

*Miniature
Rose*

Cait McCarter

From The Ashes

Fairy Rose



From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

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CONTENTS

[Praise for From the Ashes](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

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From the Ashes

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Praise for From the Ashes

[S]he made me cry like a big baby because I knew exactly how the heroine felt. I was torn all over the place, on the edge of my keyboard, dying to figure out where she was going to go with all of the heavy dashes of human angst and intrigue as well as the mysterious touch of the inhuman and paranormal that had me crying out at my screen "Wait! What does that mean??" Go. Run. Find out for yourself!—Catrina, Fallen Angel Reviews

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter One

Will snapped his fingers and flames sparked from his fingertips. In constant awe of his abilities, I watched the flames flicker. Such an awesome anomaly he was—my demon lover.

I snuggled into the crook of his arm, his body warm and inviting. The firelight dimmed then returned in a flash, creating dancing shadows on the walls of my bedroom. He laughed, his voice husky and smooth, stirring a fire of desire within me he'd quenched moments earlier.

Our bodies meshed well, lying underneath my white cotton sheets like two jigsaw puzzle pieces. I relished splaying my hand across his chiseled abs. It was so easy to trickle my fingers down between his legs, to awaken the fire boiling underneath his skin.

That's when I knew I was dreaming.

No matter how many times I remembered our final night together, I always woke alone. "Don't go," I whispered. Unable to stop myself, I pressed my lips to his fiery skin. His palm came to rest on my hip, the flesh underneath immediately warming in response to his touch.

"I have to," he replied as his hand trailed fire up and down my spine. The physical sensation of his touch wasn't the only way he burned me. My addiction to him, to his heat, was a disease. I had resisted the temptation for a year before giving in. The release had been ecstasy, a high I doubted I would ever again achieve.

As Will placed searing kisses down my neck, I remembered the first time we learned about Fiona Graves, how Will came alive at the news. His immediate interest in the stranger passing through our small town breached our stable relationship and sent warning bells clanging loudly through my mind. Then again, had our relationship been completely stable, the appearance of another *pyreweld* shouldn't have affected us so strongly.

"Don't leave," I begged, placing my palms on either side of Will's face, stopping his lips from teasing my breast. Having him naked beside me, knowing I had to convince him to give up his foolish plan with words rather than with actions, was pure torture. "Promise me you won't go after her."

"You know I can't, Hannah." He rolled away from me. Instantly, my skin cooled. "I have to find her. I have to know." He stood and walked into the bathroom, his naked image fading when each step away from my bed.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. The West Texas sun was bright, filtering unabated into my bedroom. A new day had begun in Jasper, and I was alone.

* * * *

"I'm leaving," I announced as I dropped my keys into the glass bowl by the door, my purse falling off my shoulders to my feet.

"You said that last year," Michael replied while I continued through his apartment to the kitchen. His long legs stretched across the couch, his eyes keenly focused on the television screen.

"Well, this time I'm serious. I have to move on with my life."

"Right."

"You've got nothing else to say besides 'right'?" I plopped into the small chair opposite the front door.

"Hannah."

"Michael." My hackles rose at the thought of beginning another one of these conversations with Michael. After Will's departure, I blamed myself. I shut myself away from my family and friends, and I mourned Will. I mourned the love I had lost. I mourned the future we would never have. Because of that self-imposed exile, my relationship with Tricia changed.

Tricia Tipton and Michael Parker had dated throughout high school. Two of my oldest friends, I couldn't have been more happy for anyone. I thought their love unbreakable, and I envied them, especially after Will.

But while I buried myself in my memories of Will and of what was never to be, Tricia focused on her future, specifically her dream of a singing career. Her dreams drove her away from Jasper, from me, and from Michael.

A haunting melody floated underneath the noise from the television. I instantly recognized Tricia's alto strains coming from the stereo, and I attempted to focus on them instead of the sound coming from the TV.

"Is this Tricia?" I asked before taking another sip of water.

"Yep." Michael never looked at me. He remained glued to the television, remote control firmly in his hand.

"Have you talked to her?"

"No."

I sighed. Sometimes, trying to get information from Michael was like trying to pull teeth. "Did she send you the CD? Was she in town recently?"

"Got it in the mail today. Comin' out next Tuesday."

"And she wanted you to have a copy?"

He shrugged. The music stopped. I couldn't understand what was so interesting about a football game I knew he had seen a thousand times on ESPN Classic when what I wanted to do was talk.

"Is she okay?" I pressed, generally interested. While I knew the moment Will had left me, Tricia had gradually slipped through my fingers without my knowledge. I missed my friend ... so very much.

He shrugged again, the television picture changing. Rolling my eyes, I knew this was Michael's attempt to shut me up. We volleyed often in this new, solitary life we shared. This was one discussion I wasn't willing to give up as easily as the others.

"Maybe I'll move to New York. Tricia still lives in New York, doesn't she?"

"So the postmark said."

"You are so infuriating," I growled, standing up from the chair. Without any recognition from Michael, I turned toward the door and took my keys from the glass bowl.

"Where are you going?" Michael was at my elbow, his hands wrapped around my wrist and upper arm. I glanced down then looked up to his face. My expression must have confused him; his grip on my arms tightened. "Hannah."

"Michael, I..." Michael's hands moved up and down my arms, my skin tingling underneath his touch. I wanted to fight the sensation, to put it in the back of my mind because I wanted to talk to him about Tricia, but I couldn't. I could only think no one had made my skin tingle since Will.

Tears pooled in my eyes, I couldn't control them. Michael pulled me against his chest and I sighed, his skin burning my cheek through his clothes. My face became moist as I continued to cry, Michael's arms still wrapped around me.

Part of me had forgotten Will was gone. I had forgotten how empty my life was, how dead my soul felt, how much emotion I still had stored within me, even after two years.

I clung to Michael and, as my knees buckled and my vision clouded, I could feel Will, just as surely as if he were the one holding me.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Two

"Hannah. Hannah."

Michael's musky smell penetrated my nasal cavity. I was still in his arms by his apartment door, his grip firm around my waist. I could feel his heart beat in time with mine. An odd sensation, yet one that seemed both wrong and right at the same time. Raising my head to tell Michael not to hold me so tightly, I caught a glimpse of Will at the back of the couch.

"Will!" I reached for him but the image dissipated before I actually touched him.

"Hannah," Michael spun me toward him, his hands once again clutching my arms. I could tell he was trying to focus my attention on him but I could only look past him to where Will had appeared.

"I saw Will, Michael. He was standing right *there*."

"Hannah, you're burning up."

I shrugged off Michael's hands. Even though I wasn't looking at him, I could feel his gaze on me. It seared my face, the entire right side of my head. I stepped away quickly, hoping to gain relief from the intense heat of Michael's stare. I stumbled to the ground and Michael's hands were on me instantly, burning me. I laughed as my skin tingled underneath his touch. I couldn't help myself. Michael released me, scowling at my laughter.

I took longer than he liked to collect myself, and while Michael returned to his seat on the couch, I chose to sit in the chair I had occupied before I apparently passed out. I

straightened my skirt, pulling its hem against the top of my khaki leather boots. He was still scowling at me when I finally looked at him, and I decided I was going to play for match point.

"What?"

"I don't want you to go."

To say I was speechless would be incorrect; there were so many words zooming through my brain, I couldn't focus on any of them to form a complete thought, much less a witty retort to Michael's heart-felt declaration.

I blinked and suddenly he was kneeling before me, one hand on top of mine, while the other caressed my cheek. I surprised both of us by leaning into his palm, my eyes closing momentarily to enjoy his touch once again. It was a comforting gesture yet disconcerting at the same time. Michael was my friend. He had *a/ways* been my friend.

I wrapped my hands around his wrist and gently removed his hand from my face. Dropping his wrist onto my lap, I didn't release him as I looked into his eyes. "Don't you see I'm dying here?" I was twenty-two years old and every day of my life was exactly the same. I attended classes at the community college for half of the day then worked at my father's law office until 5:30 pm. Weekends didn't exist for me. Those were the days I spent writing papers or studying, or hanging out with Michael. I had no relaxation, no stress-free moments, no joy. "The longer I stay in Jasper, the more I die a little each day. There's nothing for me here."

"Where would you go?"

"I don't know," I replied honestly. "I can't stay here any longer."

"Then I'll go with you," Michael announced, and he pulled his arm from my grasp and stood as if he were going to pack.

"What?" My voice cracked a little as I watched him round the couch toward his bedroom. My question stopped him in the doorway and he turned around, looking me squarely in the face.

"I said I'd go with you, Hannah."

"Why?"

"You were the only reason for me to be in Jasper. With you gone," his voice trailed off but I could hear his unspoken words in my mind. *You're the reason I've stayed this long.*

"Michael, you don't owe me anything. If my being in Jasper prevented you from going with Tricia—"

"It didn't."

He looked at me with an expression I didn't recognize. I placed my hand on my chest while he continued to stare at me, my heart hammering an unsteady rhythm. I couldn't maintain eye contact with him so I looked away. The first volley I had ever truly lost.

"And now, you're ready to leave, just like that?"

I could feel him moving even closer to me, my body reacting to the fantasy of his lips against mine, the rough stubble on his chin scraping my cheek while our tongues dueled. As my brain continued the scenario, I saw us in a tangle of limbs on his couch. I could feel his body against mine, our curves complimenting each other. A fire grew in my stomach. When he touched my arm, I jumped.

"I'll go wherever you want to go, Hannah. New York. Houston. New Orleans. Doesn't matter to me."

"This is awfully sudden, Michael."

"Haven't you been making idle threats to leave Jasper for almost a year?"

I raised my head, my eyes wide as I sensed the anger in his tone.

"They aren't *idle* threats." The hairs on my neck prickled. My face flushed. Maintaining this relationship with Michael had taught me to fight, and I believe I can spar with the best of them. My father's associates have told me on numerous occasions I would be a great litigator. I always smile, and secretly thank Michael's ornery ways.

"But you're still here, aren't you?"

"That's not the point." I stood and stepped away from him, suddenly nervous at his close proximity. Michael and I have spent many hours together in the past year. I've fallen asleep in his arms in front of the television. I've had more meals at his apartment than at my own home. We've laughed, argued, and simply sat together in silence, but this moment, this feeling I sensed bubbling between us was uncharted territory. Unexpected, something I had deadened my heart to following Will's departure. "What about Tricia," I added quickly, knowing if Michael could be in Tricia's life again, he would choose her. "She sent you her CD. Maybe you should go visit her in New York."

"Tricia's been dating some guy, one of her stage musicians I think, for six months."

"She told you that?"

"She called me, so I wouldn't hear about it in the tabloids or from her mother. She asked for my blessing, and I said okay."

With those words, Michael had pushed aside any idea in my mind—no matter how unlikely—of his reunion with Tricia. "But I ... I felt *Will*," I stuttered, pointing to the spot behind the couch where Will had appeared moments earlier.

"Will is gone, Hannah." His hand stroked my hip. I unconsciously licked my lips. His other hand was on my cheek again, burning me. I looked at him, his face so close to mine.

"He could come back," I whispered. "He could be in Jasper right now. I felt him, Michael, like I haven't in—"

"Will chose Fiona. He chose Fiona and he left you behind." His hold on me tightened.

It wasn't like Michael to be so blunt, especially about Will. His true opinion was shining through in this emotional moment; his opinion startled me, not the restating of facts.

"The sooner you accept his choice, the sooner you can let him go and move on with your life."

"Michael." Tears pooled in my eyes and I couldn't think of anything more to say to him. He threaded his fingers through my hair, resting his palms on the back of my neck. His breath was sweet and warm against my cheek, his closeness making me dizzy. I grabbed onto his forearms and closed my eyes, preparing for my world to go black once again.

There was silence between us but I knew what he was going to say next. I wasn't sure I was strong enough to listen, but I didn't want to turn him away, even if part of me still ached for Will.

"I think I could love you, Hannah."

He closed the distance between us, his lips pressing tenderly against mine. I never knew Michael's lips could be so soft. That's when I understood. He had been waiting for me to let my guard down so he could confess his feelings. He'd been waiting for six months.

"This town isn't holding back just you, Hannah. Being here, with memories around every corner, is difficult for both of us. I think I could love you, but not here." He released me and I shivered. Tears streamed down my face for reasons I didn't understand.

"What are you saying?" And suddenly I was afraid, afraid Michael would leave me too. I threw myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist. I sighed when he returned the embrace. Being in his arms was a comfort; it was a feeling I never knew I needed. Will had never held me as tightly as Michael was holding me, and I wasn't sure if I was willing to step out of Michael's embrace.

"Could you love me? Could we be together if we weren't in Jasper?"

