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MAD MAGIC by Nicole Conway

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*To Dr. Jerome Ward and Beth Fuller,
who were two of my greatest mentors.*

1

I wanted today to be a normal, quiet day. I wanted to go to school, take my tests, turn in my homework, eat lunch, and walk home without any major catastrophes. But, as usual, that was too much to ask.

I, Josie Barton, could not do normal.

So, for the third time this week, I sat in Ms. Gear's office. She glared at me over the top of her thick-framed glasses, but I knew better than to meet her gaze. Instead, I focused on the glass nameplate on her desk. It had the words *School Counselor* engraved on it.

Ms. Gear didn't like me. None of the faculty did. I saw it in the way they watched me with smoldering, disapproving glares. I got the sense from all of them that they were trying to figure out what, exactly, was wrong with me.

That question was getting harder and harder for me to answer these days.

For starters, I was a "problem student," a troublemaker, prone to outbursts at the worst possible moments. I caused scenes in my classes—like I had today. It used to only happen every now and then.

But lately, it seemed to be happening more and more often, and I couldn't do anything to stop it.

I didn't blame the teachers for getting fed up with me. I was pretty fed up, too. I certainly didn't want to be this way. I mean, who actually *wants* to be crazy? I practically had a reserved seat outside the principal's office. I was really on a roll this week.

"Well, Josie, I'm not sure what you expect me to do with you anymore." Ms. Gear spoke in a vicious, bitter tone.

I wasn't sure how to answer her, or even if I should try. Ms. Gear already thought I was totally out of my mind, after all, and had let me know that many times before. She'd even said I was a waste of the school system's valuable resources—but of course, not in those *exact* words. She'd phrased it very professionally. Something about how I was "wasting time that hard-working teachers could have spent on other students who actually appreciated it."

It was hard to hear stuff like that. But what hurt the most wasn't how they looked at me, or even the things they said. The absolute worst thing was the fact that I was so incredibly alone.

"It's been three years since the incident, and I feel that we have all been very considerate of your situation. We've given you plenty of time and space to deal with your personal issues. But, you've become a major distraction to the other students. You won't take your medications. You insist on disrupting every class you attend." Ms. Gear leaned back in her chair. The metal hinges on the seat creaked like they were screaming in pain under her weight. "Sooner or later, you are going to have to start taking responsibility for your outbursts."

"Yes, ma'am." I was hoping agreeing with her would save me from hearing this speech again.

Ms. Gear narrowed her eyes dangerously. Her mouth pinched up, and for a few terrifying seconds, she looked like an angry Buddha statue. Then she started raking through the papers in her desk drawers.

"I have been trying to offer this suggestion to your legal guardian,

but since he is so *difficult* to get in touch with, I will give it to you instead.” She shot me another accusing glare. “Be sure you pass it on to him.”

I cringed instinctively and managed to nod.

She finally pulled a pamphlet out of a drawer and handed it to me. “Davner’s is a school for mentally unstable children, like you. They take in students who can’t function in normal society. It’s a nice place. You’ll like it. They’ll keep you on the proper medications and give you the structure and constant attention you obviously require. You can make friends with other children who have the same issues you do. This school comes very highly recommended, and they will know exactly how to manage you.”

I carefully took the pamphlet from her, handling it as though it might be explosive. There was a picture of an old-looking brick building on the front flap. Inside, there were lots of pictures of smiling nurses, pristinely clean classrooms, and happy-looking teenagers all hugging each other. I only skimmed the text, but the words *schizophrenia*, *bipolar disorder*, and *sociopathic tendencies* caught my eye right away.

My stomach began to get queasy.

I looked back up at her, mustering all my courage to try and argue my case. “But I don’t want to transfer. I’m supposed to graduate soon. I can finish out the year. I just have to try harder. It’s only a few months.”

As Ms. Gear folded her chubby hands on the veneer desk, her thick fingers reminded me of pudgy, pink sausages. “Well, to be perfectly honest, you are on everyone’s last nerve. Here at Saint Augustine’s, we have standards. We have the highest test scores in the district. We are the most coveted private school in the city. Everyone else looks to us to set the bar, even when it comes to dealing with troubled students. I’ve already met with the rest of faculty, and we are all in agreement that this is the best option for you. All the paperwork is in order. All we need is the signature of your legal guardian. What was his name? Ben?”

I looked up again only because of the distinct flavor of sarcasm in her voice. She was grinning. It wasn't hard to imagine her with little horns and a pitchfork to match her evil smirk.

I wasn't sure what she thought was going on, but I knew she didn't think Ben was real. Even I doubted his existence sometimes, so I could understand why she might think I was making him up. He was barely in my life at all; just a spectator on the sidelines who stepped in every now and again when there was a problem I couldn't fix on my own. Beyond that, he was a shadow.

Maybe that was why I felt so isolated.

After my dad passed away in a house fire three years ago, I was completely alone in the world. I was fourteen then, so I couldn't legally be left on my own. I didn't have any extended relatives—no uncles, cousins, or grandparents who could take me in. My mom had died when I was really little, and my older brother not long after that. The only person still standing there after the funeral was over and the dust had settled was a mysterious figure that called himself my benefactor; I called him Ben for short. It sounded better than “Random Stranger Who Pays My Bills,” since I didn't know his real name.

He wasn't a relative. In fact, I had never even seen his face. Right after my dad passed away, I was sent into foster care for several weeks while the police investigated the fire. During that time, a lawyer in a snazzy, black suit had come to visit me at the hospital. He had all the right paperwork with my dad's signature naming Ben as my new legal guardian, but all of it was sealed and beyond my understanding. It was like something from a mob movie.

Before I knew it, I was sitting in a fully furnished apartment with all that remained of my family's belongings that hadn't been burned to a crisp. I had a credit card in my wallet, and an acceptance letter to an expensive private school called Saint Augustine's. What else could a teenage girl ask for?

Answers, for starters. But those were hard to come by.

Apparently, my dad had made these arrangements for Ben to take care of me a long time ago, if anything bad were to happen. Ben was supposed to support me until I turned eighteen, and then I wasn't sure what would happen to me. I suspected I'd be left on my own to either sink or swim. For now, Ben took care of everything. He paid my rent and all my expenses. I had a credit card I could use for groceries and anything else I needed. Occasionally, we exchanged emails or text messages. But as far as communication went, that was where Ben drew the line. He never answered the phone when I called, and had never agreed to meet me—not even for holidays.

Ms. Gear talked me into circles about him all the time, like she was trying to catch me in a lie. She knew as much about him as I did. He didn't answer the phone when she called either. He had, however, sent her emails that she claimed sounded "youthfully voiced," which I guessed meant she was accusing me of writing them instead. In a few months, it wouldn't matter—I was about to graduate and turn eighteen. After that, I would be able to make all my own decisions, and wouldn't be anyone's burden to bear. I could move somewhere else, meet new people, and make a clean start.

I tried clinging to that idea as I looked back up at Ms. Gear. She scared me. She must have known she did because she always made a big show of it when she took me out of class for meetings like this. I think she liked watching me squirm as I sat across from her. Honestly, I was just trying to keep it all together. Meanwhile, her beady little eyes watched my every move, the corner of her mouth twitching with a sneer.

