd had enough. I began searching for Addie to let her know I would be leaving.

“I wish you’d stay, but I kind of thought this might happen,” she said. “My driver is waiting.”

Addie never ceased to amaze me. She would never let me down. She had the good foresight to expect she would want to stay longer, but she still wanted to be sure I would get home safely. She was the best friend a girl could have. I gave her a tight hug and a kiss on the cheek before turning to leave.

“Have fun,” I shouted over my shoulder. I waved quickly to the others who were in various locations around the yard, and made my way down the long winding path from the back garden, along the pool, and back to the main house.

I was just a few feet from the bright lights of the entryway when a cool breeze swept across my shoulders. I shivered and began walking faster. That’s when I saw *him* lingering in the shadows behind the trees. How long had he been there, I wondered. He seemed to be alone, watching from a distance. Watching...me. I stopped dead and turned to face him. He stood silent, his head down, eyes staring up from under his brow. I was paralyzed with wonder.

“Hi,” I heard the word roll gently off my tongue, but I couldn’t recall willing myself to say it. He seemed nearly as surprised to hear my voice. It was barely above a whisper. Breathy.

He didn’t speak, just took a step forward. I must have been out of reach of the heaters, because I was chilled to the bone. He could see my distress, and he quickly slipped the red velvet coat from his back and wrapped it around my bare shoulders. Such a gentleman. Rare.

“I’m—”

“Cordelia,” he finished for me, taking me by complete surprise. “I know.”

I was in awe. In the moonlight, I could see him clearly. Every detail of his face was plain to me now. What had been so obscure in my head earlier was so vivid. I didn’t ask how he knew my given name. No one had called me Cordelia since before my dad had died, nearly a decade ago. I would bet that even my closest friends didn’t know my real name. I couldn’t say anything; I just stared into his eyes. They were the exact same shade as my dress, and I knew that wasn’t a coincidence. Addie would

have seen to it, I was sure. She had such a knack for things like that.

Tousled raven waves swept back from his snow white face, forming a thick mane around his chiseled features. A single frosted lock curved back from just above his brow. A slight flush colored his cheeks, and his jade green eyes glowed bright into my own. Again, I was breathless.

Before I could say another word, he took my hand in his own and guided me to the cobbled dance floor. He was tall—at least six feet. The top of my head barely reached his shoulder. The music was mellow now, and he enveloped me in a loose embrace. His right arm draped loosely at my waist, while his left arm cradled my shoulder into his chest. We were close, but not quite touching, as we swayed lightly in circles, all the while staring into each other's eyes. For a long while, no one seemed to notice us, the lone couple making use of the DJ's skills. Soon enough, I could feel all eyes were on us as we glided gracefully in unison. I didn't care about anything but that moment with him. Being in his arms felt safe, right—like he was a missing piece to the puzzle that was my inner being. I couldn't explain or even pretend to understand. We had just met. I didn't even know his name.

I was lost in the moment. Totally, completely lost, so it took a moment for me to

realize that Addie was tapping my shoulder eagerly.

“Lia! Lia,” she shouted, pointing at her watch. “I thought you left. Look. It’s after midnight. You’re never late. Your mom’s going to freak.”

I knew she was right, but I had trouble pulling my attention from him. I slipped my hand from his and started to take off his jacket. But, he stopped me by simply placing a hand on each of my shoulders and shaking his head lightly once from side to side.

“Take it,” he said. “I’m fine, Cordelia. Please take it.”

With that, I turned and ran through the main house to the waiting car. I knew that in mere moments, I would be facing my mother’s wrath. The magic of what had just taken place would soon be over. Addie gave Rob a quick kiss and assured him she would be back as soon as she knew I was safe. The entire way to my house, she kept asking me to explain what had happened, but I had no response. I didn’t know myself; I just knew that I couldn’t wait to see him again. Those few minutes with him were worth anything that would come next.

“Should I come in with you,” Addie asked warily as we pulled up in front of my house.

“No. It’s best I face this on my own.”

Neither one of us knew how my mom would react. It was only 12:27 a.m., and technically, I’d never had a curfew, but I doubted that would hold up as a reasonable excuse at my makeshift trial. I ducked out of the car and immediately saw the porch light come on. The door opened, and my mom stepped outside, her terrycloth housecoat pulled tight across her chest.

“It’s okay. She’s home now,” she mumbled angrily into the telephone that was glued to her right ear. I knew she must have called Addie’s parents, hoping to hear that we were at their house, safe and sound.

“Cordelia Lorelei Jameson,” she shouted at me. Twice in one night with my full name. Impressive. Addie winced, watching from behind the tinted window of the black

Cadillac. “Get in the house now.”

Tears stung my eyes as I ran toward the front steps. I brushed past my mother and into the kitchen. I thought about taking the stairs two at a time to my bedroom and slamming the door behind me, but I knew that wouldn’t help my case. After all, I was sort of in the wrong. I owed my mother to have it out with her.

“Where have you been,” she shouted across the room. “I have been worried sick, young lady. Do you know what time it is? Surely, Hannah’s parents have a phone. Or, how about Addie? I know she has a phone. For crying out loud, you could have just asked her driver to swing by with a message. Do you have any idea how worried I was?”

She went on like this for at least three solid minutes. I tried to answer a few times, at first, but then I decided it was best to just let her have her say. When she was done, I added my two cents.

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, looking at the floor and shuffling my gold-heeled foot in a circle along the tile. “I really am. I just—”

She cut me off then.

“Things are going to be different from now on. I’ve let this go on too long. You’re grounded.”

“But, mom. This has never happened before. In fact, I don’t have a curfew, so how can I be in trouble for breaking it,” I shouted desperately. I knew there was no point. The battle was over. “I’m a good student, I work hard. This isn’t fair.”

I actually stomped my foot. Now, even I knew I was being childish.

“To your room now. This is not up for discussion. Go,” she said, pointing to the stairwell.

It was after 1 a.m. when I flopped onto the bed still wearing Chaseyn’s velvety jacket. I kicked off my shoes and coiled my body beneath the comfort of the fluffy down

duvet. I had to work at 7 a.m. I hoped sleep would come fast, but I couldn't stop replaying the fight in my head. My shoulders heaved; sobs escaped my trembling lips. I hadn't realized how cold the room suddenly felt, and I tucked the quilt tight under my chin. It wasn't long before I felt my eyelids started to droop. I was thankful, and soon, gave in to the heavy weight pulling them down.

Though I slept soundly, my slumber was anything but peaceful. After nights of dreamless sleep, the abstract visions that had clouded my mind for weeks returned more vivid than ever. Still, I couldn't put my finger on the exact details when I awoke the next morning. There was just one thing I knew for sure. *He* was there. In the shadows...watching. I could see the glow of his pale skin and feel the heat of his bright eyes. He had always been there, in the background of my dream. I wondered what it all meant. How could he have been at the center of my dream all this time when we had never met before this week?

I was in a rush to get out of the house this morning; I didn't want to face my mom. Clearly, she had the same thought. She was nowhere to be seen, but there was a note on the table next to the box of cereal.

Lia,

Tell Addie or her driver or whomever is coming to get you after work that you won't need a ride home. I will be there precisely at noon to pick you up.

Mom

“Ugh,” I muttered under my breath. She was taking this grounding thing seriously. I’d hoped it would blow over, but that was wishful thinking. I’d never actually seen my mom that mad before. Then again, I’d never let her down like that before either.

I hurried through the motions of my morning routine, trying not to wake my mother. The last thing I wanted to do was stare her in the face. She’d had every right to be upset with me. I just wish she had taken into consideration all my good points. Where was my scale of justice? Shouldn’t I get off with a warning?

It hadn’t always been this way. My mom and I used to get along great. She and I would spend every waking moment together. Shopping, hiking, spa days, and study sessions were all part of our regular routine, until she started seeing Brad.

It was about three years after my dad died, and my mom's friend Allison decided it was time for her to get back into the dating game. My mom seemed happy enough to go along with Allison's plan, but I wasn't at all happy about it. Allison's husband was a partner in a law firm at a fancy practice in the city. They set my mom up with one of the other lawyers. At first, Brad really did seem like a good guy. He always brought me a gift, some sort of trinket usually. And, he treated my mom pretty good. Still, I gave them a hard time. I would pretend to be sick so the sitter would have to call my mom home from a dinner date. Once, I threw a horrible temper tantrum and smashed an antique vase from my great grandmother. I still felt badly about that some days.

After a while, Brad started to show his true colors. I could tell that something wasn't quite right, but my mom couldn't see it. He started showing up unexpectedly at unusual times. It was only when he started acting really strange that my mom finally picked up on it. Once, when she and I were dress shopping for junior prom, he appeared in the bridal salon window. He didn't come in; he just watched for a few minutes and then left. A week later, my mom was out for dinner with friends when he sat down at a table across from her. He watched her eat, waited for her to leave, and then followed her home. She tried to break up with him, but he wouldn't leave her alone. Finally, she had to get a restraining order. Allison and her husband had been

on vacation for three weeks, but when they returned, they had major news. It turned out Brad had been caught in a lie at the firm. He had been let go from his last job because they thought he was stealing from the company. He was using the same sneaky tactics at his new job, and they were taking him to court.

Though she never said it, my mom felt awful for putting me in such a dangerous situation. At first, she had resented me so much for hating Brad, and later, she was too embarrassed to look me in the eyes. I didn't help matters. When she told me the truth about Brad, all I could do was say, "I told you so." I didn't know any better, and it ruined what we had. Since then, our relationship was strained at best. Sometimes, I felt badly about it still, but most times, I didn't feel like she really cared. She hadn't dated anyone since, and I think she hoped I never would either.

I was killing time reading the newspaper in the kitchen when I heard my mom's heels hit the floor in her bedroom. I jumped to my feet, kicked the chair out from under me, and ran to the closet to grab my coat.

"Lia," she shouted in a raspy, sleepy voice. "Are you still here?"

I thought about sneaking out the back door, but I could hear her coming down the stairs, and I was sure I wouldn't make it out before she reached the bottom step. Instead, I waited in silence.

"Did you see my note?"

I nodded my head, knowing she couldn't see. I started to answer, but the lump in my throat had grown to the size of a small orange. I couldn't manage to get out any sound. My eyes glossed over, and I knew that if I blinked, moisture would seep from their corners. I hated this.

"Mom, I've got to go. I'll see you at noon," I managed to squeak out before running through the door, across the yard, and into the waiting car.

Chapter 7 - Lattes and Cinnamon Buns

Even the smell of warm cinnamon buns couldn't cheer up my dismal mood. Mrs. Olsen had blackcurrant tea and a sticky bun waiting for me when I walked through the door, but I wasn't interested. All I could think about was the look of disappointment on my mom's face last night.

"Lia? Is everything okay, dear," Mrs. Olsen asked. She reached for my hand to make sure I knew that she honestly cared. "You can talk to me if you need, sweetie."

I'd been working for the Olsen's since my sixteenth birthday, a little over a year ago, and they treated me like family. Some Fridays, after my shift, I would sit for hours and talk with Mrs. Olsen. She'd never had a daughter, and she wasn't close with her son. Sometimes, it made me sad that I could be myself with her and not with my own mom. I wondered if that was how she felt about her son.

"Um, I'm okay," I lied. "I just didn't get much sleep last night. Fight with my mom."

She gave me a knowing look and smiled. Mrs. Olsen knew all about our relationship—the highs and the lows. She didn't press the topic any further. Rather, she tossed me an apron and pointed me toward a conveyor belt of cookies at the back of the room.

“Well, I'll put these aside for later. I'm sure you'll get your appetite back sooner than later,” she said, placing the bun and the tea on the counter next to the till.

I tried to smile, but I knew it only came off as a partial grin. She meant well, and I didn't want to worry her. I kept my thoughts to myself and started counting cookies by the dozen as they crept along the conveyor. Just then, the room got cold. The bell above the door chimed, and a dark figure slinked quickly to the counter. Though I was farther from the front, Mrs. Olsen was bagging several loaves of bread that were teetering dangerously in a pile on a shelf. One wrong move, and she would lose them all. I spared her the grief and shuffled to the service counter. I was looking down at my flour-dusted apron, brushing as much off with my hands before entering the public area. Without looking up, I called out to the customer who was not yet in my line of sight.

“What can I get for you,” I asked, wiping away the last few splotches of white powder.

I gasped when I finally looked up, only to be met by *his* brooding gaze. He just smiled.

“Cordelia,” he said softly.

“No one calls me that.”

“I do,” he said, catching me off guard.

I looked to my feet, feeling a blush rise in my cheeks. Fidgeting nervously, I asked again what I could get for him. He didn’t say anything. He just passed me a note and left as quickly as he’d come, bells ringing again as he exited. I was dumbfounded.

“Who was it, Lia? Is everything okay? It’s awfully early for customers. Even the diehard coffee drinkers don’t usually make their way around for another few minutes. Well, if they even make it past the Starbucks these days,” Mrs. Olsen shouted from

the back.

I winced. So, she knew Starbucks had stolen her business. Of course she knew. How could she not? But, that seemed insignificant now. I had much more important thoughts on my mind.

“No one, Mrs. Olsen. It was just some guy dropping off a flier—junk really.”

My fingers felt three inches thick as I fumbled to unfold the small slip of paper he had slipped into my hand before stealing away. I had butterflies, but I didn’t know why.

Cordelia,

Thank you.

Chaseyn

Chaseyn. The sound of my voice reading his name echoed in my ears. How unusual. Beautiful. Just like him. I tucked the note into my pocket and looked up in time to realize a line had started to form at my till. The man at the front was looking at me impatiently.

“Can I get some service,” he asked angrily.

“Is everything all right out here, Lia,” Mrs. Olsen said, jumping on the other till to ease the lineup.

“Yes, sir. What can I get you,” I asked, still dazed by the note burning a hole in my jeans’ pocket. My head was spinning, and I felt dizzy. I needed to talk to Addie, but my shift had just started. I would have to wait another two hours before I could take a break. Thankfully, the bakery was filling quickly. If people keep piling in at this pace, I wouldn’t have time to breathe, let alone think about what had just happened.

The next hour passed by in a blur. From double-shot espressos to triple-chocolate brownies, I was serving up goodies by the dozen. My hands had stopped trembling,

and I was able to focus on making change. My first few customers must have thought I was a flake. I gave the angry man the wrong order, made the next order with one percent milk instead of soy, and dropped an entire carrot cake on its side. Mrs. Olsen was very understanding. She thought my problems at home were distracting me, and she shot me a sympathetic look, as she scrambled to help me clean up the mess. I felt bad for letting her think she was right.

As if on cue, Addie came bobbing through the door right at 10 a.m.—ready to gab during my regularly scheduled fifteen-minute break. I held up one finger to let her know I would be just a second. I ran to the back, took off my apron, and skipped to the table where she was sipping an iced cappuccino with an extra squirt of caramel.

“How bad was it,” she asked.

I shook my head, letting her know that the topic was off limits. And then, I pulled the note from my pocket.

“What’s this,” she said, opening the paper slowly. She practically yelped with glee when she read the words. “Oh. No way.”

I smiled wryly.

“What does this mean,” she asked.

I just shrugged. The butterflies were back.

“I’ve got to get back to work. No time to think about this now. I’m grounded for life, but I’ll call you later. My mom’s picking me up, so tell Ian I won’t need him to get me today.”

We walked hand-in-hand to Addie’s car, and I watched her speed away. That girl had one heavy foot. Despite the warm breeze, I felt cool. I turned quickly to head back inside, knowing I had less than a minute before I was officially back on the clock. I was taken aback when I slammed straight into a broad, leather-clad shoulder. I didn’t need to look up to know that my gaze would meet Chaseyn’s deep green eyes.

“Can I see you later,” he asked.

I’m not sure how, but I managed to utter two words.

“I’m grounded.”

“I know. I’m sorry. But, you didn’t answer my question.”

How did he know? Was he there when I told Addie? I didn’t remember seeing him inside. And, what did he mean I didn’t answer his question? I said I was grounded. That was the answer.

“Um,” I stammered nervously. “I would like to, but—”

He stopped me short, holding up one finger to his mouth to silence my words.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” he said softly. Then, he turned on his heel, mounted a black Harley V-Rod, and drove off.

Again, I stood breathless.

“Lia, sweetie? Everything okay? Do you need to go home? You don’t look so good,” Mrs. Olsen called as I walked through the door.

“I’m fine,” I lied for the second time today. And then, I told the truth. “My stomach’s just doing flips.”

Chapter 8 - Later

I managed to work it through the rest of my shift without making any more mistakes, but my hands never stopped trembling. I wasn't sure how to interpret Chaseyn's earlier actions. Just the thought of his name made me giddy, let alone the thought of seeing him again.

I felt silly for replaying every word, sound, movement over and over again inside my head. I tried to remember exactly the way his green eyes sparkled in the sunlight and his wavy hair whirled around his head in the wind. He hovered over me, hands in the back pockets of his faded Levis, as he spoke with the faintest hint of a British accent. He said so few words, I couldn't be sure, but it sounded like that of someone who had been born overseas but was raised on American soil. I felt frail next to his broad, composed stature.

It took a while, but I was certain I had finally discovered the reason he would want to see me later. The previous night, he had left me with a red velvet blazer. Before hanging it on the back of the vanity chair in my bedroom, I noted the Armani label along the inside lining. I was sure he was eager to retain the pricey cloak. The jacket had kept me toasty despite the chilly night air and my mother's less-than-warm

welcome home that night. It was an unexpected comfort, and the musky smell of Chaseyn's unique scent clung to the fabric like expensive cologne. I would be sad to give it back. Still, at least now I understood the motivation behind his unexpected presence this morning.

After the early morning rush, the store had been quiet. A few people stopped in to pick up pre-ordered birthday cakes and party favors, but otherwise, there were only a handful of customers. I would be gone before the lunchtime rush, but it seemed as though the clock stood still. I couldn't wait for the shorthand to reach due North.

As promised, my mom was waiting for me at exactly noon. She had taken a quick break from her volunteer work at the walk-in clinic, and insisted I return with her for the afternoon shift. I felt bad lingering around the offices, fearful that someone from school would be caught in a family-planning dilemma, and I would suddenly be in on the secret. It was a small community, and it was only a matter of time before I was at the center of just such a scenario. Instead, I sat in the back and worked on my trigonometry assignment. I was hoping to attract Ivy League attention, and the only way would be to ace the toughest courses available at my school. The choices were few, so I was stuck with both trig and calculus. It wasn't easy, but I was determined to score at the top of my class. It kept my brain from running overtime analyzing Chaseyn's next move. There was no point in speculating when he was so

unpredictable.

At 3 p.m., my mom decided to call it a day. We piled into her Kia Sportage and headed to the grocery store. Since we would be spending the entire evening shut in together, we might as well make the best of it. We scoured the shelves for the ingredients to make chicken stir fry with Szechuan noodles—a family favorite. It would take hours to prepare, giving us time to focus on something beyond each other for at least a small portion of the night. After that, we would watch a movie, likely a romantic comedy, in silence, before heading to bed early. For my mom, it would be a typical Saturday night. For me, it would be excruciating.

We arrived home around 5:30 p.m., and I ran upstairs to change into my comfy clothes. There was no point in keeping up appearances to lounge around the living room with my mom. I grabbed an old, oversized t-shirt from the drawer and pulled on a pair of yoga pants before wrapping an elastic band around my thick mane. Dashing back down the stairs, I heard the phone ring.

“I’ve got it,” I yelled, scrambling to reach the bottom step and the phone on the side table near the front door.

“I don’t think so, young lady,” my mom hollered, beating me to the punch. She cocked her head to the left and squinted her eyes, a look that I knew meant she wasn’t ready to ease up on my punishment.

“Hello,” she said sweetly. “No, Addie. She can’t talk right now. She’s helping me make dinner, and then, we have plans. You can talk to her on Monday at school.”

“Monday,” I mouthed, then grunted under my breath when my mom stared straight into my eyes and nodded twice stiffly. “Ugh.”

I fought the urge to stomp to the kitchen like a child, knowing that sort of behavior would not help my case. Instead, I tucked my feet into some fuzzy slippers and made my way to the kitchen to begin washing vegetables. When I had a stack of mushrooms, carrots, sprouts, peppers, and baby corn drying on a bed of paper towels, I began prepping the wok. Once I was done, I helped my mom cut the vegetables into thin slices. Unfortunately, I failed to curve under my fingers while chopping the ends off a large carrot. A single drop of blood oozed from my finger, in the exact place where my gash was just starting to heal. Again, I thought I heard a low gasp, but my mom—the only other person within the walls of our humble

abode— hadn't even noticed anything had happened. Cool water ran from the tap, and I was about to place my finger beneath its numbing waves when the doorbell rang. I clutched the fist of my opposite hand against the throbbing wound and made my way to the door. My mom was elbow deep in noodles sizzling in the wok, and I knew it would be disastrous if she left it to answer the door.

"If that's Addie...", she said, her voice trailing off without an official warning, but the threat wasn't lost on me.

Of course, I truly had no idea who I would find on the other side of the door. I hadn't spoken to Addie since my break earlier today, and she hadn't given any indication that she had planned to stop by. My mom would have no problem telling her to leave, so I secretly hoped it was someone else—maybe one of her friends would join us for dinner and keep us from driving each other crazy. I could only hope.

I used the heel of my hand to awkwardly force the door open, trying not to get blood on the handle. A bandage would be useful right, but it was too late for me to turn back now.

“Who is it,” my mom called. I could hear both curiosity and annoyance in her tone. I’m sure she thought that it was Addie or one of my other girlfriends and that I was hurriedly trying to get her to leave before she could cause more trouble for me. But, she couldn’t have been more wrong. I stood silent. Breathless.

“Hi,” Chaseyn said, a shy smile stretching across his crimson lips.

“Oh,” was all I could manage in response.

“Lia,” my mom called as she walked down the hall and around the corner to where I was standing at the open door. She was drying her hands on an old tea towel. It was a brisk night, and the cool air blew into the warm room, breaking the tense silence. “You didn’t tell me you had a new friend. Please, come in. You’re going to catch cold waiting for Lia to remember her manners.”

Suddenly, my mom was warm and friendly. She was a different person altogether. As Chaseyn walked through the solid oak doorway into our cozy living room, he first handed my mom a small bouquet of wildflowers before presenting me with a single white carnation. I was taken aback by the act—so thoughtful, unexpected. Boys my

age never made such grand gestures. My mom's eyes shone bright, and I could have sworn I saw her wink at me. Chaseyn clearly had a way with women. He'd captured my attention the moment I first laid eyes on him, and he was well on his way to winning over my mom.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," Chaseyn began. "I just started at Evergreen High this week, Mrs. Jameson, and Cordelia offered to help me get caught up in a couple of classes."

Impressive, I thought to myself. Not only could he charm his way into my house, my mom would be hard pressed to deny Chaseyn the opportunity to enhance his academic experience. Either way, I was baffled by his presence, but happy no less.

"Don't be ridiculous," my mom replied. "You're just in time to join us for dinner. Lia, why don't you take your friend's jacket? Do you have a name, dear?"

Despite all that had happened the night before and my mom's numerous warnings that I was not to speak to or see any of my friends all weekend, she seemed excited to have Chaseyn join us.

“Chaseyn,” he said quietly, extending his hand. “Chaseyn Lear.”

The fact that his last name perfectly complemented my first name did not escape my notice. Cordelia Lear...Shakespeare’s tragic heroine. Hopefully, this wasn’t foreshadowing.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Chaseyn,” my mom continued, rambling on about our informal plans for the evening as she led him to a chair in the kitchen. “Have a seat while we finish up. Can I get you a drink? Water? Milk? Pop?”

He just shook his head and sat down slowly.

Suddenly cold, I was on my way to grab a sweater when I remembered the cut on my finger. By now, the blood had trickled down my finger to my wrist. My mom took note, and grabbed a wet cloth, her nursing instincts kicking into gear. A low gasp—a sound I had heard a half-dozen times over the past week—whispered like a breeze on the night air. It was only because I had been looking at Chaseyn that I had seen his lips

move, releasing the barely audible murmur. How could that be, I wondered? How could he be responsible for that sound?

“Allow me,” Chaseyn said, rising from his chair and leading me to the sink. My mom went back to work, chopping the last few peppers into bite-size chunks and tossing them into the wok. She was trying hard to give us a few minutes alone—keeping her back turned—but I knew she was eager to learn more about my new friend and put her medical skills to use.

Before I could stop him, Chaseyn pressed my gnarled finger to his full lips and licked the open wound gently. I shuddered and pulled away, shooting a look of fear into his mesmerizing eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he mouthed, clearly hoping not to draw my mom’s attention.

For some reason, those two words were enough to calm my nerves. He lifted the tap and tested the water before holding my hand beneath the cool flow. It felt good, tingly. I couldn’t help but notice that the gush of blood had nearly stopped. A bandage would no longer be necessary. Just a few moments ago, I thought the

steady stream would never stop. Now, it was a faint memory as a scab began to form over the gash. Confusion and awe set in, but I managed to motion for Chaseyn to return to his seat.

The room was silent except for the sound of the wok sizzling over the red-hot element.

“I hope you’re hungry,” my mom said to Chaseyn, breaking the silence.

He just nodded and smiled. His teeth gleamed white in the dimly lit room.

I grabbed three plates and glasses from the China cupboard and began placing them neatly around the dining table. We rarely had company, but when we did, my mom liked to make a show of it. I made sure to use all the best dinnerware and that each piece of cutlery matched. Chaseyn didn’t seem the type to be impressed by material possessions, but I knew my mom would be pleased. And, I needed to take every step I could to get on her good side.

It was awkward, at first. My mom filled our glasses with iced tea and then proceeded to pile our plates with heaping helpings of noodles and vegetable stir fry. With Chaseyn there, my nerves had got the better of me, and it was all I could do to eat a few mouthfuls. I played with the food on my plate in an effort to disguise the fact that I was barely eating anything. Chaseyn ate every morsel. Between bites, he was subjected to at least a million questions from my mom.

We learned that he was originally from London, but his family had moved to the United States when he was eight. Like me, Chaseyn's father had died a few years back. He'd left them with a healthy endowment, meaning his mom could focus on her music. She was a talented jazz musician who had played in venues around the world. Now, she wanted a safe place to raise her son. It helped that Evergreen was known to have a healthy jazz scene. They'd lived in four states prior to settling in Evergreen this past week.

I started clearing the table while my mom continued the grilling. When the last plate had been loaded in the dishwasher, she excused herself to the living room. I motioned for Chaseyn to wait at the table for a moment, and I walked into the other room.

“Mom,” I started. “I’m sorry. With everything that happened, I totally forgot that Chaseyn was coming over.”

She simply waved her hand in the air, brushing away any negative feelings.

“He’s lovely, sweetheart. He can come over any time,” she said.

“So you don’t mind if we study in my room,” I asked surprised.

“Not at all, dear. Have fun.”

With that, I signaled for Chaseyn to follow me up the stairs. Upon entering my room, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. Suddenly, I felt self-conscious. In all of the excitement, I had forgotten what I was wearing. Chaseyn looked the picture of perfection in a blue button front shirt and khaki pants. I looked like a slob.

“Um, I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know you were coming. I’m a mess.”

“You don’t need to apologize for being yourself, Cordelia,” he said sincerely. “People always try so hard to please others. I find you refreshing. You don’t care what others think.”

That was the most he’d ever said to me. It made me feel completely at ease, and I flopped down on the edge of the bed. He sat in the papasan chair across from me, sinking into the fluffy cushions so deep that his head could barely be seen above the puffs of thick fabric. A giggle escaped my lips, and he smiled shyly.

“What was that,” I asked seriously. “Earlier. Why did you do that to my finger?”

I knew he understood, that I didn’t need to say any more for him to know exactly what I meant. Still, he didn’t answer. He just shrugged.

“It was seriously weird,” I said.

“I couldn’t help myself.”

That was all he said, and I didn’t ask for more. For some reason, that was enough for me.

We sat in silence for a while. Using the remote on my bedside table, I turned on music low in the background hoping to create ambience. I wasn’t exactly sure what he wanted, so I decided to let him make the first move.

“You said I could see you later,” he started.

I nodded.

“It’s later.”

Chapter 9 - The Next Day

“Why are you here,” I finally asked. I had been fighting the question for so long that it was hard to contain any longer.

“Honestly,” he asked rhetorically.

“Honestly,” I said, nodding.

“I was compelled,” he said. “That first day, in the hall, the way the light reflected in your eyes and your hair wisped across your cheek...”

My heart skipped a beat, and my cheeks flushed. I looked down at my hands that were fidgeting with the edge of my duvet. No one had ever said anything like that to me before. In fact, I was fairly certain that no one had ever really taken notice of me before. There were so many beautiful girls in Evergreen that I was never a consideration. Especially not for a specimen as stunning as the one before me now. I felt particularly self-conscious as he stared at me in silence. He was examining my

every movement as though he were dissecting the finest thread in a cashmere sweater.

“Is this really so hard for you,” he asked. “To hear that you can inspire even the coldest heart to beat a little bit faster?”

I nodded and jumped up from the bed. Grabbing my biology textbook, I sat back down at my desk and turned to the chapter on fungal anatomy.

“Where should we begin,” I asked.

He looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean,” he said, seeming genuinely confused. “I thought we were going to talk.”

“I thought you needed help getting caught up with your classes,” I replied, pointing at

the book spread open across the desk. “Biology seems as good a place as any to get started.”

Chaseyn stared up at me through his heavy brow, he shook his head once and grinned slyly. Standing slowly, he walked two paces to where I sat anxiously awaiting his response. Gently, he flipped the book closed and looked at me curiously.

“I wanted to see you, but I don’t need any help in school.”

With that, he turned and walked to the door. I stared blankly in Chaseyn’s direction as he placed his hand on the knob and began to twist his wrist lightly to the right.

“I should leave, but I’d like to see you again.”

I nodded, and he was gone.

I sat for a long time just looking at the empty hallway. Moments before, a strange boy

had occupied that space, and now, it was as if he had never been here at all. His steps were silent as he walked down the stairs. If I hadn't heard him thank my mom for the lovely meal, I would have thought he was standing in silence just past my line of sight.

"Lia," my mom yelled. "I just started watching a movie. Do you want to join me?"

My mind was racing, and I thought it would be better for me to put my brain to use in a way other than to stew over the evening's events alone in my room. I had finished my homework earlier in the day while I was waiting for my mom at the clinic, and I was banned from using the phone, so I decided to cut my losses and join my mom in the living room.

A cool breeze blew through my bedroom window. To avoid returning to an icebox at bedtime, I sauntered to the open pane and started to shut it tight. That's when I noticed his green eyes glowing in the dim moonlight. Chaseyn stood beneath the streetlamp looking up at me. A weak smile drew across his full lips, and then he turned on his heel and walked away, looking back once quickly. So quickly that, had I blinked, I may have missed it. He was an enigma, and I was determined to crack the code.

I skipped across my room and flew down the stairs, my feet barely touching the steps as I made my way across the dark room to a reclining chair in the corner. Nothing had changed in that room since my father's death. Only, when he was alive, that chair was always occupied by him. Now, it was my safe place. I curled up in a ball on the soft fabric and wrapped a flannel blanket around my body. I started to doze off almost immediately.

As I lulled in and out of sleep, I imagined Chaseyn here with me, his arms wrapped tightly around me. It felt nice to have someone hold me so close and keep me safe. Not that I felt in need of protection, but safe in the sense that I would always have someone I could turn to during hard times, someone who wouldn't judge me and would care for me unconditionally. I awoke with a start during a musical number in the film, jumping slightly.

"Everything okay, honey," my mom asked with a sincere hint of concern.

"Mmmhmmm," was all I could manage to utter. My mind was still flooded with the images of my hazy dream. It was much more comforting that the elusive dreams I

had been having for weeks, but it was also much more ridiculous. I knew nothing about Chaseyn, his intentions or his personality. I felt silly for having such intense feelings for someone I knew so little about.

“I’m okay, mom,” I said with a bit more effort to sound truthful. “I just fell asleep. I’m fine now.”

“You should go to bed if you’re tired, Lia. We have a lot to do tomorrow.”

Her words echoed in my head. As far as I knew, we didn’t have any plans, but considering the house was now my own personal prison, I could imagine the types of things that she and I would do together—cleaning, baking, watching more movies. Before I could think too much about what the day held in store, I pushed myself up from the chair, wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, and shuffled back to my room.

When I arrived, I was overtaken by a cold chill. My curtains tangled with the wind that was seeping through the partially opened window. I was sure I had closed it earlier, but I decided that it might just have been a thought rather than an action. Better late

than never, I decided, and I pushed the pane closed. In the shadow beneath the chokecherry tree, I could see him gazing up at me. My heart stopped for a moment, and my stomach did a flip. I wondered how long he had been there or if he had even left. I didn't want to consider that he might have been waiting there for the past hour while I lay asleep in the chair. He caught my gaze and pointed one finger vigorously to the center of his chest and then up to the open window where I stood. It was a universal symbol. He was asking if he could come up to my room.

Chapter 10 - Much Later

“No,” I whispered. “You can’t come up here. My mom would kill me.”

He shook his head, then made his gesture more clear. This time, when he pointed to himself, I noticed something in his hand. He wasn’t asking to come up, he was signaling something else. Looking down at the window sill, I saw the edge of a thick twine rope dangling to my floor. It led outside to where Chaseyn was looking up at me. He could see I had finally clued in and was tying something to his end of the rope. With a light tug, he indicated that I should hoist the small package up to my room.

Slowly and carefully, I manipulated the rope until, if I stretched my arm out at full length, I could just reach the tiny box. My fingers twisted and lunched until I had a firm hold, and then I let the rope drop to the ground.

Curiosity overcame me, and I wrestled with the black satin bow before managing to peel the lid off the brown cardboard box. First, I lifted a note from the package.

Wear this. For me.

C.

With his instructions clear, I pulled a red velvet bag from beneath the note and opened it cautiously. Inside, I found a delicate silver cuff-style bangle with a large chrysanthemum-like flower carved from silver protruding from the bracelet's center. I had never worn much in the way of jewelry, but it was impossible to escape the allure of this phenomenal piece. Immediately, I anchored it to my slim wrist, a perfect fit.

I glanced down to thank Chaseyn and ask him why he had given me such a lavish token, but he was gone. I decided to leave my window open slightly, hoping I would hear if he returned. I lay awake for a long while, listening for the sound of his footsteps on the gravel path and contemplating his gift, but eventually, my eyes drifted closed.

That night, my dream returned, but it was different, less obscure. Usually, the

atmosphere was dark, and I could never make out exactly where I was. I just knew that I was searching for something but could never quite grasp it. This time, I knew exactly what I was searching for. A bright light formed on the horizon, and I walked through a colorful garden knowing what I would find when I passed through the gate. Chaseyn was there, waiting for me with arms wide open, and I fell into his embrace. We stood there for a long while, swaying to music that only we could hear. I felt safe, warm, loved. And then, I woke with a start. For the first time, I could remember all of the details of my dream, and I was engulfed in an incredible feeling of ease. It was as if a weight was lifted from my shoulders, and I was finally at peace.

The sun was glaring through my window, and the scent of cinnamon raisin French toast wafted through my open door. I scrambled to my feet, and inched them into the fuzzy slippers at the side of my bed. I wrapped a fleece housecoat around my body and walked to the door. Just as I neared the bottom step, I remembered the weight around my wrist. I ran back to my room quickly and tucked the silver bangle safely inside my dresser drawer. While I would put it back on the minute I stepped outside of the house—I didn't want *him* to think I didn't like it—I couldn't stand the thought of answering what would inevitably be fifty questions from my mother about the elaborate token.

“Hey, honey. I thought I could lure you out of bed with the smell of a hot-and-ready

breakfast,” my mom said when she saw me come around the corner into the kitchen. She seemed to be softening a little.

“It smells great, mom. Can I help with anything.”

“Nope. I’m just about done here. Have a seat,” she said, pointing to the breakfast bar. She started doling out bacon, eggs, and French toast on to two plates before pouring two tall glasses of fresh-squeezed orange juice.

“Thanks, mom.”

“So,” she said sheepishly. “Where’s that beautiful bracelet I saw peeping out from under your duvet when I looked in on you this morning?”

“Oh. That,” I said, wracking my brain for an appropriate response. “It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? It looked like something to me. Until last night, I never even knew this boy

existed, and now, he's giving you jewelry. Honey, you should have told me you had a boyfriend. Is that why you were late Friday?"

I didn't know what to answer first, where to begin. So, I went with the truth.

"First, it really is nothing. I wasn't even going to keep it; I barely know him. He asked me to try it on, and I forgot to take it back off. That's all," I said, the words coming out a mile a minute. "He just started at school on Monday, so I barely know him either. It's hardly appropriate for him to be giving me such lavish gifts. And, yes. I was dancing with him on Friday, and I lost track of time. It was that simple. Is that everything?"

She looked stunned. I'm not sure she was expecting so much truth. She paused from pouring maple syrup on her heaping mound of French toast to look me in the eye. Her jaw fell open, then closed.

"Was that so hard," she asked. "It's been a long time since we've been this open, Lia. I miss it."

I was struck off guard by her response, so I stuffed my mouth full, giving me time to think.

“I miss it to, mom.”

We ate in silence. It was quite a breakthrough for 9 a.m., and we needed time to recoup before taking the next steps. I wasn't sure what my mom had in store for us today, but I knew it would be another 24 hours before I could confide in any of my friends. It had barely been 17 hours since I had last talked to Addie, but it felt like an eternity. So much had happened that I wasn't sure how I would get it all in before first period.

I cleared the table and cleaned the kitchen while my mom showered and dressed. I knew my grounding wouldn't last another weekend—she was already starting to crack.

“Lia? Do you want to head to the mall? I thought maybe you might want to get some new things for winter,” she shouted between bouts with her hairdryer. It was a nice

gesture—one she hadn't offered in ages—so I was more than happy to accept.

“Sure, mom. Sounds great,” I shouted back, running up to my room to dress. I pulled the shiny silver cuff out of my drawer and wrapped it back around my wrist. It felt right, like it was made specifically for me. I smiled. Just then, the phone rang. My mom answered, and I could hear her tell the person on the other end that I had two minutes to talk and that was all. She hollered for me to pick up. I was hoping to hear Addie's voice on the other end, but instead, I was greeted by a warm, dark baritone.

“Do you like it,” he asked.

“It's perfect,” I replied. “But, you barely know me. It seems sort of special.”

“I feel like I've been waiting forever to find you,” he said in response. “I know we just met, but there is such a strong connection. I want a part of me to be with you always. But, you have to go now. It's been at least two minutes.”

He was right. My mom was standing in the doorway looking at her watch.

“I’ll talk to you later,” I said. His response surprised me.

“At six, right. Your mom said that would be good. ‘Til then,” he said, hanging up the phone.

I was in complete shock.

“I asked Chaseyn to join us again tonight for dinner. He seemed very sweet, and it sounds like we both need to get to know him better,” my mom said, sensing my confusion. “I hope you don’t mind.”

My stomach did a flip once her words sank in. On the one hand, I was excited to see Chaseyn again. On the other hand, my mom would be there. Suddenly, I felt slightly nauseous. Still, I managed to nod and grin. I clutched the bracelet, and felt the heat searing my cheeks.

“Maybe we should go now,” I said, grabbing my wallet and stuffing it into my pocket.

“Yeah. That would be best.”

My mom was chatty the entire drive to the mall. Normally, we would sit in awkward silence. I would scour my brain the entire time, hoping to find some way to fill the empty space. There was no need for that today. She was rambling on about everything from the new Thai sit-down restaurant near the food court to a nightmare patient she tended to yesterday morning at the clinic.

Once inside, she dragged me from store to store, forcing me to try on at least a dozen shirts in pretty pastel shades that made me want to vomit. Soft and girly seemed to be the fashion trend this spring, and I wasn't biting. But, she was insistent—despite our recent dispute and my resulting grounding—on treating me to something new. I settled for a pale gray blouse with nominal frill and a pair of dark denim slacks. I had a sudden interest in at least making myself presentable, and I saw this as an opportunity to tweak my wardrobe in the direction of sophisticated chic. I couldn't say why I cared, but I thought it was a look that would appeal to Chaseyn. He had a dark edge, but he was laid back and casual. Think James Dean in color.

“Chaseyn will love that,” my mom said, reaffirming my thoughts as though she were reading my mind.

I just smiled, and tossed a second blouse on the counter. Another one that I was sure would impress Chaseyn. Addie would, of course, be impressed too, but her opinion was secondary in this equation. The notion wasn't lost on my mom, who laughed at my sudden interest in enhancing my appearance. I felt my cheeks get warm. My mom wrapped one arm around my shoulder loosely and ruffled my hair with the other. She hadn't done anything like that since before my dad had died. It felt weird but good. I couldn't suppress the huge smile that was forming across my face as I quickly raised my right arm and tousled her hair in much the same way. She had forgotten that, unlike when I was eight and could barely reach the top of her shoulders with my fingers outstretched, I was now two inches taller than her and could easily repay the unwanted favor.

“Hey,” she shrieked, running out of the store into the crowded mall. I grabbed my bag and chased after her, hands raised in the air in a threatening manner. I had been dreading spending the day alone with my mom, but to my surprise, we were having a great time. Circling each other in outside the door, we each got in a few good tickles before calling a truce.

“Let’s eat,” my mom stated, and she guided me toward the food court. She didn’t have to say anything for me to know that we were going to put the Thai restaurant she had been rambling about earlier to a massive taste test.

“Anything you want,” my mom said as we perused the menu. “Today is a special treat.”

She didn’t have to say any more for me to know that she was having more fun than we had enjoyed together in years...since Brad. Even longer...since my dad. The past week had been flurry of unusual activities. From Chaseyn’s first day at Evergreen High School to my grounding, so much had happened in the past six days. Despite the immediate tension between my mother and I following Friday night’s shakedown, we had grown immeasurably close since. Chaseyn seemed to be the common denominator. Something we could both agree on.

“So,” my mom began so teasingly that I feared what would come from her mouth next. “Do you like him?”

“Ugh,” was all I could manage to say in response. Over the years, I had closed off my emotions from my mom. While things were going great today, I wasn’t about to open the floodgates. This type of talk was strictly reserved for Addie, and occasionally, Stella, Britney, Lainie, and Chloe.

“What,” she asked genuinely. “I’m not embarrassed to say that I like him.”

“Mo-om,” I begged. “Please...”

“Well, I just wanted you to know that I think he seems like a very nice, respectable young man, and I approve of your seeing him. And, you decided to wear the bracelet today, so I can only assure you feel the same way. That’s all I’m going to say.”