His question was honest. I owed him an honest answer. Moving out of his arms, I raised my head to look at him. Until this night, I would never have imagined I could have those kinds of feelings for Michael. All of my romantic feelings died with Will's departure. I wasn't even sure if they were feelings of actual love for Michael or feelings of fear of being without him. But watching him watching me, I knew Michael believed he *could* love me. "I don't know. I'm sorry but I just don't know."

"Maybe you should go home now." He gently pushed away from me and walked to the door.

"Michael."

"I can't compete with Will's memory. I'm not willing to fight with a ghost." He opened the front door of his apartment. "You should go home now. We can talk tomorrow." Slowly, he walked to his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Three

I sat in my car outside Michael's apartment for hours after he told me to leave. All of the lights were on. Michael's shadow danced on the wall as I watched him rise from and return to the couch several times. I knew it was merely an act on his part. He was more upset than I'd ever seen him, and he wasn't doing a good job of keeping his cool.

I thought about returning to his apartment to confront him about his confession, but cooler heads would prevail the next day. Since both of us were so emotional, we could say easily things we wouldn't be able to take back. I didn't want a heated moment to ruin our relationship so I started my car and made my way back home.

I drove in silence—no radio, no street noise—simply my thoughts to keep me company. Thankfully, my parents were asleep when I returned home. I was an emotional mess, and I couldn't take my father's prying or my mother's looks of pity.

Shortly after Will's departure and after I had emerged from my bedroom exile, I had told my parents the truth, the *entire* truth. While I had expected my mother to rage and curse Will's name, she had been eerily silent as I told the story of how I had been in love with a demon who had left me to chase a female member of his species. Instead, my father had gone berserk. He had even gone so far as to storm over to Will's apartment. To this day I do not know what he would have done because Will was already gone by the time I'd

confessed his true origins. Then my relationship with my parents changed.

My mother and I had always fought but after I told them the truth, my father started to notice what I did a little more. He noticed when I spent more time with Michael, and he and my mother even got into an argument about it late one night when they thought I was asleep. My father didn't want me to get "mixed up" with Michael. He believed another boyfriend was not what I needed, that I should concentrate on college and my future after graduation. My mother argued I needed a friend. I remember being so thankful to my mother for standing up for me and my steady friendship with Michael. I wondered what she would think of my relationship with Michael now and I touched my lips, thinking of the kiss we had shared.

With the memory of Michael's kiss still on my mind, I undressed and stepped into the shower. I stood under the showerhead, allowing the hot water to drench me from head to toe. Could I love Michael? If we weren't in Jasper, could we be free to be together? In all honesty, the possibility of beginning a real relationship with Michael made me giddy. I knew what life with Michael would be like: we would quarrel and disagree, probably on more than on occasion, but the making up ... I remember Tricia had once told me making up with Michael was the best part of their relationship.

I poured shampoo into my hand, the tips of my fingers working it into a lather, making my scalp tingle. Being with Michael made me tingle. No man had made me tingle since Will.

Hannah.

I stopped shampooing because I heard his voice in my head. Like he was standing right beside me. My stomach turned, the same fluttery feeling I always experienced whenever I saw Will. Oh, I loved him so much. At one point in my life, I could be more certain of nothing else.

Will chose Fiona. He chose Fiona and he left you behind.

Thrusting my head under the water, I watched for a long time as the suds disappeared into the drain. Michael's words were true; Will left me and he chose to follow Fiona. But I also remember Will had said he needed to find her and that he would always love me. Were those words spoken by a boy trying to hold onto a dying dream? I shook my head because, even now, two years later, I knew I'd never know the real answer without speaking to Will. And since Will was gone, I wouldn't ever know the truth.

I'm here, Hannah. I'm here.

My voice caught in my throat. Those words sounded like Will's response, as if he knew what I was thinking. My body became warm in the way I'd only experienced when Will was near me. Grabbing my towel, I haphazardly dried myself and wrapped it around me. That's when I realized I was trapped in my bathroom with no plan of action. Because my temperature rose didn't mean Will was actually in my bedroom. Frantic, I closed my eyes and listened for any sounds outside the room. Nothing.

Hannah.

A chill ran across my skin—Will was in pain. I retrieved my robe from the hook on my bathroom door, allowing the towel

to drop to the floor once I was covered in terrycloth. While I wasn't as physically exposed in my bathrobe, my means of defending myself were limited. As quietly as possible, I searched through the drawers for some type of weapon. After several minutes of rummaging, I found a nail file, a pair of tweezers, and a small pair of hair trimming scissors. Any of these instruments would have to be used at close range. Maybe I could convince whatever lay outside my bathroom door to let me groom them instead of killing them.

Stifling a laugh at the absurdity of the situation, I returned the tweezers and nail file to their rightful place. I tucked several wayward strands of damp hair behind my ears and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't have many regrets in my young life, but with potential doom waiting for me outside my bathroom door, I regretted how I had ended things with Michael. I regretted allowing Will's memory and the love we once shared dictate my future, especially since Will wasn't even here to share in that future. I regretted not allowing my heart to let go of Will so I could potentially choose Michael, if he was my heart's new wish.

I cautiously placed my hand on the doorknob then decided I wasn't going to be cautious any longer. I flung open the bathroom door, the wind made by my sudden motion ricocheting back at me, blowing my robe open to expose my legs. I held the scissors open in my hand, and I ran to the corner of my bed, intent on defending myself. I saw a man lying on the floor, several steps away from my opened window. I stepped toward him, scissors at the ready. Then I

froze, struck by the realization of who I was staring at. There, face down on the floor, lay Will Caldwell.

"Will!" Dropping the scissors, I ran to Will's side. He was so frail, so thin, when I placed my hands on his back. His shirt and blue jeans contained large, gaping holes and were so faded and worn I could see more of Will's bare flesh than the actual clothing. "Will."

With my help, he turned onto his back and after several moments of struggle, I was able to get him to his feet and onto my bed. His face looked haggard and weary, more tired than I had ever seen him. I brushed aside his bangs, surprised to see his hair had grown so long. I smiled softly when he looked up at me.

"Hannah."

"Hi, Will."

He smiled at me then and closed his eyes. I froze. He was dead. I relaxed only when I saw his chest rise and fall in easy breaths. After watching him for several minutes, I picked up the telephone and called the first person I thought of ... I called Michael.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Four

I heard Michael long before I saw him. He must have forgotten how to tread with silence because he rode his motorcycle into the driveway, knocked over two of our three trash cans parking said motorcycle, and climbed through my window as I imagine a herd of elephants would. Thankfully, my father snored or both of my parents would have been in my room, wondering if World War III had begun. I wasn't ready for them to know Will had returned. I wasn't really sure if I wanted to tell Michael.

"What is so important I had to come over right away?" Michael stuck one leg and half of his upper body through my window. He raised his head to look at me and I returned his gaze as neutrally as I possibly could. "Oh," he replied standing at the foot of my bed, Will's light snoring filling the silence in my room.

"I told you," I whispered, the hairs on my neck standing up as Michael crossed to where I stood beside Will. "I told you I felt him."

"This may not be him," Michael countered. I could already see the doubt forming in his mind. "It could be another demon—"

"It's not."

"Oh yeah? How do you know? How do you know this is really Will?"

I wanted to tell him I was sorry. I wanted to tell him I wished I could have said we could explore a relationship.

Then I'd be at Michael's apartment instead of in my childhood bedroom with Will Caldwell asleep on my bed. But I didn't say any of that. I couldn't, not with Will still between us. His reappearance made my heart and brain more conflicted and I knew I couldn't honestly remove him from my life without first hearing what he had to say. "Because I do," I said, glancing from Michael to Will and back to Michael again. "I just know."

"Shit."

Not the response I expected from Michael, but as I rolled it around in my brain, it was the perfect thing to say. Shit, Will is back. Shit, Michael is in my room. Shit, I'm wearing nothing but a bathrobe.

"Why is your hair wet?"

"What?" I took a seat in the wicker chair my mother had bought me from a thrift store the previous winter. She'd told me I could take it out into our backyard garden when spring came, but the chair still sat in the corner of my room. I liked it there; I liked its consistency in my otherwise chaotic life.

"Your hair? And your bathrobe." Michael pointed at me, and I lowered my head to find my robe partially open, the slightest hint of my right breast exposed.

"I was in the shower," I replied, cinching the bathrobe tight once again.

"Will came back in your shower?"

"No." I exhaled after rolling my eyes at Michael. Part of me knew he was trying to make light of the situation, but at this hour and after his startling revelation, I was in no mood for jokes. "I was taking a shower when I felt Will's presence. I

put on my bathrobe and came out here. He was lying on the floor over there."

"And you put him on the bed?"

I could feel Michael's walls returning. The arrogance and the flippant attitude that had once been his steadfast companions were written across his entire being. I nodded wordlessly, looking away from him, but I could tell he was upset. He scuffed to the edge of the bed, watching Will as he slept.

"Why did you call me, Hannah? Seems like you've got everything you want right here."

"I ... I was scared and confused, and I didn't know what to do. I called you. I ... I'm sorry, Michael."

He paused for a moment, his manner softening. "No, I'm sorry," he admitted, pulling out the chair from my desk and turning it around backwards as he sat. "You were right to call me. I'm glad you did."

"What are we going to do with him?"

"My guess is he's had it pretty rough. Look at him, for God's sake."

"So what are we going to do?"

His gaze locked with mine and I couldn't look away. He had taken control of my body, like in those cheesy alien movies. I had no choice but to surrender. He folded his arms and leaned forward against the back of the chair, his stare never leaving mine. "We wait, Hannah. We wait until Will wakes up."

* * * *

"Hannah."

Somehow, through alternating between moments of either staring at Will sleeping on my bed or watching Michael watching Will sleep, I had fallen under the spell of the sleep fairies. I awoke fully when Will's warm hand caressed my shoulder. "Hannah," he whispered again. Once upon a time, the way he whispered my name would have caused my heart to jump but at this moment, I was too confused to allow myself to feel those feelings. I raised my lids to find Will kneeling on the floor, close in front of me, his hand still on my now bare shoulder.

"God, you're so beautiful." His breath was warm against my face, and I was still naked underneath my bathrobe. And that Michael was still in my bedroom.

"Hi, Will." I pulled my legs from their awkward hanging position and straightened my robe over my knees. Will removed his hand and I slid the blue terrycloth over my bare shoulder. I couldn't meet Will's eyes because I was scared of what I would see reflected back. "Are you ... are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm much better now. I heard your dad a few minutes ago. I figured I'd better wake you since both Michael and I were in your room." He stood and moved to the corner of the bed, pointing to where Michael had sat all night, his face hidden in the crook of his crossed arms.

"Thanks," I said, cinching the bathrobe tightly around my waist. I stepped toward my dresser, surprised by my awkwardness with him. He smiled as I sidestepped him to retrieve my pajamas, then he finally caught on to my

unspoken request and moved closer to where Michael sat, still asleep. "I'll be right back."

Scurrying into my bathroom, I hurriedly put on my pajamas. Heaven only knows what my father would have done if he'd come into my bedroom to wake me with the temptation of strawberry pancakes. I could imagine how his head would have exploded if he'd found both Will and Michael there. I put the bathrobe on over my PJs, and returned to my bedroom.

Michael was awake, but neither he nor Will was talking.

"I'm going to go find my father, before he comes looking for me."

They both nodded wordlessly. After giving them a weak smile, I stepped into the hallway in search of my parents.

* * * *

Forty-five minutes later, and after meaningless conversation and a pancake-filled breakfast with my parents, my head was no clearer. I secretly hoped Will and Michael had begun talking to each other, but as I placed my hand on the bedroom doorknob, I could feel the tension radiating from within.

"Sorry," I apologized as I entered my bedroom and closed the door behind me. "I had to eat breakfast and indulge them with my daily activities."

"What did you have?" Will asked.

"What?"

"For breakfast. What did you have?"

"Oh..." I was suddenly embarrassed at having eaten actual food. Will's once lean body now looked unnaturally thin. But he'd been with Fiona. Perhaps eating three meals a day hadn't been on his mind once he had left Jasper. Keeping my snide comment to myself, I replied, "Strawberry pancakes, chocolate milk, orange juice, and some bacon."

"That sounds good."

I nodded and looked toward Michael. He stared at me but I couldn't tell what he was thinking. His walls were turning to stone again, before my very eyes. I didn't know how long it would take before I wouldn't be able to tear them down at all. "Why don't I turn on some music," I said, pointing to my small desk stereo. "It'll be easier to talk."

"Fine."

"Sure, Hannah."

I stepped past the two of them and I could feel them watching me as I turned on the stereo. U2 echoed through my bedroom, the quiet refrain of "Beautiful Day" pumping into the silence. I ran my fingers through my hair in an attempt to quiet the chills on my skin but the action gave me no relief. An ex-lover and potential love interest together in my bedroom did not make for a comfortable situation. It also did nothing to help alleviate my confusion about my feelings for either of them. "So." I returned to my thrift store chair beside my bed, as far away from Will and Michael as possible.