"I'll give him a call when I get home," I promised.

She scoffed and rolled her eyes, as if she couldn't believe I was still trying to keep up this charade. "Fine. You're dismissed." She jabbed an angry finger toward her door.

I gathered my backpack and hurried out of her office. The hallways were filled with students all dressed in school uniforms like mine—white button-down shirts, navy-blue knit sweaters, and blue

plaid skirts or pants. We weren't allowed to wear makeup or excessive jewelry. I think it was to prevent anyone from feeling superior, like we were all equals or something. It didn't stop cliques from forming, though. There were the bookish kids, the popular and pretty ones, the athletes, and the gamers like at any other school.

Of course, I didn't have a niche. I didn't have any friends here at all. I was a pariah—thanks to my numerous outbursts—and it wasn't unusual for a room to clear whenever I entered.

It still hurt.

I intentionally avoided making eye contact with anyone as I dropped my books in my locker. The inside of my backpack still smelled like smoke from my last episode in chemistry class. I had been in the lab, paired up with one of the more popular girls to do an experiment. We were mixing chemicals, and things seemed to be going well. I had been trying my best to act as normal as possible, and she had been unusually nice to me, too. Like an idiot, I had begun to hope I might make a friend.

Then it happened again.

I was attempting to light the Bunsen burner to heat one of the chemicals when the flames flickered strangely. They flickered and danced, turning blue, pink, and purple. They'd moved almost like they were coming alive. I turned away and tried not to see; I'd always hoped it would go away if I ignored it. Then I saw the flames begin to take form—the shape of a fiery hand—and reach for my lab partner's ponytail. I screamed and dove at her, knocking her out of the way before her hair caught on fire.

Of course, no one else had seen the fire turn into a hand. All they had seen was me screaming and throwing myself at a perfectly innocent lab partner. The Chemistry teacher grabbed me by the collar and dragged me out of the lab while all my classmates watched. They stared at me with wide-eyed, shocked expressions—I got that look from them a lot. Some of the boys in the back snickered and I noticed a few of the other girls going over to console my former lab partner.

So much for making a friend.

I tried not to dwell on it too much as I left the school and walked home alone. I had other, much worse things I should have been worried about. But my thoughts got tangled up in Ms. Gear's words about transferring to a special school. Maybe she was right. Maybe things would be easier at a place like that. At least then I wouldn't have to live in that apartment anymore ...

It was freezing outside. The sidewalks were slick with ice and soggy slush puddles. Fortunately, my apartment was only a few blocks away so I didn't have to walk far. Ben had put me as close as possible to the school so I could get back and forth easily, which was especially useful when the weather was bad.

My apartment was right smack in the middle of the historic part of the city, where doctors and lawyers usually moved to retire. The buildings were all neatly huddled together on either side of the street, tall and skinny like different colored puzzle pieces. Some had small, perfectly-manicured gardens out front and iron fences with elaborate gates. There was a line of square-cut shrubs down the middle of the divided street, and a few blocks away was a collection of quaint shops and a family owned grocery store. It was everything you might need conveniently within walking distance.

I should have been grateful. Ben had given me a beautiful, quiet, and seemingly safe place to live. Instead, I felt guilty because the sight of it filled me with dread. Once I crossed the threshold of my front door, things always got worse.

Not that Ben had any idea about that. For all he knew, I was perfectly happy there. The rent was probably outrageous, and he was the one paying for it. I'd already tried asking if I could move somewhere less expensive. I didn't mind walking longer or even taking the bus. Every time I brought it up, Ben insisted I should focus on my schoolwork and "enjoy my high school experience."

Yeah, right.

It was bad enough spending a stranger's money, but what

made it even worse was despite everything he'd given me, I wanted something more from Ben. I wanted to *know* him. I was lonely, and he was the only person in the whole world who cared about me even a little, teensy, tiny bit. I had apologized to him plenty of times for being a burden, and he always replied right away to tell me it was his pleasure and privilege to take care of me. Those words never made me feel any better, though. Words on a computer screen weren't very comforting. Frankly, they were cold, distant, and impersonal. I was still desperately clinging to the hope that one day he would allow us to meet, and I'd see someone smile at me again as though they were happy to see me.

I tried not to dwell on that as I climbed the icy front steps of my building, gripping the iron railing so I didn't slip. It looked as if it had originally been built to be a colonial townhouse, but now, the top two floors had been converted into two apartments per level.

The landlord, Mr. Bregger, lived on the first floor. There were two other tenants living there besides me. One was a sweet elderly lady who lived alone on the second floor. She was deaf, and always smiled whenever I passed her in the stairwell. Sometimes, when it was a warm day, she sat out on the sofa in the mailroom with her big, fluffy orange cat in her lap.

Then there was the guy who lived directly across the hall from me.

He was standing in the common foyer, casually checking his mail, when I ducked inside. My entrance sent a blast of cold winter air through the foyer, but he never so much as shivered. I slipped off my mittens and scarf, hurrying to close the door before all the warm, inside air escaped. I made a lot of racket, most of it intentional, and he still didn't give me a single glance. He never did.

I shuffled right past him to check my own mail.

He didn't say a word.

Maybe that shouldn't have bothered me. After all, he looked exactly like the kind of person your parents might advise you to intentionally avoid while walking home alone. His shaggy, dark brown hair came

down almost to his shoulders, and there were colorful-tattooed sleeves covering both of his beautifully sculpted arms. Even if tattoos weren't usually my thing, his were amazing. They were brightly colored and riddled with rich, intricate details of flowers, vines, feathers, fish, and splashes of water. I blatantly stole glances of them whenever I spotted him wearing something sleeveless.

Creepy? Probably, but I couldn't help myself. Something about him drove me absolutely nuts, and the fact that he seemed to be intentionally ignoring my existence made it even worse.

He'd moved in here a couple of months ago, and at first glance I wondered what someone like that was doing living in a place like this. But the more I saw of him, the more my brain bubbled with mystification. Who was this guy? Why was he living here, when he could have moved to one of the trendier neighborhoods downtown?

So far, I had no answers. And whether it was the long hair, the tattoos, or the fact that he apparently didn't own any jeans that didn't have ragged holes in them, there was an air of reckless danger about him that drew me in like a gnat to a bug-zapper. It didn't help that he was insanely good-looking. He had one of those hard, chiseled jawlines you seldom see outside of department store advertisements. He was a lot older, probably in his mid-twenties, and I was just a high-school girl in a dorky uniform that stared at him like a deer in headlights every time our paths crossed. It probably freaked him out. And yet, despite what seemed like a committed effort on his part to appear as unfriendly as possible, he had never said anything mean to me. He'd never said anything at all. Maybe it was a good thing he ignored me. If our eyes met, I might suddenly combust into an inferno of girlish embarrassment.

Despite his silence, I had learned a lot about him by watching him in passing. I'd gotten good at reading people that way. Call it the curse of the incredibly bored.