She pinched her thumb and index finger together on her right hand and dragged them across her lips—the international symbol for zipping a mouth and ending a conversation. I took the opportunity to change the subject.

“Let’s try the fried noodles.”

Nodding, my mom smiled and signaled to the server that we were ready to order.

The next few minutes were spent in awkward silence as my mom tried to recover from her earlier attempt at igniting an intimate conversation about my extracurricular interests. Finally, we settled into an easy discussion about potential scholarship opportunities and my top choices for continuing my academic career. After stuffing our mouths with the final few morsels, we concluded that the food was every bit as good as it was touted to be. We dabbed our lips with the stiff cloth napkins and continued on our way through the rest of the mall.

Walking out of the restaurant, we passed a woman teetering on the top of five-inch heels. My mom and I wandered aimlessly for the next few minutes, debating the practical uses of stilettos. Though we made every effort to determine the need for such intolerable pain, we failed to find a justifiable reason to submit our feet to such torture. As our conversation came to an inevitable end, we stopped dead in our tracks and uttered the same word in unison.

“Shoes,” we said loudly, looking at each other and then the storefront before us. At

least the conversation had led us some place other than a dead end in our afternoon.

I could go months without ever stepping foot inside a fashion boutique. The need for new clothes was limited when you had a less-than-stellar social life, but even I would be remiss to pass up a shiny new pair of shoes. There, in the window, was arguably the most spectacular pair of ballerina flats my eyes had ever had the good fortune of being set upon—the perfect accessory to my new jeans. Before I could even set foot inside the door—I was still contemplating the unfortunate truth of the enormous price tag on the nearby plaque—I could hear my mother asking the sales associate if he had them in a size seven.

“Mom,” I hollered, an air of disappointment in my tone at the realization I could not afford the hefty sum. “Don’t worry about it.”

She simply waved me off and followed behind the clerk as he motioned to a nearby bench.

“They’re way out of my budget,” I told her once I had caught up. “I’m just going to look around for something else.”

At that moment, the associate appeared with an open box. He pulled paper stuffing from the toe of the right shoe, before handing it to me for assessment.

“Just try it on for kicks,” my mom insisted. I hated disappointment. If they looked good, I was just going to feel badly when I had to leave them in the store. But, I decided to humor her anyway. The day had been going so well that I didn’t want to ruin it with my spoilsport mood.

“Oh honey,” my mom sighed, first looking at my foot and then up at me sweetly with wide eyes. “You have to look.”

Again, in an effort not to ruin the mood, I positioned myself in front of the full-length mirror. My eyes lit up, and I understood my mom’s reaction. The last pair of shoes that caused such a reaction were the red patent ones my dad had bought for my first picture with Santa when I was five. Judging by the faint smile across her face, I was sure my mom had recalled the same memory.

“We’ll take them,” my mom said before I had a chance to even put on the second shoe. I ran over and hugged her. Something I hadn’t done in more years than I could count on one hand. Tears sprang to my eyes, but I choked them back before she could see. We had made major headway today.

Collecting our bags, we decided to leave the mall before we could do any more damage to our pocketbooks. We had spent more than enough of our hard-earned dollars for one day. For the second time in as many days, we would head to the grocery store together to assemble the contents of our dinner. Only this time, we would be cooking for three.

The thought of Chaseyn joining us again tonight hadn’t escaped my mind for even one second today. Every moment, I was painfully aware of the fact that in just a few short hours he would be subjected to another round of relentless questioning by my all-too-nosy mother. Last night, I knew she was practicing a certain level of self-restraint as she fished for information about his family. Tonight, I feared, she would be more driven to ascertain personal details.

Wheeling the buggy through the narrow aisles, I searched for oregano and garlic, while my mom sought out noodles and ground beef. She would attempt to win over

Chaseyn with her award-winning pasta sauce—a secret recipe that had been in the family for generations. Jameson women were only made privy to the entire ingredients list after their eighteenth birthday. I had to admit, it was impressive, and I was moderately anxious for the day all would be revealed. Until then, I settled for participating in gathering the obvious components.

I returned to where we had agreed to meet and found my mom chatting with the man who was standing behind the meat counter—likely the butcher. They were laughing at something random, and I couldn't help but notice how she touched his arm playfully. Was my mom flirting? Just a few years ago, such an interaction would likely have sent me into a tantrum right there in the middle of the store, but today, I just smiled. Over the past two days, my mood had lightened considerably, and while we still needed to make major adjustments to our jilted relationship, I was starting to see her in a new light. She deserved happiness. I couldn't expect her to sit around and pine over her lost love while I forged a new friendship—and hopefully more, I was quickly realizing—with Chaseyn.

Mid-sentence, my mom straightened to perfect posture and said a stern goodbye to the man with whom, just a moment ago, she had engaged in a friendly chat. “Kevin” was embroidered in bright red letters over the breast pocket of his white coveralls. It was a good, solid name; the name of a hard-working man who garnered respect, I

imagined. His smile dropped at her dramatic change in behavior. Suddenly, I realized the problem. It was me. She had seen me coming in her peripheral vision.

“Mom,” I said, trying to sound overly happy, approving. “Who’s your friend?”

Earlier, she had worked hard to seek answers from me about Chaseyn. Now, it was my turn to repay the favor. Her back turned to the counter, and she rolled her eyes at me. I winked in response.

“Lia, this is Kevin. Kevin, this is my daughter,” she said reluctantly.

“Lia! It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. Your mom has told me so much about you,” he said, extending his hand to take mine in a firm grasp.

What had appeared to be an innocent exchange between two strangers quickly turned into an uncomfortable situation. If he had heard about me, it indicated that my mom and Kevin had spoken before. I wondered what else they may have done before—dinner. A movie, perhaps? Was that why she had been out late so many

nights recently? Had she been lying to me about working double shifts? I was sad at the thought that she felt she needed to hide her happiness from me. At the same time, I knew I would no longer be on house arrest. If she had been lying to me, she had no right to keep me confined.

She looked at me and shrugged.

“Kevin, would you like to join us for dinner,” I asked shamelessly. Two could play at this game. I gave my mom another wink, turned on my heel, and walked away. She had plenty of explaining to do later, but for now, I would leave them alone to discuss the details.

My mom was both giddy and furious on the way home. On the one hand, she was relieved that I was more open to her having a relationship than I was when she was with Brad. She was incredibly excited about the opportunity for Kevin and I to get to know each other. She rambled on about what to wear and how little time she had to prepare herself and the meal. My mom was pretty. Much prettier than most women her age, and Kevin wasn't shabby either. I tried to convince her that she would look fabulous in a paper bag, and judging by the way Kevin looked at her, he would be satisfied just being in her presence. It was refreshing to see her so uninhibited.

Cleverly, or so I thought, I offered to make the secret sauce, but she was paying more attention than I had realized and shot down the idea before I was even finished saying the words.

I tried to throw some heat in her direction, asking her why she lied to me and kept their relationship a secret. She flashed me an apologetic look and simply said that she couldn't stand to put me through another episode like she did with Brad. She wanted to scope out the situation first to be sure Kevin was one of the good guys. She also admitted that she was more than a little bit concerned about how I might react. I wanted to be mad, but I knew she was right to have these feelings. We had such a fun day that I decided not to put a wrench in things by coming down too hard on her. At the same time, she reprimanded me for sticking my nose in her business. I pointed out the obvious, that she was doing the same to me with Chaseyn, but she reminded me at least a dozen times that as the parent in our relationship, and she had the authority to take such actions. I was simply the child.

Once we were safely inside the house, my mom put me to work chopping vegetables, boiling pasta, and spreading garlic butter on a loaf of bread before popping it in the oven to warm. Meanwhile, she dashed around like a madwoman, primping and pressing in preparation for Kevin's arrival. I ran throughout the living room with a feather duster, doing my best to make it look relatively tidy. There was

little time left for me to dress, but my mom looked stunning in the red silk blouse she had bought earlier during our shopping day, and a pair of dark, wide-legged jeans. I ran up to my room and tossed on one of my new blouses and a pair of jeans. I pulled my tousled hair into a slick ponytail, applied a dab of blush to each cheek, and swiped a sheer gloss across my lips. I hoped Chaseyn liked the fresh-faced look. It was all I had time for.

Chapter 11 - Dinner Guests

We sat nervously poised on the edge of the couch waiting for our guests to arrive. At precisely 6 p.m., there was a light rap on the door. My mom nudged my ribs with the point of her elbow. I took the hint and crossed the room quickly. A slight smile creased the corners of my lips when I peered through the peephole to find a thick mane of jet black hair—save the one icy stripe—filling the empty space. Gauging my reaction, my mom understood who had arrived first and excused herself to the kitchen under the guise of checking on our culinary efforts. I knew she was giving us a moment alone, and I opened the door to greet my mysterious acquaintance. I could hardly consider him much more than that. I had only known him six days, after all.

“Hi,” he said, a hint of his exquisite accent escaping his plump lips.

“Hi,” I said, looking down at my feet shyly. I wasn’t sure what to do next. I had never had a boy to dinner before. Not like this anyway. Sure, Rob had come over with Addie, and my grade school best friend, Justin, had come over a few times, but this was different. Though I had trouble admitting it earlier to my mom, I really was starting to like Chaseyn.

“Can I,” he motioned inside with his hand, initiating the first move.

“Oh, of course,” I said, a flush rising in my cheeks. I stepped aside so he could enter the main room. “Do you want to sit down?”

Almost as soon as I said it, I felt stupid. Why would he want to stand around? Of course, he would want to sit down.

“Actually, I was hoping to help out,” he said, surprising me. “Is there anything I can do?”

He handed me his jacket and began rolling back the sleeves of his gray dress shirt. It was hanging loose over a pair of faded jeans. My heart skipped a beat. I didn’t know much about him, but it was obvious that he was sincere, thoughtful. I couldn’t imagine any of the other boys in my grade making a similar offer without someone forcing their hand. Before I could realize what he was doing, Chaseyn gently entwined his fingers with mine and guided me toward the kitchen. I looked up to

catch him gazing intently down at me, his fair skin glowing in the pale moonlight that crept through the living room shades. I hadn't noticed—my mom and I had been so nervous—we had forgotten to turn on a light; we had been sitting in darkness. I smiled, and followed the lead of the lovely stranger who held my hand in a firm embrace. We glided together, our feet moving in perfect unison.

“Why don't you stir the sauce,” I said, passing Chaseyn a wooden spoon.

“Lia, he's a guest. Don't you put him to work,” my mom snapped with a loving chide.

“No, Mrs. Jameson, it's fine. I asked to help.”

My mom's eyes opened wide in awe, and she sent a look of true appreciation my way. Chaseyn dipped the spoon into the sauce, then lifted it slowly to his lips, one hand placed slightly beneath the spoon in an effort to catch stray drippings before they could splatter on the floor below. His lips barely touched the savory concoction before he let out a gloriously smooth purr of approval.

“Hey,” I teased. “Did I say you could do that?”

He looked up from beneath his brow, grinning wickedly as he took another taste.

“Did you make this,” he asked. “You don’t strike me as the domestic type.”

“Is that an insult,” I asked, hands on my hips to feign anger.

“Just the truth.”

A light chuckle escaped my mom’s lips, and I whipped the spoon away from Chaseyn before he could react. Though, I suspected he could have stopped me if he had really wanted.

“Go. Sit,” I said pointing at the chair. “You’ve lost your helper status.”

Chaseyn pouted, a look so sultry I thought I might melt. Suddenly, I couldn't remember what the problem had been just a second earlier. My knees went weak, and I had to put one hand on the counter to steady myself. My reaction didn't escape notice. Chaseyn could see the effect he was having on me, and the corners of his lips turned up slightly. Like a puppy in obedience school, he dipped his head and took a seat at the breakfast bar. Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Your turn," I said, watching as my mom brushed herself off, fluffed her hair, and walked out of the room without so much as one word or glance in my direction. She looked like she might be sick.

"I thought it was just the three of us tonight," Chaseyn said as more of a question than a statement. "I was hoping we could play twenty questions again. Maybe I could even ask a few."

"Heats off," I said. "Turns out my mom has a secret boyfriend. You're yesterday's news—literally. Yesterday."

Chaseyn just shook his head, eyes rolled up to the ceiling. Kevin walked nervously

behind my mother, extending his hand cordially when Chaseyn offered his upon introduction. He only had a day's head start on Kevin, but Chaseyn seemed relaxed, at ease in our humble home. He leaned across the counter, chin resting in his palms as he participated easily in conversation with me and my mom. As we hurried around the room making final meal preparations, Chaseyn grabbed dinnerware from the cupboard, and set the table with all of the utensils in the appropriate positions. I wasn't even sure which side the fork went on, so it took me by complete shock that this seemingly aloof teenage boy had such impeccable table manners. All the while, Kevin sat rigid in his chair. Sure, he laughed at all the right moments and answered any questions that were aimed in his direction, but sweat beaded on his brow despite the subtle chill in the room. Terrified was the only word to describe the look on his face as the three of us bandied about like old friends. I could see that he wanted to make a good impression, to fit into our little clique the same way Chaseyn had, but he couldn't loosen up enough to offer anything exciting to the conversation.

"So Lia, how long have you and Chaseyn been seeing each other? A few months," Kevin asked. The last part was more of a statement than a question.

"Oh, we're not exactly dating," I replied quickly. I didn't want Chaseyn to think I had been so presumptuous as to spread that rumor. "Chaseyn's new here. I'm just showing him around and helping him at school."

“But, I’m hoping she’ll give me a chance at more,” Chaseyn added, sending my stomach aflutter.

“Oh,” Kevin said stunned. “I just assumed...you all seem to get along so well, like you’ve known each other a very long time.”

He fidgeted awkwardly in his seat. He was painfully aware that he was having trouble fitting in and had hoped he’d uncovered the reason why. The notion had backfired, and now, he was even more uncomfortable. I wanted him to have fun, but I didn’t know how to help him relax. Dinner was wrapping up, and I wanted him to feel like he could stay for awhile afterward. My mom deserved a shot at happiness.

“Why don’t we let these lovely ladies relax in the living room while we clean up,” Chaseyn suggested to Kevin. “I think they could use a few minutes together, don’t you?”

He winked at me coyly. I shivered. He was incredible.

My mom and I wandered into the living room, and she gave me a pleading look once we were out of sight of the kitchen. I knew she thought I didn't like Kevin, and she was silently begging me to keep my thoughts to myself for the night.

"You're wrong, mom," I said, stopping to toss a few logs in the fireplace and open the flu. A slight draft lingered throughout the room, and I wanted to warm it up a bit—keep the atmosphere inviting for our guests. "He seems really nice. Nervous, but nice."

Next, I walked to the front hall closet where we kept a plethora of rarely used board games. Pulling down Trivial Pursuit and Yahtzee, I looked to my mom for approval. She shrugged and smiled.

"Really? You like him," she mouthed questioningly. I knew she wasn't talking about the game and didn't want to raise awareness of our conversation in the next room.

"Really, mom," I said in full voice. "Now, let's focus on making him feel at home so he

can relax a little. Which one?”

Just then, Chaseyn walked into the room, placed one hand gently at the small of my back, and whispered his preference. I had pegged him for a Trivial Pursuit enthusiast, so I was pleasantly surprised when he picked my favorite. It was a classic that rarely garnered interest from my generation. Kevin crept out of the kitchen, hands in his pockets, awkwardly shuffling toward the door. I look quickly at my mom, urging her to give him a sign.

“Kevin, you will join us for a game, won’t you,” she asked earnestly. “We’ll go easy on you.”

“Hey, I’m not making any promises,” I chimed.

Chaseyn had spread out the game pieces on the floor in front of the fire, and I knelt down beside him. A thought crossed my mind, and I jumped up swiftly.

“Coffee? Tea,” I looked around the room. Chaseyn tugged my pant leg and thumped

his palm on the floor, indicating I should return to the space beside him.

“It’s already on,” he said proudly. “The kettle should come to a boil any minute, and the coffee is percolating now.”

My mom arched her head to the right—the direction of the kitchen—and wandered out of the room. Kevin joined her in the kitchen as she grabbed a tray of cream, sugar, and four mugs. He returned carrying a coffee carafe and tea pot and looking much more at ease. Not to mention, there was a slight lipstick stain on his cheek. I cringed at the thought, but I tried to keep the uneasy look to myself. He was just starting to come out of his shell, and I didn’t want to be the cause of any regression.

While they were gone, Chaseyn and I sat across from each other, staring in silence. Neither of us blinked. We didn’t need to speak to share what was on our minds. We were both content just to be together. Stirring only when we heard the adults coming down the hall, Chaseyn quickly lifted my hand and pressed it lightly to his lips. A hint of moisture dampened my palm, and heat seared through my body. In that moment, I knew Chaseyn was much more than just a friend. I would walk across hot coals to be with him. And, I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he would do the same for me.

“Yahtzee,” I shouted, jumping to my feet and doing a little victory dance. I was feeling exceptionally confident at that point. It was my third Yahtzee that game. My mom yanked me back down mid shimmy.

“Well, I hate to break up this party, but you two have school tomorrow. I think it’s time for Chaseyn to leave. I think we all know how this game is going to end anyhow,” my mom said.

Chaseyn gathered together the game pieces and hopped to his feet, grabbing both of my hands and gently hoisting me to my feet. I walked Chaseyn to the door, while my mom and Kevin retreated to the dining room for another cup of coffee. They were quietly contemplating the evening; Kevin was concerned that he had made a poor impression. My mom was assuring him otherwise. She was right.

We stood awkwardly at the door. I wanted desperately for Chaseyn to say something, anything, but he just stood there. Finally, he tucked a stray hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering at my cheek, before sliding his hand down my neck to my shoulder, and lastly, down my arm.

“Goodnight,” I whispered.

“Sweet dreams,” he said, kissing me softly on the top of my head before turning to leave. The cold night air whisked through the door, and he pulled his open coat tight around his body. I winced as the chill stung my face, and he closed the door quickly behind him.

“Good night, mom. It was nice to meet you, Kevin,” I hollered as I walked quickly up the stairs.

“Good night, sweetheart,” my mom shouted back, a hint of appreciation in her voice. I knew she would be happy to have the time alone with Kevin.

Running up the stairs, I reached my room in seconds flat. I hoped to catch a glimpse of Chaseyn driving away. Peering through the window, my eyes were treated to more than I had expected. Chaseyn was there, leaning against his cherry red, 1967, ragtop Mustang. His arms were planted firmly behind his back for support, his legs

crossed out in front. Wisps of dark hair blew wildly around his stark face. The color was gone from his cheeks, and his lips were just one shade deeper than his skin. In the darkness, he seemed unreal. I opened the window slightly and tried my hand at a loud whisper.

“What are you still doing out there,” I asked sternly. “It’s freezing. You’re going to catch cold.”

I couldn’t bear the thought of him missing school. How would I make it through the day?

“Tomorrow. I’ll be waiting right here at 7:45 a.m.,” he said in a practiced whisper so perfect it was as if he were saying the words directly in my ear.

“But, what about Addie? I’m still not allowed to use the phone, and she’ll be waiting.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he said casually and walked around to the driver’s side. He shot me one last look before smoothly ducking inside. In a flash, he was gone. Suddenly,

the darkness seemed so empty. A part of me left with him.

Chapter 12 - One Week

As promised, Chaseyn was waiting for me in the morning. Just one week ago today, he had been a nameless face in the back row of my first-period class. Over the course of seven days, my world had been turned upside-down. My stomach did flips at the thought.

Chaseyn took a scenic route to school, weaving past green spaces and doll-like houses that I had never before noticed in the past 17 years of living in this small town. Our conversation was easy, like we had known each other our entire lives. Chaseyn had been privy to a little piece of my life this weekend that I rarely shared with anyone other than Addie. But, I still knew very little about him. Part of me wanted to shine a spotlight on his face and force him to answer a million questions, just so we would be on a level playing field. Instead, I decided to enjoy the moment. If all went well, I would have plenty of time to get to know him better.

I had never been one to shy away from attention, but today was different. All eyes were on us as Chaseyn whipped down the main road by the school looking for a suitable space to park. I hoped they were observing his the pristine vehicle, but I knew they were looking at us with inquiring eyes. The last thing I wanted to do was

be bombarded with questions about our relationship status when we hadn't even figured it out yet.

"Is it okay if I take this off for today," I asked, my hand wrapping around the silver cuff that had been glued to my wrist since Friday night."

"I would prefer you didn't," he said morosely. "Don't you like it?"

Sadness filled my heart. He thought I didn't like it, and I felt badly for making the suggestion. Still, it was a beacon to others who knew that I would never adorn anything so lavish, let alone have the funds to buy it for myself. I wasn't sure how to explain to him—without my face turning the same color as his car—that people would want to know if we were a couple.

"Please. Leave it on," he said. Then, he held his hands to me in a gesture that suggested I should wait in the car while he quickly sprang to his feet. He dashed around the front to my side and opened the door. Helping me to my feet, he grabbed my book bag in one hand and my right hand in the other. He planted a single kiss on the back of my hand, and I knew instantly what he was trying to do.

“Do you think that’s going to make it easier,” I questioned, a slight laugh in my voice.

“You were worried that people would notice the bracelet and wonder about us—if we were a couple,” he added. “Well, now there is no question...unless, of course, you don’t want to be with me. I never thought of that possibility.”

“Ugh. You’re impossible,” I said, tightening my grip on his hand.

“Impossibly cute,” he added, more of a question than a statement.

“That too,” I said smiling. “Of course I want to be with you. I haven’t been able to get you out of my head since the first time I laid eyes on you, but I was hoping to ease people into the idea. Now, I don’t think there is much chance of that.”

As if on cue, Addie came running out of the main doors and made a beeline straight to where Chaseyn and I were walking hand-in-hand. He sent me an apologetic look,

and slowly broke free of our union.

“I think I better give you two a few minutes together before class,” he chuckled and walked off toward what I could only assume was the direction of his locker. I felt foolish for not knowing. Addie’s interrogation hit me like a bolt of lightning. It was loud, fast, and frightening.

“Okay, so I got this call at like nine last night, and I thought it was a prank,” Addie started, stammering on a mile a minute. “So, I was still going to come by your place this morning, you know, just in case it was a joke, and you really didn’t have a ride to school. But, there was something in his voice that made me believe it was true. Then, I saw you guys pulling up in that awesome ride. Seriously, Lia, it’s only been two days. What happened? You have to tell me everything.”

“I can’t,” I started to say, when she stopped me short.

“What do you mean, you can’t? You have to. I’m dying here.”

“Addie, let me finish. I was going to say that I can’t because you won’t stop talking long enough to let me get a single word in. Case and point.”

“Humph,” was all she could manage to spill out now, her arms crossed around her chest. She was a bit stubborn sometimes, and she took every comment far too personally. With the exception of that one fight years ago, we had never gone longer than a day or two without talking—usually when she Addie was vacationing overseas with her family. I was every bit as anxious to share the details as she was to hear them.

“First, tell me about you and Rob,” I said.

“Come on, Lia. That’s old news. You’ve been down this road with me enough times to know how that story ends,” she said, pointing to a silver chain around her neck sporting Rob’s class ring. It was no surprise that they had reconciled. Everyone had been waiting for it to happen for weeks.

“Oh, Addie. He gave you his ring. That’s great,” I said, trying to sound genuine. That ring had bounced back and forth between the two of them so many times that I was

surprised there was anything left of it. Still, I was happy for them. When they weren't trying to outdo each other, they were a great couple.

"Seriously, Lia. Get on with it already. You're no more surprised that I'm wearing Rob's ring than he is."

"Fine. Well, you know that Friday night was a nightmare," I began, thinking back to the wrath I faced when I walked through the door just after midnight. My mind drifted a bit further back for a moment, and I remembered Chaseyn holding me loosely in his arms as we swayed to the music at Hannah's party. Looking back, I realized the song warranted a much more jubilant dance regime, but we never changed our pace. Others bounced frantically around us with heavy feet, while we waltzed slowly. I blushed at the thought.

"Yeah, Lia, I know that part. You were grounded forever. Fast forward past your Saturday morning break," Addie said impatiently.

It had barely been two days since we last spoke, but already I had nearly forgotten some of the details. Addie was sufficiently pleased when I started at the exact

moment she pulled away from the bakery to find Chaseyn looming next to me. I went into immense detail, knowing she would appreciate even the most-minute aspect. I hadn't told very much of the story when she suddenly interrupted.

“Shoes?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head lightly. I didn't have to ask for clarification. Addie was obvious, shallow.

“Yes,” I replied, knowing she would be less than impressed by my sarcasm. “He was wearing some.”

“Ugh,” she muttered. Addie had a theory about men base on the type of shoes they wore. “What kind?”

“Black?”

“Forget it. Carry on,” she urged, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

After I had regaled her with everything I had experienced over the past two days, and she had sufficiently ogled the elegant bauble adorning my wrist, Addie began an in-depth analysis of the situation. Fortunately, after only a few minutes of psychobabble, the first bell rang, signaling us to get to class. I walked hesitantly into the room, knowing others would be eager to attack with a million questions, but none of that mattered once I saw *him*. He wasn't in the same seat as last week. Instead, he was positioned in the desk next to mine, opposite Addie. Normally, Owen Larsen would be anxiously awaiting Mr. Sheppherd's arrival from that exact seat. Owen was a nervous kid. He was one of those boys who never quite fit in. He was smart, but not smart enough to blend in with the academic types. He was too clumsy to take part in athletics, always tripping over his shoelaces. And, he was far from stylish. Owen would give the shirt off his back to anyone who asked for it, but he didn't have a lot of friends. I imagined it didn't take Chaseyn much effort to convince Owen that he would rather sit elsewhere. Owen would have been happy to receive the attention, even if fleeting.

Addie nudged me in the ribs and looked at me enthusiastically. I did a little dance on the inside.

“Looks like your admirer means business,” she giggled. I felt at least a dozen eyes boring holes through me as I walked to my seat. Chaseyn glanced over his left shoulder as I came down the aisle. I could barely see the side of his face, but his cheek puffed into what I was sure was a grin.

“Enjoy,” Addie chided before taking her seat.

I sat down just as Mr. Sheppherd walked into the room, announcing the beginning of class. I pulled my notebook from my bag, and as I placed it on the desktop, I noticed a small note card lying in the corner. Gently, I tore open the seal and pulled out the contents.

Meet me at the west entrance at lunch. I want to show you something.

C.

Lunch was more than three hours away. I wasn't sure my heart would hold out; it was

beating double time. Mr. Sheppherd instructed us to form small groups to discuss our latest assignment, and I was relieved. At least for the next 45 minutes, my attention would be focused on the conversation taking place around me. My mind would have little time to fixate on anything else while it was engaged in the topic at hand. Chaseyn was recruited by one of the other groups, and I was sure it was for the best. As much as I wanted to spend time with him, I knew I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything but him. I watched him move his desk gracefully across the room to where the others in his group were noisily dragging their desks.

"Ouch," I said, glaring at Addie, who had stomped on my foot under the table. "What was that for?"

"Earth to Lia. Do you have anything to add on the subject," Max chided.

Apparently, I was failing miserably at keeping my mind on the group discussion. I had been stealing glances at Chaseyn the entire class, and every now and then, our eyes would meet. I was giddy, and the others had become painfully aware of the situation. Now, I had to face their punishment—a severe teasing. The conversation quickly shifted from the redeeming qualities of the protagonist in *Jane Eyre* to the qualities that attracted me to Chaseyn.

“Seriously? Do we have to talk about this,” Max begged, but he was sorely outnumbered by curious females. Just then, the buzzer sounded, signaling the end of class. I jumped to my feet and dragged my desk—screeching and howling along the tiled floor—back to its place near Chaseyn. I gave Addie a quick nod, indicating we would catch up later, and walked with Chaseyn out of the room.

“I’ve got chemistry,” I said as we reached my locker. I traded paperbacks for textbooks. “You?”

“Calculus,” he replied, taking my books as we moved in the general direction of the science labs.

Our hands accidentally brushed as we turned the corner, and I tried to suppress a giggle. Before I could move away, Chaseyn had entwined his long fingers with my own. I looked at him sheepishly. We were really doing this, going public with whatever it was we were. A flutter of excitement raced from my stomach to my heart. His gesture didn’t go unnoticed. At least three people pointed and whispered to friends as we walked by. Normally, I would feel silly, but with Chaseyn at my side, it

was impossible to feel anything but excited.

“So, I’ll see you at lunch,” I whispered just outside the door to the chemistry lab. Chaseyn nodded, then gently removed his hand from mine and walked briskly down the hall. My heart swooned.

Time moved at a snail’s pace the rest of the morning. I worked hard to keep from looking at my watch, but it didn’t help that each classroom had a huge clock mounted on the wall above the board. I watched as each second ticked by. Finally, the buzzer for second period sounded. If I had to listen to one more minute of talk about inorganic compounds, I was sure I would scream. I raced to my locker to grab my next set of books to find Addie waiting anxiously, toe tapping animatedly.

“So, that’s it? You’re going to spend all of your time with *him* now, are you,” she asked angrily. “Some guy who’s been around half a minute gives you a second glance, and you forget about your best friend forever. Sure, he’s got that wicked awesome hair and piercing eyes. Oh, and let’s not forget that he has that whole James Dean thing going on, but still...”

“Aw, come on, Addie. How many times have you ditched me when Rob came calling,” I pleaded. “I’ve never really had a boyfriend.”

“Relax, Lia, I’m just teasing,” Addie laughed. “I’m just upset that you ditched me for him between classes because you didn’t get to finish telling me everything about your weekend. And, you’re grounded, so we can’t even talk about it on the phone tonight. Wait. Did you just call him your boyfriend?”

I had to think about it for a minute. I retraced my words and realized I had let the “B” word escape my lips. I thought about backpedalling and trying to take back the word, but I figured it was no use. People would be drawing their own conclusions sooner rather than later. Denial would get me nowhere, so I decided to confirm their suspicions.

“Well, we haven’t actually discussed it officially, but I think he is.”

Addie jumped up from her relaxed position leaning against my locker and threw her arms around me. I practically choked from her stranglehold.

“That’s terrific. Now, we can double date. When do you think your mom will cave?”

I thought about her question for a minute, and then gave her an honest answer.

“I think she already has.”

Just then, the bell rang. We were now officially late for class. Addie turned on her heel, gave me a quick wave, and ran off in the direction of the gym.

“See you at lunch,” she called over her shoulder. Before I could tell her there had been a change in plans—not that we had plans, just a regular routine that had been solidified by years of repeated practice—she was gone.

Aside from those few moments with Addie, the rest of the morning continued at the same slow pace. Finally, the clock struck twelve, and I raced down the hall through the masses to grab my coat. Pushing through the crowd, I reached the west entrance about two minutes later. Chaseyn was waiting. He took my thin hand in his

strong grasp and led me through the double doors. Despite the winter chill that was settling in, the sun shone brightly, warming my skin.

“Are you cold,” he asked in a low tone. I just shook my head in response. “Good. This wouldn’t work out very well if you were.”

Suddenly, we came upon a red-checked blanket and a picnic basket set in the shade beneath a giant oak tree that was positioned away from any windows and the prying eyes of our peers. A slight blush rose in Chaseyn’s cheeks as he motioned for me to sit down on the ground. He wrapped a fleece blanket around my legs before taking a seat across from me. I knew Rob had never done anything like this for Addie. It was reminiscent of an old movie; the romantic kind of scene that you always hoped would happen to you but knew never would.

“What is all of this,” I asked, genuinely taken aback at the gesture. “This is incredible.”

“We haven’t had much time alone together, Cordelia” he answered. “I thought it was time that the two of us talked without your mom or someone else supervising our

every move.”

And, that’s exactly what we did. I’m not sure how he knew, but Chaseyn had all of my favorites—turkey on rye with Swiss and mayo, spinach salad with raspberry vinaigrette, and chocolate macaroons for dessert. He had even brought a bottle of non-alcoholic wine and a thermos of hot cocoa with tiny marshmallows to put on top. I was sure we had never discussed my culinary preferences, so I was surprised at the accuracy with which he had guessed my tastes. It was like he had known me for years.

We talked nonstop for the entire hour. Mostly, he wondered about my childhood and what is what like growing up in the public scrutiny of a small town where everyone knows each other’s pasts, present, and future. He told me all about living in London and how hard it was for him to leave. Though we had just met, I was certain we had shared more about ourselves in the past hour than Addie and Rob had in the past two-and-a-half years. I’m not sure they ever just sat and talked; they were always too busy worrying about appearances.

Chaseyn glanced at his watch. I knew he was trying to be discrete, but I had been staring so intently at his eyes that it was impossible to miss their slight shift

downward. I knew our time together was fast drawing to an end.

“We have to go,” I asked.

He nodded. My heart paused for just one moment, and sadness came over me. I didn't want it to end. Chaseyn began gathering the remnants of our intimate affair and placing them back inside the basket. I shivered slightly, as a cool breeze began to cut through the field. We stood slowly, and Chaseyn folded the blanket we had been sitting on. He wrapped the fleece blanket tight around my shoulders, and our eyes locked. Though I hadn't been in this type of situation before, I recognized the moment from the hundreds of romantic movies I had watched over the years wondering if these things ever happened in real life.

Instead of loosening his grip, Chaseyn kept his left hand firmly in place on my shoulder. His right hand slid gently up to the side of my face. I closed my eyes and pressed my cheek lightly against his hand. He stroked it once with his thumb before tucking it under my chin. His thumb and forefinger held my face firmly in place, and we leaned toward each other. Our lips brushed gently once in exploration. Then, they locked together in a soft caress. The moist curves of his lips moved slowly beneath mine. My arms were wrapped tightly inside the blanket, and I struggled to free them

so I could tangle my fingers in his raven waves. Before I could, the bell rang, snapping our attention back to reality. I knew I had to move quickly to make it to class on time, but my knees were weak.

Chaseyn guided me toward the school, but he seemed nearly as dazed as I was, so I wasn't sure if I could trust his swift movements any more than my own. Just before we reached the school and the hoards of people pushing through the corridors on their way to class, Chaseyn turned me to face me.

"I've never been scared of anyone, or anything, but me," he confided. "Until now ...you."

With that, he walked away from the school. I stood there breathless, watching him move stealthily toward his car. I wasn't sure where he was going or why, but I wanted to chase after him. I refrained. I knew that if there was any chance that my mom was going to let me off my sentence early, skipping class was not the best way to convince her I was on my best behavior. I managed to pull myself together and walk back into the building.

One week. That's how long I had known Chaseyn, but already, I couldn't picture my life without him.

Chapter 13 - Wonder

As far as I could tell, Chaseyn didn't return to class. My mind raced with possibilities. At first, I worried that something bad may have happened to him, and then, my thoughts turned more personal. Perhaps, he was hoping to feel something more, different when we kissed. For me, it was like sipping from the sweetest nectar of the most sensuous blossom. I had hoped he had felt the same, immediate chemistry. I wondered if he was disappointed and needed to think of a way to let me down before facing me again.

I had trouble concentrating on my classes the rest of the day. Between fifth and sixth periods, I asked Addie to wait for me after school. I was fairly certain I would need a ride home. If Chaseyn was planning to cut me loose, at least I wouldn't have to walk home. Addie would be there to comfort me.

All day, I couldn't wait for the seconds to tick by, but when the last bell rang, letting us know we were free to leave, I could barely bring myself to stand. I didn't want to keep Addie waiting, but I also didn't want to face that harsh reality that Chaseyn had been wrong about his feelings for me. I sauntered slowly from the room, lagging behind everyone else.

“You ready,” Addie said, coming up behind me quickly. A lump the size of an orange had filled the space in my throat so that I was unable to answer. I nodded my head and made an effort to smile. Addie knew better than to try to get any more out of me. Instead, she pretended she didn’t notice anything was wrong, kicked me in the behind with her left shin, and started walking toward the main entrance. “Coming, slowpoke?”

Watching my feet, I scrambled to keep up with Addie’s unbearably perky bounce. Sometimes, she was hard to take. Still, I was thankful she was willing to leave me to wallow without asking for details. I knew this wouldn’t last forever. At some point, her curiosity would take control, and I would be subjected to a full interrogation.

I pushed through the heavy glass doors into the cool afternoon air. I hadn’t taken two steps before I heard someone call my name. I didn’t need to look up to know who it was.

“I thought you’d left,” I said in tone so low I was shocked when he responded. I never looked up, and I dared not face the direction of his voice—scared of what I might

find. I kept my back to him, hoping to hold myself together just long enough to make it through this moment and on to Addie's car.

"It's okay, Addie," he shouted past me to where she was standing about fifty feet away, already opening her car door. "Cordelia's got a ride."

I was furious. How dare he disappear after our brief encounter earlier today and then return as if nothing had happened? He had no right to toy with my emotions like this and worse, have the nerve to tell my friend what to do.

"Excuse me," I said, turning quickly to face him. He was standing so close that I was sure we were breathing the same air. "Who do you think you are to just come and go without any explanation? Do you have any idea—"

He stopped me then, cutting off my words by placing a single finger across my lips, a low shushing sound seeped through his raspberry lips.

"Go ahead, Addie," he repeated. I nodded in agreement, and Addie laughed.

“You tell him,” Addie said, giggling in a high-pitch chime as she climbed into her car.
“I’ll call you later. Your mom’s working late, right?”

Again, I nodded, unable to break away from Chaseyn’s gaze. I was behaving like one of those pitiful sots in a Victorian romance who falls so hopelessly in love with the male lead that she can’t act on her own volition. I wanted nothing more than to give Chaseyn a dose of his own medicine, but I was frozen there with him. Just then, the first flakes of winter snow began falling around us as if we were in the center of a snow globe and someone had shaken us upside-down. The thin flakes rained upon us, dusting everything in their path with a sparkling white glow.

Chaseyn practically dragged me back to the car; he walked so quickly that my legs could barely keep up. Inside, he cranked the heat, though I could tell he wasn’t cold.

“Good,” he asked.

I nodded. Soon, anger was welling inside, warming my blood.

“Why are you here,” I yelled at him. “If you’re just going to break up with me, why did you come back? You should have just let me go home with Addie.”

Chaseyn looked puzzled. He grabbed both of my icy hands in his and kissed each of my knuckles. The corners of his lips curved up.

“Stop it,” I said. “You’re not making this any easier.”

“I’m not sure what you’re yelling about,” he said. “Why are you so upset?”

“You kissed me, and it took my breath away, but you just left. You left me there alone, without a word, and I didn’t see you again the rest of the day. It’s obvious you didn’t have the reaction you had hoped for. Why bother being here now?”

I started to open the car door. I would rather walk home than be forced to be near him for another minute. He held my hands tighter. I would have to struggle to get

away, and I wasn't feeling that strong.

"What are you talking about," he said sternly. "I had an appointment. I should have said something, but I was trying to be mysterious, and instead, I came off aloof. I didn't look at it from your perspective. Forgive me?"

I closed the car door and looked into his emerald gaze.

"You don't have to do this," I said. "We barely know each other. I'll understand if you think this is a mistake."

"Never," he said. "You're not getting rid of me that easily. Besides, how can I break up with you when we're not even going out?"

We sat in silence for another minute before he put the car in gear and began driving toward my house. My mom would be calling soon to be sure I went straight home from school. For the record, she would be keeping up with the grounding guise for at least a few more days so she wouldn't seem weak.

As we rounded the corner, Chaseyn shifted uncomfortably in his seat. He glanced at me through the corner of his eyes. His actions made me nervous. He slowed to a stop in front of my house. I wanted to ask him to come inside, but I decided we should slow things down a bit. Besides, I really needed to catch up on all the homework I had ignored on the weekend.

“As if you could ever be mysterious,” I said, breaking the silence and referencing his earlier comment. It was hard to keep from laughing as I spoke the words. “Right.”

I smiled as I said the last part so that he would know I was teasing, and then, I reluctantly began collecting my things to leave. It took all of my strength to thank him for the ride and get out of the car. He looked at me longingly as I walked to the door. Fumbling with my key, I finally managed to ease my way inside, stumbling over the kicker when I turned to step through the door and wave goodbye at the same time.

The phone was ringing before I could remove my shoes and coat. Sometimes, I wished Addie would calm down and give me a minute to catch up. I was prepared to tell her so much, but when I lifted the receiver a different voice greeted me on the

other end.

“Do you think I could come over later,” he asked. “I really can’t stand to be away from you.”

I hesitated for a second. I was sure my mom wouldn’t mind; Chaseyn had some sort of strange power over her. Then, I remembered a quiz I had taken in one of my mom’s *Cosmo* magazines a few months ago. According to several relationship specialists, the best way to keep a man in your life was to keep him guessing. Rather than giving in to his every whim, you should be mysterious, play hard to get.

“I don’t know if that’s such a good idea,” I said. “I’ve got a ton of homework to do, and Addie will be expecting a call.”

“I swear,” he began. “You won’t even notice I’m there.”

“When were you thinking would be a good time,” I asked. Just then, the doorbell rang.

“Hold on,” I said, putting the phone on the counter as I made my way to the door.

“I only got as far as the stop sign,” Chaseyn said, greeting me from the other side of the door when I pulled it open.

Shaking my head, I walked back to the counter and hung up the phone. Chaseyn followed me into the kitchen. He picked up my book bag along the way.

“So, where do we begin,” he asked.

As if on cue, the phone rang. I checked the call display before answering.

“Hey, mom,” I said cheerily. “What’s up?”

I tried to feign surprise at the sound of her voice. She wanted to believe that she had

caught me off guard by checking in on me, and I let her. We chatted idly for about two minutes before she felt she had done her motherly duties sufficiently well. She reminded me she would be home just past eight, as if to offer me solace for a few hours to phone my friends and conduct all-round inappropriate acts before her return. She knew I would never behave in such a way, but it was a considerate gesture. And, it was another clue that my grounding was coming to a quick conclusion.

By now, Chaseyn had made himself at home. He had poured a tall glass of milk and was sifting through the pantry in search of snacks, pulling put bags of cookies and chips and placing them on the countertop. I was about to take a seat at the nook when the phone rang again. This time, I knew it would be Addie.

“You never called,” she scolded before I could even get out a greeting. “You better have a good reason.”

“Is a six-foot tall, green-eyed cookie fiend a good enough reason?”

“He’s there,” she asked in disbelief. “What’s he doing?”

Normally, I would refrain from speaking ill of another person in his presence, but Chaseyn was an easy target, and done, right, I knew he would play into it.