"Why did you come back?"

"Michael."

"It's okay, Hannah," Will replied, a knowing smile on his face. "Nice to see things haven't changed since I've been away."

The heat from Michael's stare bore into the right side of my face. Pulling my knees up to my chest, I attempted to make myself comfortable, knowing this would be a long conversation.

"Did Fiona come with you?"

I jerked my head to the left, Michael in my direct line of sight. If I had the ability to conjure death rays from my eyes, Michael's ability to jump straight to the point would have been obliterated. It was a valid question—both of Michael's questions were valid—and I wanted to know the answers more than anyone. I wouldn't have asked in such a blunt manner.

"No, Fiona isn't here," Will replied, and I detected a sadness in his voice. I looked at him, Michael's words once again echoing in my ears.

Will chose Fiona. He chose Fiona and he left you behind.

"Michael," I started, but quickly had to clear my throat as the raw emotion caught me off guard. "Michael, I think you should leave."

"What?"

"If ... if you're going to act this way, I think ... I think you should leave." I stood from my chair, Michael's posture also straightening. We were at war with each other, when just last night we were kissing.

"Oh, you'd like that, wouldn't you, Hannah, so you could be alone with Will and reacquaint yourselves—"

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

"You saw him last night. He doesn't need us berating him with endless questions. Let him catch his breath. Let him—"

"Fiona is dead."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Five

Fiona is dead.

With one simple statement, all the tension I'd been feeling left my body. I relaxed and fell back into my chair, suddenly drained. But then I looked at Michael. Steam rolled out of his ears and I knew he wasn't relaxed at all. He was coiled and itching for a fight—with me or Will or both of us—and I knew he wasn't going to calm down until he got it.

"What do you mean?"

I watched Will squirm and I could tell he was deliberately avoiding looking at me. His entire body tensed, tiny beads of sweat formed on his forehead. "Th ... there was a confrontation," he said, after an eternity of silence.

"Between who? You and Fiona?"

"It ... it was an accident," Will replied, his low voice cracking with emotion. There was another pause as he took a deep breath, then, swallowing hard, he continued, "She ... we were ambushed."

Tears fell down Will's cheeks onto his thighs. Part of me wanted to go to him, to hug him and tell him everything would be okay, but part of me wanted to remind him he was crying for a woman who had destroyed our relationship, a woman who had kept him from me for two years.

I swallowed my anger and asked the next question looming in my brain. My heartbeat accelerated, knowing this question was as important to me as knowing why Will had chased Fiona in the first place. "What happened?"

Will's shoulders began to heave, his muffled cries stinging my ears. I had not expected such a reaction from him. I turned to Michael, surprised to find him calmer and sympathetic-looking. I gave into my instinct and knelt forward, wrapping my arms around Will's shoulders. He clung to me, as a hurt little boy would cling to his mother, and cried against my neck. I stroked his back and whispered words of comfort, all the while watching Michael watching us.

Michael stepped toward us, Will still crying and cradled in my arms. He surprised me by placing a gentle hand on my shoulder and a chaste kiss on the top of my head. "He needs you, Hannah," he whispered. I'm certain that Will heard too, but I don't know how much of an impression it made on him. Would Will pick up on Michael's unspoken affection for me? Could he sense how conflicted my heart was?

"Thank you, Michael," I replied with a firm smile, and Michael climbed out of my bedroom window, exiting the same way he had entered hours earlier. I stroked Will's hair as I heard Michael's motorcycle rev and drive away, amazed by his perception and his ability to assess the situation without anger in his heart.

"Michael's gone?" Will asked, wiping his face with the backs of his hands as I released him from my arms and returned to my chair.

"Yeah."

"Probably a good idea."

"I'm sorry about Fiona's death, Will, truly I am."

Will nodded wordlessly, his lip quivering, and I could tell he was trying very hard to stay strong and quash any tears he

had left. "You saved me, Hannah." He smiled sadly, and I gave him a small smile in return. "Whenever I thought I wouldn't survive, I kept reminding myself I had to get back here. I had to get back to you."

"Then why did you leave?" The question came out of my mouth before I had time to think. It was a gut reaction. I blame Michael's influence.

"What?"

His entire demeanor bristled, as if he were preparing to defend his actions.

"You chose Fiona..." I continued, my once cautious nature thrown to the wind.

"I chose my *species*, Hannah. In case you've forgotten, until Fiona, I thought I was alone."

"How do you think that makes me feel? You claimed you loved *me* but you followed *her*."

"It's not that simple, Hannah," Will sighed, but I didn't want him to sidestep his answer. I wanted the truth. I *deserved* the truth.

"Yes, it is," I countered, my voice rising as my emotions took over. I had waited two years to hear the truth of why Will had chased Fiona, especially when he'd sworn to me I was the only person he would ever love. I had begun to accept the fact he was gone. I was angry with him for abandoning me, for destroying all of my dreams and hopes for our future together, and for returning now when I had begun to allow myself to *love* again. "Something happened to make you want to go after her. What was it? Just tell me what happened."

Unable to stop the tears, I buried my face in my hands, emotions I thought I could control bubbling to the surface. I could tell Will was watching me as I continued to cry. Things *had* changed while he was away. I sensed Will was beginning to realize exactly how different things were in Jasper.

"I wanted to go."

"What?"

"I wanted to go, Hannah. I *needed* to go."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Will must have sensed my confusion because he knelt in front of me, his hands on my knees.

"I know how it must seem."

"No," I countered, trying hard to control the anger in my voice. "No, you don't."

"I've never been exposed to another *pyreweld*, Hannah. Fiona ... she ... we were cut from the same cloth. I needed to observe her, to learn more about our abilities, to see if it were truly safe for you and I to be together. Then she left Jasper and I felt I had to follow her..."

"And leave me behind."

"I knew you wouldn't be alone," Will whispered, his palm warm against my cheek. My stomach fluttered. I could feel his lips dangerously close to mine. "You had Tricia ... and Michael."

"Do you know where Tricia is now?" I questioned, knowing full well Will didn't have any idea. "Tricia's in New York. I haven't spoken to her in a year."

"I'm sorry," Will said as he dropped his hand from my face and stood, his shadow towering over me. "I didn't know."

"How could you," I replied, unable to contain my anger any longer. "You weren't here. How could you know what happened to any of us when you weren't here to witness it?"

"Hannah—"

"I loved you, Will. I ... I *mourned* you. I shut myself away from everyone and everything after you left. I ... I didn't see how I could survive without you, but somehow, I did. Somehow I managed to pull myself up and go on with my life. Without you. And now ... now, when I'd finally accepted you weren't coming back, you magically appear."

"I came back to be with *you*."

I tilted my head upward, my ceiling fan whirring over my bed. There were so many things I wanted to say to Will, so many questions I needed answers for, but I knew I was too emotional to talk to him. Just as with Michael the night before, I knew things would be said in anger or frustration, things I wouldn't be able to take back. No matter how angry or hurt I was about Will's reason, it was *his* reason. He chose to follow Fiona, and he chose to return to Jasper for me. "I can't do this now," I whispered after several moments of trying to organize my thoughts.

"What?"

"I'd like you to leave, Will. I ... I'd like to be alone ... please."

"I don't think—"

"Please, Will," I begged, crossing my arms over my chest as I stared at the ground. "Please, go home."

"When can I see you again?"

"I don't know," I replied honestly, moving slowly toward my bedroom window. "I don't know when I'll be ready to see you."

"Please, don't shut me out, Hannah. If we could just talk, I could make you understand. I need you. I love you."

Will reluctantly climbed out of my bedroom window and I turned to face him once we were separated by brick, mortar and sheetrock. He looked frantic, desperate. Part of me could have easily believed him; it was written all over his face. But the fact remained that he'd gone with Fiona. "I have to figure this out." I replied, my hands on the window. It hurt me to look at him, his face so pain-stricken, so hollow. He reached for me but I recoiled enough to be out of his grasp. "By myself," I amended quietly and I closed the window, separating us once again.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Six

I sat with my back to the window for almost two hours, waiting until I was certain Will had gone. I stared at my bedroom door, unable to cry, though I desperately wanted to. It had been the right thing to do, to send Will away. I knew I wouldn't be able to sort out my feelings with him staring at me. Now that he had returned, my feelings weren't so black or white any longer. I didn't want to be trapped by my emotions, unable to make the best choice for myself. I knew what I had to do to find happiness.

I had to leave Jasper.

I found my mother ankle deep in laundry, a Beatles tune drifting through the living room and kitchen. Bending to help her sort the washables from the dry cleaning, I gave her a quick peck on the cheek. "I've got something to tell you, Mom."

"Okay, sweetie. What is it?"

"Will is back."

I knew blurting it out like that would get a reaction. Despite the good relationship my mother and I now had, I knew part of her was still angry with Will for causing me such pain.

"What do you mean?" She straightened, dropping her favorite pink blouse to the floor on top of her linen pants.

"How can Will be back?"

"He said he came back for me."

"Then you've talked to him." She offered a wry smile and walked down the hallway toward the living room. I nodded wordlessly as I followed her, willing to let her ask the questions until I could find the right time to tell her I wanted to leave Jasper rather than confront my feelings.

"And what about Fiona?"

"She's dead."

"Oh, that's so sad," she said, her brows furrowing. "But certainly convenient."

My mother mumbled this last part to herself under her breath, but it was loud enough I could hear. I stifled a little snort at my mother's sarcasm, knowing she was concerned for me and my feelings. Neither she nor my father wanted Will to hurt me again. I didn't want to be hurt again either. "Well, what are you going to do?"

"I want to leave Jasper."

"Running away from your problems isn't going to make them go away, Hannah."

I knew she was right. Eventually, when I inevitably returned to Jasper, it was more than likely both Will *and* Michael would still be waiting for me. While I knew my running away was the action of a coward, what I needed the most was an escape, if only for a few weeks. I needed time away to collect my thoughts and try to figure out what would be best for me, without having to see Will or Michael while I sorted out my emotions. "I know that, Mom. I ... I just need some time."

"Does this have anything to do with Michael?"

I whipped my head in her direction, surprised when she started to laugh. I wasn't sure if she was laughing at the shocked expression on my face or the notion that Michael could be part of my life.

"I'm not blind, Hannah. Any fool could see Michael cares for you. But don't worry, I haven't told your father."

"Thank you."

She smiled at me, and I knew she was telling the truth. She wouldn't tell my father. But I also knew when the time came for me to make a decision about my future, whether Will or Michael or neither of the two, I would have to be the one to tell him. I shuddered, quickly pushing it out of my mind. My father was not the worst of my problems right now.

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. Some place where I can be invisible." My voice faded away, my spirit feeling lighter as I thought about the invisibility I'd never been able to attain in Jasper.

I wanted to say New York so badly; I'd never been to New York before. I could see myself becoming lost there, both literally and figuratively. That scared and excited me. I would be alone in a big city, without the crutch of my relationship with Michael or the excuse of my memories of Will to hold me back. I would have to survive on my own.

"Doesn't Tricia live in New York City? You could pay her a visit."

I sighed. For the second time in two days, there was a hole in my soul where Tricia had once been. She had been my best friend and because of stubborn pride or another ridiculous reason, we had lost contact with one another. I ached for

Tricia and needed the type of guidance only a best friend could offer. "I haven't talked to Tricia in a long time, Mom. I think it would be awkward."

"Maybe," my mother replied. She rose to her feet and crossed the living room to the antique buffet that had been her mother's and would one day be mine. She opened the center drawer and removed a small scrap of paper. I scowled when she placed it in my lap and wordlessly returned to her seat on the couch.

"What's this?" I questioned. I could see it was an address. I even knew whose handwriting it was—Connie Tipton's, Tricia's mother. Her penmanship contained more loops and flourishes than should be legal, but there was no denying she had written the address specifically for my mother.

"Tricia's address."

"How..." I paused then looked at my mother.

"Your father and I saw Connie in the grocery store a week or two ago. She was bragging about Tricia's new CD, her life in New York and how much she loves it there. I told Connie we were thinking of going to New York on vacation. She wrote down Tricia's address and told me Tricia would love to see us."

"Are you and Dad really going to New York for vacation?"

"No," my mother replied with a stern look on her face.

"You are."

"What?" I cried, eyeing the scrap of paper once more.

"You're serious?" My mother nodded and I jumped from my chair, falling into her arms, clutching Tricia's address as if it were my lifeline. "Oh, Mom, thank you. Thank you." I hugged

her tightly, surprised when she started to laugh. Then the reality of my situation set in. "Mom, I ... I can't afford this. My savings—"

"I have a little money saved for a rainy day. It should be enough to get you to New York and out of Jasper for a few weeks. You can't stay away forever."