For instance, I knew he had to be a heavy smoker. I saw him standing outside the apartment finishing off one of his weird cigarettes

early in the morning as I left for school every day. Mr. Bregger didn't allow smoking in the building, but my tattooed neighbor had built a regular bird's nest of burned-out cigarette butts in the flowerpots out front. Clearly, it wasn't a casual habit—not that I was any kind of smoking expert.

Normally, I would have found a smoking habit like that a total turn-off. But there was something different about the cigarettes he smoked. They were wrapped in a cream-colored paper, almost like parchment, and I'd noticed the butts were stamped with a small, gold-foiled design in the shape of a crown. That wasn't a brand I recognized. Their smell was different, too. It was floral, almost like incense.

I also figured he had to be a bouncer or worker at a nightclub. I didn't know what else he could possibly be doing from 6:00 PM when he left, until 5:00 AM when I heard him climbing the stairs to our floor every night like clockwork.

He was also single, or at the very least not in a serious relationship, because I never heard anyone else come back with him. No girlfriends, no drunken one-night stands—nothing. I'd never seen him with any friends or visitors, and he never went out of town or away on vacation. In fact, he seemed to be almost as reclusive as me.

I was discreetly trying to sneak a peek at some of his mail while slipping my key into my own box. Okay, so maybe I was being a little creepy. I just wanted to find out what his name was. What's the harm in that?

And then the lock on my mailbox made an awful clanking noise.

I groaned. It only made that sound when the lock jammed. I tried not to curse aloud as I fought to get my key free. I tried wiggling it, twisting it, and beating on the mailbox door. Nothing. The lock refused to budge or let go of my key.

I was about to resort to something more violent when a big hand suddenly eclipsed my view.

"You're gonna break it if you keep jerkin' on it like that," a deep voice murmured right behind me. My tattooed neighbor muscled

his way into my space, sliding me out of the way while he worked the lock.

I gaped at him in stunned silence, trying to wrap my mind around the fact that he'd spoken to me. He had an unlit cigarette between his lips, and his sharp eyes glanced my way for a brief second before he turned his attention back to my mailbox.

That was enough, though. That one, short glance sent a jolt through me like I'd stuck my finger in an electrical socket.

He had to have been wearing contacts. Either that, or I was seeing things again. His eyes looked *purple*. That couldn't possibly be real, right? I guess when you took the rest of his bizarre style into account, it didn't seem so strange that he might be wearing colored contacts, too.

He jiggled the lock a few times, twisting the key and finally popping it loose. Then he dropped the key back into my hand without a word and began walking away.

I stared at his broad back. It was almost too late when I finally remembered to call out, "Thank you!"

He didn't answer. He just raised one of his hands in a casual gesture without ever looking back and sauntered out the front door.

Wow.

It had all happened so fast. I was dazed as I climbed the stairs to my apartment. My frazzled brain churned, replaying every second. His tone had been so casual, like we knew one another already. And like an idiot, I had blown my perfect opportunity to ask his name. I was so busy mentally kicking myself about that, I had almost forgotten to be on guard when I arrived at my front door.

As soon as I realized where I was, I froze with my hand on the knob. I sucked in a sharp breath, and braced myself as I cracked open my door.

The things I saw at school were unpleasant. They were usually embarrassing and terrifying. In the past, doctors had diagnosed me with post-traumatic stress disorder. They said it was because my dad

had died so suddenly and in a traumatic way, and that it would take time for me to recover. They prescribed all kinds of medications to help with the anxiety and hallucinations. Their diagnosis seemed to make perfect sense . . . until I got to my own front door.

That's where the real world seemed to stop.

Some things couldn't be explained away.

I opened the door slowly and as quietly as possible, leaning to peek inside before I dared to turn on the lights. The lamps lit around the room when I flipped the switch, revealing the chaos I'd been dreading. My couch was turned over with its cushions thrown everywhere. All the pictures had been ripped off the walls again. The drapes had been yanked off the windows, and the TV was face down on the floor.

I stepped carefully over broken glass on my way to the kitchen. There, I found the fridge door wide open and food strewn everywhere. It was as if someone had intentionally sprayed the walls in ketchup. A chill crept over my body, making my skin prickle as though I were walking into an icy dungeon. I stood there for a few moments, shivering and staring at the mess.

The doctor had assured me that it wasn't uncommon for people with PTSD to have episodes like this and not remember them later. He'd called them "blackouts." I didn't remember doing anything like this to my apartment. Everything had been neat and orderly, the way I liked it, when I left for school that morning. Anyone else probably would have immediately called the police and reported a break-in, but I knew better than that.

The police couldn't help me. No one could.

It took me all afternoon to clean things up. I scrubbed ketchup off the walls and cabinets, swept up broken glass, and hung all the pictures back on the walls. Thankfully, I'd already taken all the photos with any sentimental value out of the frames a long time ago. These were just generic snapshots—some of which had come with the frames. Before, I'd adorned my home with every snapshot I could find of my family. Having them there, smiling at me, made me feel less alone. But after

a similar incident where all those images had been torn from their frames and my dad's face was scratched out of each one, it wasn't worth the risk. I didn't want to lose the few I had left.

When everything was clean and tidy again, I collapsed onto the couch and let out a sigh. It was getting late. I was exhausted, and yet I still had lots of homework to do before I could even try sleeping.

I took a quick shower and braided my coppery colored hair into a long, soggy rope down my back. I changed into pajamas, which were a pair of old sweatpants, socks, and one of my dad's old t-shirts. Then I curled up on the couch with my usual blanket and pillow, propped a textbook in my lap, and prepared to study.

Of course, sleeping in my bed or even stretching out across it to do my homework would have been nice, but I had given up on that a while ago. I couldn't sleep in my bedroom at all anymore, and I hated going in there. More things seemed to happen there than anywhere else in the apartment. The living room was the only place that even felt remotely safe. I knew it was only a matter of time, though. Slowly, but surely, I was being driven out of every room in this apartment. If things kept going at this rate, I'd be sleeping out in the hallway in the next few weeks.

I only made it halfway through my homework before nodding off. My face met my book a few times, and I finally gave up. Placing my textbook and notes in a stack on the coffee table, I bundled myself up in my blanket and drew my legs in toward my chest. All the lights in the apartment were still on, which made me feel a little better and the shadows less intense.

It wouldn't last, though. It never did. The darkness was my enemy, and I knew better than to think I would be safe just because there were a few lights burning.

My mind wandered back to that special school again. If I did decide to transfer, Ben would want to know why. He'd find out about my incidents at school, that I'd been seeing a few doctors secretly—basically everything I'd been hiding. I couldn't let that happen. I had

to make it to graduation. It was only a few more months. I could do it.

Visions of colorful tattoos swirled in my head as my body slowly relaxed, pulled under by the stress of the day. I drifted off, after one last glance at the clock.

It was only midnight. I still had a few hours left to sleep before 3:02 AM.



The sound of something like glass smashing in the kitchen made me bolt upright. The room was pitch black. My heart began pounding at a frantic pace. I panicked and a cold sweat made my whole body shiver.

It was here.

Something else broke, crashing against the floor right next to the couch.