“Right now, he’s acting like a child,” I said pulling the phone from my face so my mouth was angled in his general direction. He poked his head out of the pantry, mouth full of chocolate chips. He threw me an inquisitive look. I fanned him toward the living room, urging him to watch TV via hand signals. He refused.

“Between the chocolate chips and the stubborn attitude, I’m not sure what to do with him.”

Addie seemed sufficiently confused. She tried to get more detail, but since Chaseyn wouldn’t leave my side, I was reluctant to speak candidly. Question after question, all I would give her was one-word answers. I’m sure he was piecing together what he could out of my vague replies, but I was certain he couldn’t read too much.

“I’ll send you an email later,” I sighed when I realized neither one was going to relent.

It seemed the only solution that would satisfy Addie's needs while ensuring Chaseyn wouldn't be privy to every word.

For the next few hours, I worked on my English essay, while Chaseyn watched my every move. It was unnerving, yet comforting. Having him there was nice, though I wondered why he didn't use the time to complete his extensive homework assignments. At 8:17 p.m., the familiar sound of my mom's car lingered in the driveway. By now, she would have seen Chaseyn's incredibly conspicuous car out front of our house. The lights shone bright through the large bay window before she killed the engine. The car door slammed closed, and her footsteps thudded up the walk.

"I'm home," she shouted as a warning, obviously wanting to avoid any form of intimate activity that may have been taking place between Chaseyn and I. But, there was nothing to break up. She seemed shocked when we walked out of the kitchen, as if she had expected us to come from another, more comfortable part of the house.

"Hi Chaseyn," she said sweetly. "I didn't know you were here."

“I’m sorry, mom. I should have asked your permission,” I said sincerely.

“No need to apologize, Lia. Chaseyn is always welcome here.”

It was hard to explain the way he charmed her, but something about Chaseyn put my mom at ease.

Chapter 14 - Routine

The next few weeks played out in much the same way. Chaseyn arrived at my house each morning and brought me home every night. Most evenings, we ate dinner with my mom before retreating to my room to tackle our homework. As seniors, every grade counted, especially if I was going to make it into the Ivy League. Chaseyn convinced me to take on several extra-credit assignments to solidify my acceptance and give me a fighting chance at the scholarship I would need to secure in order to attend a facility of such high academic standing. Chaseyn had nepotism working in his favor. His mother, her father, and great grandfather had all traveled abroad from London to attend Yale. Over the years, they had bestowed healthy endowments upon the facility, making it practically impossible for them to refuse his entrance. Not to mention the fact that his exceptional academic average was second to none. Chaseyn would be accepted to any college in the country, and I wanted to be sure I had the option to stand next to him on the first day of class should our relationship last that long. I had my fingers crossed.

My mother appreciated Chaseyn's efforts. He was every mother's dream—a boy who had only the purest of intentions, impeccable etiquette, and was an academic overachiever. From the perspective of the teenage girl, he was also a dream come true. Chaseyn was, without a doubt, a hopeless romantic with a seemingly endless

credit line, impossible beauty, and boundless wisdom.

At school, we shared only one class, English. It was hard to be away from Chaseyn the rest of the day, but the intimate hour we spent hovered alone together in the far corner of the cafeteria at lunchtime made it a little bit easier. I used to hate couples who sat entwined in one another's arms, legs overlapped, staring deeply into each other's eyes. Despite my best efforts, I had become half of one of those couples. We giggled and cooed over silly things as we shared our most private moments, hopes, dreams, and fears. Nothing felt as good as spending time enrapt in Chaseyn's arms, and I didn't care who knew how I felt about him. When it was impossible to be with him, I joined Britney, Chloe, Addie, and Lainie in frivolous conversations about everything and nothing.

Two weeks after Chaseyn and I had taken our relationship public—though we hadn't said so much, it was obvious by the fact that we were inseparable—Stella made another attempt at catching Chaseyn's attention. Of course, she had been unsuccessful, but her outlandish actions had left a bad taste in my mouth, and the others were siding with me. We always knew Stella could be cutthroat when she wanted something, but this time, she had gone too far. One day after school, Addie and I made plans to meet the other girls at the mall. Stella had intended to join us, but an unexpected emergency required her immediate attention. When Chaseyn got

into his car to drive home, he was greeted by a scantily clad Stella shamelessly hiding in the backseat. Stella was in for the bigger surprise when Chaseyn, who was appalled by her actions, tossed her and her clothes into the street and sped off. Word spread fast, and I had heard about the ordeal before Chaseyn even had a chance to reach his house. By the time Chaseyn finally called me, I had jumped to a dozen different conclusions, none of which turned out to be the truth. Chaseyn was livid with Stella, but he learned to lock his car doors. And, I learned I could trust Chaseyn.

On weekends, Chaseyn would pick me up from work on Friday nights and escort me to whatever outlandish event Addie had planned for us as a double date with her and Rob. One week, she insisted the four of us spend the night wearing used shoes and sticking our fingers in 10-pound balls at the local bowling alley. Admittedly, it was a blast, but sometimes, her ideas were a little over-the-top. Once, she made us attend a gingerbread house competition at the local community center. I thought Chaseyn and Rob were particularly good sports for agreeing to take part. Occasionally, we would attend a party with some of the other kids from school, but most Fridays, it was just the four of us. I had made a deal with Addie that, no matter what, we would always spend at least one night of the weekend together. After all, she had been my best friend for as long as I could remember. I wasn't about to sacrifice years of female bonding because a boy had finally thrown a look or two my way.

I insisted that Chaseyn allow Addie's driver to take me to work on Saturday mornings. There was no use in him losing out on a precious sleep-in day just because I had to save for my college career in the event that I wasn't awarded with a full scholarship. Since my one-weekend grounding more than five weeks ago, my mom had been picking me up from work so that I could spend the afternoon volunteering with her at the clinic. Besides feeling good about helping out in the community—and scoring extra points toward my academic profile—my mom and I had finally found a common ground. Our relationship was expanding, and I was enjoying the extra time I spent with her.

Saturday nights were reserved for Chaseyn and I to spend alone together. He always went overboard looking for ways to impress me each week. At first, he made small romantic gestures. The first night, he took me to an upscale Asian restaurant where patrons wear slippers and sit on the floor in a private suite. Chaseyn had clearly been privy to many refined experiences, but this was one of few for me. He sat poised with impeccable posture upon a fluffy cushion, chopsticks positioned with extreme precision between his thumb and forefinger. I, on the other hand, teetered on the edge of my makeshift chair, working hard to keep from snapping the chopsticks in two. Chaseyn clued in to my inexperience when a solitary noodle escaped my grasp, flying across the table and into his tempura. After that, he took a new approach. Realizing that sometimes less is more, the next week, he booked a private room at a local theater and stocked it with all of my favorite snacks—junior mints, cheese

popcorn, and creamy caramels. Week after week, he never ceased to surprise me with his new and creative courtship ideas.

Sundays were now affectionately deemed “family day.” Family included me and my mom, Chaseyn, Kevin, and Addie. Occasionally, Rob would make an appearance, but his family was fairly strict about enforcing their own Sunday night rituals. Typically, my mom and I would spend the afternoon preparing the ingredients for an exotic meal. Each week, we tried to find something new and exciting that no one else had eaten before. With Chaseyn and Addie having traveled extensively around the world, it was a challenge, but we always managed to pull it off. The rest of the group would begin to gather around 3 p.m., sometimes lending a hand in the kitchen, and other times, hanging out in the living room watching live sporting events. Listening in, you could often hear Chaseyn and Kevin arguing over which games to watch. Chaseyn preferred soccer and rugby, while Kevin was all about the American classics—football, baseball, and basketball. I liked to hear them banter back and forth. Addie often tried, unsuccessfully, to mediate. Laughter always ensued.

So much had changed since Chaseyn first appeared in Evergreen five weeks earlier. With the holidays just around the corner, I was excited to share our family traditions with him. My grandma would be arriving in a week, and I couldn’t wait for her to meet him. It would be impossible not to be impressed by his incredible personality and

unconditional devotion to me.

All my life, I had sworn I would never fall in love. I never wanted to experience the pain I knew my mom had felt when she lost my dad. Now that I had Chaseyn, I was willing to potentially suffer the most immeasurable pain if it meant that I could spend even one more minute with him.

That scared me.

Chapter 15 - Home for the Holidays

“Grandma,” I yelled when I saw her come through the wide automatic doors of the arrivals terminal at the Denver International Airport. I ran to where she now stood, staring off into the direction of my voice but not quite seeing me. She was pushing an enormous trunk on a rolling cart with a gigantic handbag teetering on top. It was the holidays, and she would be showering us with an array of handcrafted goods. I threw my arms around her shoulders and held her in a tight embrace. Releasing her grip on the cart, she returned the impulsive gesture and then pushed me back so she could size me up. She twirled one finger out before her, signaling me to do a turn. My cheeks flushed; Chaseyn was watching from around the corner. I would pay for this later when we were alone. He would tease me relentlessly, I was sure.

“Where’s your mother,” she asked when she was finally done embarrassing me.

“One of the other nurses called in sick, so she asked me to come get you,” I explained.

“When did you get your license, sweetheart,” she asked quizzically. “Your mother

never told me.”

She knew me too well. With Addie always watching out for me, and the lack of funds to purchase my own vehicle, I had never seen the point in getting my license. There was no way to avoid the inevitable.

“Um, grandma, there’s someone I want you to meet,” I said shyly, signaling Chaseyn to join us. “Grandma, this is Chaseyn. He’s new here.”

I knew I would pay for that later, too—especially when Chaseyn planned to use the opportunity to clarify our relationship.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Mrs. Vanderwold. I’m Cordelia’s boyfriend,” he said respectfully. I looked at him scornfully. When my grandma turned to grab her things, he gave me a mocking glare. Then, he swiftly moved to her side to assist with her baggage.

“Chaseyn,” she began, looking him up and down approvingly. She turned to give me

a glare that said she was preparing to mock me relentlessly as well. “How come I haven’t heard about you before? You seem like a lovely young man. I can’t imagine why anyone would want to keep *you* a secret.”

Unabashedly, she pinched her thumb and forefinger around his left cheek with the hand he had freed by taking her bags. I bet he wished he hadn’t done that. I wished she would refrain from such embarrassing behavior. I was thankful when we finally started moving toward the exit.

“Ah, such a gentleman,” she said as Chaseyn instructed her to move ahead of him through the door.

Chaseyn struggled to hoist the gigantic trunk into the backseat of the car. Not because of its weight—it looked light as a feather in his strong arms—but because of its awkward size. There was barely room to fit in beside it, and with the 50-mile drive home, I didn’t want my grandma to be cramped. I insisted she sit up front next to Chaseyn. She put on a show at first, suggesting she would be fine, but I knew she was secretly disgusted at the thought of being crunched between two slabs of metal for nearly an hour. I hopped in the back and hoped she would go easy on Chaseyn.

Once we were settled and had traveled at least a quarter of the distance in uncomfortable silence, grandma decided to unleash the full capacity of her shamelessness.

“So, Chaseyn, tell me more about yourself,” she said innocently. I cringed at the thought of what might come next. She had no concept of how to filter her thoughts before expressing them aloud. “Let’s see. Where should we begin? Why don’t you tell me where you’re from, what your parents do, and if you’re sleeping with my granddaughter?”

An explosive gasp escaped my mouth. From the side, I could see Chaseyn’s lips curve and his cheeks puff up. Her comments were not funny. I would have to scold him for his inappropriate reaction later.

“Grandma!”

“No. It’s okay, Cordelia. I’d like to address your grandmother’s questions,” he said coolly, winking at me in the rear view mirror. “I was born in London, but I have lived in

14 different cities in Europe and the United States. My dad died when I was 13, and I have nothing but the purest of intentions for your granddaughter. I wouldn't dream of claiming her innocence without being in a committed, lifelong partnership."

Again, he winked at me in the mirror. I would have to ask him about that later.

"Well, dear, aren't you charming," she said smugly. "You keep a firm grasp on this one sweetheart. He's a keeper."

The rest of the drive, she kept her thoughts to herself. Unfortunately, she insisted on singing along to the radio. Chaseyn had tuned in to an oldies station thinking my grandma would appreciate the effort, and he was right. From Frankie Valley to Patsy Cline, she hummed, whistled, and sang along to nearly every tune. Once at home, Chaseyn managed to extricate my grandma's bags from the car and haul them upstairs to the guest room.

"Honey, I'm just going to freshen up, and then, we should get some dinner," my grandma hollered from her room. "Chaseyn, will you join us?"

I nodded silently, urging him to agree to the challenge.

“I would love to stay and get to know you better, Mrs. Vanderwold,” he started, doing his best to hide his sarcasm. “But I have a ton of homework, and I’m sure you would like to catch up with Cordelia without me hanging around.”

From across the room, I made a motion indicating that if he was standing closer, I would wring his neck.

“Nonsense, dear. We would love to have you, but it’s very sweet of you to give us some time together. We clearly have a lot of catching up to do,” she said in a sugary, yet chiding, tone.

When I heard the bathroom door close and the faucet come on, I knew we had a few moments alone. I took the opportunity to question Chaseyn about something he had said earlier. Something that had been weighing heavy on my mind all afternoon.

“What do you mean you wouldn’t dream of sleeping with me,” I asked Chaseyn candidly. “You wouldn’t even dream about it?”

“Seriously, Cordelia. You have to ask? I *dream* about you all the time. Even when I’m awake, I dream of you, and you and me together.”

A smile flickered across his face as he took my hands in his own and pulled me against his chest. I could feel his breath warm on my neck and ear as he dropped his head down to mine. His breathing was shallow, matching my own. Heat from our fused bodies seared through my veins like electricity.

“All the time,” he whispered again in my ear. I turned my head to the side so that our lips were perfectly aligned. Mouths slightly parted, we locked together in a kiss that rocked me to the core.

After a brief moment, Chaseyn pulled away abruptly.

“I have to go,” he said hotly.

“Don’t go,” I pleaded. “Stay.”

“I meant what I said before,” he said sincerely. “Until we can truly commit...”

He didn’t need to finish the thought. I remembered all too clearly what he had told my grandma in the car. Only then, I thought the wink he had given me in the mirror was his version of having his fingers crossed behind his back. Now, I knew he meant every word, and I was taken aback by his humility.

“You’re a virgin,” I said exuberantly. “I just assumed...”

“I never said that,” he was quick to correct. “I just don’t want to make any mistakes, rush anything. You deserve better.”

“What if I’m not a virgin,” I asked.

“But you are,” he replied. “And it wouldn’t matter if you weren’t. I wouldn’t do anything differently.”

He took a few slow steps backward until he was just outside the kitchen. Then, he turned and walked quietly to the door. At that moment, the bathroom door opened and my grandma started down the stairs.

“Goodbye, Mrs. Vanderwold. It was lovely to meet you,” Chaseyn shouted as he stepped outside.

“I’m sure we’ll be seeing much more of each other,” she replied. “So, Lia, what should we do now?”

Chaseyn had picked me up from work to take me to the airport. It had been an early morning, and the only thing I had eaten all day was a sticky bun that Mrs. Olsen had insisted I take for the ride. All I could think about—aside from Chaseyn—was food.

“Let’s eat,” I said, jumping up from the couch where I had flopped down upon Chaseyn’s departure. I grabbed a fistful of take-out menus from the drawer beside the fridge, and raced back to confer with my grandmother. I fanned out the menus on the table and asked, “What’s your poison?”

Grandma and I had spent the entire night curled up around the fireplace eating Chinese straight from the cardboard boxes and talking about anything and everything. We were like two long lost girlfriends sharing our deepest secrets and giggling like schoolgirls, which I, of course, was. My grandmother was somewhat unconventional—she wasn't quite like anyone else I had ever met— and I loved her for it. She was one of my best friends and my hero. Until recently, I had always been closer to her than my own mom.

Mostly, she asked about Kevin—if I liked him, was he good to my mom, and what were his plans for the future. I answered everything honestly. I explained that I hadn't seen my mom so happy in years. Kevin was the reason, and I thought he was great. He tried so hard to make us both happy. He never overstepped his boundaries and understood the importance of being my friend rather than a parent figure. I appreciated his efforts. If my instincts were correct, Kevin would seize the holidays to present my mom with a completely lavish gift in a small velvet box. At one time, I would have been distraught by such a notion, but now, I could only feel total contentment.

My grandma had a theory. She was certain Chaseyn was the reason for the resolution of my inner turmoil. She continued to grill me about him and our relationship. I told her that we had only met a few weeks ago, and of course I gave her the standard line about us being young and in no way ready for a serious commitment, but my heart suggested otherwise. I kept the last part from her. I wasn't ready to openly admit that to anyone yet. Even I had trouble believing it sometimes.

My mom came home around 9 p.m., and I left the two of them alone to play catch up. They wouldn't share nearly as much with each other, but they still needed to connect without me hovering. Besides, I was running on fumes, so I decided to shower and call it a night.

Before the sun could even creep into my window the next morning, I was awakened by a rasping against the window. After a few minutes of orientation, I crawled out from under my cozy quilt to see what was disturbing my otherwise restful slumber.

I reached the window just in time to see a tiny pebble scrape the sill as gravity pulled it back down to earth. Another hit the pane, startling me as I struggled to see through the darkness. Squinting, my eyes adjusted slowly, and a dark figure started to take shape on the ground below. With my grandmother in the next room, I knew it was

only a matter of time before he woke her too. Rather than calling down to him and risking waking her, I fumbled in the darkness for my cordless phone and hit speed dial.

“It’s about time,” he said impatiently. “I’ve been trying to get your attention for twenty minutes.”

“What time is it,” I whispered, creeping across the room to check the clock on my bedside table. “Chaseyn, it’s barely 5 a.m. What are you doing here?”

“Get dressed,” he said cryptically. “There’s something I *have* to show you.”

“Now? Can’t it wait,” I asked somewhat irritated. Though I had gone to bed early, I was feeling less than well rested. I had been neglecting my body’s needs lately, and I really needed a good night’s sleep.

“No. It has to be now,” he said, a hint of desperation apparent in his voice. “It’s important.”

Hanging up the phone, I walked back to the window to find Chaseyn looking up at me with pleading eyes. How could I resist?

Hurriedly, I scrambled around my room in the dark. I didn't want to risk waking my mom or grandma by turning on a light. Sweatpants and an oversized fleece hoodie would have to do. I pulled my hair into a ponytail and accessorized with a baseball cap. I felt confident that Chaseyn wasn't with me for my looks, so my appearance was of little concern.

I'd never attempted to sneak out of the house before, and I wasn't quite sure how to do it. It was normal practice for me to wake in the wee hours to use the bathroom or grab a drink, but my mom was usually in a deep sleep at those hours. Now, it was nearing a respectable time for a woman who worked shifts to begin stirring. And, I had read some place that people need less sleep as they age, so I figured my grandma might be awake by now, too. Opening the door slowly, I peeked around the edge of the jamb, looking for signs of life. Nothing. The coast was clear, so I darted down the hall. Pulling off a bandage quickly caused less pain, and I figured this was similar; better to get it over quickly. I pranced down the stairs, avoiding the last two because years of walking the same path had taught me that they would creak under

my weight. I jumped daintily to the floor below.

Chaseyn met me at the door with a quick kiss. He grabbed my hand and guided me down the street to the next block. He had the good sense not to park in front of my house. The roar of the engine coming to life would surely wake my neighbors on our quiet cul-de-sac. I didn't need them telling my mom they had seen Chaseyn and I racing away under the cover of night.

"Where are we going?"

"Shhh," was all he said. Inside the car, he was equally as quiet, turning the radio to a classical soundtrack as we drove outside the town's limits toward the foothills. About fifteen minutes later, he came to a halt on the side of the road. Chaseyn instructed me to stay put. He stopped to pull something from the trunk before coming around to my side of the car. Handing me the same blanket he had wrapped about my shoulders the day of our picnic in the schoolyard, he lifted my hand and guided me into a large field. We stopped about 100 yards in, and he pulled a small telescope from a bag I hadn't realized he was carrying over his right shoulder.

“Look. There,” he instructed, and I caught sight of a million dazzling lights falling through the dark sky.

“It’s amazing.”

“It’s a meteor shower,” he explained. “Haven’t you seen it before; it takes place the same time each year.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever taken the time to look up.”

He was holding me now, standing behind me with his arms wrapped loosely around my waist.

“Don’t overlook the little things,” he whispered into my ear, grazing my lobe with his lip as he spoke. My entire body trembled.

“Cordelia?”

“Um hmm,” I muttered, easing my head back against his shoulder. Despite the beautiful display above us, I couldn’t help but close my eyes to let my other senses experience the moment. The wind blowing cold in my face made my eyes water, and my nose was overpowered by his amazing fragrance. He smelled like soap. Fresh. I placed my hands over his, pressing them tighter against me. “Chaseyn? What is it?”

I turned to face him. He was pale, and his eyes were focused on the ground. After a moment, he looked up from under his lashes so that we were eye to eye.

“I love you,” he said softly, taking me by surprise. For weeks, I had been experiencing overwhelming feelings for Chaseyn, but I had tried desperately to push them from my mind. Over and over again, I told myself that he would never feel the same so there was no point in getting my hopes up. Now, he was standing before me openly declaring his deepest emotions.

We were too young to feel so strongly. I was sure. But somehow, I could only think about how much I wanted to be with him, forever. I would do nearly anything to ensure that happened. Resting my cold hand on his chin, I pulled his face up to

mine.

“I love you, Chaseyn. More than you know.”

Chaseyn spread a second blanket on the ground, and we lay together, my head coiled into the crook of his arm, legs curled into his side. The sparkling crystals in the sky soon gave way to the sunrise. Though I wanted the moment to last forever, I knew I had to get home before anyone realized I was gone. Chaseyn gently rolled his body so that it arched lightly over mine, barely touching any part of me. He leaned down and kissed me tenderly, then passionately, before pulling me to my feet. We walked, arms entwined, to the car, stopping frequently to kiss en route.

He drove quickly; the voice on the radio announcing that the time was nearing 7 a.m. I would have to work extra hard to ensure I didn't wake my mom or grandma on my way inside. Again, he parked on the next street to avoid raising suspicion amongst my nosy neighbors, who would be all too eager to share their observations with my mom.

“When I'm with you, I can control my destiny,” he said shyly as I prepared to exit the

vehicle.

“I’m not sure I understand what you mean.”

“You will one day,” he added. “I promise.”

Confused but intoxicated by the warmth of our incredible experience, I stepped out of the car and walked alone to the house under the guise that I had gone for an early morning stroll. He watched as I walked away, never averting his eyes until he saw that I had safely reached my house.

“Grandma,” I exclaimed in shock. She was sitting on the couch pretending to read the newspaper.

“Don’t worry,” she said calmly. “Your mother’s still asleep. She doesn’t suspect a thing.”

“Nothing happened,” I said, feeling the need to declare my innocence. “We weren’t doing anything you wouldn’t approve of.”

“Sweetheart, there’s no need to explain. I trust you,” she said.

“But seriously,” I insisted, feeling a little bit like I was on trial even though I knew she truly wasn’t worried. “We were watching the meteor shower.”

“He’s quite different from other boys your age, isn’t he,” she asked. I nodded in agreement. She seemed satisfied. “He’s very *mysterious*.”

“Ugh,” was all I could manage to say.

“You had better go pretend to be asleep for awhile,” she urged. “Actually, you must be tired. You should try to rest a bit. I’ll cover for you.”

She was right. I was beat, and the thought of laying in my soft bed dreaming about

Chaseyn seemed the perfect antidote.

To avoid raising awareness of our earlier escapade, Chaseyn showed up, as usual, moments before lunch. I had just risen from a very contented slumber. He seemed perfectly well rested. My mom was sufficiently deceived by his ruse. My grandma just winked and nudged him in the ribs. He understood and immediately looked shyly down.

Typically, we would spend the day around the house, but I wanted to give my grandma some time to get to know Kevin better without being preoccupied with Chaseyn and I, so we left the house in search of something to do knowing that nothing could live up to our early morning rendez vous.

“What do you want to do now,” Chaseyn asked as we walked out into the sunlight.

“Isn’t it time I saw where you live, met your mom,” I asked, only half teasing.

Chaseyn stopped abruptly, pondering the question for a moment. I couldn’t tell if he

thought it was preposterous or if he was relieved.

“I wasn’t sure you would want to meet my mom,” he said.

The words cut to my core. For weeks, Chaseyn and I had spent nearly every waking moment together. Like many other boys my age, I thought maybe he hadn’t told his mom about me, but I cleared that up about three weeks ago when I asked him where he mother thought he was spending all of his time. He assured me that she was well aware of my existence and the important place I had in his heart. Chaseyn and his mother had an unusual relationship. They were very open and honest with one another, sharing all of the most personal and intimate parts of their lives. This made me wonder even more why he hadn’t taken me to meet her yet. She filled such an enormous space in his heart, I wanted to know who I was sharing this role with.

“Are you kidding me,” I asked incredulously. “Of course I want to meet her. I’m just worried you don’t want me to meet her. Are you embarrassed?”

I had started to continue walking toward the car, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back to face him. His eyes were intense.

“Don’t ever think that,” he said sternly. “That’s not it at all.”

“So what is it?”

“My mom isn’t like other moms,” he said in a low voice. He had told me plenty about her, and nothing had indicated she was any different than the average woman, other than her incredible musical talent.

“What do you mean,” I asked curiously.

“You’ll see,” he said smugly.

Less than ten minutes later, we arrived at his house, a quaint abode nestled in some trees near the river. It was a one-and-a-half storey war-time house that was completely uncharacteristic of the community. The chocolate brown stucco was accented with royal blue eaves, and wooden shutters shielded the windows from rays

of light that crept in between the trees.

A cobblestone walk paved the way to the front porch, weaving at least a half acre through thick fir trees and deciduous shrubs that had shed their green fringes in exchange for blankets of shimmering hoarfrost. It was like walking through a winter wonderland—the kind that decorated the face of holiday cards at Christmastime. How ironic, I thought, given that Christmas was only six days away.

“It’s amazing,” I said to Chaseyn, taking his hand in mine as we walked up the long sidewalk to the front door. “We should have called first to let your mom know I was coming. It’s not really fair to surprise her like this.”

“She won’t be surprised,” he said, shaking his head once slowly. “She’s been waiting for this.”

Just then, the door opened, and a waiflike woman appeared on the front step. Like Chaseyn, she had raven-colored waves with a solitary grey streak above her brow. Her unnaturally pale skin was soft, flawless, with no hint of color. She was lean and sinewy, the muscles in her exposed upper arms illustrated how she was perfectly

toned. I was sure the rest of her body would look the same. Her hair hung free to her waist, and her deep green eyes tore into me with shocking intensity. Her appearance was completely unique, but stunning. Much like her son. She took a light-footed step forward, her arms extended, ready to embrace. I was sure she was reaching for Chaseyn, so it took me completely off guard when she huddled in around me.

“Cordelia,” she said with a British lilt that was similar to Chaseyn’s, only much more melodic. “It’s about time my son finally brought you to meet me.”

I smiled and nodded. She was enchanting but something about her made me feel uneasy. A sudden chill ripped through my body, and I soon realized she was only wearing a short-sleeved blouse and jeans. Without a coat, she must be freezing.

“Oh, dear, I forgot how this weather can affect people,” she said. “Let’s get you inside before you catch cold.”

It seemed strange that she would be so concerned about my body temperature when I was cloaked in a massive down jacket that was so thick I could barely move my arms. She seemed unfazed, not a goose bump in sight any place on her frail frame.

She escorted me through the large oak door to a cozy sitting room where an old-fashioned log fire was licking the brick mantle encasing it. She motioned for me to take the seat nearest the fire, so I did. Immediately, the aroma of fresh-baked cinnamon rolls wafted into the room. Mina, as she had instructed me to call her, left the room, returning a brief moment later with two, steaming-hot cups of cocoa and warm rolls. Chaseyn and I devoured our homemade treats while Mina delighted in our enjoyment.

“These are delicious,” I said between bites. “I don’t know how you have the willpower to refrain.”

Mina just smiled and said that once I was her age I would understand how hard it is to keep fit. I had trouble believing she would ever have to worry about her weight. Despite the fact that I knew she was in her late thirties, she didn’t look a day older than 27.

An overstuffed, chocolate-brown, leather couch—the kind with pewter rivets lining the edges, was positioned in front of the tiny bay window. Thick curtains in a rich gold tone blocked out the daylight, and the walls were painted a similar warm shade. An oriental rug in rich reds and greens partially covered the original wood floors, and

large wingchairs sat facing the couch, slightly overlapping each side of the fireplace, which was centered on a long wall. A small piano lined the far wall; the only sign of clutter in the otherwise spotless room came in the form of sheet music sprawled on the velvet-covered bench. Though it was cozy, the living room was dimly lit. I struggled to make out the expressions on Mina's face as she talked.

In typical mom fashion, Mina asked all the right questions about my family, interests, and college prospects. All in all, I thought I provided a suitable answer to everything. She kept the conversation light so that I wouldn't feel awkward or out of place. Still, among these two unusually attractive people, I felt strangely uncomfortable, but I wasn't sure why. Certainly, Chaseyn had never given me the impression I should feel inadequate, but in the presence of his incredible mother, I seemed unsuitable. I did my best to keep these feelings hidden from them. Mina was wonderfully hospitable, and I didn't want her to think I was unappreciative. We sat talking for a long time before Mina left Chaseyn and I to tour the house alone.

From the living room, we walked through an arched doorway to an equally shaded kitchen. The only light came from an antique stained-glass lamp standing in the far corner. Rich walnut paneling reached from the floor about mid-way up the walls; the cabinetry matched perfectly. Above that, the walls were painted a deep red. The only natural light in the room seeped in around the edges of the heavy curtains fringing

the window above the sink. The kitchen opened into a formal dining room that was perfectly accessorized with unused dinnerware and fresh cut flowers. It was easy to see that this room was rarely, if ever, used. It looked as welcoming as a designer suite in a posh show home. I thought of my own kitchen at home and shuddered. What must Chaseyn think of the unkempt stack of mail and other knickknacks that constantly cluttered the tabletop?

A short walk through a narrow hall brought us to a long stairwell leading to two large rooms on either side with a small closet in the center. In the room on the right, Chaseyn's mother sat silently in a wooden rocking chair, her head buried in a book, toe tapping on the floor every other second, encouraging the back-and-forth motion of the antique lounger. She looked up quickly, her eyes flickering slightly in the dim glow of the reading light that was positioned several feet from where she was sitting. Her room was elegant and luxurious. The four-post, mahogany bed was draped with a fluffy white quilt and at least fifteen pillows in varying shapes and sizes. Lush, shag carpet spread from one pure-white wall to the next. An enormous chest of drawers was centered on the far wall, with the small sitting area, where Mina sat now, was to the right. An acoustic guitar was tucked in the corner beside her.

"Will you be heading upstairs," Mina directed at Chaseyn but never took her eyes from mine.

We had just walked up the stairs to the second floor, so I was thoroughly confused by her question.

He flashed her a grin. Of course, I had no clue to the meaning, but there was certainly something between them in that instant.

“Chaseyn really cares about you, Cordelia,” she smiled. “Be careful with his heart.”

Chaseyn rolled his eyes and grabbed my hand. He pulled me toward the door on our left, which I could only presume was his room.

It was every bit as spacious as Mina’s, and just as tidy. A full, wrought-iron bed was covered with a chocolate-brown duvet and accented in a variety of blue and brown cushions. I barely smoothed the blankets on my own bed each day, let alone fold perfect hospital corners and primp with decorative accessories.

“Please tell me your mom makes your bed for you.”

He laughed quietly and shook his head at me coyly.

I wanted to pinch myself. He was too good to be true.

Like the kitchen, walnut panels covered the bottom half of the walls; the top was painted in a pale blue. Rather than artwork, a massive flat screen television hung on the wall directly across from his bed. I hadn't realized a jazz musician would earn enough to lead such a lavish lifestyle. I had deceived myself into thinking that Chaseyn was accustomed to *my* way of living. There was little else to look at in his immaculate space. Even Addie's room didn't seem as plush, and that was saying a lot.

“I want to show you something,” he said taking my small hand in his. “Promise you won't laugh.”

At that moment, he opened the door to a tiny closet and reached up above his head

to remove a square of wood from the ceiling. He proceeded to pull a small ladder down and instructed me to make my way up into the dark space above our heads. Now, I understood what Mina meant by upstairs. Up ladder was more like it. I looked at Chaseyn warily, and he took the lead instead, pulling the chain on a bright lamp as he neared the top rung.

Inside the attic, Chaseyn had created a magical space to express his own creativity. A large window opened to a small balcony that overlooked the lake, but it was not nearly the most prominent feature in the room. Canvas squares littered the floors and walls, stacked one on top of the other in neat rows. Tube after tube of colorful oils and tubs of brushes—of all shapes and sizes—lay on a small wooden table next to a tall easel.

“They’re beautiful,” I whispered, taking a seat on the paint-stained floor next to a row of vibrant images that perfectly recreated the natural phenomenon just outside the clear panes. Leafing through, I took in every aspect of the incredible images before me. “Why didn’t you tell me you’re an artist. These are amazing.”

“They’re nothing,” he said shyly. “Just something I do from time to time. I didn’t do anything new for a long time.”

“Why not,” I asked with genuine curiosity.

“I wasn’t inspired,” he shrugged.

“And now?”

Chaseyn bent down so his eyes met mine. He tilted my head upward gently with his left hand and brushed his lips against mine.

“And now, I’ve found new inspiration.”

I blushed.

“Let me show you,” he said, pulling me to my feet. The room was crowded and small; it only took three steps for us to cross the floor. Chaseyn paused for a moment, and

then removed a velvet panel that had been covering an easel. A perfect likeness of me was painted with extreme precision on the colorful canvas. My body stiffened, and when I tried to speak, my voice was weak.

“I understand that you’re upset. I should have told you about it before—asked permission.”

I shook my head and worked to clear my throat. Tears rushed to my eyes, and I bowed my head to hide my emotions.

“I’m not upset. I’m speechless,” I finally managed to spill out.

He started to cover it back up, but I grabbed his hands before he could finish. If I couldn’t say what I was feeling, at least I could show him. I wrapped both of my hands behind his neck and forcefully pulled him to me, kissing him deeply. Suddenly, I felt like there was so much I still needed to learn about Chaseyn.

So very much more.

Chapter 17 - Family

For the next hour, I sat quietly watching Chaseyn while he painted. With my eyes staring intently at his every move, he was awkward and adorable. Every few seconds, his gaze would cross mine, and he would run his long fingers through his hair in a show of modesty. Unruly strands stuck out in a variety of directions, and he looked so inviting that I had trouble keeping my hands to myself. Eventually, he gave up trying to focus on the brush and the canvas. Instead, he took me in his arms, and we kissed for a while. Not long, but it was enough to suppress my indecent thoughts of him.

“Cordelia,” he said with a start after looking at his watch. “We have to go.”

I grabbed his wrist to glance at the time and realized he was right. My mom would be serving dinner any second. Kevin, my grandma, Addie—and possibly Rob—would all be waiting on us. We flew down the rickety ladder to find his mom. I wanted to say a proper goodbye and thank her for welcoming me into their home.

“I certainly hope to see you again soon,” she said, wrapping her thin arms around me

in a strong embrace. I nodded and smiled.

We rushed hand-in-hand outside the door to his car and sped down the driveway in reverse.

“You’re in a hurry,” I said, gripping the sides of my seat.

“I don’t need to give your grandma any more reason to dislike me,” he said. “It will leave a terrible impression if we don’t make it home in time for appetizers.”

“What makes you think she doesn’t like you,” I asked confused. Chaseyn was charming and adorable; there was no possible reason for my grandma to be anything but happy that I had met such a wonderful boy. She was always saying that chivalry is dead, but Chaseyn had proved otherwise. “I thought things went really well.”

He just shrugged and said, “We’ll see.”

“Now, your mom...,” I started to say.

“She just spends so much time in the public eye when she’s performing that prefers to keep to herself at home. It’s nothing personal,” he cut me off. “She loved you. I mean, she really thought you were great.”

He seemed so confident in his words that it was hard to believe he could be wrong, but I had the impression his mom was impartial. She was very nice, but something just didn’t seem quite right. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but she seemed uncomfortable having me there.

Between shifting gears, Chaseyn grabbed my hand and kissed each knuckle softly. It was already dark outside when we finally pulled to a stop in front of my house. It was only a fifteen minute drive, but the sun had set during that time. Dinner would be served in less than half an hour, and despite how I wanted my grandma to feel about Chaseyn, I knew she would hold it against him if we were late.

“We better get inside,” he said, hopping out of the vehicle at a hare’s pace. “They’re waiting on us.”

He was right.

“Where have you guys been,” Addie stated the obvious, while jumping up from the couch to anchor herself at my side. “I’m starving.”

Addie had been a regular fixture at my house for half a dozen years or so, but without Rob at her side, I was sure she felt uncomfortable around Kevin and my grandma. She had only met each of them a handful of times, and they could be intimidating—maybe not Kevin so much as my grandma.

I looped my arm through hers, and we walked toward the kitchen, Chaseyn tagging along behind us, head down, hands in his pockets. Presumably, he felt terrible about delaying everyone’s meal, but I was as much to blame.

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. “We just got caught up is all.”

Chaseyn glanced at me with a look that said he would prefer I kept his artistic talents between the two of us. I nodded discretely and began wracking my brain for an alternate activity.

“It’s my fault,” Chaseyn said casually. “We went to Morrison. I wanted to see the Red Rocks Amphitheatre, and it took longer than I had expected.”

“That’s an interesting road trip,” my mom said skeptically. “It’s very beautiful, but I don’t know too many young people willing to drive all that way just to check it out when there is no performance scheduled.”

“You’re forgetting, mom. Chaseyn’s mother is a musician. She’ll be performing there this summer,” I offered, adding credibility to the claim. Luckily, I had been there three or four times before, so it was easy for me to gush about different aspects of the structure’s unique atmosphere. My mom seemed appeased by that, cocking her head slightly to the side, her frown subsiding.

“Humph,” she muttered, giving a shrug that suggested she thought it a reasonable excuse for being late to dinner.

Turkey, cranberries, potatoes, carrots, stuffing, and much, much more awaited us as we approached the table. It looked delicious and smelled even better. Chaseyn and Kevin looked like they had found their little piece of heaven as they began scooping heaping helpings of every item onto their plates.

Addie and I caught up about the weekend's events in our own private conversation. I felt badly for leaving Chaseyn to be grilled by my grandma, but she was surprisingly quiet, issuing the odd comment at completely appropriate times. Mostly, she joined by mom and Kevin in idle chitchat. We had barely finished gorging ourselves on pie and whipped cream, when Chaseyn announced that he would be leaving early. He had an assignment due in the morning, and he needed to put on the finishing touches. My mom smiled so big, I thought her head would burst. She was delighted that Chaseyn was so incredibly responsible. From the moment they had met, he had charmed her to the core. Me, too. Under the table, Chaseyn squeezed my hand affectionately and stood to leave. I escorted him to the door. He hadn't mentioned the assignment before, and I wanted to be sure everything was alright.

"What's up," I said when we were out of earshot of everyone in the kitchen. "Why are you leaving? Don't leave."

“I really should,” he said. “I do have homework, but more than that, you’ve been spending so much time with me that I think it would be nice for you to be with your family alone.”

“But Addie’s staying,” I pleaded.

“Cordelia, she *is* your family.”

“So are you, now.”

“Not like that. Not yet,” he said looking down as he traced a pattern in the carpet with the toe of his left foot. “One day, Cordelia. But, not yet.”

He kissed my cheek and walked out the door to his car.

“Come, Lia. Join us. We’re going to play crib,” my mom yelled from the other room.

My eyes rolled back in my head, and I walked sluggishly toward the kitchen, dragging my heels as I went.

“Can you believe Kevin has never played before,” she continued.

I could, actually. What I couldn’t believe is that I did know how to play. And worse, that my mom had forced Addie to play with us after so many Sunday night dinners as kids that she was nearly better than any of us. It was tradition when grandma came to stay, so I decided to buck up and join the fun.

“Come on, Lia. Haven’t we waited on you enough tonight,” Addie said laughing.

There was no point playing against my grandma. She annihilated us every game. After several cups of cocoa, one too many cupcakes, and three rounds of crib, I said farewell to Addie, kissed my mom and grandma goodnight, and called it an evening. When I reached my room, I noticed a small white envelope in the center of my pillow.

Carefully, I tore through the top with the edge of my index finger and pulled out an embossed note card.

One night without you is one night too many.

All my love,

C.

He must have sneaked back into the house while we were whooping it up in the kitchen. Somehow, our crib games always got out of control. Between my grandma's gregarious outbursts and Addie's squealing laughter, it was hard to hear your own thoughts, let alone someone tiptoeing up the stairs—especially if that someone knew exactly which creaking floorboards to avoid. He paid such close attention to detail and was so thoughtful, it filled my heart just to think about it.

The holidays came and went in a blur. It was the same story each year. On Christmas Eve, we went for a potluck dinner at the community center, which was followed by ice skating to live caroling. A large bonfire blazed in the center of the rink, where dozens of families spent the evening congregating to enjoy the company of close friends.

This year, the weather cooperated. Though there was a mild breeze that turned to a cold chill as I circled the rink cautiously on my archaic figure skates, the temperature was warm, and I was cozy in my heavy parka and thick mittens. Chaseyn held my hand as I pushed my feet forward, struggling to keep my ankles from burning the ice. My mom and Kevin glided effortlessly around the rink, while grandma watched from a bench positioned within reach of the warmth of the fire. Later, we attended midnight mass. It was the only day of the year that we stepped foot inside a church. Chaseyn was edgy about joining us—panicked at the thought, in fact. He went home to be with his mother for their own midnight tradition—what it was, he wouldn't say.

The next day, I woke early and ran into my mom's room like a six-year-old kid. Some things you could never grow out of. This was mine. She got up, grabbed her robe, and headed downstairs to call Kevin. We promised to call the minute we got up so that he could join us around the tree to open gifts. Once mom knew he was en route, she began frying bacon and scrambling eggs. Next, I pounced on my grandma, who was lying awake in bed, waiting for my arrival. She knew I would come. I always did. We walked downstairs together, my mom waiting at the bottom of the steps to take our picture as we came in sight of the tree. She wanted to capture the look on my face when I saw my gifts. It was a lifelong tradition, but it had lost its effect when I reached my teens, and the ridiculously lavish gifts that would be piled high beneath the tree when I was a child were replaced by small, gift-card-sized boxes. Still, I put on a fake face and gave her my best pose. It made her happy; I could go along with it

for one day. Only, I had a feeling this wasn't going to be the best part of *her* day.