"I won't, but I need time to, you know, sort things out." She patted my knee as she released me from our embrace, the two of us sitting side by side on the couch.

"I know, Hannah, and I'm not going to pretend I know what you're going through, what you're feeling. But, you're an adult, and as much as adults would love to run away from our problems, the adult thing to do is to face them head-on."

"Right," I replied with a sigh, tilting my head onto my mother's shoulder. I smiled to myself as my mother's favorite perfume wafted through my senses, and I remembered how many times I had rested my head on her shoulder when I was a child. As much as I wanted it to be true, I was no longer a child. I was an adult, with adult problems I couldn't keep running from. "What are we going to tell Dad?"

"I'll worry about your father," she replied, placing a kiss on the top of my head before she rose from the couch. "Let's get you ready to go." She offered her hand, which I gladly accepted with a smile.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seven

It was almost midnight by the time I arrived at the Hotel Belleclaire in New York City.

My mother and I had scoured the Internet for reasonable hotel and flight accommodations as soon as it was settled I would leave Jasper for a few weeks. I was literally flying blind, having never been to New York or any city on the East Coast before. While my mother made the reservations for the flight and hotel, I packed a couple of suitcases in an effort to be ready for New York City at a moment's notice. As I folded pants and shirts, carefully buried bras and panties should my bags be searched, added a couple of pairs of shoes and my toiletries, it never occurred to me that I was leaving Jasper without saying good-bye to anyone. I knew both Will and Michael deserved an explanation for my impulsive behavior, but I couldn't face either of them.

Stepping from the cab, staring heavenward at the immense skyscrapers and high-rises illuminated by the moonlight and from within the buildings, my heart dropped to my stomach and I feared I had made a terrible mistake.

I tried to convince myself I wasn't scared, but ... in actuality, I was. I was scared of Will's return. I was scared of Michael's declaration of love. I was scared ... so I ran. I ran to New York City and toward Tricia, another relationship that had crumbled in my hands like a stale cookie.

The cabbie threw my bags onto the curb, startling me from my daydream. The fear of uncertainty crept upward from my

stomach, its nausea unsettling me. I made a face as I pulled thirty dollars from my purse and stepped toward the cabbie. He snatched the money from my hand and without even a "thank you" or "have a nice life," he sped away, leaving me standing on the curb, my bags sprawled on the sidewalk. I stood speechless as I watched him merge into traffic, his taxi blending in with the other yellow taxis speeding down the street. I was alone in a city where the only person I knew was a woman I hadn't spoken to in over a year.

"Checking in, miss?"

I turned toward the voice in slow motion, on the verge of tears. Everything seemed so different here. I *felt* different here. I was now practically certain my impulsive decision to leave Jasper had been a mistake. "What?" I managed to spurt, my voice virtually non-existent as a car horn blared in the distance.

"Are you checking into the Hotel Belleclaire?" The middle-aged man smiled at me, his blue eyes bright and friendly.

"Yes," I replied, my voice meek. "Yes, I am."

"Let me help you." He snapped his fingers and a bellhop rushed through the door, retrieving my bags from the curb.

"Thank you," I said as the bellhop whizzed by me, but he and my bags were already inside the hotel while I remained frozen on the sidewalk.

"Miss?" The man held open the door for me, his hand at my elbow, his blue eyes silently urging me forward into the hotel lobby.

"Th ... thank you," I stammered, turning toward the front desk where the young bellhop stood, one of my bags on each of his shoulders.

"My pleasure, miss," he replied with a tip of his hat. He turned back to the door, opening it for a couple dressed in their black tie finest. He stood, staring at the street, as if I had never existed, as if our moments together meant nothing.

I checked in, my gaze never leaving him, much to the chagrin of the desk clerk I'm sure. With my room key in hand and the bellhop waiting for me at the elevators, I stepped toward the man and hesitantly tapped his shoulder. "Excuse me."

"Yes, miss?"

"I ... I wanted to thank you, you know, for helping me. I ... I've never been to New York City before and I'm from a small town in Texas—"

"My pleasure, miss."

Heat flashed across my cheeks and I lowered my head, pushing a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. "I ... I'll be staying here for a few weeks, and I ... I, well, I just wanted to say thank you."

"Again, miss, it was my pleasure. I hope you enjoy your stay in The Big Apple."

"My name is Hannah, by the way." I extended my hand to him, a soft smile on my face. He appeared taken aback at my behavior, his blue eyes flashed, turning the color of the sky before a storm, but he accepted my hand and shook it firmly.

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

"A pleasure, Hannah. My name is Greer," he replied with a toothy smile, his blue eyes bright once again.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eight

I was jarred into consciousness at 8:00 am New York time by the most obnoxious of noises. It was a symphony unlike any I'd heard before: car horns, alarms, voices, vacuum cleaners, slamming doors. Wincing against the sunlight filtering in through the half-drawn curtains and the out-of-tune strains growing outside my hotel, I padded across the room from my bed to the coffee pot. Given my late arrival at the hotel and my uncertain adjustment to a different time zone, I had planned on sleeping until at least 10:00 am Jasper time but New York City obviously had other ideas for me.

The coffee began to percolate, its aroma filling the room, and I relaxed a bit. Before my rude introduction to a New York City morning, I had been dreaming. I don't remember what I had been dreaming about—my grandmother's laugh, my mother's perfume, my father's chocolate chip pancakes—but I remember I was happy, at peace. It was a sensation I hadn't felt in a long time, so long that the happiness of my dream felt foreign.

Adding four spoonfuls of sugar and two of the hotel's instant creamer, I pulled the mug to my lips and returned to the bed. I could see the slip of paper with Tricia's address lying on the nightstand beside the alarm clock but I ignored it as I pulled the covers to my waist and turned on the TV. As much as I wanted to hide out in the hotel room all day, I

couldn't. My purpose for being in New York City was two-fold: to escape Michael and Will, and to find Tricia.

I tried to watch the Today Show but found I couldn't concentrate on any of the news stories or interviews. After thirty minutes of drinking coffee and lying in bed, I decided I'd better start my day.

* * * *

Emerging refreshed from the shower, I continued to get ready to face New York City. I selected a pair of khaki pants, a black twinset and my black Converse for my debut. Glancing at the alarm clock on the nightstand, I was surprised to see it was almost 10:00. I hurriedly applied make-up and rolled my hair into a loose bun. I was at the door with my purse in hand when I remembered I had forgotten Tricia's address, so I ran back to the nightstand and retrieved the slip of paper before the hotel door had fully closed.

I had stared at a map of New York City on the plane ride from Jasper. Looking at the map, Tricia's building was very close to the Hotel Belleclaire. I wasn't sure the best direction to take, and secretly hoped Greer would be at the front door so I could ask him.

The elevator doors parted and I stepped out into the lobby, the hotel much more lively than it had been when I arrived. Straining my neck, I tried to see Greer was at the door. My balloon of hope deflated when I saw a younger man open the door for an elderly couple coming in off the street.

I stepped toward him regardless, not surprised when he smiled, tipped his hat and opened the door for me. "Can I get you a cab, miss?"

"Is Greer here today?" I knew it was rude of me to ignore his original question. Yes, I did need a cab. I wasn't comfortable enough to walk to 94th Street. Maybe it was the small town girl in me, but New York City scared me. The high-rises, the lively pace, it was foreign. While I was glad to be out of Jasper, I knew I wouldn't be able to stay in New York City as long as I had originally planned.

"Greer will be back on duty tonight. Did you need a cab?"

"Yes, please," I replied, smiling at the man who didn't seem to have as much patience for visitors as Greer did. "I need to go to 110 West 94th Street."

He gave a loud, shrill whistle and waved his arm, a cab stopping immediately in front of the hotel. "110 West 94th," he barked at the cab driver before slapping the roof of the car and turning away from me toward the hotel door.

"You gettin' in?"

"Yes," I replied, the meek and timid Hannah Reed from last night returning, and I stepped into the cab and closed the door behind me.

* * * *

It took only a minute or so to drive to Tricia's building but cost almost fifteen dollars. I knew I wouldn't be able to control my meager savings at that rate.

I stepped out of the cab, the April wind spiraling my ponytail. There was no use attempting to straighten it. Al

Roker had predicted high gusts today, and who knew how long I'd be milling around for a glimpse of Tricia. Shielding my eyes, I glanced to the sky, both surprised and not at the presence of her building. It was tall, like others in the city, but the more I stared the more I could see Tricia living here. The Tricia I'd known anyway. I wasn't certain if she would still be my Tricia or not. She had left Jasper to make her fortune elsewhere, and our friendship had disintegrated. From the looks of the building, she seemed to be succeeding.

As I tried to fathom Tricia's successes and how proud I was of her for going after her dreams, a black Lincoln Town Car pulled up beside me along the curb. Three gentlemen—two I thought were middle-aged, and the third younger than me, like he was still in high school—all carrying packs with camera equipment, planted themselves at the trunk, their cameras pointed at the front door of the building. The doors of the building opened, and I was blinded by flash bulbs. Blinking rapidly, I saw Tricia exit the building, surprised when instead of hopping into the car, she paused, staring directly at me.

Frozen in place in front of Tricia's building, I could feel my eyes widen with each step she took toward me. To my surprise, with flash bulbs still lightening the sidewalk like fireworks, she wrapped her arms around me and began jumping up and down.

"Oh my God! Hannah!!"

Her excitement was contagious and completely genuine. When she released me from her tight embrace, tears trickled down my cheeks. Tricia gave me a wide smile, her eyes bright

and laughing. I was staring at my best friend, and she looked incredible. Connie hadn't been lying to my parents. New York City definitely agreed with Tricia.

"What are you doing here, Hannah?"

"I ... I came to see you."

"*Really?* You came all the way to New York to see *me*?"

I wasn't sure if she was skeptical as to the true nature of my visit because her tone was one of excitement and not questioning as I might have done. I would tell her the entire truth but I certainly didn't want to confess the sordid tale to her on the street. There were so many ways I could tell her, so many things I could say to put her squarely back in Jasper, Texas. This was a speech I hadn't planned, a moment I hadn't expected to have with Tricia so soon.

"Hannah, what's going on?"

I could see my silence was only making her more concerned. She grabbed my arm and gave it a little shake, her manicured nails digging ever so slightly into my flesh. Exhaling, I said the only thing I could.

"Will is back."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Nine

In a flash of camera bulbs and a human barricade of two enormous men in black overcoats, I was pulled—or in actuality hurried—into the lobby of Tricia's building. I could hear her talking rapidly into her cell phone, her voice rising and falling in that crescendo I'd heard so many times from her during heated moments. Or when she used to talk to or about Michael.

Shit.

We were on the 11th floor when I found my voice, terror seizing my heart. "Were you.... are you talking to ... Michael?"

She closed the flip-top on the cell phone as the elevator stopped on the 14th floor and she stepped forward to exit. She stared at me for a moment, like her brain had to play catch-up in the conversation or if I'd spoken to her in a foreign language.

"Michael?" Her laughter echoed throughout the foyer of the apartment, leaving me no choice but to follow her, the two hulking bodyguards remaining by the elevators. "Why would you think I was talking to *Michael*?"

"I ... I don't know," I stammered, my stomach suddenly queasy. Her evasive answer made me question her. I had never questioned her actions before. "Something in your tone, maybe."

"I was talking to my manager. One of them anyway," Tricia groaned, accompanied by an overdramatic eye roll. It

was the kind of thing she used to do any time Michael was mentioned which made me wonder if her managers frustrated her as much as Michael had once upon a time. "I was on my way to a magazine photo shoot."

"Oh." It was a stupid thing to say. I knew it as soon as it had left my mouth. I had disrupted my friend's life, her new and seemingly non-demon-filled life, and my only response was "Oh."

"It's okay," Tricia replied with a wave of her hand, and I saw the large diamond solitaire shining brightly on her finger. The third finger of her left hand.

"That's a beautiful ring. Are you engaged?" I had probably overstepped my bounds by asking such a question of Tricia. After all, we hadn't spoken in over a year, and now, here I was, trying to act as if we had continued to be friends while she had moved to New York City and I had remained in Jasper. I stared at her, suddenly shy, when I saw that Tricia looked like she was bursting at the seams. With no further prompting, she pulled me onto the black leather sofa behind us, her eyes studying her ring.

"Actually," she began, shifting her glance from the ring back to me, "I'm married."

"You're what? *Married*?" I hugged her, not knowing what else to do. Somehow I wasn't surprised when she hugged me back. It was nice, the comforting feel of Tricia's arms around me, to know that our friendship hadn't truly suffered from her move or my stubbornness.

"Yeah, Charlie and I got married about three months ago," she replied as we released each other and settled back

against the sofa. "That's why the tabloids have been practically sleeping at my doorstep. Rumor has it I'm pregnant."