It was too dark to see what it was. My chest got tight. I struggled to breathe and dove under my blanket for cover. Reaching down, I pulled my cell phone out of the pocket of my sweatpants. I clung to it as the screen glowed. It was the only source of light in my apartment now.

I had to calm down.

I had to think.

I tried some of the coping techniques the doctors had taught me for dealing with panic attacks. Breathe, count, and claim the area around me as my personal safe space. I started counting, taking deep breaths with every number.

One ... Two ... Three ...

Another loud crash made me scream. It sounded an awful lot like my television hitting the floor again. I curled up into the smallest ball

I possibly could, hugging my knees to my chest, and squeezing my phone desperately.

The pictures on the walls were rattling. The legs of my wingback chair made scraping noises as it slid across the floor. Down the hall, I heard my bedroom door slam shut, over and over again.

Then it touched me.

Icy cold fingers wrapped around my ankle.

I screamed, and tried to kick away, but it was strong—much stronger than me. It yanked me off the couch and onto the floor like a ragdoll. The back of my head cracked against the floor. My vision spotted. I was only vaguely aware that I had dropped my cell phone.

Something dragged me across the floor. Still dazed, I managed another desperate, garbled scream. I grabbed the leg of the couch and yelled. I knew no one would hear me. It didn't matter how loud I was, or how long I screamed. It was like being trapped in a bubble, an unbreakable cone of silence, where no one else could reach me.

I fought with all my might. It grabbed my braid, snatching my head back suddenly. I cried out as my fingers slid away from the couch leg.

It dragged me down the hall by my hair. I clawed at it, to get my hair free, but all I touched was empty air. There was nothing but deep, terrible darkness all around me.

It hauled me toward my bedroom. The door was still slamming repeatedly, like the chomping mouth of a hungry beast. I managed to grab the edge of the doorframe as it pulled me inside. I clung with all my strength, screaming at the top of my lungs for someone to help me.

The door slammed again, smashing my fingers and forcing me to let go.

The darkness swallowed me, gulping me down. The bedroom door slammed and locked. I screamed his name with all my might; I didn't know anyone else to cry out for.

But Ben never came.

A decorative, ornate frame containing the number 2. The frame is dark grey with intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral patterns. The number 2 is centered within the frame in a light, serif font.

I was shaking in the dark.

The cold was so intense. It felt as though someone were squeezing my lungs in clenched fists, preventing me from taking anything but short, frantic gasping breaths. My hands and feet were numb, although not enough that I couldn't feel the aching pain where the door had slammed on my hand.

I was only vaguely aware of strong, cold fingertips on my skin, gripping my throat. Not enough to choke me, though. It was just enough to let me know if it truly wanted to kill me—it could.

I should have been dead, but instead, everything seemed to be spinning. I felt weak and tired, like I could have slipped off into an eternal sleep.

And then suddenly, there was light.

The closet doors opened one by one. The grip on my throat vanished in an instant, and I gasped like I'd been holding my breath for an eternity. At that moment, I didn't know how I'd wound up in the closet—I couldn't remember anything except the darkness. It was all confused, terrifying chaos.

Looking up, I hoped to see my dad. I'd dreamt of a moment like this, when he would come home, smile at me like he used to, and rescue me from this nightmare.

But it wasn't him.

A pair of warm hands touched my face, patting my cheek like they were trying to revive me. Then he grabbed my shoulders and picked me up, pulling me out of that dark place. I heard his deep voice, but it was so muffled I couldn't make out what he'd said. He cradled me in his arms like a child and kept talking, as though he were trying to get me to answer. I couldn't. The world around me was still hazy, and yet his warmth was all too real. It made me instinctively cling to him.

My tattooed neighbor from across the hall carried me, holding me against his chest as though I were something precious. No one had ever carried me like that, especially not a guy.

As soon as we left my bedroom, everything seemed to get clearer. I could breathe easier, and the coldness ebbed away from my extremities. I could see him, his strange violet-colored eyes sharp and dangerous as they focused straight ahead.

His face was drawn into a look of quiet fury as he picked his way across the debris. Glass from the broken picture frames crunched under his shoes as we passed through the living room. My front door had obviously been kicked in. It was dangling off the hinges when he carried me across the hall. He didn't even bother trying to shut it.

When he opened the door to his apartment directly across from mine, the smell of him—that deep, musky, man-smell—hit me with startling force. I realized how long it had been since I was close enough to anyone to recognize his or her smell like that.

I looked up at him with my thoughts tangled like Christmas lights. Usually, I didn't like it when anyone touched me. It probably had a lot to do with adults dragging me places I didn't want to go. It made me feel small and powerless.

His touch wasn't like that. He was gentle, but firm. His arms felt sturdy and cautious as he carefully sat me down on his sofa.

I was feeling much calmer ... right up until I heard him go back and lock his door.

What the *hell*?

I sat up immediately. Our eyes met from across the room. He walked toward me with purpose in every step.

Alarm bells screamed in my head. I didn't know him. I didn't know what he planned to do that required locking the door. And I did *not* want to find out.

As he got closer, I scrambled to the opposite end of his couch and snatched the remote control off the end table, holding it up like a weapon.

He stopped a few feet away, glancing at my poor excuse for a defense, and raised one of his eyebrows. "Calm down. I'm not gonna hurt you," he muttered.

"Why did you—" I started to ask.

He cut me off quickly, "You were screaming bloody murder over there. I'm sure everyone in a two-block radius heard you."

"A-actually I was going to ask why you locked the door." My voice came out like a terrified squeak.

He snorted and crossed his arms. "Because I live here, and I don't want whoever broke in and trashed your place trying the same thing here. What did you think?"

I didn't want to answer that. It seemed like a stupid accusation now, anyway. I glanced down at the remote control in my hand and slowly put it back on the table.

"You alright?" The concern in his deep, gruff voice surprised me.

I was still trying to figure that out. There were cuts and scratches all over my arms. Some of them even looked like bite marks. They stung whenever I moved. My ankle had finger-shaped bruises on it, and my neck still hurt from being dragged around by my hair. Then there were my fingers—three of them were turning an unsettling shade of blue where the door had smashed them. All told, I was a mess. My face grew hot with shame. How was I going to explain this?

“I’m fine,” I managed to answer. Unfortunately, I had never been a very good liar. “Please don’t call the police.”

His forehead creased as he came closer, towering over me, and pointed at my arms. “Let me see.”

He didn’t give me a chance to refuse. He grabbed my wrists, turning my arms, and looking at the marks. Most of them were on my forearms, as though I’d been wrestling with an angry cat or something. Then he examined my fingers one by one. I winced as he probed at them, as though he were testing to see if any were broken.

Finally, he let me go and sighed. “It doesn’t look that bad. I’ll get you some antiseptic and gauze for those cuts.”

I barely heard what he’d said. I’d seen him from a distance plenty of times, but this was my first chance to examine him up close. He had defined, squared features that struck me as classic—almost like one of those young Greek heroes in old renaissance paintings. There was a dusting of short, dark stubble on his sturdy jaw, and his strangely colored eyes were so serious and mesmerizing.

When he looked at me again, I couldn’t speak. His gaze scrambled all my thoughts.