Kevin arrived just as my mom started doling out the gifts. As a child, I had heaping mounds of gifts; now, I had a handful, but I was happy no less.

We took turns opening our gifts, working our way around our quartet one package at a time. A sweater, pajamas, Blu-rays, books...I walked away with the usual fare. My mom looked moderately disappointed when she opened Kevin's gift—a luxurious, but less-than-romantic, spa certificate. They had been together several months now—though I had only known about their pairing for a few weeks—and, she was expecting something more. She would never say it, and she feigned happiness, but I could see it in her eyes. I knew my grandma could, too.

Chaseyn and I had promised not to get each other anything, but he couldn't resist sneaking a small package under the tree. I left it for last. When everyone had collected their loot and moved into the other room to partake of the delicacies my mom had painstakingly prepared, including her traditional puffed, cinnamon French toast and champagne and orange juice, I stayed back, cradling the tiny package from Chaseyn between my hands.

The package was simple; small, flat, with plain brown paper covering the outside. A long, red ribbon wrapped around the edges, forming an enormous bow on top. It was easy to tell the type of object that would be inside, but I didn't know the specifics.

Carefully, I tore away the wrapping to find a plain black journal—a red satin ribbon lay between two pages, which I immediately turned to. Inside, the pages were thick with Chaseyn's heavy script. As I leafed through I could see page after page of hand-scrawled poetry. Some were original, but most were carefully selected from other works to express a particular emotion. On the page marked by the red ribbon, he had written out the words to *Love Letter* by Sylvia Plath. And, as I read, my heart filled with the emotions he had intended to evoke. So perfectly had she expressed her transformation from a dull, unhappy soul to one of meaning and depth that I was sure she was talking about my own inner thoughts. I fought back the tears, as I now knew that Chaseyn understood me better than I even understood myself. He had found just the words to express my feelings.

"Lia, it's getting cold. Are you coming," my mom shouted.

"I'm right behind you," I called back. I just wanted to throw my new sweater on to see

how it fit. It's great."

I tucked the little book under the cushion of the recliner. This was between Chaseyn and I. It was not meant for prying eyes.

Breakfast was delicious, as it was every year, and when we were done, my mom and I sent our guests to the living room to rest while we cleaned up. Knowing what was to come next, I wanted to give Kevin a moment alone with my grandma.

Once the kitchen had returned to its normal state—that being only slightly untidy—we retired to the living room.

"Vivvie," Kevin said. "Did we miss a gift? I think I see another at the back of the tree. Would you mind?"

My mom looked slightly puzzled, but she knelt down anyway and crawled behind the tree. My grandma's face was all smiles, and I feared she was going to give away the ending before the story could even begin. Before my mom could turn around to face

us, Kevin was on bended knee. When she finally faced forward with the small velvet case in her hand, tears were gushing from her eyes.

“Vivienne Elaine Jameson, I love you, and I would be the happiest man on Earth if you would agree to spend forever with me.”

Despite her emotional state, my mom glanced up at me quickly before responding. I knew she was looking for my blessing, so I flashed her a huge grin and nodded my head vigorously, prodding her with flapping arms to give the man what he was waiting for. Finally, she threw her arms around him and shouted out a resounding, “Yes.”

I wrapped my arms around the two of them as they knelt together on the floor hugging and crying. After my father’s death, I thought it would be impossible for my mom to find happiness again, but I knew that Kevin could give her everything she ever wanted. Love filled my heart, and tears streamed down my face. Pure joy.

The rest of the day was spent preparing for dinner and calling friends and family to spread season’s greetings and share the good news about my mom and Kevin. She

was already considering dates for the big day—likely, soon after my graduation next May.

Graduation seemed so far off now, but I knew the time would pass quickly. I thought about my own future. In just a five short months, I would be saying goodbye to my youth and welcoming a whole new world. A world that I hoped would include Chaseyn in a big way. The thought had barely crossed my mind when there was a light rap on the door. We were expecting several people for dinner, but I had asked Chaseyn to come over early. The Lears had only made a few friends in town during their short time here, and all of their family was still overseas, I presumed, since they rarely mentioned any kin. I had invited his mother to join us, but she was uneasy about the holidays. After his father's death, she had lost some of her enthusiasm. Chaseyn insisted she would prefer to be alone.

I ran to the door, and when I saw his smiling face on the other side, I had trouble containing my enthusiasm. I threw my arms around his neck and planted a big kiss on his lips, lingering a little longer than I should given that my grandma was within relative view. Still, the air of young love was strong in our house today, and I couldn't help myself. Wide-eyed with surprise, Chaseyn eagerly entered the house.

“Wow,” he said, the word sounding supremely adorable with his British inflection.

“Hello to you, too. Hi, Mrs. Vanderwold.”

He tipped his head in my grandma’s direction as he greeted her. A slight blush rose in my face when I realized just how much of my little show she must have seen.

“Thank you for the lovely gift,” I said beaming. “But, I thought we said no gifts.”

“You’re welcome, but you can’t get mad,” he said, pointing to the leather cuff he had strapped around his left wrist—the same wrist that I adorned with the silver cuff he gave me the first time he came to our house. “It’s great, but you didn’t have to.”

Chaseyn didn’t come empty handed. He had brought two festive bouquets—one for each my mom and another for my grandma. He was always so appropriate. Just then, the others started to arrive. Kevin’s sister, her husband, and their three kids were first to arrive. Next, Amber, one of the nurses at the clinic came with her boyfriend, and finally, one of my grandma’s old friends arrived. We all crowded into the living room for appetizers and friendly conversation. Chaseyn and I were both only children, so the whole scene seemed out of sorts to us. It was loud but cozy.

Before, the holidays had always been quiet—just my mom, grandma, and me. I had longed for a special family tradition, and this year, I got my wish.

The night rolled on and on. We stuffed ourselves beyond the point of full with my mom's delicious spread. We played board games and listened to music. Chaseyn never left my side, and I hoped he never would. In the dim light of the fire, he watched me with softened eyes, never once taking his gaze from me. All night, regardless of my place in the room, he watched me earnestly, like *I* was the only one in the room. *He* was the only one that mattered to me. Every now and then, I would catch his gaze, and a small chuckle would escape his lips. His perfect, soft lips. In the dark glow of the candles, his hair, dark as midnight save the silvery birthmark he shared with his mother, shone bright and his emerald eyes shimmered brilliantly. I couldn't imagine being any more in love than I was at that moment. No sooner than I was able to complete the thought, I felt his hand twist with mine. He was there beside me, whispering soothingly in my ear, his breath warm on my neck.

“Forever, Cordelia. That's how long I will love you.”

My heart melted, and my knees gave out. A warm flush crept over my entire body, rising from my tips of my toes to the top of my head in a tingling sensation. Those

words...his voice, like butter...I hoped no one had noticed how he had to steady me—his hands firmly on my hips as I leaned slightly back against his chiseled chest.

“Forever,” I whispered so low I could barely hear. I knew he heard because he kissed the top of my head sweetly. After that, he never left my side again that night. It was late when the others finally left—well past 1 a.m. Chaseyn lingered behind. It had been a long day, and I couldn’t keep from yawning repetitively, but I wasn’t ready for him to leave. My mom was so preoccupied with Kevin that she didn’t seem to mind, and my grandma had gone to bed hours earlier. I took advantage of the rare opportunity.

I was cross-legged on the couch. Chaseyn was to my right, one leg tucked beneath his body, which was angled to face me. We sat in silence staring at each other. Minutes ticked by, but we didn’t say a word. Neither one of us had to say what was on our minds. I knew what he was thinking. I was thinking it, too. We were meant to find each other. To be together.

“Sweetheart, Chaseyn should probably get going,” my mom called from the kitchen. “I’m sure his mom will be getting worried.”

“You’re beautiful,” he finally said, breaking the silence, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear. Heat rose in my cheeks, and I pressed my face into his hand. He stood slowly, and I followed him to the door.

“Tomorrow,” he said.

I nodded.

Kevin had never stayed so late, and I suddenly had the feeling he wouldn’t be leaving at all tonight. Sooner or later, he would start staying the night, and though it was strange to think another man would be sharing my mother’s bed, I was oddly comforted by it.

Chapter 18 - History Lessons

The Olsen's had family in from overseas for the holidays, so I had picked up a few extra shifts at the bakery. Time was running out for me to set aside extra funds for school, and as much as I wanted to spend the holiday break hanging out with Addie or Chaseyn, I knew I had to think about the future. The last thing I wanted was for them to move off to college and leave me behind in this dead-end town.

At Chaseyn's insistence, Addie and I had spent some quality time together this week. Shopping, a spa day, and lunch with the girls were all part of the agenda. We convinced Chaseyn and Rob to join us for a chick flick on the big screen, and the four of us went ice skating on the lake. Time was breezing by at lightning speed.

On New Year's Eve, Addie and I had spent the day listening to music in her bedroom, painting our nails and talking about our dreams for the future. After, she dropped me off at home to prepare for what the boys had promised would be a night to remember. My grandma was peering through the window, awaiting my return. When I walked through the door, she was pacing nervously.

“Is everything alright, grandma?”

“Sit down, Lia. We need to talk,” she said with a serious look on her face. “You’re not going to like what I have to say, but you have to promise me that you will listen to every word before you get upset, okay?”

“Sure. I guess,” I said, taking a seat next to her on the overstuffed couch.

“I like Chaseyn. You know that, right?”

I nodded, not sure where this was going. Truthfully, she had always seemed a little standoffish around Chaseyn, but overall, I figured she liked him well enough.

“But, there’s something you need to know. Before I start, I want to remind you that you promised you would listen,” she began.

I sat statue still, eyes wide with fear. What could she possibly have to tell me about

Chaseyn that could be so bad? Images ran through my head of him with another girl. She took my hands in her own and started talking.

“Your great great great grandmother, Lorelei Eloise Dryden, was born in London at the beginning of the Victorian Era. Her father was an officer of the royal court. He was well respected throughout the ranks of the upper class, and many sought to emulate his life,” my grandma started.

She stood up slowly and grabbed a pop from the kitchen before returning, not to sit next to me, but to rest on the arm of a nearby chair instead. She seemed nervous, but she pressed on.

“Lorelei enjoyed a life of privilege—attending the best schools, receiving the care from the nation’s most outstanding nannies, and traveling to luxurious resorts around the world for extended vacations. Lorelei grew into one of the most beautiful women London had ever known. Women longed to look like her, and men fought for a chance to be in her company.”

“How come you haven’t told me about her before,” I asked, realizing how I got my

middle name. “She sounds amazing.”

“Well, there’s more. I’m not sure you’re going to find the rest of the story so amazing. I’ve never even told your mother this before, and I would appreciate it if you kept this between the two of us.”

She sat down on the recliner before continuing her story. She began by describing Lorelei’s physical beauty. Long crimson ringlets flowed to her waist. Ivory-colored skin glowed warmly accenting her chestnut eyes and peach-toned cheeks.

“From what I have heard, she looked a lot like you,” my grandma added unexpectedly. I had never thought of myself as beautiful. Tanned skin, straight blond hair with blue eyes were the epitome of beauty in today’s world, but maybe by the standards of another time and place, someone like me could be considered above average.

From there, my grandma explained how Lorelei’s hand had been promised to the son of an elite attorney. The young man, Louis, was studying to follow in his father’s footsteps. He was handsome, intelligent, wealthy, athletic, and chivalrous. Despite

the fact that Louis was the perfect gentleman, Lorelei had a strong head on her shoulders and was morally opposed to having an arranged marriage. She was in love with an artisan from Romania named Alexei. Alexei had little to offer someone of Lorelei's caliber other than his whole heart. With him at her side, she felt safe, happy, and complete. They would have little in the way of money and security, but they *would* have happiness.

Lorelei's lot in life was set. Her family forged ahead with wedding plans for her and Louis. All the while, she and Alexei prepared to escape on the eve of her wedding. They would take off under cover of darkness, leaving no trace of their route. Lorelei's father was a powerful man with many connections in the royal guard, so they would have to move quickly or risk being caught. Alexei would be arrested, and Lorelei would be doomed to a loveless marriage.

The plot was foiled when one of Lorelei's handmaids overheard a conversation between the two young lovers a few nights before the wedding. The maid confronted Lorelei, claiming she would reveal the ruse to her father if she did not comply with the wedding plans. Lorelei feared it would result in Alexei's arrest. After a restless night, she knew what she had to do. At the exact moment she was to meet Alexei in the woods outside the city limits, she sent her most trusted assistant to the location of their secret rendez vous. Immediately, Alexei understood. He read the note Lorelei

had sent and ran off into the night. First, he vowed his revenge to the young maid. Though he did not say any more, the young woman returned and told Lorelei his words. Only she understood the depth of their meaning.

Lorelei knew Alexei's deepest secrets. Though he loved Lorelei very deeply, he was capable of inflicting great terror. According to legend, his mother, Simona, had been very ill when she was pregnant with Alexei. For weeks before his birth, she suffered from a terrible fever. She lay in bed at night screaming from the pain, begging for death to take her but to spare her child. One night, she was visited by a dark stranger. He assured her that he could make the pain go away if she would just trust him. For now, he wanted nothing in return. Each night, he visited, bringing with him an elixir that seemed to quell her pain. Though she still suffered, she could no longer feel the effects. No one knew what the tiny vial contained, but the brooding gentleman made Alexei's mother drink every drop of its contents. Her husband and doctors were satisfied with the results, and they continued to allow the man to dose the woman throughout her pregnancy.

Finally, one night, Simona woke with a start. Contractions ripped through her body, and she called to the doctor to aid with her delivery. Without the elixir, she seemed to suffer immeasurable pain. The doctor could not cope with its effects, and the woman succumbed, but not before she bore her only child, Alexei. The child was the image

of perfection with marble skin, dark tufts of hair, and vivid eyes. Distraught by his wife's death, Alexei's father wanted no part in the rearing of his child. That night, the dark stranger came calling one last time. He asked for the child, and his command was granted. Alexei was given freely to the brooding man.

Baron Vladimir Strigoy lived alone in an enormous castle in the countryside. He had lived there for hundreds of years. The immortal being had been seeking a companion for more than a decade, and when he heard of Simona's difficult pregnancy, he took the opportunity to make his move.

The elixir, which was made up of Vlad's blood and some common spices to dull the flavor, did nothing to help Simona's condition. It merely numbed her pain. Instead, it provided nourishment for the young child growing within her, ensuring the baby would be born strong and healthy.

"But the blood did something more," my grandma said more softly now. "It changed him."

"What do you mean by changed him, grandma? He was only a baby—a newborn," I

replied.

My grandma walked over to where I was sitting and wrapped her arm around my shoulder.

“Your mother will be home soon, so I’m going to have to move quickly through the rest, sweetheart,” she said, squeezing my shoulder slightly. “You’re going to have to keep an open mind.”

I nodded, and she got up to pace the room as she continued her tale.

She explained that Vladimir was not like other people in the small Romanian village where he lived. She repeated something I hadn’t paid much attention to the first time when she had said it earlier, but I could not ignore it now. She called him an *immortal*.

“Wait a minute, grandma,” I said, holding up a hand to halt her speech. “Did you just say Vladimir was an immortal? I thought you meant his *family* had lived in that castle

for centuries...not him.”

“We don’t have much time, sweetheart. I need you to just keep listening.”

My grandma had always been a bit of an eccentric. She had weekly tarot card readings for as long as I could remember, wore crystals representing various chakras around her wrist, and hosted séances for friends when they lost a loved one. My mom had never been fond of grandma spreading her holistic and supernatural beliefs around our house, so grandma tried to keep it to a minimum when she was visiting. With my mom still at work, she took this opportunity to taint my thoughts with this bogus nonsense. I suppressed a laugh and decided to humor her anyway despite my better judgment.

“Though he’d been discrete, people had their suspicions about the man who never seemed to age. He was tall and broad, with thick dark hair and bright eyes. His flawless skin was fair, with only the slightest flush in the apples of his cheeks. Women were mesmerized by even the weakest stare from this mysterious man,” grandma continued.

Vlad had avoided detection by expertly entrancing the people in the nearest village with his charm and wisdom. For some reason, they were unable to see his obvious flaws. He had never aged. Not one day. Year after year, he was able to live in peace, but he was more than just immortal. Vlad had a much deeper secret.

“I’m on the edge of my seat here, grandma. Why don’t you just spit it out,” I interjected.

“Vlad needed to drink blood to keep his body from decomposing,” she announced. “I suppose it would be fair to say he was a vampire.”

I started to snicker before I noticed the sincere look on my grandma’s face. She believed every word of this legend was true, and I felt a bit badly for laughing. I pursed my lips and cocked my head to the side to feign interest.

She explained that, over the years, Vlad had been very careful about how he acquired blood. For the most part, he had drained it from those who were terminally ill and begging for death. Technology was limited, so their loved ones often believed they had simply succumbed to their disease. Other times, he fooled unsuspecting

beggars into believing he was a doctor and needed blood for pending transfusions. As money was no object for the wealthy immortal, he would pay the poor to donate their blood willingly. He kept a steady supply stocked in a cellar beneath the castle.

After hundreds of years of living alone, Vlad's life was empty. Though he had searched the four corners of the world, he had never found another like himself. He knew they existed, but none had made themselves apparent to him, and he was uncertain how he had become this half-dead creature. Vlad decided that he would find a person to share his way of life, even if it meant he would have to create one.

When Vlad learned of the pregnant woman who was writhing in agony, he ceased the moment. He had studied his own blood intently for many decades and knew that it was capable of amazing feats. He put his theory to the test by giving it to Simona to drink, and while he knew it would not save her life, he hoped it would be enough to protect her unborn child from suffering alongside her.

Sure enough, the child was born in perfect health. Alexei would provide the companionship Vlad so desperately longed for. From an early age, it was evident that Vlad's blood had a greater effect than simply keeping the child alive during his mother's difficult pregnancy.

Though Alexei did not need blood to survive, it provided him with extra abilities. He was incredibly strong, and his vision was far beyond that of any human child. He was exceptionally intelligent, and his athletic stamina was incomparable. Vlad took great pains to ensure the child had an exceptional upbringing. Alexei wore only the finest clothes, attended the most prestigious schools, and received the best care money could buy.

As he grew, Alexei began to realize who the man he called father really was, and he came to resent the man. He believed Vlad had killed his mother and stolen Alexei from his home. No matter how many times Vladimir tried to explain the real story—how his own father didn't want him—it was no use. Alexei had already formed his own opinion. Though Vlad's blood ran thick through his veins, he was completely human in all other ways, and on his eighteenth birthday, he escaped to England.

Alexei took what little money he could find around the house, packed a few items in a sack, and took a train across Europe. He sailed by boat from Paris to London. He had only been there a few weeks when he met Lorelei.

Their attraction was immediate. Though she knew her destiny, she couldn't keep away from her new love. Alexei had been using his impeccable skills as a portrait artist to earn money by sketching tourists on the sidewalks along the Thames. He'd been trained by some of the best eastern-European artists, and his ability to capture the essence of a person's face was incomparable. It was likely that this superhuman skill was enhanced by Vladimir's blood. Lorelei and one of her friends stopped to have their picture composed one morning after enjoying brunch at an upscale cafe. The moment she looked into Alexei's eyes, she knew she could never look away.

He had a strange hold on her, and she couldn't explain it. Though she knew her family would never accept Alexei, she continued to see him without them knowing. Each day, she would tell her maids that she was going for a walk alone by the river, and instead, she would meet with him. At night, he would climb the trellis to her bedroom window and spend the evenings entwined in her arms. Lorelei couldn't bear the thought of breaking his heart, but she knew she would someday. She didn't know much about Alexei's past or that he would be capable of terrible acts should she reject him in the end.

On the eve of her wedding to Louis, Lorelei knew she would break Alexei's heart. She wanted to run away with him, but she knew her family would never rest until she was found. It would only end badly for both of them, so she decided to spare Alexei the

pain. She would doom herself to a loveless life in order to ensure he could go on living freely. She was sure he would move on. With such wisdom and beauty, no woman could resist his charms.

Lorelei was alone in her dressing room adjusting her trousseau just prior to walking down the aisle when the window blew open. Alexei stood on the sill, waving his arms in fury and uttering something in his native tongue. He cupped Lorelei's face in his hands, kissed her full lips feverishly, and turned to leave. Before making his final exit, he whispered his parting words to her.

"This is not over," he said. "One day, I will return to claim what is rightfully mine—the girl with the crimson curls."

With that, he was gone. The wedding proceeded as planned, and Lorelei and Louis began a life of bliss together. Over time, she grew to love him, and they had two beautiful daughters together—one blond, and the other brunette.

Forty-seven years passed, but Lorelei had never forgotten Alexei and the love they had shared. She was old and frail, suffering from tuberculosis, when a beautiful man

came calling on her one day. Lorelei's nurse announced his presence, and Lorelei agreed to see Alexei, not knowing what to expect. When he walked through the solid oak double doors leading to the room where she lay helpless and dying, she became painfully aware of all she had lost. Alexei stood before her, as beautiful as the day they had met. She was in awe at how unchanged he was and embarrassed at how her own beauty had faded so entirely.

Alexei bowed down at Lorelei's side, and taking her tiny hand in his, he kissed her forehead gently.

"I've never left you," he said. "Not for long, anyway."

He explained that after she had made her choice so many years ago, he returned to his father's home in Romania. His fate was inevitable, and he had decided to face it sooner rather than later. He told his father everything that had happened in London and begged for his forgiveness. He understood now that Vlad had only had his best interests at heart, and he asked him for the truth about who Vlad really was. Vladimir had given his son everything his heart desired, and he could not deny him this. He started at the beginning and shared every detail of his immortality. After, Vlad asked Alexei if he wanted to join him in eternity. Without hesitation, Alexei accepted his

father's offer.

That night, Alexei prepared for the unbearable pain the death of his mortal being would bring. He had spent all day staring into the sunlight, knowing it would be his last opportunity to face its bright rays for some time. Though his father could tolerate the sunlight, it had taken several years for his eyes to adjust and skin to keep from burning in its hot glow.

Alexei dined on all his favorite fixings, from roast duck and cranberry jelly to rack of lamb and rosemary potatoes. Such delicacies would lose their appeal, their taste becoming bland, once Alexei had turned. He dressed in his evening gown, and climbed into his oversize bed, satin sheets and velour trim enshrouding him.

At midnight, Vladimir came to him. He lifted Alexei's wrist gently to his mouth and bit down hard, his long, sharp eye teeth piercing the skin fiercely. Alexei let out a painful yelp. In an instant, it was over. Vladimir kissed his son on the forehead and left the room.

Sweat poured from every inch of Alexei's body. He felt no pain, just fever. He lay there

paralyzed as his father's sting rippled through his body. In the morning, he woke to find that he was still the same man. The nurse brought a tray of food to his bedside, and to his surprise, it still carried an incredible taste sensation. The flavors danced together on his tongue, almost more robust than they had been the night before. As often was the case, sometimes it got better before it got worse. This was one of those instances. Despite his protests, the nurse drew open the heavy drapes, letting the sunshine pour into the room. Alexei felt nothing unusual. In fact, he felt perfectly well.

This same process repeated for three nights, until finally, Vladimir sunk his teeth into Alexei's wrist and began to drink his warm blood. When Alexei was near death, Vladimir slit his own wrist for Alexei to drink from. Then, he left his son there to writhe in pain. All night long, tremors shook throughout his body. Chills raced up and down his spine, and he screamed in agony from the horror. By morning, it was over.

The nurse was no longer waiting by his bedside with a warm meal. The drapes remained closed, and Alexei just lay there, thirsty. He couldn't move, and no one came to help him. He lay there for days, wondering when the feeling of emptiness would pass. After what felt like eons but was actually only a week, Vladimir appeared in the darkness of night.

“Come, my son,” he said, extending his hand for Alexei.

The pair walked hand-in-hand down the spiral staircase and out into the woods. Vladimir had hoped his son would appreciate his discrete feeding habits, preferring to keep attention away from their unusual lifestyle, but he was disappointed to learn that Alexei’s thirst was far beyond anything he had experienced. A lone hunter had been taking aim with his bow and arrow at a wild boar when Alexei came across him. With one swift move, Alexei pounced on the hunter, twisting him to the ground, and searing into his jugular with his pronounced eye teeth.

Vladimir was taken aback. He had created a deadly monster, and he feared their façade would soon be revealed. He quickly found a way to dispose of the body and attempted to force his son back indoors. But Alexei was not yet done. He wanted more. The fair-faced demon took to the streets of the nearby village and began terrorizing those who walked its alleys. That one night, three more lives were lost.

By the time Alexei returned home, Vlad had packed a number of their belongings and made preparations for them to leave hastily. Alexei realized the need to leave; he was terrified of the monster he had become, but he couldn’t bring himself to get in the waiting carriage. Instead, he vowed to spend forever mourning his lost love. At

that moment, Alexei went running into the woods as fast and as far as he could get away from the village. Vladimir stayed at his castle for decades, hoping his son would one day return, but after years of longing, he decided it was time to move on.

Alexei remained in isolation, living in a small, Tudor-style cottage in the English countryside near the woods where he and Lorelei were to meet on that fateful night decades earlier. He spent day after day painting his memories of their brief time together over and over again, until the day he learned of Lorelei's failing health. When he could sense that there was no longer any hope for her survival, he went to her.

"You are my love, my life," he told her, her frail body trembling at his touch. "Though your beauty has withered like a wilted flower, I will love you forever."

He was every bit as perfect as the last time she had seen him, unchanged, like Michelangelo's David or an immortal god. And, with the electric pulse of his touch, she knew. She understood who he had become.

"We can be together still," he said softly. "I can offer you eternity."

She closed her eyes, the corners of her thin lips turned upward, and she sighed. He knew what she was thinking. Though he wished she would accept, he knew the monster he had become. He wouldn't wish an eternity of the nightmare he had already lived for so long on any other person, especially her, his one true love. She shook her head to decline his offer and squeezed his hand with all her strength, though he could barely feel her grip.

With that, her eyes closed for the last time. Despite her last wish, he bit her wrist, hoping it wasn't too late to begin the process, but he knew her heart had stopped. A rage burned inside Alexei. He was angry for not acting sooner. Years earlier, he had vowed to come for the next crimson-haired female in Lorelei's family line, and he knew now this was his only remaining hope for happiness. This yet unborn female would become his immortal bride, to live with him for all eternity.

My grandmother stopped pacing and looked up at me then. I knew she was done relaying her folkloric tale.

"That's a great story grandma, but I'm not sure how this relates to Chaseyn," I said

quizzically.

“Honey, don’t you see? You’re the only other crimson-haired beauty to be born into this family line,” she said as if it should answer the question.

“And?”

“And Chaseyn ... well, he’s the hunter. Chaseyn *is* Alexei.”

My heart stopped, and for a minute, I forgot to breathe. Then, I heard a rattling as the doorknob twisted open.

“Did you guys have fun today,” my mom asked, a huge smile inching across her face as she marched into the room.

“Can I be excused,” I asked, avoiding my grandmother’s apologetic gaze. I didn’t wait for an answer before running out of the room at top speed.

“Lia,” my mom called after me. “Honey?”

I could hear my grandma telling her that I hadn’t been feeling well. At least the woman had the good sense to cover for me during my inevitable meltdown. All the way up the stairs, I could only concentrate on one thing—Google.

Tossing my homework to the floor, I slumped over my keyboard and began typing, searching for answers. I was hitting the keys feverishly, trying to narrow down the terms to elicit a precise response. My efforts were futile. Aside from a flattering news story in a community paper about a boy with an incredibly astute ability to decipher scientific code, the name Chaseyn Lear evoked no information about the immortal beings. Baron Vladimir Strigoy conjured even fewer hits. I would need to dig deep if I was going to get to the bottom of this ridiculous legend that was threatening to ruin my happiness.

Then, I saw something that tugged at my interest.

Origin of the name Chaseyn

Hastily, I clicked the link. One word followed the colon after his name.

Hunter

Coincidence. I was sure that it was pure coincidence that Chaseyn would be named for the very thing my grandma said he was. It was ridiculous to think that this beautiful being was anything more than that, a teenage boy who was born 17 years, nine months, three weeks, and four days ago in London, England. An impossibly beautiful, exceptionally intelligent, wonderfully mysterious teenage boy who seemed to be drawn to me like a magnet from the moment he stepped foot in Evergreen. Still, it didn't mean anything; nothing conclusive, anyway. I pushed the memory of my grandmother's strange tale from my head, and began sifting through my closet for something appropriate to wear on our double date to ring in the New Year.

It was nearly 6 p.m. on New Year's Eve, and I knew Chaseyn would be arriving any minute. Chaseyn and I had been seeing each other most nights for nearly two months. It was difficult to be apart from him, and when he wasn't with me physically, we were connected in other ways. Even now, I was half-expecting an IM to pop up on my screen, knowing he would see me online. I was somewhat surprised that he hadn't taken the opportunity to remind me that tonight was a very special night. Something he had been telling me all week. I wasn't sure why, and I had no idea what he had planned, but I knew it would be spectacular. He never did anything halfway.

Chaseyn had instructed me to dress warm. Though, he didn't tell me anything more. It was a cool December night. Dark clouds were rolling overhead as wind swirled soft snow in circles on the ground. It would be a cruel joke if he was planning to keep me outdoors in the brisk air on a night like tonight. I held my breath for a moment, letting it back out slowly in an attempt to clear my head. I wasn't sure how I would face him with all of these inane thoughts running through my head. And, I certainly did not want to raise his alarm about my family's shortcomings by revealing the details of my grandma's quirky tale. He would know in an instant something was wrong. He had an eerie sense about these things, especially when it came to my thoughts and feelings. Until I had a chance to talk to my grandma and do more background research, I

would just have to hide my thoughts. Tonight would be great, I told myself.

Suddenly, the smell of fried chicken wafted through the open door of my room, and I realized my mom had been carrying a bucket in her arms when I pressed past her on my way up the stairs. Now, a scent that would normally have my mouth watering was leaving me in extreme anguish. I was sure I was going to be sick, and I only had moments for it to pass or risk raising Chaseyn's suspicions that something was wrong.

With that, I heard the front door creak and the heavy stomp of masculine feet. My mom had given Chaseyn an open invitation to virtually come and go as he pleased. Few girls my age were so lucky. I flew down the stairs to greet him, hoping to keep my grandma's prying eyes away from analyzing his every move. I started to wrap my arms around his waist in a massive embrace, but the cold emanating from his rugged leather jacket cut through me like an icy dagger.

"You're cold," I said shivering.

"If only you knew," he muttered so low I could barely make out the words.

“Come warm up by the fire,” I said, tugging at his hand, but he stood frozen in place.

“Yes, Chaseyn, why don’t you come stand by the fire,” my grandma added as she walked into the room, a chiding tone in her voice. “You look like your blood could use a bit of a warming.”

It was obvious that my grandma was goading Chaseyn on, and despite his earlier disinterest, he winked at me and took a step forward, stretching his hands out in front of him to warm them in the glow of the fire. The look on my grandma’s face was one of disappointment. She claimed to like Chaseyn, but her actions suggested otherwise.

So many possibilities swirled through my head that I felt dizzy. Given my grandma's history with paranormal experiences—she'd once held a seance for her dead cat—I questioned the sanity behind her latest revelation. For this one night, I would push these thoughts from my head—tomorrow was a new year, a new beginning. I would sort through it then. Chaseyn and Rob had been secretly scheming for weeks to plan the perfect event for this most-magical evening, and I wasn't about to let some

reckless fairytale ruin the entire affair. Besides, Addie would hold a grudge forever if I skipped out, and that was the last thing I wanted. That girl was ridiculously stubborn and unrelenting when things didn't work out in her favor. To be on the receiving end of her wrath was a less-than-desirable position to occupy.

“So Chaseyn, how do you plan on entertaining my granddaughter tonight,” my grandma asked in a taunting voice.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Vanderwold, but I’m not at liberty to say,” he said and winked at me. My grandma’s shoulders arched back, forcing her to sit a little taller. It was rare for anyone to speak to her in this way. Chaseyn held firm despite her threatening glare. Surely, her sudden change in affection for him hadn't gone unnoticed. Until now, her interactions with Chaseyn had gone swimmingly well. As my mom entered the room, my grandma's shoulder relaxed. It was evident that she didn't want to raise suspicion amongst the unsuspecting.

“I assure you, Mrs. Vanderwold, Cordelia's mother is well informed of our plans and is able to reach us in the event of an emergency.”

He was curt, almost smug, in his tone, an unusual quality in his otherwise gentle nature. Only when he said my name did the hard edges of his words soften. The way it rolled off his tongue still sent chills rushing through every inch of my body, even after all this time.

My mom nodded in agreement, clearly oblivious to the thick fog of tension encircling our captive trio.

“No curfew, Lia, but use good judgement,” she reiterated, looking more at Chaseyn than at me. He winked at me again and flashed an enormous grin at my mom, who seemed giddy with anticipation. Her excitement was piquing my curiosity, but a part of me was still focussed on the day’s earlier events. I shook my head in an effort to rid the thought from my mind. Chaseyn grabbed my hand then, as if aware of my internal angst, and in his most soothing voice suggested we begin our evening.

“We had better get Addie and Rob before she kicks up a tantrum bigger than a category five hurricane,” he said, only half laughing. He'd spent enough time with Addie to know patience was not one of her many virtues.

“Mom, are you and Kevin staying in with grandma,” I asked, slightly embarrassed that I had forgotten to ask about her plans.

“Grandma and I are introducing Kevin to our long-standing tradition,” she said wryly.

I had been privy to that tradition for the past 16 years. It entailed ordering Chinese food and watching the ball drop on Times Square at 10 p.m. our time. I was happy to have alternate plans this year, but she seemed content enough with the same old. I just shrugged and turned to grab my coat.

“Have fun,” my mom shouted as we made our way through the heavy door and into the blustery darkness.

I saw my grandma scowl. Did she really think I was going to simply succumb to the fear instilled by her cryptic story and break all intimate connections with Chaseyn before completely investigating the details.

As I sat beside Chaseyn in the warmth of his conspicuously remodelled sportster, I felt something unusual course through my veins. Typically, I felt only happiness and security when we were alone together, but tonight, I struggled to find a word to match

my abnormally anxious state. Finally, I realized what it was. Trepidation.

I didn't fear Chaseyn—I was entirely certain he would not harm me. Almost. Now, a possibility boiled in the back of my mind—albeit a small possibility, but it surged none-the-less. Did Chaseyn have an ulterior motive for being with me?

My changed behavior did not go unnoticed. As we slowed to a stop in front of Addie's house—palace, really—Chaseyn took both of my hands in his and stared deep into my eyes. Using his most serious, gentle voice, he whispered four words to me that did as much to quell my nerves as they did to raise my curiosity—and heart rate.

“Everything will work out.”

What could he possibly mean?

Addie and I had been anticipating this night for weeks. Well, perhaps she had been a little more expectant than I. She was prone to strong emotional reactions, while I was considerably more restrained. Not to mention that she had come to the

conclusion that this would be the night that she gave herself to Rob—mind, *body*, and soul. Sealing their commitment with the ultimate act of intimacy had been a long time coming, and I was surprised they had waited this long. Of course, there is strength in numbers, so in an effort to convince herself that she was, in fact, making the right decision, Addie had suggested I offer Chaseyn the same level of commitment.

Though the thought was tempting, and I gave it serious consideration—even going so far as to purchase a frilly black lingerie set—I came to the realization that we needed to explore all of the avenues of our relationship before delving into carnal lust. There was no doubt that I loved Chaseyn, but I felt we owed it to ourselves to know each other better on a mental and emotional level first—no sense in rushing. I was certain—even at this early stage—that we would have the rest of our lives together to explore the physical.

At Addie's, we parked Chaseyn's Mustang in the front drive and transferred to a waiting car, complete with driver. Addie would be impressed. Being the eve of such an important annual event, one may have expected a limousine, but with Chaseyn, I had learned that he was nothing if not completely unique and original. Addie, shivering with anxiety, not cold, I was sure, was already seated in the back of the massive Hummer H3, Rob clinging to her side. He had no idea that she was planning to cap the night with a surprise of her own. Chaseyn had been fully informed, and he gave my hand a knowing squeeze when he took in the wide-eyed

look on Addie's innocent face. Innocent...for now.

When I told Chaseyn of Addie's plan, I had expected him to inquire about our own union. But again, Chaseyn could not be held to the same standards as other boys our age. He made no such suggestion—not even a hint of expectation sounded from his lips. Instead, he simply smiled and stated that Addie had to make the choices that were best for her. At that moment, my internal struggle came to a crashing halt, and I knew it was right for us to wait. Even now as I thought back to that moment, it made me tingle. I snuggled into Chaseyn's side, my arms wrapped tightly around his.

What happened next was completely unexpected. Simultaneously, both Chaseyn and Rob pulled a little black scarf from their coat pockets. They instructed us to lean forward so they could position the dark cloth over our eyes, tying it securely at the back. Given the earlier events of my day, this seemingly innocent gesture now had me slightly on edge. Being devoid of this one important sense left me feeling moderately helpless. Though I took some comfort in the fact that Chaseyn and I were not alone. Despite the fact that my grandma's story seemed utterly impossible on the surface, I knew she had no reason to expose such information and risk my affections for her if she didn't fully believe in its truth. This knowledge, combined with my deep emotional connection to Chaseyn, left me feeling entirely obscure—conflicted. For

this one night, I would try to conceal my emotions. Though I was fairly certain Chaseyn had caught on that something was affecting me other than his grand plan for the evening. Addie, though she had known me longer—was oblivious.

In the darkness—complete darkness, thanks to the silky fabric robbing me of even the slightest shadows—I could feel the rocky surface of the path we were following, tossing our bodies about the vehicle like ragdolls. Curiosity flooded my mind. So did visions of Alexei and Lorelei.

As the vehicle slowed to a halt, I could feel Chaseyn shift his weight toward Rob. The motion was followed by the sound of their mumbling voices, kept low so as not to spoil the surprise. The creaking of the car door signalled the end of our brief journey, and a blast of cold air stung the parts of my face that were not shielded by the makeshift blindfold. Someone, presumably Chaseyn, pulled the collar of my parka up high around my neck and then gently wrapped something heavy around my back, forcing my body forward gently as he took great care to cover my arms and shoulders thoroughly. A gentle tug of my hand was Chaseyn's wordless signal that it was time to exit the vehicle. I slid my body across the seat in the direction he guided and braced myself against the cold night air. Chaseyn lifted me gracefully to the ground when I reached the doorway and ensured my feet were securely planted on the earth before directing me to take a step forward. Rob, though well-intentioned, lacked

Chaseyn's poise and grace. Strength was not his forte, and though I was certain he must have intended to mimic Chaseyn's thoughtful acts, I heard a thud and then a low yelp from Addie.

“She's okay,” Chaseyn said so quietly that only I could hear. He chuckled lightly before continuing. “She just hit the top of her head on the door frame.”

I laughed a little. Rob had always been the ultimate catch. Now, Rob's numerous flaws were exceptionally evident. At one time, like every other girl in Evergreen I pined after Rob's affections. True, his skills on the field, court, or diamond were unparalleled. And, his impeccable style and boyish good looks had been second to none, until Chaseyn came along. When Chaseyn arrived nearly three months ago, I realized little, if any of those qualities mattered.

When Addie and I were standing side-by-side, our hands firmly locked together—my left with her right—Chaseyn loosened the knot at the back of the cloth that had been keeping me temporarily blinded, letting it slip down around the base of my neck. More darkness greeted my eyes as they struggled to focus. In the blackness, I began to make out silhouettes of indescribable objects. Rob stumbled as he struggled to shift in front of Addie. Chaseyn, however, glided effortlessly into my view. With his

face just inches from my own, my body tensed with anticipation—would his lips lock with mine? Or maybe, his teeth would clench the throbbing pulse in my neck? I felt his warm breath in a steady flow against my skin. My heartbeat raced, and the blood coursed through my body at lightning speed, warming me to the core.

“Turn around,” he whispered, the edges of his lips brushing against my earlobe as he said the words in a thick, husky voice.

With both hands braced lightly on my shoulders, he twisted me slightly to the right—away from Addie. Rob made an effort to guide Addie in a similar fashion, but their feet tangled as they turned. Blocking their clumsy interaction from my mind, I focussed solely on the location Chaseyn indicated. Sucking in an enormous breath, I let out a huge gasp as I laid eyes upon the intended surprise. In that instant, I wished it were just the two of us there. Addie would find Rob's role in this most elaborate event unbelievable incredible, and truthfully, so would I. Only Chaseyn was capable of engineering such an elaborately grandiose gesture, but I was certain he had so skilfully included Rob that the poor guy actually believed he had a hand in the details. It was a kind act on Chaseyn's behalf.

An ornate wooden gazebo was nestled between ancient fir trees in a small

outcropping at the top of one of the foothills. This area was not known to me, and judging by the rough ride to the location, there had been to pre-cut trail.

“Chaseyn, ”I said exasperated. “How did you do this?”

“We,” he corrected, and I knew Addie must have been within earshot "came up with the idea a few weeks ago."

Twinkle lights covered every inch of all the trees in our view, and two wrought-iron bistro tables—like the ones that line European sidewalks—were set at each end of the gazebo. Chaseyn led me to one of the tables, and we settled in for a gourmet meal. Propane heaters kept us warm. A catering tent could be seen in the distance, just past the last set of twinkle lights. Butlers clad in black tuxedos brought silver serving platters to our tables. We dined on lobster tail, garlic mussels, rice pilaf, and twice-baked potatoes. Sparkling cider that had been iced with frozen cranberries washed down every delectable bite. I felt like a pampered princess from a childhood fairytale. The night could not have been more splendid, save the hexing thoughts that were hovering inside my head.

After dinner, soft sounds swept through the calm night air. The boys had strung a series of speakers from the tallest trees. Chaseyn led me to a clearing in the woods that served as a makeshift dance floor. I draped my arms loosely around his neck, rested my head on his sculpted chest and listened.

A heartbeat. The throbbing sound was a welcome relief. How could Chaseyn be undead if he had a heartbeat?

I sighed in true contentment, and Chaseyn kissed the top of my head.

“Mmmm, pineapple,” he said , taking in the scent of my fruity shampoo. “My favorite.”

We swayed in the moonlight for what seemed like hours, and though I wanted to stay that way forever, the frigid air began to take its toll. Though outdoor heaters warmed the dance floor, I could no longer take the wintry chill.

“We should go. You're cold,” Chaseyn said with clear reluctance.