I didn't know what to say, but by the look on Tricia's face I could tell she wanted me to ask, so I did. "Well, are you?"

"I'll be having a baby for Christmas."

Tears immediately came to my eyes, and I hugged Tricia once again. "Oh, Tricia. That's ... I'm so happy for you."

"I'm happy for me too, Hannah." And as she released me and stood to go into the kitchen, I could tell it was true. Happiness radiated off her, like she was the sun and you'd lose your sight if you stared directly at her for too long. "So is Charlie. He's sky-high about being a dad."

"I'll bet."

"But we can talk about me later." She reappeared with two bottles of water and a tub of ice cream with two spoons. She offered a spoon to me and plopped beside me on the sofa.

"Right now, I want to hear about Will."

* * * *

"So Fiona is dead, and Will came back to be with you." Tricia and I had spent the afternoon together, facing each other as we sat in Indian-style on her black leather couch. The tub of rocky road ice cream had long since vanished, its empty carton littering the otherwise spotless hardwood floor. In true Tricia fashion, she had summed up the entire sordid tale in one sentence it had taken me the entire afternoon to explain. God, I had missed my friend. "I ... I don't know what to say, Hannah. Talking about Will and Fiona pisses me off."

"Me too."

"I'm sure it does," Tricia said, her biting sarcasm in full effect. As she rose from the couch and padded back into the kitchen, I could feel the air simmer with her anger. It grew the longer she remained silent, and I knew she would explode soon. She was out of sight only seconds but when she stepped out of the kitchen, her face was flushed in anger. It rushed at me, like a spark searching for more fuel. My own face grew hot. "They caused you months of heartache and Will was *crying* because she was dead? I ... I'm glad she's dead. Otherwise, I'd have to kill her myself."

"You don't mean that," I said as she sat beside me once again, a bowl of fruit in her lap.

"I *do* mean it. First I'd yank every blonde curl out of her head then I'd ... well, I haven't thought much past that." She popped a handful of raisins into her mouth, her teeth grinding them in anger. "Why did Will come back?"

"For me."

"So someone killed Fiona but didn't kill Will. They were always together, right?"

I must have paled because Tricia offered me a handful of raisins, her hand wrapped tightly around my upper arm. Will's survival had never entered my mind. Why would someone kill Fiona and not at least attempt to take Will's life too? "I ... I never thought of that."

"Didn't you ask him?"

"No."

"Michael didn't ask him either?"

"Tricia," I began and suddenly, I couldn't speak after her mention of Michael. My throat was dry, my stomach in knots. "Tricia, there's something you should know about Michael ... and me."

"You and Michael? What about you and Michael?" It only took a moment and I watched as the realization of what I was implying registered on Tricia's face. If she had been hurt, she didn't show it. What I did see was surprise, followed immediately by understanding.

"Michael and I broke up a long time ago, Hannah. I'll always love him, just not in that way."

"Michael told me he thought he could love me," I blurted out, closing my eyes as I allowed more truths to be told. "I had thought I might ... but there was always you..."

"And Will," Tricia added, and I opened my eyes to look at her. "And now Will isn't just a memory in Jasper."

"Exactly."

She smiled and I smiled, feeling lighter now that I had told Tricia about whatever relationship Michael and I could have. There was no judgment or contempt in her eyes, only kindness, and I knew Tricia had been truthful when she said she was over Michael.

"So," Tricia began. "What are you going to do?"

"I honestly don't know."

"You know what always makes me feel better? Shopping."

"I don't know." Shaking my head, I lowered my gaze to my lap.

Tricia shifted on the sofa. "Damn, I have a pre-release dinner to attend at The Waldorf."

"Okay." I moved to get up when Tricia's gentle hand stilled me.

"Why don't we meet up tomorrow? I could show you my town." She smiled.

"I don't want to ruin your schedule." It was true. I was thankful for the afternoon we had shared but I didn't want to take up any more of Tricia's time. Sorting out my love triangle shouldn't be on her "to do" list.

"Schedule?" Her brow creased and she arched her eyebrow. "Hannah, you're my oldest friend. I'd much rather spend time with you than visit the set of TRL."

"If you're sure..." I stood with hesitation unlike Tricia who practically jumped to her feet.

"Positive," she interrupted, looping her arm around my waist. "Where are you staying?" We walked the short distance to the front door of her apartment, our bodies literally joined at the hip.

"The Hotel Belleclaire."

"Excellent. I'll pick you up around eleven. Look for the black Town Car."

She hugged me then promptly shoved me onto the gold-plated elevators the moment the doors parted as cameras flashed in my face.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Ten

I woke later than I had planned and when I emerged through the glass front doors of the hotel, Tricia's black Lincoln Town Car was waiting for me. Her driver scurried to open the back door for me, and I smiled my thanks.

"I'm sorry I'm late," I said as I slid across the leather seats beside Tricia.

"It's okay. Believe me, Fifth Avenue will be glad to see me coming."

We merged into traffic, Tricia taking the lead in our conversation. I was thankful. I'd managed to gulp down half a cup of coffee but my brain still felt foggy. She had received a call from her agent about a possible performance at the Grammys. It sounded like an amazing opportunity, but Tricia only shrugged. "The ceremony months from now," she said, our car slowing, "and I'll definitely be showing. I'm not sure I want to expose myself or the baby to that."

The door opened from the outside and a couple of flashbulbs popped as Tricia extended her legs and planted her feet on the sidewalk. I imagine seeing a black Lincoln Town Car with a driver automatically equals celebrity.

Hulking bodyguards attempted to shield her—and me to an extent—from any other photographers. "I think you're already exposed, Tricia."

"I guess you're right," she whispered when we crossed Macy's threshold.

In that respect, Tricia and I were exactly alike. We both had desired something—a music career in her case, a demon in mine—and our desires came with excess baggage.

"Where would you like to start?"

I hadn't been inside a Macy's Department Store since my parents and I traveled to The Galleria Mall in Dallas ten years earlier. Local shops and brand-name chains had always been okay with me. Macy's was in an entirely different league.

"Let's go to the cosmetics counter," I replied, plastering a bright smile on my face. Tricia smiled back, but I could tell her heart wasn't in it.

We wandered aimlessly through each department while I made idle chatter to keep Tricia's mind off what I had said. It wasn't working, and I hated I had made my friend question herself. "Do you want to go back to your apartment?"

"What?"

"I think I'm done here," I replied with a shrug. "We can go, if you like."

"Okay. Thanks."

We rode back to Tricia's in silence. I wanted her to be happy again, to glow as she had yesterday when she spoke about her life with Charlie and their baby. She excused herself and I reclaimed my spot on her sofa.

"I'm sorry, Hannah," she said when she came back from the bathroom.

"What? Why?"

"I wanted to show you around town, to show you how wonderful things are, but I only made you ... sad."

"Well, I made *you* sad. That comment about being exposed didn't come out correctly."

"But you're right," she said, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. "I chose this career, to be in the spotlight, but my child ... I just never thought about it, you know."

"I know."

"Well, hey," she slapped me on the knee, "we can still go out and have lunch. What about Tavern on the Green? That's a New York can't-miss spot."

"Sure."

"I'll call for reservations. The hostess owes me a small favor." She rose from the sofa and disappeared into the kitchen.

In the momentary silence, my mind immediately wandered to Michael and Will. I sighed as the doorbell rang, echoing through Tricia's apartment. I didn't know what I was going to do, who I was going to choose. I had made a small step toward reclaiming Tricia's friendship by coming to New York City but the fact we had reconnected didn't solve what I considered to be a much bigger problem. Will or Michael. Ultimately, I knew I would have to choose between them. Life in limbo wasn't healthy—for any of us.

"I bet that's Charlie," Tricia said as she stepped past me to go in the foyer to open the front door. "He probably forgot his key ... or his guitar. He's *a/ways* forgetting something." She sighed. "Don't worry, Hannah. We'll get you stinky drunk and I'll watch and we won't be sad for a few hours. Coming, sweetie."

I laughed aloud. I couldn't hear who was at the front door of her apartment but I did hear Tricia's voice rise in anger, so I stood from my seat on the sofa. She surely wouldn't be mad at her husband, not when she said he forgot something all the time. My entire body warmed, my stomach churned.

"Where is she? I know she's here."

Will.

I stepped into the foyer, my arms wrapped around my stomach, my mouth suddenly dry. "Will?"

"I didn't want to let him inside the apartment," Tricia said, "but a couple of photographers were stalking in the hallway, and I didn't think it would be good for my image for photographs of me kicking Will's ass to be shown to the world."

"We knew you were here," Will replied, ignoring Tricia's remark. He took a couple of steps toward me but I recoiled and he stopped his forward progress.

"We?"

I saw Michael standing beside Tricia, his face neutral but clearly focused on me.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eleven

"How ... how did you find me?" I stammered as I stepped further away from Will and into the living room of Tricia's apartment. "I ... I've only been here one day."

"I have my ways." Will, Michael and Tricia followed me.

"Demonic hocus-pocus still alive and kicking, I see," Tricia said. She placed her arms around my shoulders, guiding me back to the black leather sofa where we had spent the previous afternoon.

"I was worried," Will replied and I recognized Michael's cough in the immediate silence. "We were worried," Will amended, stepping closer to where I was seated on the sofa.

"Didn't you ever think Hannah wanted to be alone?" Tricia countered, stepping between me and Will. "That she didn't want to see either of you?" Will was partially blocked from my view by Tricia, but I could clearly see Michael, standing to Will's right.

I couldn't understand the expression on his face. He looked happy to see me but there was a mixture of sadness and anger in his eyes. I couldn't hold his gaze. There were so many things left unsaid between us, between Will and me as well.

"Tricia," I said, grabbing onto her hand like a small child trying to get their mother's attention. "Tricia, it's okay."

"They shouldn't have come here, Hannah. They should have respected your privacy."

"I didn't tell them I was leaving," I replied as I stood, Tricia's hand still enfolded in mine. "Only my mother knew I was coming to New York."

"Oh."

Tricia moved aside, allowing me to see Will clearly once again. I heard her in the kitchen, and I knew Tricia well enough to know she was busying herself, biding her time. "I'll be right back," I said to Will and Michael then spun away from them toward Tricia.

"We should go," I said as Tricia furiously scrubbed the countertop.

"Are you okay, Hannah, I mean, really okay?" She paused and dropped the sponge into the sink, reclining slightly against the counter. "Because after the way Will has acted, I ... I don't want to leave you alone with him."

"Michael's here," I answered before the implication of what that might mean for Tricia reached my brain. If it hurt her, she didn't show it. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean," she said with a smile, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. "And I'm glad Michael's here." She squeezed me tightly then released me. "I'm happy, Hannah. Happy in New York, happy with my life, totally ... happy. You deserve to be happy too."

"Thank you."

"You can stay here if you like. Or I can call my therapist and we'll go to her office. She's excellent at confrontational mediation. I've got her number..."

"We'll go back to my hotel, Tricia." She opened her mouth to argue but I shook my head. "Really, it's better if we go there for a ... confrontational mediation."

"But you'll call me before you leave town, won't you? I've got to say good-bye."

Tricia knew me too. With Will and Michael here, I'd have to return to Jasper soon. I didn't want to leave New York City, not yet anyway. Neither had said as much but I knew they would encourage me to return home.

"Of course, I will." We hugged again and I grabbed my coat and purse from the floor beside the sofa. I didn't stare at either Will or Michael as I left Tricia's apartment but I knew both of them would follow me. Sure enough, they joined me in the elevator, and the three of us remained silent until we arrived at the Hotel Belleclaire.

* * * *

We walked into the lobby of the hotel, following our short yet expensive cab ride from Tricia's apartment. Michael paid the cabbie. I stepped out of the cab the moment we parked against the curb. I didn't turn around but I could tell Will was following me instead of Michael. The heat from his body scalded me and I knew Will's heat contained something different from the love he had exhibited toward me upon his return—anger. That was okay with me. I was angry too. I just wasn't certain if I was more angry with Will or myself.

Michael joined us at the elevators where we waited in silence. The elevator doors opened, I stepped on followed by both Will and Michael. We were only traveling five floors to

my hotel room and I could have used the walk to gather my emotions and calm myself but I wanted to stay mad.

After entering my hotel room, I dropped my purse and card key onto the table beside the television set and headed straight for the bathroom. I could feel Will hot on my heels so I turned and politely closed the bathroom door in his face. Once alone, I released my anger the only way I knew how: through tears. Silent tears as I slid down the length of the bathroom door onto the cold tile floor—tears for my unanswered questions, tears for my confused emotions, tears for my broken heart. I didn't care about what anyone thought. I was grieving ... so many things.