He didn’t seem to notice though. “Sit tight.”

I nodded, watching as he disappeared down the hall. After a few minutes, he came back with a spool of medical gauze and a tube of antibacterial cream. He sat down on the couch beside me and held out a hand expectantly.

“Arm,” he demanded.

I put one of my arms in his hand. He smeared cream on all the cuts, scrapes, and bites. Then, he carefully wrapped both of my forearms in gauze. He seemed entirely focused on his work, and completely oblivious to how I kept staring at him.

I didn’t understand why he was going to so much trouble. Why had he come in to get me in the first place? Why hadn’t he just called the police? Anyone else would have dialed 911, complained about the noise, and left it at that.

Suddenly I realized—he had *heard* me. No one had ever heard me before. Why him? Why now? Wasn't he supposed to be at work?

I glanced over at the digital clock on his microwave. It read 3:37 AM, so he was home early. I knew his work hours kept him out all night. Most likely he'd never been home to hear me during one of those attacks.

It was painfully awkward to sit in silence and stare at him, but I didn't want him to ask about what was happening in my apartment. In my experience, once people got to know me, they tended to act like my brand of crazy might be contagious. With him, I had a clean slate—at least for a little while. I wanted to savor it while it lasted, so I didn't dare say a word.

He glanced up at me so suddenly I startled. His bizarre eyes caught in the dim light of the room and shimmered in hues of lavender and violet.

“What?” he asked with a frown.

“Nothing! It's uh ... I don't even know your name.” I blurted out the first excuse I could think of.

He rolled his eyes, looking back down at my arms as he finished tying off the last strip of gauze. “Zeph,” he answered. “Zeph Clemmont.”

Zeph. I'd never heard that name before. It sounded kind of exotic. Then again, he wasn't exactly what most people would call average-looking.

“Your eyes are kinda strange,” I blurted again before I could stop myself.

His eyes narrowed slightly, making one corner of his mouth scrunch as though he wasn't sure if he should be insulted.

“I-I mean I've never seen anyone with purple eyes like that.” I frantically tried to explain myself. “I bet people ask you all the time if you wear contacts.”

Zeph shrugged as he gathered up his medical supplies. “It's a genetic thing,” he mumbled. “Is there anyone you can stay with tonight? A friend or something?”

“A friend?” I gaped at him for a moment like he was speaking a foreign language. Then I remembered normal people had those. I slowly shook my head. “N-no. It’s fine, though. I can just go back to my apartment. I’ll give my cousin a call tomorrow. He looks in on me sometimes.”

The corner of Zeph’s mouth twitched into a smirk, as though he wasn’t buying one inch of that story. “Cousin, huh?”

“His name is Ben,” I said as convincingly as possible. “He exists. Don’t look at me like that. I’m not lying.”

“Whatever you say, princess. You should probably let someone know what happened, though, even if you don’t want to call the cops. Not a good idea for you to stay there tonight since I busted your door down. It isn’t safe.”

I wanted to tell him it didn’t matter if I had a front door or not; I was never safe over there. I hung my head instead, watching out of the corner of my eye as Zeph stood up and went into the kitchen. He rooted around in his cabinets and finally came back with a jumbo-sized can of sliced peaches, a fork, and a big glass of milk. He sat down next to me again and gulped down half the glass of milk in one noisy slurp.

“I guess you can borrow my couch for tonight,” he offered so casually that at first, I didn’t realize what he’d said.

Then it clicked. “Wait, what? Me stay here?”

“Well, it’s that or you sleep in the hallway, right?” He had a mouthful of sliced peaches.

“But you don’t even know my name,” I protested. He was right, though. I had nowhere else to go.

He glanced sideways at me through some of his long, messy bangs. “So what is it?”

“Uh,” I stammered. It was hard to answer when he was looking at me like that. “It’s Josie.”

“Josie who?”

I was really hoping he wouldn’t ask me about my last name—or anything else specific about my life. If Child Protective Services ever

got wind of my living situation, I knew they'd pull me out of school and send me to live with strangers. I'd gotten a small taste of foster care after Dad died, and I was not eager for seconds.

But I couldn't lie. Not when he was glaring at me like that. "Josie Barton."

"And you live alone?" I could feel his gaze moving over me, sizing me up from the other side of the couch.

My face began to get hot, and I looked down at my lap. I didn't want to answer that. "I-I need to go find my phone," I tried to change the subject. I was already wondering how I could explain all this to Ben.

Zeph leaned over to one side and pulled his cell phone out of his back pocket. He tossed it into my lap and went back to his dinner of peaches and milk. "Call whoever you need to. I'll stop by Mr. Bregger's tomorrow and let him know I'm paying for the door, since that one's my fault."

The door was the least of my worries. Hadn't he seen the rest of my apartment? It was an absolute wreck. It would take me all day to clean it again. I'd have to buy new picture frames and restock the refrigerator. I was worrying about all those things as I picked up Zeph's cell phone. It was still warm from being in his pocket, and there was a picture of a beautiful night skyline as his background image.

"Is it okay for me to send an email?" I asked. "It's probably too early to call him. I don't want to wake him up."

Zeph shrugged again and went on eating his peaches.

I logged into my email account and quickly typed a message to Ben. I tried to keep it as vague as possible, telling him there'd been an accident at my place. I told him it was my fault, but everything was okay now. I was going to stay with a friend for the night, so he didn't have to worry.

It was a lie, of course. Calling Zeph a friend was a huge stretch. I doubted Ben would catch on, though. At least, I hoped he wouldn't. I wasn't confident in my skills of deception, even though I had never

told him anything about my personal life. He didn't know about the trips to the principal's office or my visits with a doctor. I'd been careful about that, using cash to pay for the appointments so he wouldn't see the charges on the credit card. He didn't know anything about my PTSD outbursts, or how I saw things that weren't there. I guess part of me was afraid that if he did find out, he might send me off to one of those mental hospitals himself.

"I'm going to bed," Zeph announced as he swallowed the last slice of peach. He left all his dishes and the empty can on the coffee table as he stood and stretched. Then he held a hand out to me, wiggling his fingers like he wanted me to take it.

I was stunned.

It looked like an invitation. Was he ... asking me to go to bed with him? I opened my mouth to speak, but all I did was make choking sounds.

"My phone," he growled, frowning like he wasn't sure why I was taking so long.

Now I was even more embarrassed. Way to go, Josie. Jumping to *that* conclusion right off the bat.

"Thank you for letting me stay here," I squeaked as I handed him back his cell phone.

"Don't worry about it." He went to a closet in the hall and took out a spare pillow and blanket. He tossed them at me before disappearing down the hall. Somewhere out of sight, I heard a door shut.

For a moment, I sat there and stared around his apartment. It wasn't much bigger than mine, although the layout was different. The kitchen and living room were combined, and the walls were painted a dark, soothing slate blue. His furniture was simple, just a dark brown leather sofa and two matching chairs. There were no decorative pieces anywhere—no pictures on the walls, only one rug that was too small for the room, and no artwork. There was nothing personal about the place at all, nothing to tell me about his life or who he was.