“No,” I said through chattering teeth. Hardly convincing. “I’m fine.”

With that, he led me to the waiting car and silently urged Rob to do the same with Addie.

Chaseyn and I sat in the very back row, cuddled together for warmth. We looked longingly at each other, sharing stolen kisses between bumps in the road. They were soft kisses—the kind that revealed a deep love rather than a lustful need—and I wanted to believe that Chaseyn could never be the monster my grandma had described.

Addie looked a nervous wreck. She and Rob sat like statues in the second row, and I could see her face in the rear view mirror. She looked ill. With my elbow, I poked Chaseyn in the ribs. He smiled and gave Addie a gentle, knowing squeeze on her left shoulder—out of Rob’s view.

To Rob’s utter surprise, we left them at a bed and breakfast on the outskirts of town. Rob had sincerely believed he would be spending the night at Chaseyn’s house, so

he was completely shocked when Chaseyn tossed Rob's duffel bag out the door and wished him luck. I gave Addie a firm hug and whispered words of encouragement in her ear.

"It's right for you. I know it is," I said. She just held tight.

Holding her out at arm's length, I asked, " You love him, right?"

She nodded.

"Then, everything will work out fine."

Addie grabbed her Louis Vuitton bag, and hurried toward the cozy cottage house.

Chaseyn and I drove in silence for a long while. We didn't need words to know what the other was thinking. Had we made the right choice? Should we have rented a room for the night, as well?

“No,” Chaseyn said, finally breaking the silence. “Not yet.”

I didn’t need to ask what he was talking about. And, I knew he was right. Especially now, with all of the doubts my grandma had placed in my head. As we pulled into the drive outside my house, I tugged Chaseyn into a tight embrace. For that one instant, I wanted to be happy. After all, I wasn’t sure what I would feel the next day.

Chapter 20 - Pause

In the wee hours of the morning, after Chaseyn had dropped me off at home and we had said a long goodbye in the warmth of the Hummer H3, I searched Google again for Vladimir Strigoy, and this time, I paid closer attention to the details. “Strigoy” pulled zero matches, but a slight variation of the spelling opened up a vast wealth of information. “Strigoi” was the Romanian word for *vampire*.

Shock and fear ran through my veins as I stared at the words written across my computer screen. The logical part of my brain began working overtime, reasoning with my imagination to come to a rational conclusion. Finally, I realized that there was still no evidence to suggest that Chaseyn Lear was, in fact, Alexei Strigoy. And, even if he was, he had never once given me reason to fear him. Only the opposite.

I tried to sleep, but my pulse was throbbing, and my mind swirled with wildly irrational thoughts. I watched every hour, every minute tick by on the clock, waiting for the moment the sun would rise, and I could see Chaseyn again. He would laugh at the ridiculous accusation, I was sure. I must have dozed off in the wee hours because, when I awoke, the sun was shining bright in the morning sky. The sounds of laughter

and cutlery scraping against porcelain rose up through the stairwell from the kitchen. Looking at the clock, I noticed it was 10 a.m. I hadn't slept this late on a Saturday in years—especially since I had taken the early shifts at the bakery. Being New Year's Day, I could relax and take my time.

"Lia, we were getting worried. Are you feeling okay," my mom asked.

"I'm fine, mom. I just didn't sleep well."

"Well, we waited for you, but we got hungry," she said with a slight shrug. "There are leftovers in the fridge."

But, I wasn't hungry. Anxiously, I waited for Chaseyn's distinct knock on the door; he normally arrived around this time. Nothing. Hours passed, and still, Chaseyn had not arrived. I tried calling his cell, but there was no answer. When I called his house, Mina told me he had left early this morning. He told her he would be back in time for school on Monday, but not to expect him before then. I was confused and scared. Since that first Friday night we danced together at Hannah's party, Chaseyn and I had never been apart, not for one day. I spent the entire weekend in my room, curled

up in a ball under my thick duvet trying to figure out what I had done to make Chaseyn leave. I came up with nothing.

Addie came by on Sunday afternoon to try to get me out of my funk, but it was no use. She crawled under the covers and lay face-to-face with me, like we used to when we were kids, telling ghost stories and making silly faces in the dark. Now, she just tried to console me, but it was hopeless. I wasn't in the mood to talk; besides, there wasn't really anything to talk about. Until I talked to Chaseyn—*if* I talked to Chaseyn—I had no idea what to tell her. She tried so hard to make me smile that I felt a bit guilty for not relenting, but my mind was numb, and my body ached all over. I just wanted to be alone. It seemed to lift her spirits a tiny bit when I asked her to pick me up for school in the morning.

My grandma left that afternoon. It was all I could do to come downstairs to say goodbye. I tried to put on a show, a happy face, but I knew she could see through my thin façade. Maybe she felt guilty, like she was to blame, but she didn't force me to make the drive to Denver. Instead, she hugged me gently and got in the car with my mom and Kevin. As much as I loved her, I was glad she was leaving. I didn't want to hear any more of her ridiculous theories.

Once they had left, I waited for the tears to come, but they never did. Maybe that was a good sign—that I wasn't ready to mourn lost love yet. I would know soon enough if I should. I lay in bed alone and awake until dawn on Monday morning.

Addie pulled up to my drive at 7:45 a.m. She seemed impressed to see me waiting. I'm sure she thought she would have to drag me out of bed and help make me presentable. Everything seemed surreal, fuzzy as I walked down the path to her waiting car. It had been months since I had driven to school with Addie, and a sadness swept over me. Just then, a streak of red came speeding around the corner. Chaseyn's Mustang screeched to a halt beside Addie's car. He jumped from the car and ran to my side.

"Please, please Cordelia, come with me. I can explain," he begged.

Now, the tears came in waves. They streamed down my face like waterfalls. I could barely see two steps in front of me, but I managed to make my way to Addie's passenger door, pull up the handle, and step inside. She just shook her head at Chaseyn as she drove away. My breathing broke into sobs as I fought to keep the tears from falling. Addie held my hand in hers.

Chaseyn followed close behind us; I could see his lights in the passenger side mirror. After parking in her usual space, Addie turned to me.

“What do you want to do,” she asked. “Do you want me to yell at him? Or, may be you would rather do it. Or, we could ignore him. Just tell me, Lia. I’ll do whatever you want.”

I wiped the last of the tears from my eyes and dabbed at my face with powder, trying unsuccessfully to hide any evidence that I had been crying. After another minute or two passed, I finally spoke.

“Give me a few minutes alone with him.”

“Are you sure,” Addie asked. “I can stay if you want.”

“I need to do this alone. You know, closure,” I said, shaking my head. “I love you, Addie. You’re the best friend a girl could have. Now, go find that cute, sweet boyfriend

of yours and stop worrying about me. I'll be fine eventually."

I got out of the car slowly and took a step toward the schoolyard. Chaseyn was waiting, leaning against a nearby tree, and the moment he realized I wasn't going to run and that Addie was walking in a different direction, he began moving toward me. In khaki pants, a blue collared shirt, and a navy pea coat, he looked more beautiful than I had ever recalled seeing him, but I wouldn't let that cloud my judgment.

After three sleepless nights, I decided it was time to take fate into my own hands. If my grandma was right, if Chaseyn was who she said, I needed to know. We were walking through a quiet corner of the schoolyard on our way to first period—away from prying eyes—when I turned to face him. I was tired of doubting him, us. My stomach did a flip as my mouth began forming the words I needed to ask.

"Who are you," I asked, turning around to face him. I was staring hard into his deep-green eyes, silently begging for an honest response.

"I'm not like anyone you have ever met," he said confidently.

He started to leave, but I grabbed his arm. For once, he was the one trembling.

“You’re not going to walk away. Not this time,” I said angrily, my voice loud enough that the group of middle schoolers standing a few feet to our left looked harshly in our direction.

“Isn’t it enough that I’m in love with you,” the words rolled off his tongue like creamy honey on a hot summer day. “Can’t you just let it go at that?”

Dropping his arm, I fell back a step. My eyes were wide as I considered the words that had slipped so easily from his lips, as if it were commonplace and obvious. I came to a complete standstill, breathless, as I watched him walk away quickly.

I thought about running after Chaseyn, but I knew there would be a better time to have this conversation. The schoolyard was not the appropriate location if I was going to get the answers I was looking for.

I didn't see Chaseyn for the rest of the morning. And I couldn't stop thinking about what he had said. If he really loved me, what difference would it make if he was *that person*? I could get past it with time, I was sure. But I wasn't sure if I wanted to. What I really wanted was for Chaseyn to be honest with me, not just about his feelings but everything about him, who he was.

Before the beginning of first period, at least three, people asked me where Chaseyn was, and I caught a dozen others staring inquisitively in my direction as I walked between classes alone. Chaseyn and I were always together; they would be questioning if our seemingly indestructible union had finally crumbled.

"I just heard. Is everything okay," Addie came running to me the minute I stepped foot in the cafeteria. A look of genuine concern marked her normally perky face. "How are you?"

"Confused," was all I could say, at first. Addie just looked at me wide eyed. "What are you talking about?"

From the corner of my eye, I could see Stella, Chloe, and Britney stop talking to look

at me sympathetically. A few others began whispering while shooting glances in my direction. I wondered exactly *what* people had heard, realizing that the entire school clearly thought something was wrong with me.

“What’s going on,” I asked Addie. “Why is half the school looking at me?”

She wrapped her delicate arm though mine and marched me toward our usual table.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” she said as we were about to take a seat. “Max told Rob he saw Chaseyn walking away from you in the park earlier today. He said it looked like you were having a heated discussion that didn’t end well. Oh, honey, I’m so sorry. I know what he means to you.”

I didn’t know how to respond. Despite the torrid weekend I had spent fearing that Chaseyn had decided I wasn’t what he wanted, I knew that I would never be able to walk away from him. The minute I laid eyes on him in my driveway earlier in the day, I knew he still wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with him. We would sort through anything that stood between us.

I hadn't given him a chance to say what he wanted to say. Instead, I jumped headfirst into accusations about his character. I couldn't blame him for being upset. Sure, Chaseyn and I had an unpleasant conversation, but it wasn't the end of our relationship. At least, I hadn't thought so. Besides, hadn't he tossed those three emotionally charged words in? Surely, his feelings were too strong to just walk away now.

As if on cue, I felt a familiar, warm weight around my shoulder and a moist pressure on the top of my head. Chaseyn was there, his arm draped loosely around me, kissing my brow as he took his usual seat next to me.

"So, did I miss anything good," he asked as if nothing had happened. "I'm sorry I took off this morning. I was sure I had left the iron on."

"Oh," Addie said sarcastically, not willing to buy in. "Is that all?"

Addie pulled me aside to whisper something in my ear.

“How do you want me to play this,” she asked. “No one else knows what happened this weekend, except Rob, of course, and he won’t say a thing unless I give him the thumbs up. Should I go along with this ruse, or are you going to call him out? I’m on your side either way.”

“Let it go,” I said, a bit embarrassed that I was giving in so easily. Behind closed doors, I would take a different stance, but in public, for now, I would continue his charade. “Thank you, Addie. I promise to tell you everything later.”

I looked around, and everyone had gone back to doing whatever it was they had been doing when I first walked into the lunchroom. There was no news after all, at least not that concerned them. I was still curious—Chaseyn was playing coy, and I wanted answers once and for all.

I sat silent for most of the lunch hour, not sure what to think about Chaseyn. Three hours and four classes later, I was still uncertain. Only now, I was furious. He had disappeared all weekend and had made no effort to explain why or where he had gone. Worse than that, I still didn’t have any answers about who he really was. I was going to corner Chaseyn, and I wouldn’t let him get away with vague responses.

Addie was waiting at my locker after school. So was Chaseyn. Neither one looked at the other; they stared straight down the hall for me. It was clearly some kind of stalemate. Chaseyn was first to spot me, and he propped himself away from the locker by pushing his shoulder blades back into the metal behind him. Though her eyes scanned the hallway frantically, he had taken at least three steps before Addie clued in. She pushed past Chaseyn and ran to my side. Clipping my elbow in her palm, she whirled me backward and started gushing.

“There’s no way you’re going home with that joker, Lia. You were a wreck all weekend because of him, and I know you asked me to play along in front of everyone else, but I know the truth, and I can’t just let it go that easily,” Addie poured out in one long breath.

My head was spinning with her words when Chaseyn finally approached.

“Addie, do you seriously think that I don’t have a good reason for what happened,” he asked nonchalantly. “Give me some credit.”

“Well, your mom was pretty vague—didn’t indicate there was an emergency of any kind. Chaseyn, you took it too far,” Addie responded angrily. Despite her best efforts, her voice was starting to carry through the crowded corridor.

“I had good reason,” he said, looking down at his feet with a grimace.

“Why don’t you enlighten us then,” Addie asked. She was making this easy for me. At least one half of my battle would be complete before I left the school. I would just need to work on part two, and she couldn’t help with that.

“I have a friend,” he started, looking pained. “He hasn’t been doing so well, and he needed me.”

“No phones? You couldn’t call her?”

“Um, actually, there weren’t any,” he said.

“Get on with it already Chaseyn,” I urged, getting anxious to hear why he had left me in such a terrible way.

“He’s in a rehabilitation center in Vernal, Utah. His counselors left a message with my mom while we were out, and I left as soon as I got it. I drove all night.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling guilty for my outburst a second earlier. It seemed it was possible that in this one instance, someone may have needed Chaseyn more than I did.

“They wouldn’t let me use the phones at all, and, I wasn’t thinking. I left mine at home. My mom wasn’t sure she should say anything; she didn’t think it was her right.”

“Oh,” was all I could manage.

“I’m sorry Chaseyn,” Addie said genuinely. “I jumped to the wrong conclusion, but you still should have found a way to let Lia know where you were. She was a mess all

weekend thinking she had done something to make you leave. She wouldn't get out of —."

I kicked her then. He didn't need to hear any more, and I could handle the situation now.

"I just...never mind. I guess I'll leave you two alone," Addie said, and she walked off slowly, backward watching us all the way.

I blew her a kiss so she would know I wasn't upset. Then, I turned on Chaseyn.

"So, you want to try telling me what really happened," I asked, fuming.

"What?"

"Addie may have bought your little story, but I'm not biting. Oh, sure, you almost had me, but you went too far with the part about your mom. She would have told me

something, anything, if she had known. And, you did that thing with your eye.”

“What thing?”

“Your left eye twitches when you’re lying. It’s barely noticeable, but I’ve spent a lot of time looking at your eyes, so it’s easy for me to see.”

“Agh,” he said—a sound of defeat. “Fine, but I wish you would just leave this alone. This one thing.”

“It’s a pretty big thing,” I said, calmer now that it seemed he was going to cooperate. “I think I deserve some answers.”

Without waiting for his response, I started walking toward my locker to grab my coat. Chaseyn hesitated for a moment before following behind. I was painfully aware of the fact that he kept at least one pace behind my own, and his hand, which would normally be woven into mine, was firmly entrenched inside his jeans’ pocket. My stomach was doing flips. I was sure that this weekend was a misunderstanding of

some kind—that he hadn’t intended to break my heart—but I still felt uneasy. So much remained unsettled between us.

“Cordelia,” he said quietly. “I did go out of town; I just needed some time alone to think about the next step. Give me a chance, and I’ll tell you everything, I swear. Please just let me pick the time and place—not here.”

Anger rose inside me. I had anguished over this for three days, feared the worst of our relationship. Not to mention, I was contending with my grandma’s inane accusations. Now, Chaseyn was asking me to wait again. At that moment, I was overcome with emotion. Anger. Fear. Sadness. Confusion. All these feelings rose to the surface and took control of my mind and body. I acted without thinking.

“Just forget it,” I screamed at Chaseyn, throwing my bag at his feet. “Just leave me alone. You seem to be good at that.”

I started running as fast as I could. I didn’t care that the wind was swirling clouds of cold snow at my face. The ice was slippery beneath my feet, and I spread my arms to my sides to help with balance. Still, I didn’t let up; I kept running as fast as I could.

Chaseyn didn't follow.

I was torn. A part of me was relieved. The other part was terrified. What if he never followed?

I ran for a long time. I wasn't sure how long, but the day faded into night, and the stars shone bright in the dark sky. When I stopped running, the freezing air turned my cold sweat into icy drops on my skin. My teeth chattered, and my body shivered uncontrollably. Tears streamed down my face, as I walked the long journey home from the edge of town. My mom would be home from work in less than an hour, and I was determined to keep this secret from her.

When I arrived, my bag was perched on the front step, a note tucked into the front pocket. I looked around quickly, hoping to see him. But, the street was silent. Before stepping inside, I unfolded the piece of paper to read his words.

I can't give you what you want, Cordelia. You have to trust me with this. Until you can, we can't be together. My mind, body, and soul—they all belong to you—but this is one piece of me you can never have. The choice is yours alone. I'll be waiting

when you're ready.

C.

Heavy sobs poured from my lips; my chest heaved as I struggled to catch my breath. Before anyone could see my state, I shoved open the door and ran to the bathroom. I barely made it inside before the contents of my stomach—what little there was—spewed out into the toilet. I managed to splash some water on my face to remove any remnants of the tears I had gushed before my mom's arrival. She found me dry heaving on the floor.

"Lia," she said, panicked. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"I'm okay mom," I lied. "Dinner just didn't agree with me."

She helped me change and tucked me into bed—the way she did when I was a little girl. She sat there for a short while, rubbing my back, humming a lullaby. Instantly, I started to feel better. But, I knew my heart would ache when she left the room.

“Did you see Chaseyn today,” she asked. I had been dreading the question, but I had the story worked out. As much as he had hurt me, I devised a tale that would paint an acceptable picture of his actions this weekend. I told her the same thing he had told Addie, but I followed up with my own ending.

“I told him I couldn’t see him anymore. At least, not for a while,” I embellished. “I know he meant well, but I don’t like how it made me feel. I think I just need some time, mom. Maybe someday...”

She nodded understandingly.

“Whatever you think is best, sweetheart. You have to find the place between your head and heart that makes the most sense.”

She was right. My heart ached to be with him, but my head said that I needed to know the full story before I could return to him.

“You’re so young, Lia. Your hormones are all mixed up, and it’s not your fault. It’s not his either. Remember that, and base your decision on that. He really cares about you, Lia. I respect that.”

She got up, kissed my forehead, and paused at the door. She turned off the light and pulled the door closed behind her. In the dark quiet of my room, my thoughts were overwhelming, unbearable. Try as I might to close my eyes and will myself to sleep, I just couldn’t, so I crawled out from under the covers to peer out the window.

And, there it was. The cherry-red Mustang was parked on the corner, and a tall, lean form stood in the shadows beneath the trees. He was looking up at me with incredible sadness in his eyes. A cold chill crept over me in a way I hadn’t experienced in months. I shuddered. Chaseyn caught sight of my silhouette in the darkness, and he shuffled slowly back to his car. I wanted desperately to call out to him, but I knew it wouldn’t solve anything. I needed something from him that he couldn’t give.

Weeks passed. Chaseyn kept clear of me and my friends. In fact, he arrived just in time for first period each day, and left abruptly after the last. He never came to the

cafeteria at lunch, and I rarely saw him around town. My head knew that this was the best situation for both of us, but my heart was screaming out. Sure, I had kept busy with extracurricular activities—I had joined prom committee with Addie and Chloe, and I was working as a stagehand for the senior production of *Guys and Dolls*. For the most part, my mind was too busy to think about anything outside of my academic career and work, but every now and then, when I had a free moment, I would remember the way Chaseyn's arms felt around me in an embrace. I almost always managed to keep the tears inside now, but as my college acceptance letters began arriving in the mail, I found my mind wandering more and more. I couldn't help but wonder if Chaseyn had started receiving his and which he would choose.

I was backstage during dress rehearsal for Friday's opening night performance when I felt a cool breeze blow through the room. Then, I heard his voice from the other side of the curtain that separated the front of the house from backstage. This was my safe place, the one part of the school I knew I would never have to face him. And now, he was here, asking for me. He must have used my full name—as he always did—because the junior he had asked for help sounded confused. Of course, I couldn't see anything that was happening; I was making assumptions based on the mumbling I could hear on the other side of the heavy black curtain. After several others became involved in the conversation, someone finally realized who Chaseyn was looking for and guided him to my location. Wouldn't it have been easier if he just used my nickname, I thought quietly. Just then, the thick velvet curtain swayed at his

touch, and he finally broke through. He stood before me, arms outstretched, welcoming me in.

Without thinking about my actions, I rose to my feet and folded myself into him. His clean, soapy smell enveloped me. This was right. It was where I belonged. And, I knew in that moment that, somehow, we would put everything behind us and do whatever it took to make *us* work.

“I love you, Cordelia,” he whispered into my hair. His hand was now firmly gripping the back of my head, forcing me even tighter to his chest. “It’s time.”

With my arms still wrapped around him tight, I looked up at him in awe.

“I can’t do this anymore. I’m going crazy without you,” he explained, looking down at me and placing a single peck on my lips. “It was never supposed to be like this, but it is, and there’s nothing I can do. You win.”

I wrapped my fingers tightly into his curls and pulled his lips to mine. This was the

moment I had been waiting for. Now that it was here, I had no idea what to do next. Rob was, of course, starring in the play, so I asked him to tell Addie I would be preoccupied tonight, and I brushed off the rest of rehearsal. Where to begin, I thought, as we walked hand-in-hand through the long corridor leading to the outdoors. We had been apart as long as we had been together, and there was so much I wanted to talk about, but I knew, more than anything, that we had to get to the truth before we could move forward.

“I’m not who your grandma thinks I am,” Chaseyn said coolly as we slid into the front seat of his car.

Somehow, he seemed to know what I was thinking.

“I’m not *him*.”

A shiver shot through my body, and I struggled to suppress its rippling effect. How could he know about my grandma’s ridiculous theory? Surely, she hadn’t told him the same inane story she had told me. What would be the point? Fear tore through me as I wracked my brain for another solution.

“I don’t know where *he* is,” Chaseyn added, obviously referring to Alexei. “I haven’t seen *him* in decades.”

Despite my sudden shock, the last sentiment wasn't lost on me. Chaseyn had only been alive for less than two decades. He was confessing to something, though I wasn't sure exactly what. Yet.

Rain spattered on the steel frame of his perfectly preserved vehicle. The sound as it hit the ragtop was painfully loud in the sudden silence inside the car. I wasn't sure if I should run in fear from what was likely a monster or sit and listen to the man before me. My feet were like lead, glued to the floor, and I knew that, despite my better judgment, I would not move. Breaking the ice, I asked what I hoped would be a simple question.

"Chaseyn? Did you rebuild this car yourself."

"Something like that," he said, looking up from under his heavy brow. A wicked grin crossed his face, and for the first time, I noticed his pronounced eyeteeth.

"Like what," I asked, already certain of the answer.

“I sort of bought it new,” he said, looking away to hide his smile.

I did the math quickly in my head, knowing I wouldn't be able to make sense of it all. I let out a loud gasp, and spun around swiftly to reach for the door handle. Chaseyn grabbed my hands in his own. His grip was firm but gentle, but the smile that was gracing his face only a few seconds earlier had transformed into a thin line along his lips.

“Don't,” he said, pleading. “Don't be afraid. It's not *quite* what you think.”

How could he possibly know what I was thinking when I hadn't even sorted through the details yet. The rain poured down harder, and a loud thunder clap roared through the town. Seconds later, a sharp light seared the sky. It was as if the gods were interpreting my thoughts, using inclement weather to express my inner turmoil. The last thing I wanted was to run halfway across town in a torrential downpour, so I sat still, waiting for Chaseyn to speak.

He didn't. Not for a long time. When he did, his words cut through me like a warm knife through butter.

“I don’t know what I would do without you,” he said, choosing every word with extreme care. “My kind, we are destined to spend our lives searching for our one perfect match. Most never find that person. But, without even trying, I found you.”

Tears spilled from my eyes. My heart was throbbing inside my chest, and I could barely breathe. Without any thought, I tore my hands free and sprang to my feet. Stumbling out of the car, I left the door wide open and started to run. The water weighed down my clothes, slowing my pace, but I kept moving, salt water flowing from my eyes. Chaseyn scrambled over the gearshift and out the passenger door after me. He was calling after me, desperately pleading.

“Please, Cordelia. Don’t do this,” he shouted. Though his voice cracked and a sob escaped his lips, not a single tear ran down his cheek, and I knew then he was not of my species.

I felt like I was running full throttle, but I was barely making any headway. In a flash, he was there, and I was huddled in his arms, half holding him, half punching. After a few rounds, I tucked my head into the crook of his arm, and gave myself over to his

embrace. As much as I wanted to run, I knew I never could.

“Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t leave,” he said. “Even if *you* wanted me to.”

Never looking up, still cradled in his arm, I nodded. The rain fell down around us in sheets, and we stood there statue still. His arms wrapped tight around me, head dipped protectively over my own.

“I swear to you,” he said, lifting my chin to meet his gaze. “I’m not *him*.”

I nodded once. Our eyes locked, lips brushed gently. He kissed me then, deeply, passionately.

“You’re going to catch a cold,” Chaseyn said, grave concern on his face. “Let’s get you into something warm and dry.”

Instead of returning to the car, Chaseyn bent slightly to cradle my body in his arms. His smooth lips caressed my own, and he started walking slowly across the park, never lifting his gaze from mine. I rested my head against his broad shoulder. Any fear I was feeling washed away with the rain. A wave of exhaustion swept over me, and I fell asleep in his arms. A few minutes later, I heard my mom’s worried voice, but I could barely lift my head.

“Chaseyn. Lia. Is everything okay? You’re soaked” she asked anxiously.

“We’re fine, Mrs. Jameson,” he said smoothly. “We had some car trouble and had to walk in the rain. She’s pretty worn out. Is it okay if I carry her up to her room?”

Such a gentleman. Despite the fact that he hadn’t been a part of our lives for nearly

two months, Chaseyn knew my mother would never mind if he was involved. She was totally entranced by him. Much like I was. He crept carefully up the stairs, trying hard not to wake me. My mother walked slowly behind, eager to help me dress in dry clothes.

“Chaseyn,” I whispered. “Don’t leave.”

He nodded, and then looked to my mom for approval. She motioned for him to wait downstairs. I was so tired, I could barely stand. All of the emotion and running had sapped my energy. My mom grabbed some clean flannel pajama bottoms and a fleece sweater from my dresser drawer and helped me peel off my wet clothes. I was soaked to the core, making it hard to strip the fabric that was plastered to my body away from my skin. We chuckled as I tried to wriggle free. It had been weeks since my mom and I had been this close. After all that had happened with Chaseyn, I had shut her out again emotionally. I had shut everyone out, even Addie. The truth was that I didn’t want to get hurt again, so I buried myself in my schoolwork instead. I couldn’t help but think that maybe Chaseyn was the reason why—our common ground. When we were done, I crawled under my warm quilt. I could already feel the sick creeping over me.

“Can Chaseyn stay a while,” I asked quietly, my eyes closed. My mom simply nodded and smiled.

Chaseyn appeared in the doorway, and I patted the fluffy down duvet flat beside me. He looked unscathed by the circumstances. My mother loaned him some baggy sweatpants and an extra large shirt she kept for bloated days. He was always so impeccable; it made me smile to see him dressed this way. He sat backward in the chair at my desk, facing me with his back to the window. He rested his chin on the top of the chair; he was pensive.

“Tell me more,” I mumbled. “I want to know the rest. Are you some kind of hybrid freak?”

He laughed.

“More like a super freak,” he said, winking.

“I bet you can do some really neat stuff,” I said, knowing my choice of words sounded

childish and silly.

“I don’t want to disappoint you,” he started. “You seem to be expecting something extraordinary. I’m just your run-of-the-mill, semi-immortal being.”

I wasn’t sure how to react—it was possible that Chaseyn was a threat, but I had trouble believing that. Flight was my first thought, but running away *again* wasn’t going to solve anything. I decided to channel my response in another direction.

“I’m not sure what that means. Can you be a bit more specific?”

“Alexei is my father,” he said.

I gasped, terrified, now. He caught me completely off guard. Suddenly, our light-hearted fooling around went awry. Until he said Alexei’s name, I had convinced myself that it was still possible we were talking about two totally different things—that Chaseyn had inadvertently played into my worst fears without knowing it.

Clearly, I was the one being played. My grandma wasn't entirely wrong. Alexei hadn't come for me, but his offspring had. Beneath the blankets, I scrambled to pull my knees up tight to my chest in a defensive pose. If Alexei was Chaseyn's father, it could only mean one thing. A part of him, if not all of him, was vampire. Chaseyn noticed the realization in my expression, and he immediately began to reason with me.

"Don't," Chaseyn urged. "Don't be afraid."

It was easy for him to say. He wasn't staring his destiny in the face.

"Are you kidding me? He sent you to do his dirty work—reel me in—and then, what? You'll turn me over to him to be his immortal bride for all eternity. Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"No, Cordelia. It's not like that, I swear. Calm down," he said, his hands out in front of his chest to brace against a potential attack from me.

“Then, what is it, Chaseyn,” I was trying to be abrupt but calm so as not to raise my mom’s suspicion. “What are you doing in my neck of the woods if you’re not doing his bidding?”

It all seemed so incredulous. The fact that there had been some truth to my grandma’s story seemed to be the least of my problems. Chaseyn’s ominous confession was a bigger concern to me now. He had all but confirmed that the finer details of her tale were true. I had no idea what to do next. It seemed futile to flee, so I waited impatiently for Chaseyn to speak.

“I’m not here to hurt you, Cordelia. It’s quite the opposite, in fact,” he said trying to calm me, but it was no use. I trembled uncontrollably. “Please, let me explain.”

Realizing my options were limited, I decided to remain perfectly still. This same person who had once made me feel more safe than ever before was now the thing I feared most on the planet. Perhaps, if I avoided sudden movements, he would let me live.

Chaseyn stood calmly, avoiding quick movements so as not to frighten me further. He crept slowly up the side of the bed, and I pressed harder against the headboard, my legs pushing me back farther and farther away from him, until there was no place left for me to go. He sat on the edge of the bed at my side and stroked my hair back from my forehead. Tears flowed freely down my cheeks. Choking back the sobs, I managed to shake my head quickly from side to side, indicating I didn't appreciate his caress.

"Shhh," he whispered, bringing his face closer to mine. I imagined his teeth sinking into my neck, and a chill ran through my spine. "I'm not going to hurt you. I can't do what you think I can."

Swiping with the back of my hand at my tear-stained cheeks, I lifted my head to look into his eyes. He was intense, and perhaps, a bit saddened at the thought that I was so frightened by him. He took my chin in his hands and forced me to look at him while he spoke. His grasp was firm, unrelenting.

"I'm not a vampire, if that's what you're thinking," he said, staring me straight in the eyes, unblinking.

“But—” I started to talk, but he cut me off abruptly.

“Let me finish first,” he implored.

I nodded.

“But, I can turn you,” he finished, bracing for my reaction. I pulled away from him, standing quickly and walking to the other side of the room. “I wouldn’t, Cordelia. Not without your permission.”

A million thoughts raced through my mind, drowning out the words he spoke next. He muttered something about protecting me, immortality, and never hurting me intentionally. That was the problem—he could hurt me unintentionally.

“Permission? To make me a vampire? This is ridiculous, Chaseyn. Did my grandma put you up to this?”

He shook his head, but it was starting to make sense to me now. She had found a comrade in Chaseyn, and the two of them had set up this crazy plan just to get a rise out of me.

“Cordelia, if I were to bite you in the jugular now, it would start the transformation process,” he explained, his face stone-cold serious. It was suddenly clear that this was no joke. “It wouldn’t take immediately. I would have to do it several times, and then, you would need to drink some of my blood to complete the process.”

I was pacing the room now, rubbing my temples frantically as I let the words soak in. I didn’t dare look at him. I didn’t want to witness the sincerity on his face as he explained vampire philosophy. The fact that I was even playing along with this ridiculous ruse was unthinkable.

“And, then I would be a vampire?”

“Well, something like that, anyway. It’s not quite that simple. Your human body has to die first,” he said lackadaisical. Ignoring my look of disbelief, he continued with his

reasoning. “My mom and I began looking for you as soon as we heard about the curse of Lorelei Dryden. We thought it would be difficult because we weren’t actually sure you existed, but it was surprisingly simple. Your family is easy to trace. Your great grandmother came to the United States as a war bride in 1945. She lived with her husband’s family in Amarillo, Texas, and they had three children—your grandma and her two sisters. As you know, two were brunette and one was blond. None fit the description to fulfill Alexei’s curse. Your grandmother was the only one to bear a daughter, your mother, but she, too, did not meet Alexei’s standards.”

“How do you know so much about my family,” I asked awestruck by his knowledge of my entire family tree.

“Public records. They’re surprisingly easy to trace,” he explained matter of fact. “Anyway, your mom went off to college and met your dad. You were born soon after, and they moved here for your dad’s work. We didn’t know when we came here if you would fit the description, but it didn’t take me long to find out. I knew the minute I laid eyes on you at school that day that you were Lorelei Dryden’s kin. Have you ever seen her picture?”

I shook my head, and he pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket. He unfolded the

relic carefully and reached across the room to hand it to me. I didn't want to come too near to him, so I gripped the corner from the farthest distance I could manage. I was taken aback by the face staring back at me from the tattered image. I gasped loudly. It was as if I was looking into a mirror.

"Ah, you see the resemblance," he said. It was impossible to miss. From the auburn ringlets to her golden brown eyes, she looked nearly identical to me. "Beautiful, isn't she? I can see why Alexei was so taken with her."

The sound of his name sent a tremor through my body.

"Alexei will come for you eventually, but only once you have reached a certain maturity, if you will. That's why it was so important for me to come now, while you're still so young."

I still didn't understand why Chaseyn was here. He could tell.

"I came to stop him."

“Why?”

“My mom was victim to his charisma when she was human,” he began to explain.

“Your mom’s not human?”

“No. But she was when she met him. They had a whirlwind courtship, marrying just before he was scheduled to ship out to Normandy during the Second World War. She became pregnant immediately with me. He knew he had to turn her or risk losing us both. I’m half human, half vampire, but she is completely undead.”

“I’m still not sure I understand why you want to help me and not *him*,” I said cautiously.

“He never came back for us. He left us to learn the ways of this new life on our own, which is unacceptable to our kind. Had he not been the ‘child’ of such an ancient,

formidable vampire, others would have tortured him with the most severe of punishments. But that is a story for another time,” Chaseyn said casually. “For most of their short-lived union, Mina and Alexei lived in his cottage in the woods. He never returned to the house after the war. Though we remained there for a brief while when I was first born—and visited for short stays often over the years—Mina hated being in isolation. She wanted to be among others like *us*. Fortunately, in Europe *our kind* are much more common, and Mina soon found a coven working as folk musicians in a Soho pub where she had taken a job as a barmaid. At first, she wasn’t aware of *what* they were, but they knew immediately that she had a dark secret. One evening, they invited her to their home in a dark alley behind the tavern. In her previous form, she would have feared for her life, thinking these beautiful, brooding creatures wanted more than she was willing to give. But soon, she clued in to their alternate lifestyle. They took her—*us*—in under their wings to help us adjust to this life of eternal darkness. I hate to think where we would be today if not for them. We stayed with them for only a short time—about 15 years.”

“But, what about *him*,” I asked, frustrated that he hadn’t said any more about Alexei.

“We only know what those most-hospitable vampires told us years ago. Alexei was a relatively young vampire at the time, having been turned about 100 years earlier. His father, though, was one of the ancients, offspring of the original immortal couple. He

was very powerful, and he passed some of that power on in his blood. But that's a story for another time.

"My mother didn't know what Alexei was when she married him. She didn't choose this life, and she's not the only one. He's done this to other unsuspecting women. It's nearly impossible to know who he will prey on next, but we knew he would come for you one day soon. If we could even stop him from claiming one more innocent life..."

"So that's it? All this time, you've been leading me on in an effort to save me from *him*? How could you lie to me like this? I fell in love with you."

"I'm not done," he said, fury raging like a storm in his mossy eyes. "That first day, at the school, I saw you, and something happened that I wasn't expecting. Something I couldn't control. This is going to sound silly, and I'm embarrassed to even speak the words, but it was love at first sight. You felt it, too. I know you did."

He was right. From the moment I first had laid eyes on him at the back of the English class, and then again in the hall later, I knew we had an impenetrable connection.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Not ever.”

“How can you be so sure? Don’t you have uncontrollable primal urges? I’ve read *Dracula*.”

Gregarious laughter rolled off his lips, and I thought he might actually bust a gut.

“What,” I shrugged innocently. By now, my fear had eased, and I felt fairly certain that Chaseyn was harmless—to me anyway.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I’m not a vampire. I’m human—mostly,” he said, grabbing my hand and placing it on his chest so I could feel his heartbeat.

“It’s the mostly part that scares me,” I said, curling into his arms.

“For all intents and purposes, I’m no different from you, with the exception of a few

minor details.”

“Can you fly,” I asked deadpan.

He just smiled and shook his head.

“Does holy water burn your skin,” I asked next.

Chaseyn rolled his eyes. I was taunting, and he knew it. Relief washed over him; I could tell by the way his shoulders relaxed before I asked the next question.

“Do you read minds?”

Now, Chaseyn was laughing uncontrollably. He was taking great pleasure in my ignorance.

“Well, why don’t you enlighten me, then,” I said, embarrassed that I was so clearly naïve to immortal code. My hands were trembling, but my anguish had softened. Still, I wondered, now that I knew his secret, would some sort of undead justice league force him to kill me?

When Chaseyn finally regained his composure, he looked at me with sincere concern. I wondered what he was contemplating. Perhaps, he was deciding my fate.

“Forget everything you thought you knew,” he began.

“That doesn’t leave very much,” I said.

He shrugged and continued.

“I can’t fly or leap tall buildings—just small ones—and reading minds is just a myth, too,” he began.

“Well, that sounds like a rip off. What’s the advantage,” I asked.

“That I’m going to look this good forever,” he said with a wink. “Seriously? I’m not sure you would call them advantages.”

I looked at him with pleading eyes. Now that he had entrusted me with his secret, I wanted to know everything, and he was holding out.

“I have heightened awareness on multiple levels—it’s kind of like sensory overload. I can hear a pin drop, run like the wind, smell the faintest odor, and see with incredibly clarity for miles. I have exceptionally precise aim, my intellect is incomparable, and my reflexes are second-to-none,” he explained.

“Anything else,” I asked.

“I have a reflection, as you know, but true vampires do not, and my saliva has a healing power. Remember when we first met...that wound...no scar,” he said, before carrying on with a snicker. “Oh, and, I don’t sleep in a coffin and garlic, holy water,

and crucifixes...more myths.”

“That’s it?”

“One last thing,” he added. “I have a sixth sense. I am incredibly intuitive.”

That last part explained a lot, I thought. Like how he always seemed to know what I was thinking or planning before even I did.

“Is that right,” I asked.

He smiled coyly.

“I think I might need an example to illustrate what you mean.”

“Well, I know that your mom is likely getting suspicious about what’s happening up

here. We're being too quiet," he said.

"That's too obvious," I replied.

"Okay, um, let me think of something else. You're hungry."

"My stomach growled, and it's been six hours since I last ate. Anybody could draw that conclusion," I goaded.

Chaseyn shrugged.

"I guess you'll just have to wait and see," he said, reaching his hand out, palm up, next to my head.

"What are you doing," I asked confused.

“Shhh. Wait.”

Just then, my left earring fell from my lobe, landing softly in his waiting hand.

“Lucky guess,” I said, though I was clearly impressed. He smiled like the Cheshire cat.

“I’ve got to go,” he said, kissing me on the head and dashing for the door. “I should head downstairs before your mom comes up. I’ll tell her you’re sleeping. She’ll likely come up in a minute or two to check that I’m not lying. Curl up on your side, tuck your arms under your pillow, and breathe deeply.”

“How did you know that’s how I sleep?”

“Really? I thought you were paying better attention,” he chided. “Have you forgotten already?”

“Wait,” I shouted just above a whisper. Chaseyn turned quickly on his heel to face

me, sensing the urgency in my voice. “We’re hardly through here.”

Chaseyn was stepping backward, inching his way closer and closer to the door. I had mere seconds to get out the words I needed to say before he would disappear into the narrow hallway.

“You’re practically over it,” he replied smugly, his hand reaching behind his back for the doorknob. “I can tell that you’re warming up to the idea. Everything will be back to normal soon.”

“You never told me about Alexei. What’s he going to do to me?”

“Nothing,” he said firmly.

“Nothing,” I repeated. Surely, we hadn’t gone through this entire charade for nothing.

“Not while I’m here. I promise.”

And, he was gone. Sure enough, less than five minutes later, I heard the soft pads of my mom's feet climbing the staircase. She peeked her head inside the door and seemed sufficiently satisfied with what she saw. I, of course, appeared to be sleeping soundly. In actuality, I was working hard to maintain control as I pondered all of the outrageous events that had transpired over the afternoon. It explained so much—the cool breeze whenever Chaseyn was nearby, the low gasps as my finger bled, the calming effect he had on people, the haunting dreams and how they stopped when he arrived. It was so clear now. He had been there all along, keeping a constant vigil outside my bedroom window.

I was in love with a semi-immortal, mutant freak. Around here, the biggest problem most couples faced was whether they should vote republican or democratic or if they should raise their kids Catholic or Protestant. I wondered how we would explain *this* to our kids. I supposed we could always offer them their choice of blood or milk with their meals.

Once I knew my mom had cleared the room and was firmly planted in front of the television watching her favorite soap opera, I reached for the phone beside my bed. There was just one more thing nagging at my conscience, and I needed an answer. I

hit speed dial and waited for the warmth of his familiar voice on the other end of the line. When he answered, I didn't waste any time with formal greetings. If he was truly intuitive, I wouldn't have much time to get out the words before he caught on to the reason for my call. I blurted out what was on my mind.

"Chaseyn, I just need to know one more thing," I said hesitantly.

"Anything."

"Were you ever going to tell me?"

Silence. I had my answer.

Chapter 23 - Catastrophe

For the most part, life went back to normal the next day—normal as in how it had been before Chaseyn and I had taken a break from each other. We were once again inseparable. I still had plenty of unanswered questions—and I was a tiny bit terrified of *what* he was—but I tried to overlook those details. At least, for a while. Chaseyn had been pretty forthcoming in the sanctuary of my bedroom, and I decided to cut him some slack. We never spoke of the secrets that were revealed that day. Life continued this way for a long time. Until, one day, my life changed course.