When there were no more tears to shed, I stood from the floor and turned on the faucet, cupping water in my hands. Splashing the cool water against my face was like the first breath a drowning person takes when they reach the water's surface. I felt alive, renewed. I pulled a hair tie from around my wrist and pulled my hair into a ponytail before splashing more water onto my face. Then I opened the bathroom door.

Will was leaning against the dresser beside the television and Michael was sitting in one of the room's two chairs. I wasn't surprised neither one of them had chosen to sit on the bed.

"Why did you come after me?"

"I was—" Michael coughed. The two men exchanged glances, and Will turned his attention back to me. "We were worried."

"And why would you be worried?"

"Because you weren't in Jasper."

"So? I can take care of myself, Will. I've been doing a pretty decent job for the past two years."

"I have enemies, Hannah."

"Like *who*?" My voice decibel rose as I crossed in front of Will and sat on the bed but I didn't care what the other hotel patrons heard. "Until Fiona, we thought *you* were the only *pyreweld* alive."

He sighed and I glanced out of the corner of my eye at Michael. He looked as interested as I was in whatever Will was going to say, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his eyes narrow. It was a look I'd seen from Michael on many different occasions. He was paying attention.

"Fiona was the bait. She was supposed to draw me out into the open."

"Well, it worked."

"Hannah." Michael's tone was neutral but still hit me the wrong way. It hurt, feeling like he didn't trust me or didn't ... love ... me.

"Don't do that, Michael. Please don't judge me."

"I'm not judging you. I'm just as curious as you are about how both Will and Fiona left Jasper and only Will returned."

"I made a vow," Will replied, ignoring Michael and inching closer to me. "If I somehow managed to escape, I would come back to Jasper and find you." He pressed his hand to my cheek and I melted against him, basking in the touch that had filled so many of my dreams, until his hand was ripped away from my skin, leaving me cold.

"I don't think you should be touching Hannah," Michael said, his hand firmly around Will's wrist. "You're doing something to her. I want you to stop."

"She still loves me, Michael." Will jerked his arm out of Michael's grasp and stepped toward me once again. This time, however, I stepped away from him, curious to know if what Michael had said was true.

"Maybe she does but she's afraid of you. She's never been afraid of me."

"Are you," Will paused, glancing first at me then at Michael. "Hannah, are you sleeping with Michael?"

"I don't see—"

"That's none of your business, Will." Michael eclipsed my denial with one of his own. "You claim you came back for Hannah but what you really did is put her life in danger."

"I can protect you," Will said, a smooth smile plastered across his face, and I had to look away from him. "I'm not alone in this fight. I know more about myself than I did two years ago. How can Michael protect you?"

"By leaving Jasper," Michael responded, and my heartbeat accelerated. Michael stared at me with warm eyes. I bit my lower lip. "I told Hannah we could leave Jasper. If your enemies can't find her, they can't use her to hurt you."

"My enemies will always be able to find Hannah."

"What?" I questioned, my face contorting into a strange mix of horror, confusion and anger. I meant nothing to Will's enemies. At one time, I knew Will would have done whatever necessary to protect me, to save my life. But now...

"I branded you, Hannah, our last night together." He ran his palm underneath the curtain of my hair to the base of my neck. The second his skin touched mine, I was on fire. I melted against him, an undercurrent of warmth hitting me in all the right places. He stepped closer to me. His hand stroked my skin, and I wanted his touch all over my body.

"You son of a bitch!" Michael roared then punched Will's jaw, sending him sprawling to the floor.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Twelve

Will and Michael thrashed against each other on the floor at my feet. I couldn't tell who was winning the fight and honestly, I didn't care. Will had dropped another bombshell on me. He was certainly good at that.

I branded you, Hannah, our last night together.

I could sense the exact ramifications of what his statement held for my future wasn't a pretty picture. Before he left me, Will had "branded" me, baptizing me with fire. It was a baptism I hadn't consented to, and one that could lead Will's enemies straight to me.

Staring numbly at the floor, I saw fists and legs flying as Michael and Will continued to duke it out. Smears of red gave a sharp contrast to the cream carpet. Both Will and Michael were bleeding. "Stop," I said meekly, bending at the waist to push whoever happened to be on top. "Stop it. Will! Michael! Stop!" My voice rose in anger, and Will grabbed onto my ankle, mistaking it for the bedpost.

I inhaled sharply as Will jerked my ankle, pulling me to the ground on top of him and Michael, entangling me into their brawl. I shoved against them with all my might, causing Michael to mistakenly punch me. I cried out and cradled my cheek, my face throbbing thanks to Michael's right hook. The scuffle ended, both Will and Michael immediately turning their attention to me and my injury.

"Oh God, Hannah, I'm so sorry," Michael whispered, his thick hands around my waist, helping me up from the floor. "I didn't see you."

"I noticed."

"Here." Will's slender hands touched the small of my back. "Lie down on the bed. I'll get some ice for your face."

"I'll get it," Michael growled and before Will could argue, Michael was out the door, plastic ice bucket and my room key card in hand.

"I'm sorry, Hannah," Will whispered as he sat beside me on the bed, his fingers gently feathering my hair out of my eyes. "I didn't mean for you to get hurt."

"I'm used to getting hurt," I replied, tears stinging my eyes.

"I ... I never meant to hurt you. You have to believe me." He looked so sincere and he gave me a soft smile, the kind of smile that once upon a time would have melted my heart and made me forgive him. I couldn't help but smile in return but quickly winced when my cheek throbbed in response.

"Here's the ice," Michael said, and he placed a washcloth full of ice against my face. I hadn't heard him come back into the room, and my eyes immediately went to Will. He was still sitting on the bed beside me, his left arm supporting his weight as he leaned across my hips. Was Michael right? Was Will doing something to me? Too many unknowns. I winced again, cradling the ice against my cheek.

"What's wrong?" Will questioned, reaching for me. I shook my head, uncertain of what to say.

"I'm going to the bar," Michael announced after several moments of silence.

"Michael—"

"You want me to bring something back for you?" He stood at Will's right and looked like he wanted an escape, not a drink from the hotel bar.

"No, thank you."

"Will?"

"I'm fine but thanks."

"Sure," Michael replied with a shrug, turning to leave the hotel room without looking back. Something inside of me cracked. I had been certain he would turn for one more look.

"How's your face?" Will asked, startling me from my inner pity party. I carefully pulled the washcloth away from my cheek and he inched closer to inspect the injury. "You'll live," he said with a small smirk, and I stared back at him through hooded eyes. I recognized this behavior—Will was flirting with me. And even though I would have enjoyed flirting back, more pressing issues clouded my mind. Like the fact my life might be in danger.

"What did you mean when you said you branded me?"

"Hannah—"

"Don't sidestep me, Will." My anger rose. "If my life is in danger, I ... I think I'm entitled to know."

"I never meant for this to happen," Will whispered as he moved away from me and stood. I straightened, placing the ice back on my cheek again, and watched as he paced at the foot of the bed.

"Are you ... are you more ... of a demon now?"

"Does that scare you?"

I wasn't sure how to answer him. He looked so lost. Not as lost as he had the day of his return when I told him I needed time to think, but still, there was an uncertainty in his eyes.

"I'm not sure," I responded truthfully, lowering my head a tiny bit. "I ... I feel things when we touch, Will. Things I never felt before you left."

"But you have to know I still love you, Hannah. You do, don't you?"

I opened my mouth to answer but his lips silenced me. My skin tingled as he ran his hands down my arms and around my waist. He pulled me tight against him, stretching our bodies across the bed. My mind became jumbled, my thoughts incoherent. All I could feel was Will. I was drowning in him.

"Don't you feel that?" he whispered, and a chill ran down my spine. There was no denying how much he wanted me. How could I not with his groin pressed tight against my thigh?

His hands crept lower, trailing fire down the lower half of my body. I was lost in a haze of stars as Will kissed my neck. From deep within my soul, I felt an ache, a *need* for him. Teasingly slow had always been Will's pace for seduction. It was good to know that hadn't changed. As I fisted his cotton t-shirt in my hands, certain I would die from the fire raging underneath my skin unless I found a release, my brain fought back.

Will chose Fiona. He chose Fiona and he left you behind.

I think I could love you, Hannah.

My enemies will always be able to find Hannah.

I branded you, Hannah, our last night together.

Drawn back into the reality of the situation, with Will's warm hand resting high on my ribcage, his mouth at my collarbone, I squirmed against him. I couldn't allow myself to give in to these desires, no matter how much I ached for Will. I wasn't thinking clearly; I wasn't thinking at all. Michael was right. Something about this seemed so very wrong.

"We can't," I said, at last able to free myself from underneath Will. I stood quickly and pulled my shirt over my lacy purple bra. "We can't do this," I said again for good measure.

"Yes, we can," Will argued as he too rose from the bed, never taking his eyes off me. "We love each other, Hannah. We can do anything we want."

I stood unmoving, watching Will as he stepped toward me in slow motion. He touched my face, his simple touch setting me on fire once again. He brushed his lips across mine in a manner so unlike Will. "Will," I whispered. It sounded more like a moan than a whisper.

"I know you, Hannah," he whispered, his hands roaming across my waist and hips. "I can give you things Michael has never dreamed of..." his voice trailed off, the outline of his entire body glowing like embers. I reached out to touch him, speechless and drawn to him like a moth. I was powerless to resist. "We can start again, Hannah. Michael will never love you the way I do."

"You don't know that," Michael's voice boomed in my subconscious and the flames around Will's body dissipated,

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

revealing my hotel room and Michael in the doorway, a look of determination on his face.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Thirteen

"Michael," I said, immediately stepping out of Will's embrace while Michael stepped further into the hotel room.

"I've been thinking," he said, standing in front of me, separating me from Will. I still felt the heat from Will's stare against my cheek. It was distracting, to say the least, to feel Will's warmth all around me while I tried to focus on Michael. Then Michael's soft hands cradled mine and all remnants of Will's warmth disappeared, instantly taken over by Michael's desire washing over me.

It was shocking to learn how much Michael wanted me. To know how jealous he was of Will. To learn how truthful he had been when he said he could love me.

"—what's best for you." I returned to the present in time to hear the final snippet of Michael's sentence.

"What?"

"I said we all need to focus on what's best for you." He guided me to the corner of the bed, past where Will was standing, and he stepped away from me once I was settled on the bed. "When I found out you were missing, I ... I couldn't think straight. All I could think was something had happened to you."

"We both thought that," Will amended but Michael kept his eyes on me and acted as if Will hadn't spoken at all.

"All I could think about was finding you, making sure you were okay. I've been doing it two years, Hannah. At first, out of duty, a sense of loyalty, but then..." He paused and kicked

at the carpet with the toe of his shoe. I glanced down too, somehow not surprised when I saw nothing on the floor.

"When you were gone, I felt like ... like I was dying."

"Michael—"

"Let me finish," he instructed and I settled back onto the bed, my attention firmly focused on him. "Before Will came back, I told you I thought I could love you."

"I remember."

"And now that Will is back, I still mean it. I think I could love you, Hannah. Whether in Jasper, New York City, Japan, wherever you want it to be."

I opened my mouth to respond to Michael's declaration but slowly closed it, realizing I had no words to say. Any response I made, someone would be hurt.

"I'm not sure ... what to say," I admitted, staring at Michael then to my left at Will. Both men were eerily silent, like they were hanging on my every word. My cheeks flushed under their strenuous gazes. It had been a long time since anyone had been so invested in my opinion.

"Tell us the truth," Michael offered.

"Tell us what's in your heart," Will suggested.

I sighed again because I didn't understand what was in my heart, and I didn't know truth from lies. I stood from the bed and crossed the room to the large-pane window looking out onto New York City. It was a bustling metropolis, a place I could easily lose myself. A place where I could become invisible, where I could be anyone I desired to be. But that was the problem—my desires were unknown.

"When I left Jasper," my back to both Michael and Will, "I left with a purpose. I left to try and figure things out, to get know my own heart again. You have to understand how ... lost I feel. First, Michael tells me he could love me. Then Will returns and tells me Fiona is dead and that he came back to be with me. I ... I try to escape, to give myself a little time to sort out these feelings but the two of you track me down."

An overwhelming anger rose from my stomach. My entire body burned with it, like my burgeoning rage was fueling me, pushing me toward resolution. I closed my eyes, the world in front of me spinning at a dizzying pace. I didn't understand this reaction. I couldn't control it.

"What do you need, Hannah?"

With Michael's question, the anger boiling within me subsided. My thoughts became my own, my brain no longer muddled by feelings of pity, confusion and anger. I could breathe again.

"I need time," I admitted, allowing myself to say the first thing that came to my mind. If I didn't think about what I was saying or the impact it would have on the three of us and our futures, the truth would come out eventually.