There was a stack of magazines on his coffee table, though. The first few were what I would expect a guy to have—about cars and fitness—but the third one down had a big picture of a busty woman straddling a motorcycle on the cover. The one after that had two busty girls in string bikinis posing on the hood of a sleek black car. I stopped there because I was blushing like crazy. Did all guys keep these kinds of magazines lying around in the open like this?

Curling up under the blanket, I tried not to think about what had happened in my apartment. Whenever I closed my eyes, my skin crawled. It was as though I could still feel those cold fingers squeezing me.

I wished I hadn't dropped my cell phone. I wished I could send Ben another message to make sure he believed me when I said everything was okay. I was terrified of him finding out how miserable I was. He'd told me once that there was no shame in asking him for help when I needed it. He was probably right, but that didn't make the situation any less terrifying. I was already a financial burden to him. I didn't want to be an emotional burden, too. I didn't want him to think I couldn't handle living by myself. If he found out about the things I saw, he might ship me off somewhere much worse than a special school.

The problem was ... I needed help so badly I couldn't stand it. My stupid pride and determination to be mature and rational about this was crumbling. I couldn't handle this on my own for much longer. Things were getting way out of control. I'd been screaming for help for years now, praying someone would come to rescue me.

Zeph Clemmont was the first person that had heard.



I couldn't remember the last time I had slept so long without being disturbed or woken up by something terrible ripping my apartment to shreds. Zeph's apartment felt safe. It was quiet, warm, and everything stayed peaceful for the rest of the night. I slept like a log.

The sound of traffic woke me late the next morning. I squinted at the digital clock on the microwave again. At first, it didn't matter to me what time it was. I didn't care. I was comfortable in that hazy state of bliss, clinging to the first good dream I'd had in months—which happened to be about eating sushi from one of those neat restaurants with the conveyer belt that went around with seemingly endless delicious options. I'd never actually been to one, but seeing them featured on the cooking channels always piqued my interest. Yes, I dreamt about food. Go ahead, judge away.

Then it hit me.

It was almost noon.

All my delightful visions of a brightly colored sushi parade evaporated. My head popped off the pillow immediately. I bolted upright, snatching the blanket off my legs. I was late for school—extremely late. I'd already missed morning detention, which was a sentence leftover from another one of my outbursts earlier in the week, and most of my morning classes. Ms. Grear was going to be angry enough to breathe fire by the time I got to her office. Getting written up two days in a row was a new low, even for me.

"So, you're alive." A deep, masculine voice made me jump. Zeph was leaning on the kitchen counter, sipping a cup of coffee with a scheming grin on his face. "I was beginning to wonder if I needed to check for a pulse."

"Oh no. No, no, no, no ..." I couldn't even put a sentence together as I scrambled to my feet and rushed to his door. "I'm late! I am *so* late!"

Zeph didn't try to stop me as I unlocked the door and then flung it open wide.

I didn't even get one foot outside. When I saw all the workers

filing in and out of my apartment, I was too surprised to move. Men in matching uniforms were fixing my door, while others were carrying out bags of trash and mopping up the spilled food in the kitchen.

I stood in the doorway with my mouth open, staring, until I heard a loud sipping, slurping sound. Zeph was standing right behind me, drinking coffee like there was nothing at all strange about this.

“That cousin of yours works fast,” he observed casually. “They’ve been here all morning. I went ahead and told them I’d pay for the work on the door.”

“H-he didn’t have to do all this,” I whimpered. I was mortified at having all these people in my house, touching my things, and looking at the damage. It was like being violated somehow. “I could have cleaned it myself.”

Zeph snorted. “So I take it you won’t be filing a police report for a home invasion after all? Afraid cps will come for you?”

I flinched at that accusation and shot him a glare. “It’s none of your business.”

“It wasn’t,” he corrected me as he went sauntering back into his apartment. “Until I had to come rescue you and let you sleep on my sofa. Now, I’m involved.”

I slowly shut the door so none of the workers would overhear us. “Zeph, please don’t tell anyone about this, or that I’m living by myself. I turn eighteen in a few months, and then it’ll be legal for me to live alone. I can’t go into a foster home. It’ll ruin my school year and—”

“Can the waterworks, princess.” Zeph plopped down onto his sofa and started flipping through one of his non-pornographic magazines. “I’m not telling anyone. It’s your business, not mine.”

I sank back in relief, leaning against his front door and letting out a deep sigh. “Thank you.”

“You can thank me with some favors.” He took another noisy drink from his mug. “My silence won’t be free.”

I frowned as my relief swiftly devolved to suspicion. “Wait, are

you *blackmailing* me?”

He shrugged slightly. “That’s an intense word for it. Let’s just say a few favors on your end would ease my guilty conscience about letting a little high-school girl live all by herself in an apartment that’s been vandalized.”

“It wasn’t vandalized, I ... I did it myself!” I couldn’t keep my voice steady. It was easier to agree with the doctors and Ms. Gear—to blame myself rather than trying to explain the things I saw.

“Right. Sure.” He cocked an eyebrow.

I marched over to stand in front of him. “What kind of favors are you suggesting, exactly? It better not be anything like your gross magazines!”

He made a sarcastic snorting noise and shot me a cunning grin. “I was thinking more along the line of chores, actually. But if we’re going that route—”

“No! No we are not,” I interrupted. “Chores? You mean like doing your laundry?”

“I was thinking more like cooking.” He flashed me another appraising glance with those mesmerizing eyes before going back to his magazine. “I’m a vegetarian, though. So keep that in mind.”

I’d seen plenty of vegetarians before. Zeph did not look anything like a man who lived off broccoli, carrots, and kale salads. He had a robust, sturdy build even for a man of his height. His arms and chest were very toned beneath the thin, cotton undershirt he wore. I could see faint veins in his forearms and biceps as he sat there, nursing his coffee mug.

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously.

“Just leave whatever you make by the door.”

“How did you know I like to cook, anyway?”

He didn’t even look up from his magazine. “I can smell it when I leave for work. Smells good. And since you live alone, you must do your own cooking.”

I blushed a little because that almost sounded like a compliment—a

watered-down, vague compliment. “And that’s it? You just want me to leave a bunch of food sitting outside your door?”

“Or bring it in. I don’t care.”

It was hard not to read too much into that. Was that an invitation come over and visit? I dared to dream. “Fine. I guess I’ll have to read up on vegetarian recipes.”

He grunted in agreement.

For a few minutes, everything was quiet except for the noise of the traffic outside and the workers fixing my apartment. I couldn’t help but realize what a total wreck I was. My long red hair was frizzy and falling out of its braid. I was still wearing pajamas that weren’t even remotely attractive. It made me even more self-conscious as I sat down on the opposite end of the couch from him.

“I guess I’m not going to school today,” I muttered to myself in defeat. I couldn’t even get inside my apartment to take a shower or retrieve my uniform. To be honest, my heart wasn’t in it anyway. I didn’t have the courage to endure another visit to Ms. Gear’s office.

“Don’t worry about it,” he grumbled. “One day won’t kill you.”

“In my case, it might. My school counselor absolutely hates me, and so do most of the other teachers and people at my school.”