“Lia, you’re grandma’s had an accident,” my mom said. She sounded serious, but she seemed calm. If something truly bad had happened, she would have been a mess, so I waited quietly for her to finish. “She slipped on some ice going up the stairs to her house, and she broke her hip.”

“That’s terrible, mom. Is she going to be okay?”

“She’ll be fine, but she could use some help getting around,” she continued. “That’s what I really wanted to talk to you about.”

I sensed I wasn't going to like what was coming next.

"Well," she said hesitantly. "Next week is spring break, and I thought it would be great if you could go stay with grandma for the week. She could really use your help."

It was worst than I had thought. In my head, the conversation took a totally different direction. I was sure my mom was going to say that she and Kevin would be venturing to Amarillo to cater to my grandma's every whim. I most definitely wasn't expecting this turn.

"Mom," I said angrily. "It's senior year, and there are at least a million activities planned for next week. Not to mention I have mid-terms to study for."

"That's perfect then, honey. You won't be distracted from your studies with all of those frivolous activities if you're staying at grandma's. You want that scholarship, don't you? Your flight leaves Friday after your shift at the bakery."

“Seriously? I don’t even get a chance to hang out with my friends once. We had plans,” I hollered, storming out of the room frantically. I was furious. “What about Chaseyn? And Addie?”

It was Wednesday, and I decided to make every minute count. Before I could even pick up the phone to call him, Chaseyn was on the doorstep ringing the bell. From my bedroom, I had seen his car pull up. I was starting to buy into the whole sixth sense notion, but I kept that to myself, for now. I hoped his presence would have a calming effect on both me and my mom.

“Chaseyn, sweetheart, come in,” my mom said in a sugary voice as she pulled open the door. “Lia, you have a visitor.”

I flew down the stairs two at a time, throwing my arms around him to show my sincere affection. Chaseyn set one foot back to steady himself against the weight of my body lunging toward him. Though his broad frame could easily support my slight size, I had taken him off guard with my unpredictable display of emotion.

“Something’s up,” he said with an inflection that suggested he was asking a question rather than making a statement.

“Lia is unhappy about a trip she has to take over the break,” my mom said before I could force out the words. I was tucked tightly into the folds of Chaseyn’s strong arms.

Unhappy may have been the ultimate understatement. Addie had always been the one with a flair for the melodramatic, but that afternoon, I could have given Greta Garbo a run for her money with my performance. If memory serves, I actually draped the back of my hand daintily across my forehead before collapsing onto to the couch.

“I hate this. We won’t get to spend any time together,” I sobbed, feeling only slightly guilty that I was acting so selfishly. I knew my grandma needed someone—me—but I was terribly resentful of her in that moment.

Chaseyn lifted my feet, placing them gently down in his lap, as he took a seat next to me on the couch. My mom left the room to give us a few minutes alone together to discuss the situation.

“It sounds like your grandma really needs you right now, Cordelia. You won’t have many moments like this is your life. Trust me. Cherish the time you’ll have alone with her,” Chaseyn said, always the voice of reason.

“But, what if…”

“What if she asks about me,” he finished my thought. Again, was this intuition, or was it just obvious? “Tell her I’ve been busy draining blood from unsuspecting small-town do-gooders. And, local authorities are frantically trying to piece together evidence to determine the source of a series of bizarre deaths in the community.”

“Seriously, Chaseyn. This isn’t funny.”

This was the first time we had broached the subject since the day I learned the truth about him. Chaseyn had been very accommodating that one day, but I knew that if I pressed for more, he would close down. Shut me out. That was the last thing I wanted, so I let it be. True, the knowledge of *what* Chaseyn really was lingered

constantly in the back of my mind. Part of me was always just a tiny bit on edge when we were alone together—despite the fact that I knew he would never intentionally hurt me. Today, though, I was forced to bring up this forbidden subject once again.

“Who’s laughing,” he responded, deadpan. “Okay. Tell her I would never hurt you. That I prefer to maintain a human façade, so she doesn’t need to worry about me drinking your blood.”

“Oh, of course. That’s a great plan,” I said, sarcasm dripping from every word. I proceeded to act out just how I pictured the conversation between me and my grandma. “So, it turns out Chaseyn is Alexei’s son, but he swears he only wants to keep me safe. Don’t worry, grandma. He’s not a real vampire; he really likes cupcakes. After all, how many vampires do you know that have a hankering for butter cream frosting and candy sprinkles?”

Chaseyn laughed and shook his head.

“You’re right. She’ll never buy into that,” he said seriously, looking pensive. After a few seconds, he offered a new solution. “You should go with pie. Everybody likes pie.”

“Chaseyn,” I whined. Irritated by his childish response, I slapped his arm away from its resting place atop my outstretched legs. He didn’t budge. I should have known my feeble attempt would be no match against his supernatural strength.

“Okay. Okay,” he said, finally ready to provide a viable response. “Try this. Tell her the truth.”

The next two days were a blur of activity. After school on Thursday, Addie helped me pack. Seeing as though the entire break would be devoted to catching up on my studies and nursing my ailing—sort of—grandma back to health, I would require little more than sweatpants and pajamas. Still, Addie insisted I take at least one dress and a blouse, just in case. In case of what, I wasn’t sure, but it was easier to comply than to argue with her. Before I could stop her, Addie had also packed a full manicure set, which she had bought new upon hearing of my unplanned travels, and a face palette from Bobbi Brown’s latest collection.

“Addie, what are you doing? I’m trying to keep it down to one carry-on bag.”

“You never know what unexpected events may come up. You have to be prepared for anything,” she said, shrugging as she tossed a flat iron and black kitten heels into the bag. “All you have in here are sneakers and T-shirts. It just won’t do.”

Friday came and went too quickly. I had barely had time to absorb the fact that I was leaving town when the pivotal moment arrived. My mom declined to let Chaseyn drive me to the airport. She was certain he would refuse to assist in any attempt to flee that I might have been planning, but she wanted to spend some time alone with me to be certain I understood what was expected of me in Amarillo. However, she allowed Chaseyn to pick me up after work so that we could have at least a few moments of privacy to say our final farewells, for the week, at least.

Chaseyn slipped his large fingers between mine as we drove in silence. The dark, star-flooded sky encircled us as Chaseyn drove at a snail’s pace along back alleys and side streets—clearly taking the longest route possible to stretch out the time we still had together. My mom would be wearing circles in the carpet as she paced the room awaiting my arrival. All I cared about were these final moments—untainted by imperfect words and sadness. In the quiet of the dusky moonlight, I chose to reflect on the past few months and all Chaseyn and I had endured. I sensed he was doing the same.

Finally, inevitably, we reached my front drive. Chaseyn gazed longingly at me before twisting his fingers from between my own. I sat still, wanting the moment to last, but he moved swiftly to my side of the vehicle. Opening my door, he signalled my exit. I shook my head—a negative response. He smiled and motioned again for me to move. Sticking out my bottom lip into a childlike pout, I shook my head again. Before I knew it, I was airborne, saddled in Chaseyn’s strong arms as he carried me up the path to the brightly lit porch. Gently, he placed me down on the swinging lounge chair, where we sat together again in silence. After what seemed like seconds but must have been minutes, the drapes opened slightly, just enough for me to see my mom motion at the invisible watch on her left wrist. I nodded knowingly but prolonged the moment. She held up two fingers, and I nodded again.

“You have to go,” Chaseyn said without looking in her direction. “Two-minute call.”

Through glassy eyes, thick with tears that I refused to let fall, I looked up at Chaseyn who appeared to be equally unhappy. Heavy lids veiled his almond-shaped eyes. In unison, we stood and walked to the door, out of my mom’s sightline. Chaseyn took me in his arms tenderly, and I began to whisper how I would miss being away from him.

“I’ll—”

“Shhh,” he said, pressing his finger lightly against my lips. “I know. Me, too.”

Of course he knew what I would say. He had a sixth sense. This time, I opted not to question his abilities and trust he had it right. By now, tears flowed freely down my face, freezing to my cheeks and dampening his thin sweater. Chaseyn was always cool to the touch, but he never suffered the effects of the cold. Holding me out half an arm’s length away, he wiped each new tear as it fell. A single tear slid down his alabaster cheek as he drew me back into his embrace and planted a firm kiss on my forehead. Without a sound, he tucked a small white envelope in my hand—just like the one he gave me at the bakery so long ago—and walked away, never looking back. I knew more tears had stained his flawless face, and he didn’t want me to see. As I watched him drive away, I could see his deep green eyes staring back in the rear-view mirror. He lifted the back of his hand to his cheek at the same time that my mom opened the door and pulled me inside.

“Grab your stuff, Lia. We’ve got to go,” she urged.

Try as I might to suck back the tears, they wouldn't stop flowing. My shoulders heaved, sobs rolled like waves off my every breath. We had been on the road for nearly twenty minutes, but the image of Chaseyn driving away, tears in his eyes, remained as vivid as though I were still watching it happen live.

"Honey, you have to stop. You're going to choke," my mom said soothingly, using her right hand to pat my back in a calming manner. "Take a deep breath, sweetie. One at a time."

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. I willed my body to listen. I inhaled deeply, but my lungs rejected the intake of air, and I began coughing. Hard. Until, I nearly passed out. My mom pulled the car over and ran around to my side, bottle of water in hand. Sweat drenched my brow, and my face was red with a heat that surged beneath the skin.

"Lia, sweetie? Honey? Drink this," she said, frantically pouring water into my gaping mouth. "This is silly, Lia. You'll be back in a week. You'll see him soon enough."

Water dribbled down my chin, soaking through the front of my thin, white t-shirt. My arms flailed in an attempt to push my mom and the water bottle away.

“Go. I’ll miss the plane if you don’t start driving.”

I longed to miss the plane, but my conscience had started to get the best of me. It was true, my grandma needed my help, and it seemed a simple gesture. I loved my grandma. We had always been close, and under normal circumstances, I would have been eager to spend a week chumming around with her. But now, I feared being alone with her. She knew too much. Maybe, even more than I did.

The rest of the way, my mom regaled me with care instructions and appropriate etiquette for the duration of my visit. Externally, I had calmed considerably, enough so that I managed to hem and haw and nod at all the right parts of her speech. Forty-five minutes seemed like four hours, but we finally arrived at the airport with just enough time to rush me through the gates.

“Wait, Lia,” my mom said, tugging my arm. I stumbled back a few steps to where she was now standing totally still, a small black object resting in her palm.

“Mom, I have to go. They’re boarding in five, and I have to pass security.”

Quickly, I threw my arms around her awkwardly—I was upset about the trip but not so mad that I couldn’t spare a decent parting sentiment. I turned to walk away when she pushed the object into my palm.

“I know you’ve always wanted one,” she said proudly, nodding toward the cell phone in her hand. “I thought now would be as good a time as any. You can call Chaseyn and Addie any time you want while you’re away. I got you a long distance plan. And, if you can forgive me for this, you can call me, too.”

“Thank you,” I said, genuinely elated. While I had hoped that the wells of my eyes had dried up, I quickly learned they hadn’t. I blew her a kiss and dashed through the security doors, cell phone squeezed tightly between my fingers.

With seconds to spare, I scurried through security and to the gate just as the perky attendant announced the final boarding call. Once safely onboard the aircraft—belted

in, baggage stowed—I began dialing the familiar number. Just one last call.

“Hey,” I said quietly at the first sound of the voice on the other end. “I love you.”

Seconds, maybe minutes passed before I finally received a response.

“Me, too,” my mom said, a hint of surprise noticeable in her tone. “Me, too, sweetheart.”

Over the intercom, the captain demanded that all passengers prepare for takeoff by powering down all electronic devices. I snapped shut the phone and closed my eyes.

As promised, a man was waiting for me at the airport, a small cardboard placard scrawled with my name held securely in his hands. Mr. Bethsby, I was told, had lived next door to my grandma for the past 35 years. His wife had died about four years ago, and now, he passed the time lending a hand doing odd jobs for other seniors in the neighborhood. He mowed my grandma’s lawn twice a week. At first, I wondered why he couldn’t just check in on my grandma a few times each day to be sure she

had everything she needed and hadn't collapsed to an unconscious state on her way to the bathroom.

Apparently, when I was a little girl, I would tag along behind Mr. Bethsby when he walked his labradoodle to the local speedy mart. We would sit on the bench outside the shop doors and chug chocolate milk—me and Mr. Bethsby, not the dog. Now, the grey-haired waif of a man stood before me, porcelain dentures beaming as I lugged my overstuffed—thanks to Addie—duffle in his general direction.

“Lia,” he said gleefully as I approached. “You haven’t changed one bit from that sassy little rugrat. Do you remember how you used to pluck crab apples from my orchard and feed them to Buster? You were such a little menace.”

He actually pinched my cheeks when he said the last part. The events surrounding my current circumstances just kept getting worse. It had already been the longest five minutes of my life; I could only imagine how long the week would feel.

“Let’s get cracking,” he chuckled, sweeping his fragile arm in front of him as he spoke. I didn’t even know what that meant, but I figured I should start moving since

he was already at least ten paces ahead of me. “Coming? We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

Again, I could only pretend to comprehend his obscure comment, so I just grinned and tried to keep up. For a little man, he walked at breakneck pace. It was late, and the evening air was cool. I pulled my collar up tight around my neck and wrapped my arms across my chest in an effort to insulate against the unexpectedly cold climate.

“Cold?”

Clever. He must have been tapping in to Chaseyn’s special talents.

“I just thought it would be warmer, that’s all. Isn’t Texas a southern state?”

“You know, that’s what a lot of people think,” he started. “Well, technically, it is, but Amarillo...”

That's when I stopped listening. Mr. Bethsby muttered on for the next fifteen minutes about the climate in this particular part of the state—barometric pressure, cloud cover, average precipitation, nothing was off limits. Occasionally, I interjected with a polite, “oh” or “I see,” but truthfully, if he had asked me to repeat anything he had said—even the most recent comments—there was no way I could recall a single word. I wanted to feel guilty, but I was too exhausted to put in any effort. That's when I noticed we had come to a stop in front of the 24-hour supermarket.

“Well, hon, you ready for our first task as nursemaid?”

I looked around, but I was definitely the only person in earshot. Clearly, there had been some sort of misunderstanding, only I had the distinct impression I was the one who had misunderstood.

“I'm sorry. What was that,” I asked, trying to sound polite but failing miserably.

“Your grandma insisted we stop and pick up a few things on the way home, and who am I to deny an ailing woman her innocent commands,” Mr. Bethsby explained. “She gave me a list of your favorite things—pop tarts, rolled oats, tomato soup, gumdrops.

Just a few things she though would help make you more comfortable during your stay. She said I should get you anything you want.”

I didn't have the heart to tell him that gumdrops and pop tarts had failed to make my list of favorite things since I was twelve. Instead, I figured I could manage to choke them back for a few days or at least hide the evidence of their remains before leaving. As we made our way through the aisles, I managed to augment his acquisitions with a few of my favorite items of late—pretzels, pizza pops, and seedless grapes, to name a few. At the check stand, I dropped a handful of tabloids onto the conveyer, realizing I had no idea what sort of digital entertainment would be available at my grandma's house. In the potential absence of cable television and Internet access, the week would feel like an eternity. Not to mention, the less time I spent engaged in one-on-one conversation with my grandma, the less likely she would have an opportunity to confront me about Chaseyn. I was reluctant to provide any ammunition for her already overactive imagination.

“Well, here we are, sweetheart,” Mr. Bethsby announced as we rolled to a stop in front of my grandma's familiar bungalow. I had spent many a summer here as a young girl. When my dad died, the extended visits stopped. My mom needed to focus on school first, and later, her career. It had been at least five years since I had been to Amarillo. Due to a lack of impenetrable commitments, my grandma usually

came to us.

“Thanks, Mr. Bethsby,” I said, grabbing as many grocery bags in my hands as I could manage. Foolishly, I thought he would leave me be to carry our purchases and my belongings inside. How wrong I was.

“Drop those. Now,” he ordered, pointing toward the bags that were dangling from my wrists, cutting off my circulation and overflowing from both hands. “What do you think you’re doing?”

I continued hobbling up the path, leaving only my luggage—one carry-on bag—curbside. Quickly, he scrambled to grab the handle and follow me up the path. In one swift motion, I pushed open the door and called to my grandma.

“Grandma? I’m...we’re here. Where are—,” I shouted. Before I could finish the sentence, she popped up from the sofa in the sitting room just inside the front entrance.

“Lia, honey. I’ve missed you so much,” she said, pinching my cheeks tauntingly before planting a huge, wet kiss smack on my lips. She looked the picture of health, with the exception of the fact that she was using a wooden cane to help her balance as she sauntered about.

“Grandma? I thought mom said that you had broken your hip. Where’s your cast?”

“Let’s discuss that later, shall we,” she said, wrapping one arm around my shoulders and steering me toward the kitchen. “First, let’s eat. You must be parched. Hank, you will join us, won’t you?”

Something was crooked in Amarillo, and I had a feel it was a lot more than just my grandma’s right leg. It was painfully obvious that she had taken advantage of her situation and concocted a scheme to get me to come to her. I had a pretty good idea of her motivation, but I had no clue what she had in store.

A feast of my favorites was spread out on the dining table. Tall tapers stood amongst an array of fresh cut flowers in the center of the long table. Hank took a seat at the head, and my grandma sat to his right. She pulled out the chair beside her,

indicating I should make myself comfortable there.

“Grandma, you’re not well. You didn’t need to go to all this trouble just for me,” I stammered. While I was still upset that she was up to some crazy antics, I was touched that she had put forth such an effort.

“It was nothing. After all, how often does my sweet little girl come to town?”

Just then, there was a rap on the back door.

“Hank, would you mind,” my grandma asked.

As if on cue, Hank rose to his feet to greet the unexpected arrival—likely a canvasser of some sort, I figured. Moments later, he returned with an olive-skinned, strong-jawed boy who appeared to be about my age.

“Eli! It’s lovely of you to join us,” my grandma said, beaming as the handsome teen

—clad in designer jeans and a starched shirt—stepped into the room. “Lia, this is Eli, Hank’s grandson. He lives next door with Hank, and we thought it might be nice if he could show you around Amarillo while you’re here. He has this week off, too.”

“Grandma, I’ve been to Amarillo a million times. I hardly need the grand tour.”

“Well, you haven’t been in years. A lot has changed,” she countered.

“What? There’s a new shrine to the cattle industry on Main Street?”

“Lia,” my grandma snapped. “Be polite.”

She was right; I had overstepped. It wasn’t Eli’s fault that my grandma and his grandfather had cooked up some sort of ridiculous matchmaking scheme. I stood up and took a step toward the startlingly attractive young man, my hand extended.

“I’m sorry, Eli. My grandmother’s right; that was rude and uncalled for,” I said

sincerely. “Please. Let’s start over. My name’s Cordelia, but everyone—well, almost everyone—call’s me Lia.”

“Hi, Lia. It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said, taking my hand in his firm grip. Under any other circumstances, I would have been fawning all over such a strapping show of masculinity. With Chaseyn in the picture, I wasn’t in the slightest bit interested in anything Eli could offer, other than friendship—for the week, anyway. “I’d be happy to show you around. It gets pretty tired hanging around here with these guys all the time.”

Though I had reconciled to be courteous to Eli, I wasn’t ready to do my grandma and her shifty friend the same justice. I shot her a glare as we returned to our seats and began passing around the lukewarm roast beef and fixings.

Casual dinner conversation revealed that Eli’s parents had died in a car wreck when he was three. He had lived with Hank ever since. Before I could question why I didn’t remember meeting him when I would visit as a young girl, I learned the answer. Each June, Eli would travel to Pennsylvania to spend a few months with his mother’s parents—sort of a joint custody arrangement. Not once had our paths crossed as children as a result of these circumstances. He appeared to be nice enough—well

groomed and seemingly intellectual—so, by the end of the evening, I had concluded spending the week palling around with him would be a more pleasurable experience than lazing around my grandma’s house wallowing in my own self pity.

“So, I’ll swing by around eleven, okay,” Eli stated as he and Hank pulled on their jackets and prepared to leave.

I nodded in agreement.

“It’ll be fun. I promise,” he added, obviously sensing my skepticism. Maybe Chaseyn wasn’t the only one with a supernatural sixth sense.

When they were gone, I retreated to the dining room to begin clearing the table—doing my best to avoid my grandma. Seconds later, I heard the heavy thud of her cane on the wooden floors. We were alone. There was no place to hide, except under the table, and even I wasn’t stooping that low—literally and figuratively.

“Lia?”

“Not now, grandma. I’m not pleased with you.”

She seemed to understand that I was serious because she smiled a toothy grin then turned on her good leg, and hobbled out of the room and down the hall. When I heard the door hitch shut, I was grateful. It appeared she would leave me alone for the evening, but I knew tomorrow would be different.

Alone in my room, I pulled the small white note card from my bag. I needed to be near Chaseyn—emotionally, at least—for just a brief moment. I lay atop the bed and read his words.

Cordelia,

Miles may separate our physical beings, but no distance can come between our hearts. You are with me always.

C.

Nineteen words. That was all it took to calm my nerves and heal my soul.

Clanging. The piercing sound of chiming bells resounded through the tiny room.

“Agh,” I groaned loud enough to be heard down the hall. “What is that racket?”

And, that’s when I saw it sitting there on the bedside table. Someone had gone to the liberty of providing an archaic two-bell alarm clock and setting it to bellow out an excruciatingly painful sound at an hour so early even roosters would wince at the thought of rising.

“Stop. Just stop,” I shouted in a raspy voice, my mouth still dry with sleep. Reaching across the bed, I managed to pound the top of the silver gadget and put an end to the drilling din. Something I hadn’t noticed before knocked to the floor during the commotion. Its featherweight made no sound as it hit the floor. I rolled on my stomach to the edge of the bed and fumbled around the ground with the tips of my fingers until I felt the crunch of crisp paper against my skin. With a bit of awkward manoeuvring so that I was facing upright with the sheets twisting like licorice around my body, I pulled what appeared to be a recipe card to my face. My eyes—still

adjusting to the dim light of dawn and blurry from sleep deprivation—required coaxing to read the clumsy scrawl. With the note just inches from my face, I poured over the words.

Lia,

By now, you have learned that your grandma is not suffering to the extent that you had believed. Nonetheless, her hip is not completely well, as evidenced by the cane she uses to aid her walking ability. She wouldn't say why, but she really wanted to have you here this week. Her heart is in the right place, so go easy on her. She is in pain, but she'll never let you see how much. Anyway, she is going to need your help with a few things, which is why I have set an alarm to wake you at the crack of dawn. Your grandma rises early. Have a fresh pot of coffee brewing for when she awakes. That's your first task. Further instructions will be found in the kitchen.

Hank Bethsby

“Ugh,” was all I could manage to utter as I rolled toward the edge of the bed, landing

feet first on the floor before thrusting the rest of my body upward. Heavy footed, I clopped down the hall to the kitchen. A second note card rested atop the coffeemaker.

Lia,

Kudos for finding this note before your grandma. She said you were a sweet girl, and it seems she may be right since you appear willing to play along with my little charade. Your grandma would be very upset if she knew I had put you up to this, so let this be our little secret. I've laid out everything you will need to supply her with the morning essentials. Follow the instructions below, and you should have no trouble.

1. Fresh-ground coffee can be found on the third shelf from the bottom in the pantry. Place two scoops in the filter, and add four cups of water. Once it is done percolating, pour it into the tall zebra mug found in the cupboard above the sink. It's her favorite. She takes one drop of cream and two sugars.

2. Grab a tray from the cupboard beside the stove. You can use it to carry breakfast

to your grandma when you first hear her stir. This should happen around 6:45 a.m.

3. While the coffee is brewing, take a bagel out of the brown bag on the counter, and put it in the toaster. Strawberry cream cheese in the fridge.

4. The newspaper should be laying on the front step. Bring it in, and place it on the tray with the other items.

One last note card is waiting for you in the bathroom. Together, we can make sure your grandma is comfortable. I'm sure you want that as much as I do.

Hank

It was then that I realized Mr. Bethsby and my grandma were more than just friends. I wondered how long their affair had been carrying on and if my mom knew. I figured not, or she likely would have been less insistent that I spend the week here against my will.

I wasn't sure if I should be happy that someone cared so deeply about my grandma's welfare or if I should be concerned about the fact that he had sneaked throughout the house in the night leaving little clues about how to keep my grandma comfortable. I jumped back and forth between the two options while I prepared breakfast according to Hank's instructions, finally landing on the former. So long as Hank's intentions were pure, I had no problem with him playing caretaker to my grandma.

Before my grandma could wake, I dashed down the hall to the bathroom adjacent my room and began searching for the final message. It took a minute—pulling back the shower curtain, checking under the sink, and lifting the tissue container proved fruitless. However, inside the medicine cabinet, there was a small, thick envelope. This time the message was much more detailed. Hank had taken the time to write down all of my grandma's idiosyncrasies. From her favorite television shows to the time of day she would take a walk, he had listed everything. He said I should use the information to plan accordingly. There were no specific instructions, just suggestions. I folded the papers into a wad and stuffed them between the mattress and box spring in the guestroom bed where I had set up shop.

Despite the anger I had felt the night before—and was still harboring this morning—I

knew I should appreciate the fact that my grandma was healthy and able. After I had given her a chance to explain her intentions—and I had given her a piece of my mind—I would spend some quality time with her.

From down the hall, I could hear stirring in the master bedroom. I dropped the mattress corner and tiptoed into the corridor.

“Grandma, are you up,” I called just above a whisper. I hoped that if she was awake she would hear, but if she wasn’t, I didn’t want to wake her unnecessarily.

“Lia, sweetie, what are you doing up,” she said in a thick growl that ended in a coughing fit.

“Stay where you are,” I called as I ran down the hallway to the kitchen. After all of my hard work preparing her a breakfast in bed, I was not going to let her get up before she could enjoy it. “I mean it grandma. Don’t move. I’m already furious with you for whatever little ploy you have going on here. You don’t want me to tell my mother do you?”

The last part was uncalled for, and I knew it. I could tell that she had stopped making an effort to crawl out of bed, so there was no need to cast threats. Still, I wanted to take advantage of the fact that I had a captive audience. She needed to know I was keen to her plot and unhappy about the situation.

Like a toddler caught with her hand in the cookie jar, I wracked my brain in search of an excuse for committing such a kind act as making breakfast in bed when I was supposed to be so angry. My mind drew a blank. I paused for a moment outside her bedroom door, balancing the unstable tray atop my knee as I struggled to palm the doorknob. I still hadn't figured out what I would say once inside.

"Grandma," I nodded as I shuffled to her bedside and laid the tray across her lap.

"This is very nice," she said, fiddling with napkin and cutlery.

"Um hm," was all I could muster in response.

“You’re mad,” she said, stating the obvious.

Standing so that only part of my body was facing her, I twisted my head in her direction and narrowed my eyes. Suggesting I might be mad was a gross understatement.

“Okay, so maybe you’re furious, but Lia...” her voice trailed off as I started to walk out of the room.

“Wait,” she called after me; I could hear the pleading in her voice, and I knew I would cave in to her command. Coming to a sudden halt in the doorway, I turned to face her completely, my arms crossed tight across my chest. “You have every right to be upset, Lia. I would be.”

This was a good start, I thought, though I would never say so out loud. I relaxed my stance slightly to indicate she should continue.

“I really did fall. And, my hip—well, it’s in poor form,” she started to explain. “I knew

your mom would send you to stay with me, and I wanted to see you sooner than later. The way we left things the last time I saw you...it's been eating me up inside. I hate that you're so upset with me, Lia. We have always been so close, and now, I hardly ever talk to you. I had to do something."

"And you thought ruining spring break of my senior year would be your first step to forgiveness?"

"Oh, Lia. I guess I never realized what you would be giving up. I've been selfish."

"Yes. You have," I replied, storming out of the room. From the corner of my eye, I caught a glimpse of the clock on the kitchen wall. I could practically hear it mocking me as it flashed the time—7:15 a.m. It would be nearly four more hours before Eli would rescue me from what seemed like my own personal purgatory.

For the rest of the morning, we managed to stay out of each other's way. I sat on the edge of my fluffy bed—I preferred a firm mattress, so trying to sleep on it was, in my opinion, the equivalent of trying to swim in a pool of tapioca pudding. Nonetheless, I buried my head in the pages of my calculus textbook and began plugging away at

mathematical equations. After about an hour, I had managed to complete the entire assignment, as well as all of the trig questions we had been told to attempt. At this rate, I would be done all of my schoolwork before lunch, and I would have nothing left to keep me busy the rest of the week.

Two-and-a-half hours. I contemplated ways to spend the time before Eli would appear—hopefully. After all, I had only known him for a few hours. Perhaps, he was completely unreliable and would decide to skip out on our engagement. Surely, someone who looked and dressed that good would have plenty of available girls pounding down his door. And, I bet the football team, or some equally appealing set of jocks, would want to monopolize his time. Why would he want to spend a perfectly lovely Saturday morning with me? The answer came to me quickly. His grandfather would likely have his head if he even considered playing hooky from our plans. I found the thought ruthlessly consoling. For the next two hours—until the time I would have to consider making myself presentable—I caught up on emails and listened to tunes on my iPod. The time passed quicker than I had expected it would.

As promised, Eli was standing on the doorstep promptly at 11 a.m. The doorbell took me by surprise.

“You ready,” he asked as I pulled open the creaky oak door, motioning for him to come inside. After looking down to see that I already my sneakers fastened to my feet, he ignored my invitation. Instead, he stepped backward off the step and—never taking his gaze from mine—began slowly walking toward the curb, where an enormous, blue vehicle of some kind was parked awkwardly in front of Hank’s house—which was, of course, practically on top of my grandma’s driveway. How could I have missed this eyesore the night before? Even under the cover of night, I was sure it would be impossible to conceal.

“We’re going in that,” I questioned as I pulled the door tight behind me. For half-of-a-second I had an internal debate about locking the door, and I finally settled on leaving it unlocked. I felt fairly certain that Mr. Bethsby would be over to check on my grandma before Eli and I had left tread marks from our departure. He could lecture me later about security concerns.

Eli laughed and disappeared behind the massive machine. As I struggled to climb into the passenger seat, the engine roared to life. Next to a jet engine, it was, possibly, the most deafening sound I had ever encountered.

“Where are we going,” I asked innocently, secretly hoping that the destination was

nearby so that I would not be confined to this hideous wreck any longer than absolutely necessary.

“It’s a surprise,” he said smiling, his crystal blue eyes gleaming bright. Eli could be the poster boy for any leading toothpaste manufacturer. There was only one word to describe his impeccable appearance—stunning. In his shadow, I felt entirely inadequate. Despite Chaseyn’s equally remarkable aesthetics, I never felt *that way* in his presence. Perhaps it was the fact that Eli so perfectly fit into the All-American archetype, while Chaseyn exuded a sense of the eccentric. Beyond their categorically pleasing appearances, there were no similarities, really.

“So,” I said after a few awkward moments of silence. “Tell me about your wheels.”

“I don’t want to bore you,” Eli said politely. “We can talk about something else.”

Though he was right, I would likely find the conversation boring, I was still contemplating other acceptable conversation starters. In the meantime, this would just have to do.

“No. I want to know. What is *it*?”

Immediately after I said the words, I worried he might find my tone offensive. I had no idea what to call the old tin lizzie we were using to transport us around town, but I had not intended to sound so chiding. Especially when Eli was taking time out of his own life to cart me around town.

“*It’s* a 1981 Toyota half-ton. I rebuilt it with my grandpa,” he said proudly. “Took us six months to collect all the parts. Gramps had to search every junkyard from here to Fort Worth to find everything we needed. He was so excited to get under the hood.”

Instantly, my heart hurt. Eli, who had lived with his grandfather most of his life, still found it comforting to spend quality time with the old man, and I couldn’t find it within me to spare my grandma a bit of forgiveness when she had only been trying to help. I hardly saw her anymore, and she was only getting older. What if I ran out of time? Right then, I decided that I would put the past behind us the minute Eli dropped me off at her house.

“That sounds like fun. You must really love spending time with him,” I said sincerely.

“He seems pretty great.”

“Yeah. He’s not so bad, I guess,” he said, clearly downplaying his admiration for the older man. “Your grandma’s pretty cool, too. They spend a lot of time together—her and grandpa.”

“I figured so much. He must really care about her,” I said.

Eli nodded.

“We’re here,” he said pulling to a stop in what seemed to be a concrete jungle.

“Where’s here,” I asked, glancing around for clues that would indicate any form of information about the site.

“The zoo. Your grandma said you like animals, so I thought we could spend the day

here. We can go someplace else if you would prefer.”

“No. This is great—I just couldn’t tell where we were—literally,” I explained, noting the disappointment in his voice at the suggestion that I might be unsatisfied with his plan. “I have a cat.”

I have a cat. The words circled inside my head. Did they sound as foolish to him as they did to me? I hoped not, but then, why should I care. Though Eli seemed nice, I doubted I would see him again after this week.

Eli and I spent hours strolling through the exhibits staring at the animals. From watching the Bengal tigers rest in the African exhibit to performing our own goofy gorilla acts during our search for the disappointingly nonexistent monkey display, we had a blast, and I barely thought about all that I had left behind—namely, Chaseyn.

For lunch, we dined on foot-long hotdogs and super-sized slushies. Later, we plucked fluffy chunks of spun sugar from bags packed tight with pink cotton candy. At the end of the day, we took the long way home—meandering through side streets so Eli could point out local attractions and landmarks. We laughed and talked the entire

way. Just one day earlier, I could barely fathom how I would survive the week away from home, but now, I was having such a good time that I barely wanted it to end. Part of me felt guilty for feeling this way.

As expected, Mr. Bethsby was keeping my grandma company, so Eli and I offered to get take out from the Chinese restaurant up the street. Approaching the counter, I was taken aback by the vision of a hauntingly beautiful girl—about my age—placing an order just ahead of us.

“Hi,” the raven-haired beauty said shyly when she saw Eli.

Eli was clearly oblivious to the fact that this stunning creature was carrying a torch for him.

“Hey,” he said, turning back to me for clues to my favorite dishes.

“I’m Frost,” she said, holding out her delicate hand. “Who are you?”

Suddenly, she seemed much less shy.

“Frost, this is my friend Lia,” he said. “She’s visiting from Evergreen for the week.”

“Well, I’m sure I’ll see you again,” she said, taking her order and dashing for the door.

Before Eli had even finished the last part of his sentence, Frost had taken out her cell phone and was frantically dialing a number. She was talking at such a rapid pace when she left the restaurant that it was impossible to make out anything she was saying.

“She seems...”

“Eccentric,” Eli finished for me.

“I was going to say quirky, but eccentric certainly fits the bill,” I said laughing. “I have

this eerie feeling that I've met her before. Does she live nearby?"

"Not likely," Eli said. "She just moved here a few months ago."

"Well, she's most certainly set her sights on you."

"Aw, shucks, Lia. You're embarrassing me," he said sarcastically. "She's always nice enough to me, but I can't shake the feeling that there is something she's hiding—some sort of secret."

"What do you mean," I asked curiously.

"It's hard to pinpoint exactly," he said. "She's so elusive and mature. She holds herself with a grace that is uncommon to other girls. At first, I found her enchanting, but now, she just gives me chills. Besides, she's hardly my type."

It happened so quickly that I nearly missed it, but as Eli said those last four words,

he stared me straight in the eyes—a look of intrigue and allure clear across his sweet face. Sensing he was about to reach for my hand, I shifted my weight slightly, hoping to buy enough time to formulate an appropriate escape.

“Next,” the pimple-faced tween behind the counter called in an effort to capture our attention.

“Hello,” he said in a second attempt to break our entrancement. Uncertain how to react, I stepped toward the till and glanced up at the menu hanging overhead. “Look, if you’re not ready, step aside so someone else can order.”

“Do you know what you want,” I forced out despite the awkward events that had just unfolded.

“Yeah, I’ve got it,” Eli said casually, suddenly alert to the scene we were making and the line forming behind us. “I’ll have the usual.”

We placed our order—lemon chicken, ginger beef, mushroom fried rice, chicken

chow mein, and sweet and sour ribs—which was ready in next to no time, thankfully. Our once warm conversation had quickly turned cold, and I was anxious to rejoin the others. Within minutes, we were back at the house, spreading the array of tins filled with savory sensations across the kitchen counter.

“Dig in,” Eli said, passing out plates and placing a large silver spoon in each container. He winked once in my general direction as he handed me a large dish. I pretended not to notice and instead took one of the stack he had placed next to the food.

“So kids, tell us about your day,” my grandma said, putting one arm around each of our shoulders and forcing us closer together than I thought comfortable. I knew it was no accident.

Politely twisting away from her grip by feigning an unnatural amount of enthusiasm for a packet of plum sauce on the other side of the room, I began regaling her and Hank with tales of black-footed ferrets and hissing cockroaches.

“Sounds like you had fun. So, would it be safe to assume you already have plans for

tomorrow,” my grandma asked a little bit too enthusiastically, and it suddenly dawned on me that she hadn’t invited me here to make amends—she was trying to divert my attention from Chaseyn and hook me up with a partner that she deemed acceptable, safe.

“Oh. Eli probably has better things to do than hang around with me all day. I’m sure there are tons of people hoping to get even five minutes of his attention this week,” I said sheepishly, gazing in his direction.

“Actually Lia, a couple of my friends were thinking about going to Wonderland tomorrow, and I was hoping you would join us,” Eli said shyly. Until now, he had seemed so strong, confident, but I could see the fear of rejection in his eyes as he put his emotions on the line by posing the question.

“That’s very thoughtful, Eli, but I don’t like rides very much. I wouldn’t be much fun. Besides grandma, I’m here to spend time with you. I would feel terrible leaving you alone again all day.”

“Don’t be silly, Lia,” my grandma retorted. “Hank will be here. Go. Have fun. I’m sure they won’t mind if you just watch.”

“She’s right,” Eli said happily. “No one will mind. I swear.”

Times like these, I was glad my inside voice was sheltered from prying ears because it was screaming profanities that I had never actually uttered out loud in all of my life. There was no escape from this game my grandma was playing. Unfortunately, Eli was an innocent, unwitting participant, and I feared his heart would become a casualty of the unspoken war that was taking place between my grandma and I. Realizing there was no point in battling any more tonight, I simply shrugged as a sign of surrender.

“Great,” Eli said enthusiastically. “It’s settled then. We’re leaving at 2 p.m. Meet me out front.”

“Great,” I said, trying to mimic his enthusiasm but falling miles short. “I can’t wait.”

After the dishes were cleared and our guests had retired to their own home for the evening, I decided to confront my grandma about her twisted plot.

“Seriously, grandma, this isn’t going to work,” I said as I kicked back the recliner and settled in to watch my favorite sitcom on TV.

“Whatever are you going on about,” she asked coyly.

“Come on, grandma. I know what you’re doing, and it’s not fair to Eli.”

“Isn’t he lovely, dear,” she changed the subject.

“He’s very sweet,” I said.

“And handsome. Isn’t he handsome,” she asked eagerly.

“Yes, grandma. I’m sure he will make some girl very happy, just not me,” I fiddled with my bracelet as I spoke the words, hoping the gesture wasn’t lost on her. “You know

how I feel about Chaseyn.”

“I know, sweetheart, but he’s your first boyfriend, and I just want to be sure that you are aware of all of your options. You’re a very pretty girl, and you have a good head on your shoulders. There are so many nice young men—men who aren’t cursed.”

“Please grandma, just drop it. I don’t really want to talk about all of that ridiculousness,” I begged sincerely.

“I promise I won’t mention it again so long as you promise to give Eli half a chance,” she added.

I thought about it for a moment before realizing it seemed like a fair deal. With any luck, I could avoid what seemed like the inevitable—a series of unpleasant questions about Chaseyn’s origins and intentions—in exchange for spending a few days in the company of a seemingly pleasant and unsuspecting teenage boy.

“Deal,” I said, holding out my hand to seal the agreement. She extended her hand

return, and we settled in for an evening of enjoyable conversation that centered around anything and everything, except Chaseyn.

“Chaseyn,” I said with extreme elation at hearing his voice on the other end of the line. “I miss you so much. Why haven’t you called before?”

“I miss you, too,” he said softly, smoothly. He was always collected; his demeanor screamed sophistication. Of course, he had nearly half a century before my birth to perfect his patience. “I wanted to give you some time to settle in. Besides, you could have called, too.”

“No, actually, I couldn’t,” I told him truthfully. “Despite the fact that she said I could call any time, I know my mom is monitoring my outgoing calls. She wants to be sure I don’t rack up too many minutes and that I spend the majority time taking care of my grandma’s every need. Ugh...there’s so much to tell you.”

“I have a pretty good idea,” he said laughing.

“You could have warned me,” I sneered.

“What? And, ruin the surprise. Never,” he chided. “How’s neighbor boy?”

“His name is Eli, and he’s very nice. You should be jealous, you know.”

“Believe me, I know,” he responded sinister. “Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I can hardly wait to see you again. Evergreen is entirely empty without you here. And, I need you to promise that you will be wary of any strangers you meet in Amarillo. Save Eli, of course.”

“Actually, I was planning on accepting some unwrapped candy from a man driving a minivan and carrying a cocker spaniel,” I teased.

“I’m serious, Cordelia,” he pleaded. “Be cautious of anyone you meet, no matter how cordial.”

“Would you mind telling me what this is about,” I asked, uncertain if I wanted to know

the answer.

“I’m not sure exactly,” Chaseyn said. “I have an unsettling feeling, and I want to take every precaution. I need you to let me know if you sense anything out of the ordinary.”

“I will. I better go,” I said, forcing the words from my mouth. “Eli will be waiting, and I should check on my grandma before I leave.”

“Be careful.”

“I will. I love you.”

“Me, too.”

Chapter 26 - Reflections

Eli was already waiting in the truck, thrumming his thumb across the steering wheel like it was a six string.

“It’s about time,” he said, his impatience evident despite the teasing tone. “I’ve listened to this song five times while waiting.”

“It’s not my fault you have limited taste in music,” I chaffed. “See that button? If you press it, you can skip to the next song.”

“Ha. Ha. You’re quite the comedian,” he said, shifting the gear to drive. “Beautiful and witty.”

I blushed and changed the subject.

“So, who will be joining us,” I asked.

Eli spent the next half hour enlightening me about the physical appearances, personality traits, and individual quirks of each of the eight people who would be meeting us at the park. For the most part, they sounded as though they would rival Eli in beauty and brains—all jocks and cheerleaders with impeccable transcripts—with the exception of Darcy, the water boy and bearer of the team mascot uniform when needed. Despite Darcy's lack of inherent external aesthetics, he was always a willing participant, and for that, Eli encouraged the rest of his varsity teammates to welcome Darcy into their inner circle.