I still had so many questions for both Will and Michael, and for myself. Questions that wouldn't be answered today or even tomorrow. But they lingered in the air between the three of us, etching their place onto my heart and in my brain.

"I think you both should go back to Jasper."

"What about you?" Michael questioned, his brow furrowing in unspoken concern. I smiled, knowing he was internally arguing with himself about leaving me.

"I'll be fine."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to stay here," I replied, and the tension in my shoulders relaxed. "I'm going to stay in New York City."

"For how long?" Will continued, his face unreadable. At one point in my young life, I would have known everything Will Caldwell had been feeling and thinking just by staring at his face. In our years apart, however, Will had gained the ability to hide his true feelings from me.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "I don't know how long I'll be here or where I will go when I decide to leave."

"I don't think this is a good idea," Michael argued, his voice remarkably calm despite the irritation I knew boiled inside of him. "If Will's enemies find you—"

"I'll deal with that when and if the time comes."

"Hannah—"

"I'm going to be fine, Michael. I promise." I smiled and hugged him tightly. He wrapped his arms around me, swallowing me whole, and placed a gentle kiss on my forehead. He held me as he if would never see me again.

Michael released me and quickly walked out of the hotel room. I knew he still didn't like the idea of leaving me here, but it wasn't Michael's decision. It was mine.

"He doesn't want to leave you."

I nodded my agreement as Will stepped closer to me, sweeping me into his arms.

"I don't either."

I wasn't surprised by Will's kiss, the touch of his lips against mine so familiar, a memory I had desperately clung to

after his departure. I allowed myself to be lost in him for a moment, adding this to my collection of memories for the photo album in my brain then I stepped backward out of his arms.

"I'll be fine," I replied with a small smile.

"I know you will." He touched my cheek, letting his warm palm linger against my skin for several seconds. And with a smile, he turned and left the hotel room.

I turned back to the window as silence filled the room, the sun setting against the New York City skyline. I wondered briefly about Tricia, if I should call her to let her know I wasn't leaving for Jasper after all. I also wondered if Michael and Will would return to Jasper as I had asked them to do. As I stared out the window to the streets below, a voice from my past echoed through my brain. It was the voice of a scared girl, her heart broken, her future uncertain.

I'm gonna be alone.

The memory hit me square in the stomach. I had confessed my fear to my reflection once it became obvious Will would not return. I remember how alone, how lost and uncertain I felt. Though I didn't feel as broken as I had then, I did feel an emptiness I hadn't expected. But I was determined I'd come through this unscathed.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fourteen

My luggage sat by the door, Tricia and I side by side on the bed. There were no sounds in the small hotel room—even the bustling New York City streets were quiet, though I knew midday traffic was at a high volume. I dreaded going to the airport, because of the traffic, yes, but also because I was leaving Tricia and New York City behind to return to Jasper, Texas. And Michael and Will.

"You'll come back for Christmas," Tricia said, her voice breaking the silence. It shook as she spoke. "I'll have the baby, and we'll go ice skating at Rockefeller Center."

"Not in that order, I hope."

She elbowed me and laughed. I knew what she meant. She didn't want to say good-bye. I didn't want to say good-bye either.

For four weeks, I'd lived at the Hotel Belleclaire. Four weeks spent reconnecting with Tricia, watching her and her husband, Charlie, listening to their plans for the future as they prepared for the birth of their baby. Four weeks with nary a thought of Michael or Will or what might have happened to the two of them once they'd returned to Jasper. It had been an amazing time for me, discovering I could survive on my own—the fact it was my mother's mad money that got me to New York City in the first place was irrelevant to my logic. Now lack of funds called me home, the knot in the pit of my stomach tightened.

"We should get you into a cab," Tricia said, rising slowly from the bed. "Traffic to JFK will be hell." She stretched then placed her hand in the small of her back. Her body had changed so much during my stay. You could now tell she was pregnant, a small baby bump obvious on her thin frame. I could only imagine how her balance and equilibrium would shift in the coming months as the baby grew. She would be a mother soon, and I would be an honorary aunt.

"Thank you," I whispered as I grabbed onto her right hand. She turned toward me, her green eyes filling with tears. Moisture tipped the corners of my own eyes. The most difficult thing, I think, is to smile through your tears. Inside, your heart is breaking, struggling to cope with whatever incident caused you cry in the first place. But on the outside, you have to appear strong. You have to smile. That's exactly what I did.

Then Tricia hugged me, and we both shattered.

We held each other close, her stomach melded against my ribs. Our shoulders shook in off-setting rhythms. Sniffles permeated the otherwise silent hotel room. Tears streamed down my face. I closed my eyes to hold them in but it was pointless. I was sad to leave my friend.

Part of me wanted to remain in New York City, to call my mother and beg for money. But my mother's words rang through my brain, reminding me of my responsibility to return home, my price for being an adult.

Running away from your problems isn't going to make them go away, Hannah.

Tricia sniffed in my ear and we broke our embrace. "Well, I'm sure I look horrible now," she said while patting underneath her eyes with her fingertips. The tip of her nose and her eyes were red. Otherwise, she looked no different than she had when she greeted me.

"You're glowing."

"And you're lying," Tricia countered. She pegged me with a grimace. I couldn't help but laugh. I expected her to dart to the mirror to check her appearance. She didn't. Instead, she placed both palms against her cheeks and inhaled slowly. Releasing the breath, she turned her attention back to me. "It's five months, Hannah. I'll be Shamu. You'll be stress-free and things will be as they should be."

"You're right." I wanted to believe her; I *needed* to believe her. But somewhere in the back of my brain I knew things wouldn't be as easy as that when I returned to Jasper. The events of my life had never been so easy.

I gathered my bags and we walked slowly to the door. I turned, sad to leave, but I knew I couldn't stay. Tricia placed her arms across my shoulders and gave a little squeeze. I rearranged my bags to allow her closer to me. We practically waddled to the elevator, completely in step with one another. I was glad to reconnect with Tricia, to call her my friend once again.

The elevator doors opened in the lobby, Bobby, the bellhop, jumping into my line of sight. "I'll get those, Miss Hannah." He fumbled my bags but didn't drop them, expertly rushing through the swinging door onto 77th Street. I saw

Greer manning the door. I was glad I could say good-bye to him too.

"Miss Hannah," Greer said as Tricia and I walked toward him. He tipped his hat then opened the door. Tricia walked ahead of me out of the hotel. I saw a taxi waiting by the curb.

Pausing in front of Greer, I leaned toward him, watching his baby blues cloud over as they had done on my arrival to the Hotel Belleclaire. "Greer, I just wanted..."

"There's no need," he interrupted, his hand up to silence me. "I was simply doing my job. A job I enjoyed very much, and am sorry I must relinquish to someone else."

"Thank you," I whispered, tears threatening to fall down my cheeks once again, and I placed a chaste kiss on Greer's cheek. His smile faded. With the fade came a shadow I'd never seen before. He looked sad, almost as if he regretted ... something.

"A pleasure, miss." He tipped his hat once again. The glass door closed behind me, leaving me beside Tricia on the sidewalk. Bobby looked anxious as he held the taxi door open for me.

"Call me when you land." Both Tricia and Bobby helped me into the back seat. He slammed the door. The entire taxi shook. I waved at Tricia as the cab merged into traffic, and continued to wave until I could no longer see her. Shifting in my seat, I was once again conflicted. Who would be there to greet me when I arrived back home in Jasper? Michael or Will? The motion of the cab lulled me into a comfortable fog. Just as sleep threatened to claim me, an idea I'd never

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

considered passed through my brain: what if neither one of them appeared?

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Fifteen

My brain roared to life, my eyes snapped open. It didn't take long to realize I was still in New York City, a twilight haze of orange, purple and red merging behind the tall buildings. Shifting in the back seat of the cab, I stared down at my watch. 8:00. My mouth felt sticky, like I hadn't had water in days. When I moved left to exit the car, someone blocked my path. Someone I thought I'd never see again.

Fiona Graves.

Her face was bright, like she was in a spotlight, her blonde curls cascading down her shoulders. She looked older, battle-worn yet still beautiful. Opening the door, she slid onto the seat beside me. She smiled at me, her blue eyes shiny, alive, and quite mesmerizing for a dead person.

"Didn't think you'd ever wake up, Hannah."

"You're dead."

Her laughter crackled through the car. The sound made me shiver. "Do I feel dead?" In a flash, she reached out and placed her hand on top of mine. Her skin was warm—unusually warm—as Will's had always been. Fire instead of blood, the hallmark of a *pyreweld*.

Pulling away from her touch, I moved closer to the other door. "Will said you were dead." A shadow passed over the window to my right, and I turned to see a man standing guard. He wasn't a hulk, but he was too stout for me to think of tackling to make my escape. My throat constricted; my heartbeat thundered in my ears. I was trapped.

"Yeah, well, *Will* said a lot of things," Fiona countered, flipping an errant curl over her shoulder. "Like he told me he didn't love you anymore, but we both know that ain't true."

"Will doesn't love me," I argued. It was stupid. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. I understood. I'd been a woman scorned too. "He doesn't," I repeated, certain I had sealed my fate for confessing such a blatant lie. "I ... I haven't seen him—"

"Since you left Jasper, Hannah. I know." She shifted toward me, pulling her legs underneath her. The leather squealed as her boots drug across. "You think I don't know Will? You don't think I can sense what's inside of him? In his heart? He still loves you."

Being this close to Fiona was difficult. I wanted nothing more than to get away from her. We weren't friends; we would never be friends. Breathing the same air as her revolted me. She'd been on a mission to lure Will away from Jasper and me, and she'd succeeded. My life would have been different had he remained. I wasn't certain I could forgive either of them. "But he left with you, and he was gone from my life for two years."

"That doesn't mean he didn't think of you while he was with me."

Anger boiled inside of me. I had moved on from the place where I moped and cried about Will's departure. I'd picked up the remaining pieces of my life and had struggled to regain control, to learn to live without his presence. Yet with one phrase, Fiona drew me back in. I knew she was baiting me,

but I didn't care. She'd come back to life. She'd pissed me off. "He slept with you."

"Did he tell you that?" She stared at me, a questioning look on her face. She looked hurt, but as soon as the emotion surfaced, it was gone, replaced by her ever-present bravado. "Believe me, I tried. There were plenty of nights I could get him out of his clothes and ready. No matter what, he'd never give in. He was certainly responsive, that's for sure."

She glanced at me, a wicked smile playing on her lips. I didn't need to be reminded how responsive Will's body was. Or how mine had responded to his four weeks earlier. My skin burned from the memory. I grew hot as phantom kisses seared my lips. "What do you want, Fiona?"

"I want what I've always wanted. Will. I want you to give him up, to let him be with his own kind."

"Done," I replied with a shrug of my shoulders. "You can have him."

"Just like that?" Fiona laughed again. It sounded like fingernails down a chalkboard. "You really are stupid."

A fresh wave of anger rolled through me. "I'm tired of playing games with you. If you want Will, you're going to have to talk to him. You can't use me anymore. I'm finished with both of you." I lowered my shoulder into the cab door, working the handle at the same time, hoping the pressure would cause the door to give way. I needed to be out of the car, and away from Fiona.

The lug standing outside the door moved when the frame pounded against his backside. I tumbled out of the car onto the gravel and dirt parking lot in front of an old abandoned

building. "Where are we?" I screeched to Fiona, who calmly exited from the other side of the cab. "Take me to the airport."

"The only place we're taking you is inside that building." Fiona pointed to the warehouse behind me as a pair of thick hands grabbed my shoulders. "You can leave as soon as Will arrives."

"He doesn't know I'm here! He's probably waiting for me at the airport in Jasper."

"Oh, he'll be here." She stepped around the car and walked toward the dark warehouse. "Just you wait and see."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Sixteen

Instead of sleeping, I huddled against a metal pole in one corner of the warehouse, Fiona and her guard watching me. Not the most ideal conditions, but New York City wasn't where I wanted to be. I wanted to be home, in Jasper.

Past conversations filtered into my overactive imagination. I thought of Tricia and our plans after the birth of her baby. I remembered how Michael had looked when he left me in the hotel room four weeks earlier. He'd hesitated, like he wanted to throw me over his shoulder and forcibly return me to Jasper. I envisioned Will's panic if what Fiona had said was true. Would he be on his way to New York City as she'd predicted?

"Do you hate Will?" I asked aloud. I didn't turn my head to look at Fiona. Something about Will's grief over the story of her death and his insistence he now had enemies didn't make sense.

"Why would you ask that?" she countered. I rolled my eyes. I suppose I should be thankful she answered me, but responding to my question with a question wasn't my ideal answer. She stepped toward me then squatted. Raising my face to look at hers, I couldn't tell what she was thinking. Her poker face was excellent. One more thing I hated about her.