Zeph finally glanced up from his magazine. He looked surprised. “Why? What’d you do?”

I looked down, fidgeting with my hands. “Well, you know. I’m crazy.”

“Crazy how?”

I forced a laugh, trying to play it off like it wasn’t a big deal. “Come on, you saw what I did to my apartment.”

He’d been referring to it like it was a real home invasion, but surely he didn’t believe that. Nothing was stolen. I hadn’t been murdered or kidnapped. So what would have been the point of anyone breaking in? Besides, it was a lot more believable for me to have a mental breakdown than to try to convince anyone there was an angry, dark spirit haunting my home.

He was scowling. “And?”

“And it’s like that all the time. I don’t remember doing it, but it had to be me. It couldn’t have been anyone else, right? It happens at school, too. I see things that aren’t there. The counselor says I’m causing a disturbance, and she’s right.”

“Your counselor sounds like an idiot.” He snorted. “You’re not crazy.”

“H-how can you say that?”

He went back to sipping his coffee as nonchalantly as ever. “Because, believe me, I *know* crazy. You’re weird, maybe even a little ditzzy, but you’re not crazy.”

Before I could stop it, a grin wriggled up my face.

Being called crazy was terrible. I’d heard it whispered at my back so many times I’d lost count. It was like having a disease that everyone else was afraid of catching. All of a sudden, nothing about you was credible. But weird? Ditzzy? Those were words I could live with. Those were tolerable things.

I’d never been tolerable to anyone before.

“That’s a creepy smile.”

I wrinkled my nose at him. “I’m going home.”

“Whatever you say, princess.” He yawned, waving his hand off toward the door dismissively.

Even though it made me feel a little stupid, I kept smiling at him. I couldn’t have handpicked a more inappropriate person in the entire world to become friends with, but for the first time since my dad passed away, I didn’t feel alone anymore.

As I stepped out his front door, I glanced back to where Zeph was stretched out on the sofa with his feet propped up on the edge of the coffee table. He was gruff, a little rude, and rough-looking with the long hair and all those tattoos on his arms.

But it was too late.

I already liked him.

A decorative, ornate number '3' centered on the page. The number is white with a slight shadow and is set against a dark, textured, circular background with intricate scrollwork and floral patterns.

The workers left an invoice and receipt taped to the door with an envelope that had a new key inside it when they were finished. They had fixed everything and had even given me a new knob and deadbolt for my front door. I wondered how long this one would last.

Inside, everything was clean and smelled like fresh paint and bleach. All my decorations had been placed carefully around the rooms. Not all of them were in places I liked, but it was nice to come into a neat, orderly apartment. Even my cell phone was left sitting on the kitchen counter, waiting for me.

I took a shower and fixed my hair, taming my wild red curls with a few swipes of a straightening iron before changing into casual clothes. I sent Ben a text message to tell him that the workers had done a great job. After thanking him profusely, I promised it wouldn't happen again. Lies, lies, lies.

I was layering up my socks so I could brave the cold and buy fresh groceries when my phone began beeping and vibrating, announcing I had a new text message.

BEN: Glad everything is all right now. More than anything, I'm thankful you're all right. I know you don't want to tell me what happened, otherwise you would have in your email, but I am here for you regardless. Please remember that. Don't be afraid to ask me for help when you need it.

Guilt immediately made my stomach bind up in knots. I stared at the screen, reading his message over and over. I felt bad for not telling him the truth, and yet at the same time, messages like this always sort of pissed me off. He was responsible for my well-being and survival, but we might as well have been total strangers. He kept himself anonymous and carefully set apart from my life, except to reach in like the proverbial hand of fate to move things in my favor now and again.

I had no right to be angry with him. I couldn't point fingers at the person giving me a roof over my head just because he didn't want to share it with me. It was his choice to keep his distance. My dad had asked him to be there for me in these few, specific ways, and Ben had been faithful to that agreement. I should have been content with the way things were.

After all, someone wanting privacy wasn't a new concept for me. My dad had been extremely private about his work. I knew absolutely nothing about what he did except that it involved a lot of bizarre research. He spent a lot of time buried in old books, most of which were written in foreign languages. A few of them had even survived the fire, and despite my best efforts to read them, I couldn't make heads or tails of the strange pictures, diagrams, and spidery handwriting etched in them. So I had packed up all of those books and stuffed them away in the guest room. They'd been so important to him, getting rid of them felt wrong.

I'd always suspected that Ben was somehow involved with my

dad's work. It was the only reason that made any sense as to why Ben didn't want me to know anything more about him. Maybe they were in a secret line of work, like the CIA or FBI, and Ben couldn't get any closer to me than this because it would put my life in danger. That was part of the reason why I'd never just come out and asked to meet him, although I had hinted heavily at it plenty of times. That and ... I knew what the answer would be.

I quickly typed back a message, assuring him that I was fine and everything was going swimmingly in my perfect teenage life. Sooner or later, I knew he was going to find out that wasn't true. Then I would have to confess to him about what was happening at school. If things with Ms. Grear kept going downhill this quickly, I wasn't going to come close to making it till graduation.

I couldn't tell him yet. I was too embarrassed by it all. Not to mention I was absolutely terrified he might agree with Ms. Grear and ship me off to some school for the mentally disturbed.

His reply came back so quickly, it made me nervous even before I read it.

BEN: What happened last night? Is there something you aren't telling me?

My throat went dry. He'd never asked me anything like this before. He never pried.

My fingers hovered over the buttons while I desperately tried to come up with a convincing story. Maybe I could tell him I threw a wild party? Didn't other high school kids do that kind of thing sometimes?

I couldn't do it; I couldn't lie to him again. That wasn't the kind of person I wanted to be. Cramming my phone into my pocket without answering, I finished getting dressed. My thoughts were scrambled, torn over the difference between lying to him outright and covering everything up like always. Either way, it was deception, and either way, he was probably going to be seriously angry when he found out

what was really going on.

I went back into the kitchen to grab a quick bite of breakfast and make a grocery list before I left. I was hoping that at least some of my food had been spared from last night's chaos.

Zeph was sitting at my kitchen table.

I screamed and fell back against the wall.

I wasn't expecting to see anyone sitting there. I didn't get many guests, especially not of the friendly, visible variety. When I recognized him, I tried to catch my breath.

Zeph crossed his arms over his chest like he'd caught me doing something terrible. He waved the Davner's pamphlet in front of my nose like a battle flag declaring war. "What's this?"

I was mortified.

Immediately, I dove to snatch the pamphlet back from him. "Don't go through my stuff! What are you even doing here? How did you get in?"

Faster than I could react, Zeph yanked the pamphlet out of reach. His violet eyes smoldered dangerously. "I came to leave you a check for the busted door. It's not my fault you left it unlocked. No wonder you had a break in."

"That does not mean you can come prancing in here anytime you like!" I fumed. "Give that back!"

"Not until you answer my question," he growled as he quickly stuck it under his rear end and sat on it. "What the hell is it?"

I wasn't about to go digging around under his butt for the pamphlet. "It's a special school. My counselor wants me to transfer there since I've been causing so much trouble." My eyes began to well up. "It's supposed to be for people ... like me."