“Sounds like a good group,” I said, thinking mainly of how the only one I could hope to relate to on any natural level was Darcy. “So, what’s there to do at Wonderland?”

If I had known the excitement this question would evoke, I would have asked it much earlier in our conversation. Eli's eyes widened, and he turned down the volume on the radio to ensure maximum audibility as he spoke. He spent the remaining 15 minutes of the drive providing precise details about every attraction in the amusement park—from approximations of roller coaster speeds to the heights of various rides bearing names that sounded far more frightening than anything I could imagine ever wanting to conquer.

When Eli was finished regaling me with the finer points of Wonderland, all I could manage to express was a noticeably less-enthusiastic “Wow.” A look of disappointment swept across his face as pulled to a stop in a stall that seemed much too small for the oversized vehicle. With a little more vim, I tried again. “Wow.”

As we approached the group, it was easy to identify most of the people Eli had described on our drive. Darcy was the most obvious, wearing jeans that were just slightly darker than the current trend and thick glasses. It was only a moment before I saw another familiar face lingering in the background, one that seemed equally out of place. A quick head count revealed an unexpected ninth participant.

“Frost,” I called out to the lovely—yet oddly undefineable—figure hiding behind a bevy of blondes. As I looked into her moss-colored irises, I felt a faint chill. Something about her seemed so familiar, like I had known her in another time and place. “How are you? Eli never told me you were coming.”

I glanced at Eli, who was hovering close behind me. His nearness made me somewhat uncomfortable. Though I knew Chaseyn would find Eli’s advances

amusing, I was rattled by his constant looming. Thankfully, Frost had made her way through the others to stand at my opposite side, easing the tension with the upbeat chirp of her trill voice.

“Hi,” she said just above a whisper, wrapping her frail arms around my upper body in an unexpected act of kindness. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Come on,” Eli said anxiously, grabbing my hand and dragging me deeper into the group. “I want to introduce you to everyone.”

I smiled back at Frost and shrugged my shoulders to show my objection at being pulled away from our little reunion. Eli continued to hold me close as we moved from one person to the next—ensuring they all knew to keep their hands to themselves. Like I was some sort of trophy, I thought sarcastically. Hardly. In an effort to keep from embarrassing Eli in front of everyone, I waited until we were alone in line to remove my hand from his tight grip—reaching for the wallet securely pinned in my back pocket as a guise.

“Look, Eli,” I began, “You’re great. You really are, but—“

“I know,” he cut me off before I could finish. “Chaseyn.”

“So you know,” I said surprised. “And, you’re still—“

“Interested,” he said, cutting me off for the second time. I thought Chaseyn was the one with an extra sense, but it seemed Eli could also foresee my thoughts. “You’re really pretty and smart and just so different from the girls around here. Besides, your grandma told me I shouldn’t let Chaseyn stand in the way of pursuing you.”

“She did, did she?”

“Was she wrong?”

“You don’t know the half of it.”

“So, where does that leave me,” he asked innocently. I couldn’t fault him for my grandma’s misgivings. I decided to let him down easy. “Eli, if I was available, you would be a dream come true. But, I’m definitely, positively, undeniably in love with Chaseyn Lear. I’m sorry.”

“Can you do me a favor,” he asked, looking sorely dejected. “I sort of told my friends that we were seeing each other, so would you mind pretending for the day? It would mean a lot to me. After you go home to Colorado, I’ll tell them we decided it would be too difficult to maintain a long-distance relationship.”

“Just for today, though,” I said, smiling and replacing my hand gently inside his palm.

“You’re amazing,” he said beaming.

Before I could respond, a baritone voice broke my train of thought.

“Last one to the Cyclone rides alone,” Christopher, a dirty blond brute, shouted, and the group began running at a mad dash. I had no clue what he was talking about,

but I followed suit, running flat out. The last thing I wanted to do was ride alone on what I could only imagine was a terrifying monstrosity of metal.

Sure enough, Cyclone—a behemoth of a coaster—was a labyrinth of winding metal rods that looped and twisted in circles around each other like a pretzel. As expected, Darcy was last to arrive, having tripped over a loose stone en route.

“I think I’m going to sit this one out,” I said, trepidation apparent by the crack in my voice as I spoke the words. “Darcy, you can ride with Eli.”

“No way, wiseacre,” Eli said, practically pulling my arm from its socket as we followed leader to the lineup. “Darcy will be just fine on his own.”

Darcy nodded enthusiastically and pushed his way to the front of the group to stand next to Frost. He was clearly smitten with the raven-haired beauty, but she paid no notice of him.

As we waited our turn, I listened to the buzz of jubilant voices around me. Everyone

was aflutter with the promise of the day. The effect was contagious, and for the first time since leaving Chaseyn, I let myself succumb to the intense emotions surrounding me. I leaned back against Eli—more a show of camaraderie than of affection—and joined in the buzz. Looking up at the side of his face, I could see his cheeks rise in a smile.

“Thank you,” he whispered softly in my ear so that only I could hear.

The feel of his warm breath on my skin sent a shiver through my spine and a feeling of guilt through my heart. Would Chaseyn be upset by my behavior, I wondered. Was I leading Eli on? My intentions were pure—I wanted comfort and friendship from Eli, nothing more. I hoped that was clear. When we were safely belted into our seats, Eli turned to me and said the words that made me flinch with apprehension.

“Just so you know, I’m not giving up that easy. You’re here for an entire week, and this Chaseyn guy can’t be that spectacular. I’ve got a lot to offer. Ask anyone.”

Judging by the looks of disgust the two fashionable platinum blondes in the group gave me every time Eli reached for my hand or placed his arm around my shoulder, I

had no reason to doubt he was a hot commodity. Still, it was difficult to imagine any one person could measure up to the standard set by Chaseyn. I ignored Eli's comments and clenched my muscles in anticipation of what was sure to be a wild ride—literally and figuratively. Bracing myself—the first cars had already reached the penultimate peak before the inevitable drop, and their inhabitants were screaming loudly out of both fear and excitement—I prepared for what seemed like an endless fall into a bottomless pit, as well as a deep plummet into the next steep climb.

When our feet were once again firmly on solid ground, our group of eleven huddled together to compose a game plan for the rest of the afternoon. It was still off-season, so the park's operating hours were limited, and we only had a short time to conquer every attraction.

“Alright, so here's the plan,” Christopher began, spinning in a circling to map our route as he spoke. “We start with the pirate ship, then we hit fantastic journey. After that, it's the bumper cars before we break for a snack. We can regroup and come up with a plan for the rest of the day from there.”

Everyone's gaze followed Christopher's finger as he pointed to each attraction. Looks of complete contentment warmed every face as he clapped his hands to signify the

end of his plan—for now. Eager to camouflage with the group, I skipped alongside Eli to our initial destination, a massive boat that swung from side-to-side at least 100 feet above the ground. My stomach did loops just looking at it.

“Ready,” Eli asked, winking and squeezing my hand to show that he perceived my anxiety. Even without an extra sense, Eli intuitively understood my nervousness—perhaps it was the fact that upon entering the main gates to the ride, my palms began to sweat and my heartbeat started pulsing out of my chest. Even during the Founder’s Day Festival, Evergreen only featured traditional attractions like Ferris wheels and carousels. I had never before in my life experienced anything like the massive machines permanently displayed at Wonderland—particularly those that flung people through the air at extreme speeds.

“So, this is safe, right,” I asked with hesitation, uncertain I wanted to hear Eli’s response. “I mean, they test these things, don’t they?”

“Come on,” was all he could say as he grabbed my wrist and dragged me to a seat at one end of the flying ship. “The closer you sit to one side, the more you’ll feel the effects.”

He seemed proud of this fact, but I found it less-than-enticing. I missed Chaseyn's chivalrous consideration of my every thought and emotion. Knowing how I felt about the experience, he would have selected a seat in the center to ensure I was subjected to the minimum amount of discomfort. Eli had a lot to learn, but in fairness, Chaseyn had some fifty-odd years of experience more than Eli at dealing with human emotion.

From left to right, the supersized pirate ship soared through the sky. Screams of anxious schoolgirls—myself included—filled the early evening air. Admittedly, I was having fun acting immature and taking part in reckless activities with others who were truly my age. After my father died, I had taken on the personality traits of an old soul, which explained why Chaseyn and I were so inexplicably drawn to one another. Now, as I was surrounded by fresh faces and inescapable excitement, I felt like the teenager I was.

“This is a blast,” I confessed to Eli, steadying myself against the wobbly feeling that overcame me when I stood at the end of the ride.

“Easy there,” he laughed. “I’m glad you’re having a good time, but my grandpa will

have my head if I let anything happen to his girlfriend's granddaughter."

"Girlfriend," I questioned. I knew it was true, but the admission still came as a surprise. "Are they really that serious?"

"Are you kidding? Gramps is thinking about popping the question."

The rest of the group rushed by, pulling me toward the next ride and diverting my thoughts from the shocking revelation Eli had presented. I let emotions flood over me and then wash away, as I struggled to forget what he had said and focus on the task at hand—enjoying the company of my newfound friends. Hank seemed nice enough, I had decided. Despite their age, they should have every chance at happiness as they lived out the golden years of their lives. And, that was the last time I allowed myself to think about their situation. At least for the day, anyway.

"Let's go," Eli said, breaking into a run alongside the others.

I followed behind, stopping only once to catch my breath. Next up was the bumper cars. I was glad to keep my feet firmly on the ground for once. As we entered the

attraction, chaos ensued. It seemed we had all set our sights on the same four cars. The two blondes—whose names I had now learned were Anna and Amanda—were grappling over which should have the right to infiltrate the only pink vehicle in the lot. After a moment of heated debate, Amanda won the privilege, while Anna stuck out her bottom lip and sauntered toward a powder blue cab. Frost and I had long since realized we were fairly low on the food chain and decided to cut our losses by claiming two beat up yellow cars in the back corner. We giggled together—something I rarely did with Addie, let alone a practical stranger—as we watched the others sort through the dilemma of who held the highest ranks and should therefore get the cars of their choice. I noticed that several boys were making their way toward a shiny silver car, but once Eli made his intentions clear—that he, too, coveted that vehicle—not one actually took another step toward it. Despite Christopher's best efforts, Eli clearly held the number one position amongst the group.

With a bit of coaxing from the twenty-something male operating the machine, who was obviously frustrated by our group's lack of organization and courtesy toward others waiting in line, we managed to sort through the seating arrangements. As the engines roared to life on our pint-sized automobiles, we wheeled around the platform, pounding each other thoughtlessly. I took a particularly hard hit in the back from one of the blondes, who shamelessly tried to tell me that she was aiming for one of the other boys—but he was on the other side of the attraction. Something told me it was payback for my cozying up to Eli. Seconds later, she was riding alongside her

sidekick and giggling, likely regaling her tale of triumph over attacking the girl who was trying to steal away the object of their affection. A light tap on the side of my car broke my attention, bringing me back to reality.

“Eli,” I shouted in warning. “When you least expect it...”

Just as I started to say the words, an alarm rang out, signaling the end of our ride.

“Ugh. Well, I’ll find another way to get back at you. Just you wait,” I shouted.

Eli laughed and hopped over the side door of his car. To show his strength and prowess, he leapt to my side, and as I stood, he hoisted me into his arms and out of the vehicle.

“A little over the top, don’t you think,” I asked as he placed me gently on the ground.

“The Bobbsey twins already have a hate-on for me. You’re not making this any easier.

”

“But am I making an impression on you,” Eli asked with a shrug. “That’s the only thing that matters.”

With that, he walked to the exit, looking back once to make sure I was following suit. He winked and turned around again to look for the rest of the group. I walked slowly behind, hoping to avoid his eager attention for at least a few moments. Flattered as I was, it was difficult to maintain the charade when I was so surely in love with Chaseyn. In another time and place, I may have succumbed to the temptation, but now, I only felt like a tease for playing along with Eli’s plot for even a short while. When I finally caught up with the others, they were hovering around a long bench amidst a myriad of eating establishments. It appeared a debate was ensuing over which to frequent.

“Do we all have to eat at the same place,” I asked innocently, noting the majority was in favor of funnel cakes, and I had a hankering for something a little more savory. “I could really go for a corndog.”

As if an epiphany had struck them all at once, they looked to where I was standing and fell silent. It was difficult to tell what thoughts were running through their heads.

Was I a fool for thinking we could each exhibit our individual tastes, or was I genius for suggesting such an independent plan.

“Cool,” Christopher finally conceded as he began walking toward one of the stands in the distance. “I’m all over those bison burgers and fries.”

The crowd quickly dispersed in a variety of directions, leaving me and Eli to mind the table as they gathered their preferred dining selections. As I was last to arrive, I needed time to review the options so I didn’t mind being left behind. I urged Eli to satiate his hunger while I read the oversized menu boards hanging over each stand, but he quickly returned with a heaping portion of nacho chips covered with a zesty cheese.

“I remembered your grandma saying once that these were your favorite snack when you went to the movies together,” he said proudly. For the first time, he had proved to me that he could, indeed, give Chaseyn a solid battle for my affections if only we had met a few months earlier.

“That’s very sweet,” I managed to say between bites.

Evidently, my body was more deprived of nourishment than I had originally thought. I lifted another cheese-drenched triangle to my mouth as the others in our group began to pile in around me. Eli had stepped away again, and this time, he returned with the prized corndog I had been craving since we first stepped foot inside the park a few hours earlier. I practically pounced on the wax-paper-wrapped package Eli was lowering to the table in front of me.

“And, for the piece de resistance,” he said in a mediocre, though still impressive, French accent after placing a super-sized fountain pop beside the corndog. “Cotton candy for dessert.”

For that, I decided he deserved a hug. He had gone to a great deal of trouble to show me a good time—from memorizing my favorite childhood treats to behaving like a true gentleman—and I knew the least I could do in return was lead his friends to believe we were carrying on more than an innocent friendship. I added spark to the flame by planting a big kiss on his cheek when he sat down next to me. He looked at me appreciatively, but then took the liberty of wrapping his arm around my shoulder while we ate. He took advantage of the fact that I would keep my displeasure at the action under wraps while we were surrounded by his friends. I took comfort in the fact

that I would have the entire drive home to lecture him about his inappropriate behavior.

This time, it was Darcy to layout a challenge as we devoured our last bites of food.

“So, who’s ready to ride the Tilt-A-Whirl?”

As if on cue, everyone jumped up from the table and began commuting to the nearby attraction. Knowing my limits, I encouraged Eli to join his friends and leave me in peace to digest my meal.

“Come on,” he coaxed. “It’ll be fun.”

“Seriously, Eli, there is no way I will make it through that ride without the contents of my stomach spewing out in front of us,” I replied. “You go ahead.”

“I’ll stay here,” a weak voice whispered from across the table. “I’m pretty sure my

body will thank me for it later, too.”

I looked up to see Frost sliding into position on the bench across from me, a wide smile forming across her pale face. In the overcast light, I could see that she was actually breathtakingly beautiful—by far, the most stunning female in our gathering. However, due to her untraditional attire and introverted nature, she was likely overlooked for the fair-haired Barbies who conformed to the latest fashion trends and flaunted their assets in front of the males. Still, Frost had a familiarity that made me feel completely comfortable in her presence.

“I’ll be fine,” I told Eli, sincerely content to be left alone with Frost. Had it been any other of the girls in the group, I would have been considerably more reluctant.

Eli stared warily as I, quite literally, pushed at his toned bicep, guiding him in the direction the others—who were now out of sight—had trudged just moments earlier.

“You should go have fun. I’ll wait for you at the log chute. By the time you get there, my stomach should be settled.”

Frost and I sat in awkward silence for a few minutes after Eli left, but before long we were chatting like old friends. After about 15 minutes of idle banter about our favorite classes, Anna and Amanda's infatuation with everything Eli, and our mutual concern for the reduction of waste, we again sat silent. When Frost suggested we take our chances manoeuvring through the funhouse labyrinth, I practically jumped at the opportunity to escape what was becoming an embarrassingly awkward situation.

"Sounds like fun," I said eagerly, hopping up from the bench we had been occupying since lunchtime.

"This way," she said, waving me toward her.

Frost was safely inside the enormous building before I had even managed to swing my leg over the bench and into a standing position. In an effort to make up for lost time, I quickly skipped toward the comic facade and ran swiftly through the rolling barrel entrance to the staggered steps that shook back and forth as I climbed. Once I had navigated my way past the devices aimed at making me lose my balance and rattling my nerves, I was immersed in a sea of blue and grey. After a few moments pondering my whereabouts, I realized an exact clone of myself was staring back at

me—I was in a hall of mirrors.

“Frost? Are you in here,” my voice echoed through the disturbingly silent space.

What seemed like thousands of mirrors lined the dimly lit room. Variations of myself—only taller, shorter, wider, and narrower—crowded the room. Frantically, I searched around every corner looking for an exit, or at least something other than another Lia look-alike. A feeling of defeat washed over me, and I slumped against one of the rigid structures surrounding me and slid to the ground below. I sat there and sullenly pondered my fate—that the entire group would forget about my mere existence and leave me alone in the park. I imagined what it would be like to be trapped inside this chamber of doom overnight when a sudden high-pitched ringing jolted me back to consciousness.

“Chaseyn,” I shouted in elation into the receiver as I flipped open the phone. “I’ve never been so happy to hear—”

“Shhh,” he shouted in what sounded like annoyance. “Don’t say another word.”

“What’s wrong,” I asked, practically hysterical. I had been upset prior to his call, and his harried tone only added to my anxiety.

“I said don’t say another word. In fact, don’t move an inch or breathe a single breath.”

My entire body began to tremble. Though I had no idea why Chaseyn was being so demanding and harsh, I found it utterly terrifying.

“Quietly, Cordelia. I mean it, please be very quiet,” his tone was softer, gentler now as he pleaded with me, but I was holding back sobs. “Now, tell me, are you alone?”

I waited a moment before answering, for two reasons. First, I wanted to catch my breath to be sure that not so much as a single, shallow whimper escaped my lips. Second, because I simply wasn’t sure if I was, in fact, alone.

“I don’t know,” I said so quietly I could barely hear. Still, I knew his keen ears would catch every syllable. “I think so.”

“This is very important, Cordelia,” Chaseyn said calmly. “I need to know when you last saw Frost.”

Suddenly, it was all perfectly clear to me why she seemed so familiar. Piercing green eyes, practically translucent, flawless skin, hair nearly as black as a raven’s feathers—Frost was Chaseyn’s sister. In that moment—the exact moment of realization—a rush of cold air washed over me like a brisk breeze through an open window on an autumn night. I knew I was no longer alone.

“She’s here,” I murmured into the phone. “I can feel her.”

“You have to get out of there. She’s young, and her skills are less developed than mine, but you’ll still need to be very careful,” he explained so quickly that I barely caught a word of what he was saying.

“The mirrors,” I started to say.

“What do you mean?”

“She’ll see me no matter where I go.”

“Cordelia, I don’t understand. What mirrors?”

Carefully, I crawled on all fours along the floor, keeping my eyes peeled for any sign of what I could only assume was one of Alexei’s soldiers of doom. Visions of the terror she planned to ensue flashed through my head, wreaking havoc with my imagination. As I rounded the corner, I noticed a thin layer of ice on one of the mirrors, about five feet up from the floor. It occurred to me in that instant how Frost got her name. Her breath. Like her body, it was icy cold. I also realized the game she was *playing* was going to be made more challenging by the fact that *she* did not cast a reflection.

“Oh, no,” I said quietly to Chaseyn. “She’s not like you. She’s—”

“A vampire,” a feminine voice answered from someplace nearby.

“I’m almost there,” Chaseyn shouted into the phone. “You can do this, Cordelia. You can outwit her.”

Clicking the speaker button on the cell phone so I could free my hands and still allow Chaseyn to hear my every action, I dropped the phone on the floor and rose up onto my feet. There was no point in being discreet when Frost was so obviously tuned in to my every move. Not to mention that she had the unfair advantage of watching my reflection.

“I can’t see her, Chaseyn. She has no reflection, and she moves too fast,” I cried aloud in the direction of the place where the phone was now laying open on the floor.

“I can’t do this.”

A frosty sheen glazed the mirrors around the place where I stood, dissolving nearly as quickly as it appeared. I spun in a circle watching as one and then another and another were coated in a thin layer of ice, sparkling like diamonds on the shiny, reflective surface of each mirror.

As my feet pushed forward, glass began to shatter all around me. Like dominoes, each row of mirrors tumbled to the ground, creating a jagged spew of glass. Shards flew through the air, piercing my skin as they punctured the fragile membrane. I tried to ignore the stinging pain as blood oozed from each tiny wound, but it was nearly impossible to ignore.

“Stop, Frost. Please stop,” I begged, looking for a way out.

By now, all but a handful of mirrors had been smashed in Frost’s attempt to gain my surrender, and I was wading through a knee-deep pool of shattered glass that tore strips from my jeans as I trudged along. Scanning the room through blurry eyes filled with watery tears, my heart skipped a beat when I finally located the neon exit sign only a few feet away.

Realizing the room was silent, I took the opportunity to make an escape. Perhaps, Frost had tired of this perilous game and decided to forfeit, I thought as I scurried toward the sign. I consoled myself with the thought that she had likely heard Chaseyn say he was nearby. Surely, she would not want to challenge his wrath and

masterful skill. Regardless of the reason for her sudden departure, I was going to use the time to find safety as quickly as possible.

With the protective layer of denim torn away, my bare skin was exposed to the effects of the serrated glass edges as they ripped into my legs. Doing my best to ignore the unbearable pain, I stumbled, hands first, at the doorway, knowing imminent relief was only steps away. Feeling consciousness slip away, I worked hard to push myself back up, but as I applied weight to my hands, I felt an intense throbbing in my palms. A deafening scream exploded through the room, jolting me to life. Scanning the area for the sound, I realized it had come from my own mouth. Frost had reappeared, blocking my exit.

The scream was the result of both the shock of seeing her there and the unbearable pain I felt as she thrust a thick, glass shank through my right hand, completely incapacitating me. As I lay there, staring up at her profoundly beautiful face, I could almost imagine Chaseyn standing there in her place—their resemblance startling now that I had made the connection.

“Chaseyn,” I mouthed, the sound so faint, even I could barely hear. My mouth was dry, like the saliva that naturally flowed had been replaced by wads of fluffy cotton.

“It’s just the two of us now, Cordelia,” she mocked. “You have no idea how long I have waited for this. Father will be so very pleased with me.”

My eyes were heavy, and I struggled to keep them open. Sleep was not an option, I reminded myself. There would be no hope if I lost consciousness. Was there hope now, I wondered? As if in response to my silent question—or maybe I *had* said it aloud—Frost opened her mouth wide, revealing a pair of glistening fangs and the most startling difference between her and Chaseyn.

This was it. The moment my grandma had warned me about. The one Chaseyn had vowed he would prevent. My brain swirled; I couldn’t think straight. The room was hazy and unfocused. Objects blended together, obscuring my vision. It was too much to absorb all at once.

I closed my eyes and waited.

Chapter 27- Heroes

“Lia? Where are you,” a masculine voice called frenetically, begging for a response.

“Lia? Answer me, Lia. Come on.”

The voice grew louder and louder, until it stopped entirely. Was I dead, I wondered? A loud din—a crunching, like the sound of feet trekking across hard-packed snow—filled the air around me. Again, the sound stopped, giving leverage to my panicked thoughts. Frost had taken my life and betrayed her father’s trust. She would get a greater rise out of cheating Chaseyn. Of this, I was certain.

Suddenly, a calming warmth surrounded me, and I could feel myself floating above the ground. Is this how my soul would feel if it were leaving my human form? My entire body remained limp, motionless, and any effort to open my eyes was futile. This must be death.

“Help,” a voice called. “Somebody, help. Please.”

My body was jostling about, as if it were moving at a high speed, and I knew *he* had made it in time.

“Chaseyn,” I murmured quietly, almost inaudible. He would hear. “I knew you would come. You promised.”

He did not respond. The only explanation was that I was, in fact, dead. I tried again. Louder, but barely.

“Lia, don’t move,” the voice replied. I didn’t notice at first that he didn’t use my given name. “Oh, please, be okay. Please.”

Chaos was the only word to describe what happened next. Shrieks of terror and sobs of fear penetrated the buzz inside my head. As my body was lowered to the ground, I felt hands pounding at various wounds on my body. I moaned softly, hoping they would stop, but they persisted relentlessly. Soon, I realized—despite the haze clouding my thoughts—that they were trying to stop the bleeding. When I finally managed to open my eyes—albeit for a short time—I could see that the boys had removed their shirts to make compresses. Bits of cloth were tied strategically around

several locations on my badly beaten body. I felt no pain, but I didn't fight the feeling to close my eyes again. Before falling into a sleepless state, I called for *him* one last time.

"No, Lia. He's not here. I'm sure he'll come when he hears what happened," Eli whispered, patting the sticky hair back from my bloodied forehead. At some point, I must have fallen face first into the glass. He tried to sound soothing and calm, but I could hear the anxiety boiling beneath. "It's okay. Help is on its way."

Sirens sounded, and I heard voices telling the crowd that had gathered around me to disperse. Pushing through the hoards, the paramedics kneeled at my side, urging me to stay awake.

"What happened here," one of them asked feverishly. "Is there anyone else inside?"

Before anyone could answer, a loud engine roared in the distance. Within seconds, I could feel *him*, his cool aura cut through the air, bringing with it a sense of calm and relief.

“She was alone,” Chaseyn said to the paramedic. “I was on the phone with her when the attraction started to crumble. She was terrified. I tried to talk her through, but it was too late.”

Everything would be all right. Chaseyn would see to it.

“I can handle it from here, Eli. Thank you for getting her out of there,” he said sincerely.

I fell into a deep slumber.

When I woke, I felt surprisingly well. My grandma, who had clearly held a vigil at my side, was jumping up and down with excitement.

“She’s opening her eyes,” she shouted. “Quick.”

“Hold still,” I begged. “You’re making my head hurt.”

“I’m guessing it’s the sixteen stitches above your left temple that are actually making your head hurt,” Chaseyn said wryly as he bent down to kiss my forehead. “It’s about time you came round. We’ve been hanging around this place forever.”

“Ouch,” I said, feeling the gauze wrapped around my head with my free hand—the one that wasn’t bound to an intravenous cable. “Harumph.”

“Most of the wounds are superficial. They look a lot worse than they actually are. There’s just the one,” Chaseyn’s voice trailed off, and he looked at Eli and Hank sitting in the corner. I felt the bandage fastened securely to my neck and instantly understood his discretion.

“But you had a terrible fever. It gave us an awful fright,” my grandma added, and I realized she knew the meaning of the two small marks on my neck.

“Oh,” I said enthusiastically, genuinely happy that I hadn’t received any life-

threatening injuries but wary of her remarks. “What happened? I can barely remember anything.”

For the most part, it was a lie. I had a pretty good idea, right up to the end, but I figured I should know the alibi. People would be asking about my injuries, and I better know what to say.

“I’ll explain it all to you later,” grandma said, winking at both me and Chaseyn. “Thank goodness Eli was there to pull you out. He’s a real hero.”

Chaseyn shifted his weight uncomfortably. I could hardly believe my grandma was still trying to sell me on Eli with Chaseyn standing right there.

“It was nothing, really,” Eli blushed. He was obviously uncomfortable. “Chaseyn was just a few steps behind. He took care of all the major details.”

It had only been about 26 hours since the fateful event, and there was still so much to consider. Chaseyn had managed to stave off my mother by telling her that he

would bring me home safely. He played down my injuries, suggesting there was barely a scratch on my skin. My grandma helped convince her to stay put.

“Can I talk to Chaseyn alone for a minute,” I asked.

“Sure, sweetums,” my grandma said, dragging Hank out the door. Eli followed close behind. “We’ll be back in five.”

It was just like her to rush our rendez vous. Just when I thought she might come around to Chaseyn, I could see that it would take more time to get her onside.

“She knows,” Chaseyn said as soon as they were out the door, and I understood why she was even more reluctant to succumb to his charms in the same way my mother had.

“How much,” I asked.

“Everything. It was impossible to keep from her,” Chaseyn said quickly. “She has an incredible gift of insight—unlike any I have seen before in a human.”

“Perfect. Now what? Where’s Frost?”

“I was hoping you might remember,” he said. “Mina and I have been trying to uncover her whereabouts, but we can’t place her. Did she say anything to you before...well, you know.”

“Before she bit me?”

“Yes.”

“No. The last thing I remember is the gleam of her sharp eye teeth as they lunged toward my jugular. I was sure she had decided to kill me, but she must have chosen to let me live after all. What does this mean?”

“It means we have to be very careful,” Chaseyn explained. “Frost likely heard Eli searching for you and feared revealing her dark secret if he had discovered her there unscathed. If she wants to finish what she started, she will have to sink her teeth into you twice more before the next full moon. After that, Frost won’t be able to touch you. Alexei would have to send another member of his biological army to find you and finish the job.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We wait,” he said. “Cordelia?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry I broke my promise.”

As if on cue, my grandma emerged. Hank and Eli were no where to be seen. I knew this meant she wanted to talk. Alone. Chaseyn left the room without so much as a word.

“Grandma, when did you know...about Chaseyn, I mean,” I asked perfectly candidly.

“I knew—we *both* knew—instantly,” she said carefully.

“What do you mean you both knew?”

“The minute I saw Chaseyn standing there at the airport in Denver when we first met, a cold rush came over me. I knew instantly what it meant,” she explained. “I could tell immediately that he felt something, too. He may not have known what it was at the time, but I’m sure he figured it out quickly. After he talked to his mother, no doubt.”

With Chaseyn’s ability to foresee and understand events on another level, I knew Mina’s wisdom would only have enhanced any information he had already discerned. In fact, it was possible Chaseyn knew what he was stepping into before he had even left for the airport that day. I knew my grandma had come to discuss other matters though, and I remained silent so that she could proceed.

“Lia, you can’t stay with him. It’s too dangerous,” she began. “You wouldn’t be here, in this place, if it wasn’t for him.”

“That’s not true, and you know it,” I protested. “It’s because of him that I stand a chance at coming out of this...alive.”

I pondered that last thought for a moment. Should one of Alexei’s soldiers actually complete his or her mission, I wouldn’t exactly be dead. Rather, I would be undead, and I was only marginally certain that was negative. Part of me had considered the possibility of remaining forever with Chaseyn as a warrior of the underworld, so to speak. Still, if I was to crossover, I would want it to be at his hands, not by the tainted fangs of an immortal soul. Often, I had thought about our future, but I had yet to make a decision. There was plenty of time, and it deserved a thorough assessment before coming to an absolute conclusion. Besides, I had no idea if Chaseyn would be willing to have me join him in eternity.

“It’s impossible for me to support your relationship,” she persisted. “Chaseyn is one of *them*. How can you be so sure that *he* isn’t part of the plan?”

For the second time since I had met Chaseyn, my grandma caused me to doubt the sincerity of his devotion and commitment. She had a point that I had to consider.

“I don’t know that for sure, but what other choice do I have,” I posed, knowing that was the truth. Either way, I was fodder for Alexei’s centuries-old game. At this stage, it was better to hope that Chaseyn was free from Alexei’s grasp and prepared to stand off against his father than to believe he would turn against me in the end. “Let’s assume for a moment that Chaseyn is sincere, shall we? He can help me escape this curse.”

“Or, he could take matters into his own hands...,” she replied.

“I can’t run from this. There is no place I can hide where Alexei won’t be able to find me. He’s populated an army of his offspring to hunt me down and fulfill this destiny,” I said through a heavy flow of salty tears. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“Okay,” she conceded. “I see your point, but I don’t have to like it.”

Sitting on the edge of my bed, she wrapped her arms around me and rocked slowly back and forth. To comfort me, she hummed the same lullaby she often sang to get me to sleep as a child.

“I love you, grandma.”

“Me, too, Lia. Me, too.”

Chapter 28 - The Plan

Another twelve hours passed before the medical team felt I was in stable physical condition and could be released from the hospital. Looking at the perfectly formed gash on my neck, they contemplated how two identical glass pieces could have made such an impression. Each shard cut equally deep through my flesh, causing mass amounts of blood to spill forth from my veins. It was the only major wound I had sustained during the incident, and the only one that mattered now. They would never know the truth, and I had to work hard to keep it that way.

Recalling the tale of Alexei's transformation from human to vampire, I knew that, had I been completely conscious in the moments following Frost's bite, I would have experienced an intense fever and temporary paralysis. Fortunately, that memory had been banished from my brain. However, the after affects were imminent. Shortly after I had awakened in the hospital, I became increasingly aware of my heightened senses.

"It's like everything is in some sort of multi-dimensional, Technicolor dream world," I said, waving my hand back and forth in front of my face. I could see every pore, every freckle and line in immense detail. "It's so surreal."

“Shhh,” warned Chaseyn. “Someone might hear you.”

“Oh, right,” I remembered. “How long do you think it will last? It’s kind of neat.”

“A couple of days at most. But, you mustn’t let any of the staff know. Okay?”

“Of course. Oh, no. What’s that smell? It’s disgusting,” I said, holding my nose.

“Bed pans. Sometimes, having an acute sense of smell can be more of a pain than it is pleasant. You’ll get used to it eventually.”

“Just get me out of here.”

Once I was safely tucked into bed at my grandma’s house, the others descended upon me like hawks that had just spotted fresh carrion on the roadside.

“We need a plan,” Eli said fervently.

Mina had now caught up to our group at my grandma’s house, and she had insisted on telling Hank and Eli the truth. Every detail. Now, Eli was wearing a hole in the carpet from pacing back and forth.

“Good thinking, Sherlock,” Chaseyn said sarcastically. He and Eli had been butting heads since I had come home from the hospital. Their show of gratitude for one another was just a guise for my benefit. Now that I was showing marked signs of improvement, they felt secure revealing their true emotions. “What impressive skills of deduction you have acquired.”

“Enough, boys,” my grandma hollered.

“He’s hardly a boy,” Eli countered. “He should learn to act his age. You don’t see my grandfather romping around with teenage girls like he’s king of the world.”

“If I had his genes—,” Hank began to tease.

“Hank,” my grandma warned, cutting off his words mid sentence.

“It’s not like that,” Mina explained. “Chaseyn may be the same age as your grandfather biologically, but he lacks the experience needed to develop mentally and emotionally beyond his early twenties.”

“I’m standing right here,” Chaseyn reminded the group.

“Chaseyn, it’s important for them to understand,” she continued. “Because of his physical appearance, people treat him in such a way that he has only ever been able to have the experiences and emotions of someone between the ages of 15 and 23. And, he will relieve those same emotions over and over again for all eternity. No one is ever going to talk to him like a man who has the wisdom of several decades and multiple graduate degrees. He will never have a professional career, be a father, grow old...the list is endless.”

“Cool,” Eli broke in.

“No. Eli, it’s not cool,” Mina said forcefully. “Don’t ever wish for this. Not for one minute.”

Mina’s command rang loudly inside my head. Despite the fact that she had spoken the words in response to Eli’s bemused comment, she was looking deep into my eyes, willing me to comprehend the authority behind her weighty words. Her message was clear.

“Okay, mom,” Chaseyn said wryly. “I think everyone’s been educated well enough about my pathetic existence and meager emotional aspirations. Can we focus on the task at hand?”

Mina, who rarely expressed emotion, smiled at her only son. Chaseyn was always in control, determined. She had just revealed a side to him that I had not contemplated previously. Though he had spent many decades roaming the Earth, we shared a common innocence in many ways. He seemed softer in the light of this realization. Eli

thought so, too. I could tell by the way he quieted and waited for Chaseyn to declare a course of action.

In the time it had taken Mina to unravel the mystery of Chaseyn's emotional shortcomings, he had formulated a plan. Simple, though it was.

"The next full moon is in four-and-a-half days. We just need to keep a constant vigil until then," he told our small group.

"I'm supposed to go home in three days. There is no way my mom will believe that I want to stay here any longer than I have to," I reasoned.

"You're right," Chaseyn agreed. "That's why we'll tell her that the attending physician wanted to see you one last time before you left and that he would be out of town until Monday."

"Will *she* come back," Eli asked, referring to Frost.

“Most likely,” Mina said. “Frost has been training for this moment her entire life. She’s not likely to walk away so easily.”

“What chance do we stand against a vampire,” Hank added.

“She is young,” Mina told him, resting a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of reassurance. “She will make mistakes. She already has.”

“What do you mean,” Hank asked.

“Frost was only born a few years ago. Her strength is minimal compared to decades old vampires, and her skills are not yet honed. Though she is much stronger than other girls her size, she would be no match for Eli’s brawn,” Mina stated matter of fact.

“Seriously? That is so cool,” Eli said gleefully.

“Bear in mind, though, her senses of sight and smell are exceptionally sharp. Regardless of the fact that she is in the infantile stages of her undead form, she can use these skills to her advantage. For this reason, Chaseyn and I will remain nearby at all times.”

“Will you know if she’s here,” I asked.

“Mina will have a better sense than me,” Chaseyn said, looking ashamed. “Vampires can feel each other’s presence within a certain proximity.”

“You’re not a vampire,” I said, acknowledging the reason for his shame.

He nodded.

“For once, I wish—“

“No you don’t, Chaseyn,” Mina stopped him. “You’re very fortunate to remain at least partly human.”

“You can use your special skill to track her, can’t you,” Eli asked—obviously proud of the fact that he had made such a deduction.

“Not this time. She’s my sister—half-sister, anyway. My sixth sense is unreliable when dealing with blood relatives. Basically, I’m flying blind.”

“So how did you know she was with me in the funhouse?”

“The bracelet...it’s a sort of amulet, if you will,” he explained. “It’s not foolproof, but it detects minor changes in your body chemistry based on anxiety. Occasionally, I am able to *feel* these changes through heated pulses in a similar silver cuff that I wear on my left wrist.”

He lifted the sleeve of his Oxford shirt to reveal the narrow band.

“It worked once, but it is all dependent on Cordelia’s emotional state. She had a great deal of time to contemplate her fate. She worked up a large amount of stress while she tried to understand the events unfolding around her. A surprise attack, for example, would leave her less response time.”

I shuddered, and Chaseyn wrapped his arms around my shoulders. Eli looked on enviously, and for a moment I felt badly that he was so willing to help me given his unrequited love. I wanted desperately to feel something more for him—after all, he was a beautiful, talented young man with a promising future. He could give me a normal life. Better than normal—he could give me everything that Chaseyn never could. Yet, I could not will myself to want that.

“So what do we do now,” Eli asked Chaseyn nervously, echoing my sentiments just one day earlier as I lay in a hospital bed healing from the wounds inflicted by Frost’s first attack. This time, Mina answered, using the same simple words Chaseyn had used earlier.

“We wait.”

Before the clock struck twelve announcing lunch hour on the first day of our stake out, I was going mad. Between Chaseyn and Eli stalking me around the house, I felt like a prisoner in my own—well, my grandma’s—home. I had all but got on my hands and knees begging for a little privacy, but they insisted it was necessary to monitor my every move. We continued in much the same fashion for the next two days.

Hank, Mina, and my grandma had settled into their own routine. Realizing Chaseyn and Eli were practically tripping over each other to cater to my every whim, they felt secure finding other ways to entertain themselves. Mostly, Hank lay sprawled across the couch watching college football on my grandma’s small-screen television. Mina took lessons in domesticity.

“Now, darling, you must be careful to coat the countertop with only a small amount of flour. Any more, and you will ruin the dough,” I heard my grandma saying in the kitchen. “No, no. That’s much too much. Let me just dab some of it up. There you go.”

Visions of a dust-covered Mina clad in jeans and an oversized T-shirt—quite a stretch from her normally perfectly pressed designer fashions—cluttered my head. With a

rolling pin in hand, I could see her moving to and fro and she struggled to make the pastry just the right thickness so she could press in the star- and heart-shaped cookies cutters. The thought made me chuckle.

“What’s so funny,” Chaseyn asked. I was lying with my head in his lap as he stroked my head gently, being careful to avoid my wounds. It was one of the few moments Eli had left us alone together and only because he had been sent on an errand to get more milk and eggs. My grandma was determined to teach Mina how to make the most delicious sugar cookies despite the fact that not a single one of her creations would ever touch Mina’s lips.

“Listen to them,” I said.

“How many batches have they made?”

“This is the third. Who is going to eat all of those cookies?”

We laughed together and kissed a little before Eli rejoined us. For his sake, I sat up

straight and motioned for Chaseyn to select from a series of board games that were stashed in the corner of the room. After much thoughtful consideration, he lifted Monopoly from the center of the stack. I realized later that this was one of the few games he would not be able to anticipate our moves. For the next two hours, we competed in a high-stakes round of one of the world's favorite pastimes.

"I just don't understand how you stay so thin," my grandma said to Mina as they continued their kitchen adventures. This sent the three of us into uproarious laughter. Soon, I could hear Mina chiming in from down the hall. She rarely showed any emotion, so this was particularly amusing for Chaseyn.

"Why are you all laughing?"

"Grandma, you can't be serious," I called from the next room. "Have you really not figured it out yet?"

By now, the three of us had abandoned our game to join in ribbing my grandma about her inability to comprehend the biological workings of the undead.

“Heaven knows what you’re talking about, Lia. I just want to know how she manages to keep so very trim,” my grandma said to me sternly before turning her attention to Mina. “You haven’t gone for a run or pretzelled yourself into a Yoga pose since you’ve been here. What *is* your secret?”

Mina paused for a moment to regain her composure before speaking. My grandma sank her teeth into one of the freshly baked cookies cooling on the countertop.

“Etta,” she began politely. “It’s been very nice of you to show me your secret recipes. I just love spending time with you in the kitchen—and Chaseyn will love benefitting from all I have learned—but I have little need for such delicacies.”

“Whatever do you mean, dear? Everyone can use a little sugar high every now and then.”

“Actually, my body rejects such culinary pleasures. I, quite literally, have no way of processing this type of nourishment,” Mina explained.

“But, Chaseyn loves my baking, don’t you?”

He nodded reassuringly.

“Chaseyn and I are quite different,” she continued. “His body functions in a very human way. Sadly, mine no longer does.”

A look of defeat crossed my grandma’s face at the same time realization sank in.

“Oh, I see,” she said in surprise. “Thank goodness. I thought you were some sort of freak of nature with a superhuman metabolism.”

As she said the words, she clasped a hand over her mouth, realizing her faux pas. We broke into hysterics.