"Just a question," I replied with a shrug. "You seemed so eager to have him for your own and now you're holding me prisoner to, what, get back into his good graces in the hopes

he'll go with you ... wherever. That's not very smart. I mean, if he still loves me like you say he does."

She lowered herself onto one knee and leaned close. "Will would do anything for you, Hannah. You underestimate your power over his heart."

"I think you *overestimate* it. I told you Will and I aren't together. We aren't going to be together again."

Fiona stared at me like she was trying to read my mind. Much to my surprise, the statement felt like the truth. I loved Will—would probably always love him—but the days when I needed to be with him in order to function were over. Two years without him had cured me. I was stronger now, more determined, and I'd made a vow I was going to be happy in my future, however long that might be.

Fiona sat beside me on the dirty, cold concrete floor. Her voice was low which I took to mean she didn't want the other guard to know what she was talking about.

"Stumbling onto Will had been a mistake. I was supposed to bait him."

It wasn't what I had expected her to say. I had imagined she would be possessed, obsessed with Will. She'd make herself irresistible to him. Nodding, I hoped she'd continue.

"I was in Jasper for another reason, but when I discovered Will and reported to my boss, I was instructed to bring Will with me. There are a lot of factors you wouldn't understand."

"So tell me. I just want to know the damn truth."

She paused, glancing over to the large guard. I looked too, and saw the big man had a cell phone to his ear.

"He's busy. Go ahead."

"*Pyrewelds* are unusual, fantastic creatures." Maybe she said that for my benefit, but I didn't need a mythology lesson. I knew Will was different. At one time, it had mattered to me but his physiological makeup didn't scare or excite me any longer. I had loved him because he was Will. "Because we're so unique, the services we can provide are invaluable."

"What services? What are you talking about?"

"I kill people, Hannah. I work under a contractual obligation, and I eliminate unwanted complications."

"Oh my God." The woman who took Will away from me was a professional assassin. I didn't know whose life I should be more concerned with: mine or Will's. "An ... and Will?"

"My boss wanted me to recruit Will."

I stared at her when she paused. Again, her ability to look neutral bothered me. She'd confessed she was a hired killer, and Will was to be her charge, possibly her partner in those endeavors. It made my blood run cold. Will wasn't a killer. If she'd known anything about him at all, she should have known that.

"He loved you," she continued, startling me from my thoughts. "I sensed it right away. To get him to leave Jasper, I had to convince him I knew about our species."

"So you lied?"

"No," she snapped, her voice rising in anger. "I knew a lot of basic information about *pyrewelds*, more than Will did anyway. I trained him, helped him to come to terms with what he was and what he could do. When it came time for his first assignment, he balked. My boss made it look like I had

been killed in hopes Will would want revenge for my death. But he didn't. He ran straight back to you."

"I'm sorry—"

Fiona continued like she hadn't heard me. "So by threatening *you*, I know he'll come running to your aid."

"Then what happens?"

"He dies." She stood, our bonding time over.

I shifted, my body suddenly tense. I didn't want to be used as bait for Will. I didn't want to play a part in his possible demise, not because he was weak but because I knew Fiona and the goon she was with were serious enough to kill him. Wondering what would happen to me should Will not arrive in New York City, I hoped Fiona would release me. Unfortunately, she did nothing to alleviate my fears.

"And if Will doesn't show up, you'll die in his place."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Seventeen

Following Fiona's confession, sleep wasn't on my mind. I sat with my back against a concrete pole, replaying the regrets of my young life. My biggest regret was how things had ended with Michael, that I hadn't kissed him the night he confessed he loved me.

It was easy to remember the feel of his skin against mine, to conjure up a mental picture of his face and think about his mouth on me. I imagined his hands holding firm to the curves of my hips as we lay together on the couch in his apartment. His hair was shaggy, giving me enough length to hold onto at the nape of his neck while we exchanged kisses. Things between us would be timid at first, but within seconds, our passion would no longer be denied.

Blinking tears down my face, I shook the fantasy out of my head and looked up at the blacked-out windowpanes near the ceiling of the warehouse. It was still dark outside but I could tell dawn was approaching. I didn't know how long Fiona would wait for Will. I didn't know how much longer I'd be alive. Being this close to death was startling, to know my life would end if one event didn't fall into place. Memories of Will only made me more scared. So I chose my other option: Michael. Closing my eyes, I allowed my fantasy of Michael to play out.

His hands felt nice against my skin, coarse and a bit calloused, gentle as they danced around my waist. Rough fingers crept toward my bra, and I urged him on by flexing

my thighs around his hips. His mouth brushed my neck, sending chills down my spine. There was no doubt he wanted me, our bodies fully intertwined on his ugly, plaid couch. The heat between us was intense. No words were necessary. All I had to do was look at him, and I could read his mind. We'd never gone this far before. I'd never imagined taking the plunge, but Michael had always been there. He'd been ready, willing to wait as long as necessary until I saw what was right in front of me.

I think I could love you.

That moment in his apartment slammed into my brain, shoving my fantasy aside. Reality hit me square in the chest. Six little words gave such comfort to my soul in this dark hour. My skin tingled from his imaginary touches. My lips burned from his phantom kisses, memories alone enough to stir desire between my legs. Everything was suddenly crystal clear. What a stupid girl I was.

* * * *

Fiona nudged me with the toe of her black boot, the high wattage of her smile particularly annoying. I didn't know when I'd fallen asleep, but I sat up and ran my hands down my neck and shoulders, trying to work out some of the kinks. Light refracted through the window onto the concrete floor but did nothing to bolster my melancholy.

Fiona might kill me if I remained in the warehouse, and she would most certainly kill me if I attempted to run. Either way, I'd be dead. Then I'd never know what might have been with Michael...

The rise in temperature in the warehouse was subtle, slow, like a predator stalking its prey. With Fiona near the entrance of the warehouse, I couldn't tell if she'd sensed it too. My body hummed, coming to life from the inside out, imaginary flames flicking against my skin. My pulse accelerated. I knew Will was close, hopefully waiting for a free moment to make his presence known.

Heat rose from the floor, the air suddenly thick with texture. I saw waves of condensation float in front of my face. The fire was so hot, it scalded every inch of my body. I was smothering, smoke and haze choking the life out of me. Something—or someone—whizzed by me, stirring the noxious clouds around my face. I coughed. Certain I'd hack up a lung before I died from inhalation, I fanned the air around me. I had to breathe. I *needed* to breathe.

Light broke through. Small fires littered the ground, but none were around me. Despite the overwhelming smoky haze, I saw Michael, motioning to me from the doorway. His hand scalded me.

"Hannah, are you okay?"

"Michael?"

My vision cleared and I saw not Michael, but Will. Black soot covered most of his skin, the brown t-shirt he wore frayed with what looked like scorch marks.

"You need to get out of here." He sounded surprisingly calm, and despite what he looked like, I knew he hadn't come to New York City covered in blackness.

"Fiona," I whispered, only to have my lung once again threaten to make an appearance. "Fiona is alive."

"I've got her cornered, Hannah. Go on. Get out of here."
He pulled me into an embrace, resting his chin on the top of my head as he had done on so many previous occasions. He smelled of charred flesh, a scent I had never wanted to associate with Will.

"Is Michael..."

Then he kissed me.

It was so simple, his lips on mine, so natural and comfortable, regardless of the mess around us. I grabbed onto his shoulders and he pulled me close. I memorized the feel of his body against mine, the underlying warmth I knew I'd never experience again after today.

"Michael's outside," he whispered into my ear after he broke the kiss. "Go, Hannah. He's waiting."

Light flashed again from the doorway, and I did not hesitate. Flames licked my heels as I ran. Michael stood less than five feet away, a frown on his face, the evidence of his pacing obvious in the gravel lot. I didn't slow down. I ran straight into his arms. He held me tight while I cried.

"Shhh. You're safe now, Hannah. Shhh."

Burrowing my face against his chest, I whispered, "Please take me away from here."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter Eighteen

Michael and I lay together on the hotel bed. How we got there was a blur. Part of me was thankful. The other part of me hoped Michael had found my bags. Raising my head, I saw the familiar red luggage propped beside one of the dressers, and I lowered back to my position on Michael's shoulder.

"They're there," he muttered, his voice husky from sleep. The deeper timbre rattled through my body, awakening the desire I had capitalized on during my fantasy hours earlier. "You okay?" He sounded more like himself now as he turned onto his side and stared at me.

"I guess," I replied with a shrug, tucking both palms between my head and the pillow. "It doesn't seem real, you know."

"He loved you." He gave me a quick smile before pushing an errant strand of hair out of my face and behind my ear.

"I know. I loved him too." I wanted to move closer to Michael, to touch his face, to kiss him softly, to feel his breath on my skin, but I remained where I was.

"You should take a shower," he said abruptly, rising from the bed. "I booked us on a flight back to Jasper this afternoon." He walked to the window, stretching his arms over his head. The movement pulled his shirt above his waist, inches of skin winking at me, teasing me. Before I said or did something I might regret, I stood from the bed, grabbed the

smallest piece of luggage and went into the bathroom. Once inside, I closed the door behind me, exhaling slowly.

The water was warm against my skin so I stood for several minutes under the steady stream. Washing made me feel dirty, like I was removing pieces of Will, his memory floating down the drain along with the soap suds. Turning off the water, I grabbed a towel and wound my hair in it, then tucked another underneath my arms around my chest and back. I opened the bathroom door and stepped back out into the hotel room.

Michael sat in a chair between the bed and the window, his long legs reclining on a second chair. When he saw me, he straightened. "Hannah?"

"I ... I felt like I was trying to forget him. I ... I'm not ready to forget, Michael."

At my side the second my tears began to fall, Michael led me to the edge of the bed. We both sat at the same time. He took my hands into his, cradling them in his lap. "No one is asking you to forget. You could have died. She could have *killed* you. You loved Will—"

"I wasn't *in* love with him, Michael. I loved him, yes, but not any longer." I turned my head to look at him. "When I was in the warehouse last night, I started thinking about all the things I regretted. And my biggest regret is you."

"Hannah—"

"No, listen to me. What would have happened between us if Will hadn't come back? I was thinking about you that night, about *us*."

"You were?" His inflection gave away his shock, but Michael did nothing to recover or try to hide it.

"Last night, I kept imagining myself with you," I whispered, drawing our joined hands to my chest. Slowly, I turned over one of Michael's hands and slipped it underneath the fold of my towel. "I imagined you touching me, kissing me. I wanted *you*, Michael."

He darted away from me suddenly, keeping the entire room in the space between us. His hands shook when he ran his fingers through his hair. Dipping my gaze lower, his arousal was even more obvious. "This ... this isn't right. You've been through a lot, a *hell* of an ordeal."

"I know what I want," I replied, standing up from the bed. Removing the towel from my hair, I slowly walked toward him. By the time I stood toe to toe with him, his desire for me would have been obvious to a blind person. Placing my hands on either side of his face, I raised myself onto my tiptoes and gently kissed his mouth. He responded by pulling me tighter against him, grinding his erection into my stomach. "I think I could love you," I whispered seconds after I broke our kiss.

Michael ripped the final towel away with both hands.

* * * *

Snuggling closer to his naked body, I wrapped my leg over his thigh. He kissed me and rolled me onto my back. Trailing his mouth down my neck, he stirred to life once again.

"You're insatiable," I said with a laugh.

"I've been saving it up," he replied, his fingers teasing my breasts. When he gave a little snort at his own joke, I knew

our lives had changed forever. Even after these hours making love, he seemed light, different, happy. This was a Michael I longed to know, one I hoped to be with for a very long time.

"Did you mean it when you said you could love me anywhere?"

His tongue gave a quick flick of my nipple then he raised his head to look at me. "Of course I did. Why?"

I covered myself with the sheet and continued, "Because I think you're right."

He rolled away from me and sat up beside me in the bed. Arching his eyebrows, he wet his fingertip and drew a line in the air, making an imaginary tally. When I scowled at him, he laughed. "You've never said I was right about anything. I had to mark that down." I slapped him, and he sunk back underneath the covers, wrapping his arms around my waist. "What was I right about?"

"Being in Jasper is holding me back. I don't think I want to go back there. Not permanently, I mean."

"Where would you like to go?"

I pushed the sheet away from his body, straddling him. He palmed my breasts before rising up and pulling me flush against him. The touch of his skin to mine set me on fire, making my brain fuzzy. Control I'd fought so hard to gain had been obliterated with his nearness. But I welcomed its loss.

"I don't care, as long as we're together. I'm ready to make new memories."

He flipped us so he was on top. When he kissed me, I let my mind go blank, focusing on the pleasurable sensations Michael brought out in me.

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

I would never forget Will, but Michael was my future now. Whatever happened from here on out would be my new adventure, new memories to add to my mental scrapbook. I planned on making as many as I could.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

From the Ashes
by Cait McCarter

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