“I’m so sorry,” she said quickly, face flushing a scarlet red. “Mina, Chaseyn, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

By day three, we were all getting on each other's last nerve. We had been cooped up inside the small house, tripping over one another. Using all of my powers of persuasion, I managed to convince the others that it would be a good idea to get some fresh air for a while.

"What harm can come to me in a mall," I asked the group. They were arranged like a jury in a row on the couch, and I stood before them pleading my case. "We have to do something. Sitting around here is driving us all mad."

After about an hour of deliberation, weighing and balancing the positive and negative possibilities, everyone agreed that the mall seemed a relatively safe haven. Everyone, except Chaseyn. He tried to insist that I remain in the confines of the house.

"Over my dead body," he said, knowing the argument was futile. Eli stood to take him up on the offer, not realizing the irony of Chaseyn's remark.

"You're being ridiculous, Chaseyn," Mina said methodically. "You know that would

require way too much effort, not to mention flights around the world to bury your dismembered parts on consecrated soil in various countries. Eli, honey, take a seat. You simply don't have what it takes to challenge my son."

Everyone looked at each other quizzically before looking to the two of them for an explanation.

"Never mind," Mina urged. "That's a tale for another day. Eli, Chaseyn, you take Lia to the mall and keep your eyes open for anything suspicious. I'm sure Hank and Etta have a million things they would like to do as well. I'm just going to run home to grab a few things."

"Home? That will take days," my grandma said. Again, the group broke into laughter at her words. "What now?"

"Come on, Etta. I'll explain it all on the way to the market," Hank suggested, taking her by the arm.

Chaseyn had driven his V-Rod, and Mina planned to drive her car at least partway home in an effort to avoid raising suspicion among the neighbors if she returned walking while carrying loads of heavy bags. Refusing to cram into the cab of Eli's so-called truck, Chaseyn opted for taking my grandma's old clunker. We piled in and began our long drive across town.

As we strolled through the corridors of the busiest mall in town—I knew this because Chaseyn insisted we research these statistics before selecting the most suitable destination—I made every effort to shake my escorts, but to no avail. Even when I wanted to try on a pair of jeans, they pushed into the fitting room ahead of me to inspect every angle. It was all I could do to convince them to wait outside the room—although, I was quite certain that had little to do with a potential vampire attack. Chaseyn, always the gentleman, was easier to persuade than Eli.

Now, a certain matter of nature was calling, and I knew that using a public washroom was entirely out of the question. I begged for lenience to no avail.

“But I really have to go,” I begged. “I had that huge drink at lunch.”

“Well, next time, you will know better,” Chaseyn replied. Eli laughed.

“It’s not funny,” I pouted.

After about two hours of uneventful toiling around the mall, I could no longer ignore the pressure building against my bladder and demanded we return home.

“Chaseyn, I know you can drive faster, and I am going to ask that, on this one occasion, you ignore the posted speed limit,” I said urgently.

When we left the house, it seemed no concern that the mall was on the other side of the city. Our priority was to find the location with the most people so that we could blend effortlessly into the crowd. Now, it seemed an unfortunate circumstance. I fidgeted uncomfortably in the passenger seat, while the boys made inappropriate comments about running water and swimming pools. Finally, the streets became familiar; it would be only a few more blocks until we reached home. Just one week ago, my arrival to this place had been plagued by negativity. Now, I felt joyous at its sight.

The house was empty. Presumably, Mina had gone home, and grandma was still out with Hank. Without thinking, I dashed upstairs to use the facilities.

“Lia, no,” Mina called as she rushed through the front door and past the boys. She was panting hard.

As I pushed open the bathroom door, I heard her shout of protest from down the hall, but it was too late. There stood Frost. Like a statue come to life, she flung herself at me and bit down hard on the opposite side of my neck. Then, she turned quickly and jumped through the open window in the shower stall.

I lay on the floor, blood staining my shirt and spilling to the ground below, when Mina found me. She was three blocks away when she sensed both Chaseyn’s and Frost’s presence. She ditched her car and ran flat out, hoping to make it to the scene before any damage could be done, but she was too late.

By now, a fluffy white hand towel—one meant for display only, never to be used—was pressed tightly against the gaping wound in my neck. A feverish sweat poured over

my body, and while I felt I should be writhing with the pain of the bite, my limbs lay perfectly still. Chaseyn was holding my hand, though I could not feel him. Paralysis had set in.

“Help her,” Eli screamed, tears streaming down his cheeks. Mina rose quickly and guided him out of the small room and down the hall. All the while, Chaseyn whispered soothing words in my ear.

“It’s okay, Cordelia. I’ve got you,” he assured. “I won’t leave you again. Not for one moment.”

Mina returned with a bounty of fresh linen and antiseptic wipes. She began working away at the gash, cleaning and mending. I knew a visit to the hospital was out of the question, and she seemed perfectly capable of tending to my needs. Thankfully, I had lost all feeling and was starting to doze.

When I awoke, it was much the same scene as it had been in the hospital just a few days earlier. Again, my grandma rejoiced when I opened my eyes, and I could see the others lingering in the background.

“I brought you a cookie,” she said smiling. “We have enough to feed an army.”

This time, I was on my feet within a few hours. Mina had managed to keep the blood loss to a minimum, which left me feeling lightheaded but capable of exerting a minimal amount of physical effort.

“How will I ever explain these scars,” I joked. No one laughed.

“How could I let this happen to you—twice,” Chaseyn questioned dejectedly.

“You could have stopped her,” Eli challenged.

“No, Eli, this was beyond Chaseyn’s abilities,” Mina reminded. “He feels badly enough.”

She was right. Chaseyn had tried to blame himself for everything that had happened, but we all knew he was not at fault. Eli took advantage of Chaseyn’s guilty feelings, until I made it known that I found his behavior reproachful and that he should be ashamed. Eli was agreeable ever after.

Chaseyn had kept his promise to remain with me at all times. If I stood—even just to stretch—Chaseyn stood beside me. When I slept, he watched. It was both suffocating and endearing.

“Twice,” he muttered. “How could I let it get this far?”

“We all played a part in this, Chaseyn,” Hank, who had been unusually quiet the past few days, said loudly. “One of us should have stayed behind to keep watch over the house. It was a novice error, but now, we know better.”

Chaseyn nodded, and Eli gave him a playful punch in the shoulder. Only I could see him grimace when he turned away. Chaseyn may be part human, but his body was rigid. While Eli was used to being tackled by enormous linebackers, they seemed like kittens compared to Chaseyn’s perfectly sculpted physique.

No one spoke of it, but it was on all of our minds. Frost still had more than a day to make one last attempt at accomplishing her goal. There was nothing we could do other than be on guard, so there was no point harping on the subject. Instead, we decided to watch a movie.

“We should watch *The Longest Yard*,” offered Eli. “Adam Sandler is so funny.”

“Adam who,” asked Hank. “Burt Reynolds stars in that one.”

“No, grandpa. Burt Reynolds has just a small role,” Eli corrected.

“Have you lost your mind, Eli? He’s the main character.”

“Grandpa, what do you know about this movie, anyway? You haven’t been to see anything other than fairytales and love stories in more than a decade,” Eli teased.

“I won’t argue with that,” Hank said, sending a loving look at my grandma who adored those film genres. “But that film is from the seventies. I doubt this Adam kid was even walking back then.”

They argued a little while longer before deciding the only way to settle the score was to watch the movie. I took this as the perfect opportunity to catch up on some much needed sleep, and curled up in a ball beside Chaseyn, who had seen both versions of the movie but had thought it more fun to watch Hank and Eli banter. It was late

when I finally woke again, and everyone had decided to call it a night. Chaseyn had remained completely still at my side while I slept.

“What time is it,” I asked in a raspy voice.

“Late. I should take you to bed,” he said quietly. I smiled menacingly. “You know what I mean.”

“I know, but the thought of something more was nice, wasn’t it?”

“One day, Cordelia. It will be very nice.”

He carried me to my room and tucked in the sides of the blankets around me. I could barely move I was folded in so snug. He sat on the chair across from the bed where he could keep a constant vigil. Sunday night was restless. With less than twenty-four hours to the next full moon, I was anxious to be rid of this ordeal. In the wee hours, I stirred again, and Chaseyn was at my side in an instant.

“I need air,” I whispered, a sudden feeling of claustrophobia had come over me. “I can’t breathe in here.”

He nodded in quiet agreement and scooped me into his arms. Craddled like a baby, he carried me out into the quiet moonlight, resting me gently on a tire swing that my grandpa had hung in a large oak tree when I was a toddler. Chaseyn placed his hands gently on my back and began to push. For the first time in days, I felt carefree and liberated. I leaned back on the swing so my head dangled upside-down. My hair nearly reached the ground below as it swept back and forth in the wind. Touching my feet to the earth, I came to a slow halt, and Chaseyn moved in close, wrapping his strong arms around me. As we stood there staring deep into each other’s eyes, it was as if all of the world had melted away. It was just us. The two of us. And, we kissed, our lips barely grazing. His hands pressed firmly at the small of my back, and I tangled my fingers through his dark curls. I wanted to press pause—to keep us frozen here forever.

“Chaseyn,” whispered an unfamiliar male voice from the shadows, making me jump and Chaseyn tremble. The deep baritone came like a melody on the wind, but I sensed its sweet sound was deceptive.

“Mina,” Chaseyn called out in fear, wanting to alert his mother to the danger I knew we now faced.

“She’s on her way, son,” the man offered, and my heart stopped.

“Alexei,” I said quietly, inquisitively, my voice shaking ever so slightly. Another figure stood silently behind him. Frost.

Mina appeared in the doorway. There was no time for her to express her displeasure at Chaseyn and I for taking such a risk. Instead, she made her approach.

“It’s time,” Alexei said to Frost.

Though there were more of us in number, we lacked the strength to fend off this powerful duo. Even if Eli joined the fight, we would be no match for Alexei’s brute strength. Chaseyn and Mina joined forces against Alexei in an effort to keep him safely away, but Frost was free to attack—her third, and final, bite was imminent.

For a while, she danced tauntingly around the yard, circling near me and then farther away. Tauntingly, she twirled and flitted about, occasionally leaping onto rooftops or perching on the branches of tall trees. I was thankful for the cover of night shrouding us from view of the neighbors. However, I knew Alexei would never let Frost jeopardize their lifestyle by so wistfully flaunting it in the open if he had thought anyone was awake to see.

“Now, Frost. Stop wasting time,” he shouted in anger at his youngest child.

In the penultimate moment, Frost jumped down from where she had been balancing on a fence post, exposing her fangs with a hissing sound. The beauty of her face contorted into a wretched shape, and she sank her sharp teeth deep into my jugular. I let out a loud shriek—the pain was unbearable, and I knew this bite had triggered my transformation. Instantly, I felt a new reaction to her attack. Previously, I had felt nothing. There was no pain, only fever and paralysis. This time was different; I could feel my body dying.

With Frost’s teeth firmly entrenched in my skin, I crumpled to the ground. I lay there,

writhing in the most excruciating pain as she drank from the fountain of blood pouring through my veins. This entirely new sensation was intensely sensual and entirely horrific. I could, quite literally, feel her draining the life from my body. More disturbingly, I could feel an overwhelming thirst building inside of me.

Chaseyn had released his hold on Alexei, realizing his father could do no more harm to me now than had already been done. He ran to my side. Mina remained entangled with her one-time husband, doing her best to keep him at bay. With Frost and I interlocked, there was little Chaseyn could do. Though he was undoubtedly much stronger than Frost, pulling her away with the necessary force, he would risk wounding me past the point of repair.

“Cordelia, look at me. Focus on my eyes,” Chaseyn pleaded.

Rolling my eyes upward from where I lay on the grass, I could see him staring back, but it was hard to focus on anything other than Frost and the pain she was inflicting. I struggled to maintain my gaze, but my eyes deceived me. I pulled her closer, tighter to my body, forcing her teeth to sink deeper and deeper. The sensation was no longer one of pain but of desire. I longed for her to take more.

“Cordelia, you mustn’t give in,” he cried. “Let go.”

I knew he was right, but I could barely restrain myself. He was prying at my hands, but it was no use. My mind was focused on one thing only, the thought of replenishing my nearly empty veins with Frost’s blood. All thoughts of Alexei and my inevitable demise as his vampire bride had banished. My future with Chaseyn was lost. I was under *her* spell.

“Frost,” called Alexei weakly. Mina was no match, but she had at least a little effect on his focus. “You must stop now. She has to drink or die.”

“This is it Chaseyn—your one chance to put an end to this,” Mina called. “You know what you have to do.”

For one brief moment, Frost would have to break free from our embrace in order to slit her own wrist so that I could drink of her blood. This would complete the transformation. I was all too eager, and just as reluctant to release her from my grasp as she was to release me. As she pulled away, gingerly disentangling my fingers from

her hair, Chaseyn lunged forward, pushing her to the ground. She lay on her back struggling to break free when Alexei eased his way out of Mina's loose hold and almost literally flew across the yard to fend off Chaseyn.

The two wrestled together—a mess of legs and arms kicking and punching—in a lump on the ground. Yearning for the nourishment my body needed, I reached out for Frost, and, gaining her attention, pulled her closer. Despite the fact that I was near death, I had gained immeasurable strength.

Alexei forced Chaseyn to his feet, drawing him farther from where I lay crumpled beside the swing I was so peacefully employing just a few moments earlier. In one swift motion, Alexei pushed Chaseyn back against the old oak tree, and the ground rattled when the weight of his body hit its trunk.

“You inherited more of me than I would have thought possible,” Alexei said gleefully.

“You can't take credit for any part of me,” Chaseyn said through gritted teeth. He was holding up to Alexei, but for how much longer was uncertain.

“Ah, but I can, son,” Alexei said smugly. “We both fancy the same woman.”

Pushing with all his might, Chaseyn managed to gain a few feet of space and grab Frost just as she was about to open her own vein for me to drink. Swiftly, Alexei swooped to the scene and slashed a small, clean gash in Frost’s wrist before tossing his son a good five feet through the air. Chaseyn’s body came to an abrupt halt only when it made impact with another large tree, which snapped in half and tumbled quietly over. Alexei’s laugh roared powerfully through the yard in a din that rivaled a thunder clap. There was no time for him to rejoin the effort, so he did the only other thing he could and called out to me.

“Cordelia,” he shouted madly. “Please look at me.”

Chaseyn was on his knees. I looked at him swaying there in the pale glow of the soft moonlight. The breeze blew through his perfect locks, which were adorned with bark chips from the fallen tree.

“You have to look at me,” he called. “Forget about Frost.”

As he said the words, I felt the first drop of her blood on my skin. Narrowly missing my mouth, it landed in the crease at the corner of my lips. My tongue struggled to reach the solitary bead.

“Stop it, Cordelia,” Chaseyn begged. “You mustn’t taste even a single speck of her blood, or there will be no way to reverse the process. Please.”

During Chaseyn and Alexei’s tussle, Mina had escaped inside. Now, she returned with Eli—who had fallen asleep on the couch earlier—at her side. The two of them lunged toward Frost, tackling her to the ground. At the same moment, Chaseyn leaped from the ground and rolled me as far from the scene as he could. By now, the open wound on Frost’s wrist had started heal, and I was breaking free of her trancelike hold.

“Now,” Chaseyn yelled as he tossed Eli a thick splinter he had been cradling gently in his hand. In true quarterback form, Eli caught the stake one handed and rammed it into Frost’s chest, in the place where her heart would be if she had one. Frost let out a horrifying groan before collapsing limply in Eli’s arms. Acknowledging defeat, Alexei

looked at Chaseyn and I huddled beneath the eave and sounded his displeasure.

“You may have won this time, son, but this is far from over,” he warned then disappeared into the thick black of night.

“Is she dead,” Eli asked Mina, clearly horrified by the potential crime he had just committed. “It would be self defense, right? What’s the story?”

“She’s fine, Eli,” Mina assured. “A stake through the chest is simply a means of incapacitating a vampire temporarily. Once we remove the stake, she will heal immediately. I’ll take care of her from here.”

I was slipping in and out of consciousness as they debated the matter of how to proceed, my blood having been drained nearly dry. Chaseyn had made provisions for just such an event and had a supply of my blood type on hand. Meanwhile, Mina scooped the rumped mass that Frost had become into her strong arms—not to be seen again in Amarillo.

“What is all the ruckus out here,” my grandma shouted from just inside the door to her house. “I’m trying to get some sleep, and it’s nearly impossible with all this noise.”

One would think that being drained of all your blood to the point of near death would be very exhausting, but it was surprisingly refreshing. The healing process began almost immediately. Although, I later learned that it was enhanced by an ages-old herbal remedy that Mina had in her possession from a recent visit to Romania.

“She had hoped we would have no use for this but knew that if our plan went awry, we would need to stimulate immediate regeneration of any cells that were depleted during the attack,” Chaseyn explained, trying to sound matter-of-fact. “As I’m sure you have concluded, it expedites the healing process by increasing the speed of blood flow through the veins.”

For at least three hours after the attack, I lay forlorn in the darkness of the master bedroom while Chaseyn struggled to bring my vitals back to manageable order. Thanks to Frost, I had inherited a temporary, but very powerful, ability to hear every step as my grandma paced back and forth in the hallway.

“What is in that stuff? I feel great,” I said, hoisting my upper body onto my elbows. It

was around noon—only nine hours after the fateful event that had left me practically for dead.

“Whoa,” Chaseyn said, guiding me back down to a restful position. “Not so fast. I know you’re feeling better, but you still need to rest.”

By Tuesday, my body had regained its full strength, and Chaseyn felt certain I could make the short flight home comfortably. Though I would miss my grandma, and even Hank and Eli, I was happy to be making my way back home.

“Here, put these on,” Chaseyn said, handing me a pair of ridiculously large DKNY sunglasses.

“I’m not wearing these,” I protested. “I’ll look like a cricket.”

“Trust me. You’re going to want to keep them on for at least a few days.”

Stepping onto the front porch in the morning light, I immediately understood. My sight—which, along with my other senses, had been heightened due to Frost's bite—had not yet been restored to its former state. The sunlight stung like salt on an open wound, and I squinted hard against the bright rays.

We had shared so much over the week that I knew we would be connected forever by our vows of secrecy and traumatic adventures. I thanked the three of them profusely for all of their goodwill and glad tidings. To Eli's surprise Chaseyn decided to leave the V-Rod in his possession so that he could make the airborne journey home with me.

"Don't get too cozy with her. I'll be back in a few weeks to pick her up," Chaseyn warned, stroking the handlebars. Eli nodded vigorously, as we drove away with my grandma at the wheel of her 1988 Plymouth Reliant. I knew Chaseyn would never have the heart to take back the bike—it was his way of thanking Eli for helping save my life.

It had only been ten days since I had left home, but I was an entirely different person. Ten days. That was all. Yet, I felt a lifetime older, wiser. Moments after touching down, we were making our way through the long corridor to collect our baggage. My mom

was waiting patiently to greet us. In an unexpected show of affection, Iran to enwrap her in my arms.

“Lia, you look really well,” she said, her eyes glistening with a dewy sheen. “I thought—”

“You thought I would look a little worse for the wear,” I added, laughing for good measure. By now, Mina’s mystical remedy had healed most of my wounds so that externally I looked much the way I had when my mom had last seen me. “I’m sure grandma exaggerated things a bit.”

“But I saw the wreckage on the news,” my mom added. I had almost forgotten about the Wonderland fiasco and had certainly not considered the fact that it would be covered by television media. “The mirrors were an awful mess.”

“Oh, mom,” I said, brushing off her concern. After all, those events were the least of my worries in the big picture. Touching the places on my wrists and neck where Frost had left her mark, albeit nearly nonexistent now, I continued my reassurance. “I was a little black and blue at first, but I’m fine now.”

“I was so worried,” she added anyway. I knew the remains of the stitches entrenched in my temple would give her a fright, but she managed to maintain a brave face for my benefit. “Chaseyn, I’m so glad you brought her home safely, but why were you there?”

“It was the four-month anniversary of the day I first laid eyes on Cordelia, and I wanted to surprise her. I really hadn’t planned on staying long, but I couldn’t leave once I knew she had been hurt. I’m sure you understand.”

She nodded in agreement and put her arm around me as we walked through the revolving doors to exit. Chaseyn followed behind with my bag. As I slipped the sunglasses over my eyes to shade them from what I was sure would be an overpowering burst of light, my mother looked at me curiously.

“I caught a case of pink eye from Eli, and my eyes are a bit troubled by bright light. I’ll need to wear these for a few days,” I said quickly. She seemed satisfied with the hasty explanation.

During the drive, my mom jabbered on about all that I had missed at home—namely a myriad of wedding preparations for her pending nuptials to Kevin. I bobbed my head up and down at all of the right moments, I hoped, knowing that I was preoccupied with my own thoughts of the future.

According to Chaseyn, Alexei had numerous children who were prepared to do his bidding should a suitable opportunity arise. What, exactly, had become of Frost, I was uncertain. Neither Chaseyn nor Mina would explain the exact measures they had taken to ensure she would never again be in a position to reprise the events of which she had executed this past week. However, having survived her attack, she could no longer commit the act of transforming me into a vampire herself. She could only aid another in his or her attempt. This was a small bit of comfort, though I doubted she would be part of such an ambush again.

As we pulled into the driveway, I made a promise to myself that I would not worry about Alexei and his intrepid offspring, with the exception of Chaseyn. I could not live in fear of the seemingly inevitable. Once he had carried by bag upstairs, Chaseyn kissed my cheek and left my mom and I to catch up on the most current local events. She pulled swatches and samples from a big box in the kitchen, and together, we reviewed the wedding selections she had already made and those still in need of

confirmation. After a few hours of idle chitchat and picking at finger foods, the doorbell rang, and my mom hopped to her feet.

“I have a surprise for you,” she said smiling. Seconds later, she reappeared with Addie at her side. We held each other in a long embrace before retreating to my bedroom to catch up.

“I was so worried about you,” Addie gushed. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Unlike my mom, Addie made me recall every detail of the tragic funhouse escapade so that she could picture what it must have been like to live through such a terrifying event. Then, she got down to business with the latest local gossip. Normally, my mom would frown at Addie staying over on a school night, but she made a special exception on this particular occasion. We spent the entire night talking and giggling. It was good to be home.

Unfortunately, our sleepless night took its toll the next day. In class, I could barely keep my well-shaded eyes open. The tale of my misfortune in Amarillo had become an epic saga, and I spent most of the lunch hour telling half truths about the actual

events. Chaseyn added to the story as needed to lend credence to my statements. By the end of the first week, almost everyone in the school—regardless of their grade or relationship to me or anyone else at my regular cafeteria table—had been privy to the details.

Given recent events, Chaseyn found it difficult to let me out of his sight for even a moment, and my grandma continually checked in—raising my cell phone minutes off the charts and arousing my mom’s suspicions.

“She just misses me, mom. That’s all,” I told her often. “To be honest, I kind of miss her, too.”

It wasn’t a lie. I did miss my grandma, but her non-stop surveillance was becoming a nuisance. She had taken to regularly interrogating Chaseyn using web cams and instant messaging services. It was endearing at first, but now, I wanted nothing more than to return to my life as a normal teenage girl living in a quiet mountain town.

Spending time alone with Addie had become my saving grace. From lip syncing our favorite songs in front of the vanity in her bedroom the size of a football field to

spending Saturday afternoons scouting for designer sample sales at the local mall, we fell back into our old routine. Of course, Chaseyn and Rob were still a big part of everything we did—often trailing three stores behind carrying Addie’s bevy of boutique purchases—I had a renewed faith in friendship and closeness with those I loved.

Weeks passed, and life seemed as though it were completely normal again. At least as normal as life can be when you are destined to be a vampire bride and must always be keeping a watchful eye for potential aggressors.

Chapter 31 - Past Lives

There was little I had yet to learn about Chaseyn. Now that I knew the entire truth about his family and my unfortunate destiny, there was little reason to keep secrets. Each night as I lay in bed waiting for sleep to come, he would tell me stories of his past. He was always just outside my window, waiting on the ground below watching for any suspicious characters to make an appearance. Of course, my mom had no idea, so we were forced to communicate via telephone. Still, I knew he was only a few feet away, and I could feel the chill of his presence in the air.

For some time though, I had contemplated the parts of Chaseyn's past that had not yet been revealed to me. One night, while Chaseyn and I lingered amongst a crowd of our friends at a house party, I decided that I could no longer put off knowing the answer to one of the thoughts that had invaded my mind on numerous occasions. I dragged him out to the dance floor and pulled him in close.

"Chaseyn," I said softly as we circled around the outdoor dance floor in the glow of the pale moonlight. "There's something I need to know."

“Anything,” he said sincerely.

“I’m not sure you will want to talk about this,” I added.

“I have no secrets from you.”

After a few moments pause, I decided to quash my curiosity and ask the question that had been plaguing me for weeks. Regardless of Chaseyn’s response, I needed to know the answer. Though I was uncertain why it hadn’t occurred to me before, it was something I needed to know now.

“I need to know,” I started to speak, but the words refused to leave my lips. It seemed maybe I didn’t want to know after all. “You’ve had so many more years to experience life. I wondered—”

Again, I tried to speak, but no sound escaped my mouth.

“Yes,” he said, already knowing the answer to my unasked question.

That one word made my heart plummet into my stomach. Chaseyn had been in love before. It was ridiculous to think in all his years on Earth that he might have been untouched by another until now, but it still hurt to hear the truth.

“Once. A very long time ago,” he continued.

We had stopped moving now and were just standing in the center of the room. He stared down into my eyes, looking for some sign that he had not left me completely shattered.

“Cordeli, say something,” he urged.

Try as I might to fight the strong emotions welling inside me, tears sprang to my eyes, falling uncontrollably down my cheeks to my bare shoulders. In one swift move—so swift I feared someone might recognize his superhuman abilities—Chaseyn swept me outside, away from prying eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m being silly. I knew. I mean, of course I didn’t really know, but a part of me knew. It’s just hard to hear. I guess I had hoped that we were both experiencing this for the first time.”

“We are, Cordelia,” he assured.

“But, we’re not,” I replied, trying to stop the saltwater flow from its constant stream.

“It’s true, I was in love, but it didn’t feel anything like this,” he explained.

I looked at him with hope, but I still felt cheated.

“Lia, where are you going,” Addie shouted as I ran out of the room. “Wait.”

But my legs just kept pushing forward. I ran with a speed I did not know was possible for someone of the human form. Chaseyn didn’t try to stop me, though I knew he

would not be far behind. First, he had to contend with Addie's incessant interrogation over what had just transpired. He was vague but honest, and she expressed instant concern—instructing Rob to wait while she tracked me down.

After about a half hour of running through random suburban streets and alleys, Addie had finally caught up with me—and so had Chaseyn. He was impossible to spot in the dark light, but I knew the instant the temperature dropped that he was nearby. I tried to be happy that he cared so much, but I was still distraught by his earlier revelation. Addie wanted desperately to comfort me in the same way I had on the many occasions that she and Rob had called an end—and later a new beginning—to their relationship. I was unwilling to give her the satisfaction. Instead, I assured her that what I truly needed more than anything right now was time to think. She drove me home and walked me to my room before returning to the party. As usual, Chaseyn waited in the shadows beneath my bedroom window, but rather than making his presence known, tonight, he remained completely silent, respecting my wishes to be alone.

Sleep came quickly, but morning came even faster. I was still enrapt in my thoughts when the doorbell rang. Looking at the clock, I realized that I had been lying awake for hours and it was, in fact, a reasonable time of day for an unexpected guest.

“Lia,” my mom shouted up the stairs. “Are you awake? It’s Chaseyn.”

She crept up the stairs and poked her head inside the door. Pretending to be asleep at this hour would be completely ludicrous, so instead, I feigned illness.

“I’m really not feeling well, mom. Can you tell him to go away?”

“Sure, honey.”

Standing at the top of the stairs, I listened intently as my mom explained the situation to Chaseyn. I should have known better than to think he would simply walk away. Before I could protest, he was resting comfortably on the couch.

“Thanks for letting me wait, Mrs. Jameson,” he said in a voice that suggested he had won the first of many battles today. “I promise I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

“Oh, Chaseyn,” my mom cooed. “You’re such a silly boy. You’re never any trouble.”

Returning to my room, I sat on the edge of the bed and continued to think about my life as it was, Chaseyn, and the future. What did I want, I wondered? Would I eventually ask Chaseyn to make me an immortal being? If not, how would it feel to grow old with Chaseyn if he never truly aged? Would he stay with me? There were still so many things I needed to experience before I could make an educated choice. How could I know what I wanted until I had lived been through the same things Chaseyn already had? As these thoughts raced through my head, the minutes ticked by on the clock. More than an hour had passed since Chaseyn had arrived, and I knew what I needed to do.

Tossing on a T-shirt and jeans, I poked my head out the door and silently motioned for him to join me in my room. We talked for hours.

Chapter 32 - Fancy Dresses

“He’s leaving,” Addie asked surprised. “And, you’re okay with that?”

I nodded my head, tears stinging my eyes. No matter how many times I had been over it in my head, it still hurt to think about it actually happening.

“It’s for the best right now.”

“Lia, you love him. Don’t you know that? I’ve never met two people so perfectly synchronized,” Addie continued. She was pleading her case, and it was nearly impossible to bear.

Again, I nodded.

“Chaseyn knows who he is and what life has to offer. I’m just not sure right now who I’m supposed to be. I can’t figure that out with him always by my side. Once I have

the answers I'm looking for, he'll come back."

"How can you be so sure," she asked. "What makes you think that he'll wait for you to get your head on straight. He's amazing, and there are a lot of beautiful, smart women out there who would give their right arm for a chance to be with someone like him."

"I've never been more certain of anything in my life," I replied.

Addie seemed satisfied for now, but I could see the look of skepticism in her eyes. She thought I was deluding myself and that he was going to find someone new, but she had no idea. He was bound to me forever. It was Chaseyn who had no guarantees about what I would decide to do.

"So, I guess we better find you an awesome dress for prom since it will be one of your last chances to leave a strong impression on him before he leaves," Addie said, a huge grin sweeping across her face.

She was right. Even though I knew it was needless, I still wanted to give him

something special to remember me by until I sent the signal that I was ready to reconnect with him. Addie was already racing toward the boutique where she thought she had found the perfect dress...for me. She knew that in this one, rare case, I was going to let her lavish me with expensive fashions, and she was going to take advantage of the opportunity. Before I stepped foot inside the store, I saw her standing in front of the picture window flashing four different dresses wildly at me, one at a time. I let out a wry chuckle and shook my head knowingly. I was in for a bumpy ride.

The next few weeks were a challenge. I waffled between wanting Chaseyn to remain with me always and needing to be on my own for a while. Until, the one day came that I had to make the ultimate choice.

“I’ve decided to attend the University of Denver.”

“But, you got accepted to Dartmouth, Columbia, and Brown,” my mom said in surprise. “Why would you turn down full scholarship at an Ivy League school to live in Boulder?”

“To be close to you,” to be closer to you.

My mom smiled shyly. We had been getting along so well over the past year that I wanted to continue growing our relationship. If I moved away, I may not have that opportunity again. I deferred my acceptance to the other schools for one year. That way, I could have the best of both worlds.

“I promise, mom. I’m going to get the best education I can, but for a little while, I want to spend my weekends with you and Kevin. Unless you don’t—“

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course we want you around as much as possible. But, how is Chaseyn going to feel about this? Hasn’t he already enrolled at Cornell? I’m sure one of the reasons he selected that school was to be near whichever one you selected.”

“It’s okay, mom. He knows, and he supports my decision,” I told her. “We’ll be together again someday, but right now...”

It was difficult to continue, and she didn’t press for more information. She didn’t ask

any more questions about why I had chosen to stay nearby for school, while Chaseyn would be moving across the country. Instead, she made me a big cup of hot cocoa—even though the temperature was in the sixties, and the sun was shining like a neon bulb in the sky—and leafed through the University of Denver brochures I had fanned out on the dining table.

Time passed at lightning speed. Prom, finals, and graduation came and went too quickly. I wasn't ready for what came next. Life. And, goodbye.

Chapter 33 - New Beginnings

Simple. Elegant. That was the only way to describe my mom's wedding to Kevin. Wild lilies, daisies, and roses adorned an elaborate gazebo that was constructed in the meadow at Evergreen Memorial Park. On each side of the makeshift aisle, ten rows of six chairs each were covered in white linens. Kevin, a tall, sturdy man with a youthful glow, looked impressive in a tailored suit, mauve shirt, and lavender tie. His brother flanked his right side as he stood waiting for my mom to come down the aisle. I wore a pale purple sundress. The strapless, satin frock was layered with a lacy crinoline that hung to my knees. I wore my hair in ringlets on the top of my head, the odd escapee dangling to my shoulder. Chaseyn watched from the first row with pride as I glided effortlessly across the grass to stand in front of the crowd. My grandma, seated next to him, was more intent on his face than on me. I knew she was concerned about our future and if Chaseyn could keep me safe, but I had faith in our bond. I smiled at both of them and then at Kevin, who looked like he was going to pass out from anxiety.

As the wedding march played, the guests stood to face the back of the aisle. My mother stood beaming in a long, ivory slip style dress made of pure silk. It was sleeveless and slim-fitting, but modest. She walked slowly to take her place next to me, and I could see the tears of joy in her eyes. Kevin was crying, too.

I watched intently as my mom and Kevin exchanged vows, carefully listening for my cue to help light the unity candle. Every now and then, I stole a glance at Chaseyn, who hadn't taken his eyes off me once. I could feel them burning through to my soul. This was our last day together for an undetermined length of time, and neither of us wanted to think about goodbye.

After a few photos in the field with the mountains as a backdrop, we retreated to a nearby barn for the reception. I thought it was cheesy and unnecessary, but my mom insisted that I arrive with her and Kevin and that rather than simply announcing them as husband and wife, we be introduced as a family. It was her day, so I went along, but it seemed silly. It also meant there would be no time for me to be alone with Chaseyn until after dinner. My muscles tensed with anxiety as I thought about how long that would be and how little time we had left.

As each minute passed, I longed to be near Chaseyn. The clock seemed to be ticking too quickly, and time was flying by. In just a few short hours, he would be gone. The minute the typical wedding rituals ended—dinner, speeches, and the first dance, which was extended to include a dance between Kevin and I—I was finally free to join Chaseyn.

“Mmm, I missed you,” I murmured against his lips, brushing my nose back and forth across his.

Chaseyn held me tight. He was much larger than me, and his arms wrapped almost entirely around my waist in a complete circle. I never felt as safe as when I was in his arms. After all we had been through, I knew I could trust him implicitly. He would never let me down.

“Do you think they would miss you if we went outside for a minute? Just a minute, I promise,” Chaseyn assured.

I nodded even though I knew my mom would be frantic if she lost sight of me today. Still, I needed to be with Chaseyn, alone, even if just for a moment. I took his hand and guided him through the crowded dance floor to the far side of the room where a side door led to a wooded area. We only had a short time before someone would come searching for me—no doubt to pose for more pictures or help cut the cake. I felt like I was on an emotional roller coaster. On the one hand, I was feeling overjoyed by my mom’s happiness and at being such a big part of this blissful event. On the

other hand, Chaseyn and I would be separated in just a few hours, and though I knew I would see him again someday, I didn't know when. It was of my own volition, and I knew he would stay if I asked him to, but it was best for me to take some time away from him for a while. We both knew it. I had to be a participant in my own life before I could decide to take another path. Knowing this, wanting this, didn't make it hurt any less.

Chaseyn slipped his hand into the pocket inside the lining of his suit jacket. He pulled out something so small that I couldn't make out its shape in the dim exterior lighting. He placed the object in the palm of his right hand and spread it out before me.

"I had this made for you," he said, nodding his head toward what I could now see was a silver loop with a large gem at the top. "I hope you like it."

Using both hands, I scooped the trinket into my fumbling fingers, which were now shaking at the symbolism of his gesture. I looked up at him from under my long, false eyelashes.

“What is it,” I asked, realizing how ridiculous I sounded as the words came out before I could manage to stop them. “Is this a ruby?”

He shook his head and took the ring from my hand. He turned over my left hand and slid the band along the length of ring finger until it was securely in place.

“It’s not a ruby,” he said with a hint of caution in his voice. “It’s not a gem of any kind.”

I looked at it closely, confused.

“Well, I thought it would be distasteful—not to mention conspicuous—to ask you to wear a vial of my blood around your neck, so I had it made into something a little less unattractive,” he laughed.

There was a part of his reasoning that wasn’t clear to me. I squinted my eyes and tried to understand why I would need to wear a ring of his blood on my finger. I knew he was different from other boys, but he could still just give me a boring promise ring with a small diamond. Several seconds passed before Chaseyn noticed I was reeling.

“My blood,” he started. “If you are ever in trouble, break open the back of the ring, and drink it. I’ll know the minute you do, and I’ll find you wherever you are. It will also provide you temporary—very temporary—invincibility. Hopefully, the effect would last long enough to keep you safe until I arrived.”

I smiled. He would be gone, but never too far. It would be hard to keep from calling to him, I was sure. Just then, a man in a tuxedo came through the door.

“Are you Lia,” he asked. I nodded. “They’re about to cut the cake, and they’re madly trying to find you.”

I sighed heavily and looked at Chaseyn. It was getting late, and I wasn’t sure we would have a chance to be alone together again. I asked the man to stall for two minutes, and he agreed. I looked at Chaseyn, his face ashen and eyes sad. We kissed once, lips parted slightly, and then just stood there swaying slowly in each other’s arms.

“I’ll have a part of you with me always,” I said, smoothing my fingers over the ring, my voice cracking as I said the words. “But I have nothing for you.”

“You fill the space left empty by my heart,” he whispered into my left ear, grazing the lobe with his bottom lip.

He kissed my neck gently at the hollow under my chin, just beside the place where my pulse throbbed wildly beneath my skin. It was a subtle gesture; one that hinted at our future together. Should I choose to follow the path of the undead later in life, he would bite that exact spot to bring about the death of my mortal being. Though the moment was devoid of physical lust, it was the most passionate, intimate we’d ever shared. In that instance, I knew he meant it when he had said he would return, and a calm overcame me. He turned slowly, grasping my left hand in his right hand, he started to walk away backward. I remained perfectly still. As our fingertips stretched to maintain the hold, I knew I had to let him go. I watched as he walked away with a jaunt so brisk a galloping horse would have trouble keeping pace. He left me there feeling the exact same way I had when I first laid eyes on him six months earlier.

Breathless.

Epilogue

“Come on,” Addie called from the car. “We have to go.”

Hoisting the enormous backpack over my right shoulder, I gave my mom a kiss and hugged Kevin tight.

“Take care of her,” I said with a giggle despite the tears trickling down my cheek.

“You’ll only be gone three weeks. Surely, we can manage,” my mom laughed, her face also was streaked with tears.

Though I felt no sadness when Chaseyn left—I knew it was right—my mom and Addie thought it would be good to turn my attention elsewhere for a while. As a graduation gift, my mom had surprised me with a ticket to Heathrow in London. Addie had taken care of the details from there. We would spend the next few weeks trekking across Europe, from hostel to hostel, taking in all of the landmarks of the ancient world. Addie had been overseas before, but never like this. On all of her

previous journeys, she had stayed in five-star hotels and dined at the finest establishments. This time round, she wanted a normal teenage experience. Nothing but rock-hard, low budget cots and beer-battered fish at corner dives.

“I love you guys,” I shouted through the open window to my mom and Kevin as we drove slowly down the street. “Thank you.”

Chaseyn had been out of the picture for nearly a week. We had spoken only once so that I could reveal the unexpected vacation plans to him. I knew he would worry about how to keep me safe during this time, especially being so close to where, undoubtedly, so many of his siblings would be located. But, as per the plan, he would avoid contacting me, unless I asked him to. Something told me he would never be far.

We arrived at the airport the recommended two hours early for international flights. Thumbing through the pages of a fashion magazine, Addie recalled childhood memories of shopping in French boutiques and Swiss chocolate shops. Like a kid on Christmas Eve, dreaming of sugar plum fairies and flying reindeer, I fantasized about the adventures we would enjoy. When, suddenly, Addie stopped short and began talking gibberish.

“Okay, so Lia, don’t be mad, but there’s something you should know.”

Just then, I felt a warm hand clap down had on my right shoulder.

“Hey there, beautiful,” someone said in a deep, masculine voice with a drawl as thick as molasses on a January morning in New York. “Happy to see me?”

“Ugh,” I said, looking up to see the smiling face of one exceptionally handsome, Amarillo quarterback staring deep into my gaze. “What are you doing here?”

“Surprise,” he laughed and pulled me in for a bear hug. “Addie invited me to come along. I’ve been waiting around here for hours—had to take the redeye to make sure I would make the connection.”

“Addie, would you mind explaining to me what is going on here?”

“Lia, don’t be mad,” she said. “I know it was just supposed to be the two of us, but Chaseyn—“

“Chaseyn? What’s he have to do with anything,” I cut her off.

“He thought it would be a good idea if we had a male companion come along with us ...just in case,” she explained.

“In case of what,” I asked, hoping Chaseyn had not burdened Addie with any of the heavy details of his ancestry. She was naïve to the darker side of life, and I would hate to spoil her optimistic view of the world.

“Well, he didn’t say what exactly. He just warned that two unilingual teens alone on the big, multilingual, European continent might be easy prey for pickpockets and the like. This was supposed to be our time away without the guys, so I didn’t feel right about bringing Rob,” she went on. “Chaseyn told me all about Eli and how well you two got on in Amarillo over spring break. He set up the whole thing.”

“Oh, did he,” I said sarcastically, looking at Eli’s mischievous grin.

“Come on, Lia. It will be great. Now, you’ll have plenty of time to get to know the real me,” Eli said with a 100-Watt smile that could light up an entire room.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“If I get on your nerves, just tell me, and I’ll back off. I promise. No funny stuff,” he assured, backing away, hands in the air like a petty criminal who had been caught red handed by the authorities.

“Fine. But just remember to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Okay,” he paused before continuing on. “But if things get a little...frosty, I’ll be here to warm the situation.”

Eli poked my ribs with his elbow when he said this last part, just in case I missed the double entendre.

“Ha, ha,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Very funny.”

“Am I missing something,” Addie asked innocently.

“Oh, Addie, be thankful,” I assured.

As the plane began to board, Addie locked her arm in mine and began skipping cheerfully toward the line.

“Ready for our first big adventure,” she asked both Eli and I.

“You have no idea,” we answered in unison.