Zeph pulled the pamphlet out from under him and immediately tore it into a hundred little pieces. He crumpled them all together in his palm, molding the shredded bits of paper into a marble-sized ball that he then dropped into my hand.

"You don't need to go to any special school."

I stared down in quiet mortification at what was left of the pamphlet. The tears that rolled down my face felt cool against my flushed cheeks. I clenched my teeth and stifled a snuffle. “Y-you’re wrong. You don’t know anything about me! I see things all the time that don’t exist. I see monsters in the halls at school and shadows that move on the walls here at home. I hear things moving and growling in the dark. There is something wrong with me. I *am* crazy!”

Zeph stared at me with an eerily neutral expression. It was like the calm before the storm, and I wasn’t sure what he might do.

I swallowed hard.

Suddenly, Zeph stood up and walked right past me. He left without saying a single word and slammed the door behind him hard enough to make the windows rattle.

Trembling and still holding the little wad of paper in my hand; I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the door. Five minutes must have passed, and he still hadn’t come back to finish our argument. I had made him angry—really, *really* angry. He might not ever come back, and that absolutely terrified me.

I was determined not to cry anymore. I wasn’t going to do it. Somehow, it seemed like crying would be the same as letting him win. So, I threw what was left of the pamphlet away and snatched my coat off the rack by the door.

There were only a few things that brought me any comfort when I was this upset. Usually cleaning was enough to soothe me after a particularly rough day, but the workers had left everything in perfect order. So that left only one other option.

I cooked everything I could possibly think of that a nosy, vegetarian bachelor might want to eat. The smell of a few loaves of bread, vegetable stew, and more cookies than any sane person would need at one time filled my apartment. I wrapped everything up neatly in a brown paper bag, then scribbled a note on the side that said, “*Sorry I made you angry. Here’s your first payment. I promise there are no laxatives in this.*”

I left the bag on Zeph's doorstep and rang the bell before running to the stairwell. Peeking around the corner, I waited for him to come out. I wanted to see how he would react to my peace offering.

He never came.

I left our apartment building disappointed, and sat down on the front steps to watch the evening traffic roll by. People walked home from work or rode by on their bicycles. A few happy couples wandered by, laughing and holding hands. I wondered what that must be like. I'd never had a boyfriend before. I'd barely even had a real friend until ...

I flushed and fidgeted with my hair. Thinking about Zeph left me baffled. Why had he gotten so angry about me changing schools, anyway? Why did he care about that? It wasn't any of his business.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, sending a fresh pang of dread through my body. I'd forgotten all about Ben's text message from earlier. Seeing his name pop up on the screen with another message made my stomach twist.

BEN: I'm sorry if my previous message seemed intrusive. I didn't mean to upset you. My primary concern is your safety. I want to respect your privacy while also providing you the security I promised your father I would. It's a difficult balance for me to strike sometimes. I trust you will tell me if there is something serious happening that I can help with.

How could I be so stupid? I should have answered him sooner. Now he was worried about me. I'd been so quick to tell him everything was fine that it must have sounded like I was overcompensating.

I quickly typed a message to thank him for his concern and support. I told him how much I appreciated everything he'd done for me, and promised to be more responsible with telling him when

I needed help in the future.

Alone on the steps, I watched the sun set over our quaint neighborhood, as the streetlamps hummed to life. The air got colder and the wind blew through my hair. I'd watched the end of the day like this so many times, and it always made me think about my dad. I knew he wouldn't have enjoyed living somewhere like this. He didn't like cities. Dad had preferred the rolling countryside, like where our old house had been before it burned. I hadn't been back there in years. I missed it. The smell of the woods, clean air, and the sound of the wind in the trees were still etched in my memory, fragments of a childhood that had gone up in smoke.

Finally, I stood up and went back inside.

On my way back to my apartment, I walked past Zeph's door. The bag of food was gone. I smiled with relief. He didn't hate me, at least. If he'd hated me, then surely he wouldn't have taken the food, right?

I nibbled on my bottom lip, wishing I had been there to watch him discover it. Had he smiled? It was hard to imagine him smiling without also picturing devil horns on his head, though. Maybe some fangs, bat wings, and a pitchfork, too.

Everything in my apartment was still clean and orderly when I went inside. I ate a late-night snack, changed into my pajamas, and made my bed on the couch in silence. I should have been happy. My house was clean. I'd taken a day off from school. Instead, all I could think about was how unbearably quiet it was.

My gaze kept wandering back to the chair at the kitchen table where I'd discovered Zeph that morning. Why did my apartment feel so empty without him in it? Why was I hoping he'd come storming back through my front door to finish our argument?

Staring down at the screen of my phone, I scrolled through all of Ben's old emails and messages to reread each one. I still had them all saved, including the very first one he'd ever sent after my dad passed away. Sometimes, reading them helped ease my loneliness and

anxiety about what was to come. After all, nothing had changed. I still wasn't safe here, even with Zeph across the hall.

I fluffed my pillow and tucked my blanket around me. Today was the first normal-ish day I'd had in a long time. I hoped that would extend through the night, too. Maybe it was over now. Maybe I could finally get a good night's sleep. After all, my apartment seemed quiet and calm.

I should have known it was too good to be true.



Something was breathing on me—a hot, moist breath, puffed right in my face, tickling my cheeks. I squinted and twitched my nose. Only it smelled awful—almost like ... dog breath.

When I opened my eyes, there was nothing there.

A cold shiver ran through my body.

I sat up straight, snatching the blanket against my chest as I looked around. The room was completely dark again. The lamps had been extinguished. I couldn't even see the furniture.

Then I saw a glowing pair of silver eyes hovering in the corner of the room.

I froze. My breath caught in my throat. A sound like a dog snarling cut through the darkness. I gripped the blanket so hard my fingers went numb.

The monster in my apartment had never revealed itself before. Something was different—and very wrong.

As fast as I could blink, the creature moved closer. The eyes were a few yards away, then a few feet, and then suddenly, jagged teeth came into view.

It wasn't a dog. It was a wolf—a huge wolf with fur of pitch black

that seemed to melt right into the rest of the shadows in the room. The edges of its body licked like dark flames, wavering and shifting as it prowled toward me.

I had to move. I had to get away. *Now!*

I crawled over the back of the couch as the creature pounced, bellowing in fury.

I screamed, kicking away from the animal as I scrambled to the other side of the room. The wolf stalked after me, its bottomless silver eyes glowing like two moons with an eerie, ethereal light. They shone so brightly I could see the saliva dripping off its fangs.

The beast backed me up against the living room wall, prowling closer and closer. There was nowhere to run, and nothing I could use as a weapon. I trembled, trying to find my voice so I could scream for help.

Suddenly, my front door burst open with a loud crack. Shards of wood went flying. The black wolf whipped its huge head around, and we both stared at the figure standing in the doorway.

The light flooding in from the hallway was too bright to make out anything more than a tall man's silhouette.

I knew it was Zeph. I could feel it.

I was afraid he wouldn't see the creature. No one else ever saw the things I did. Why would he be any different? But when Zeph raised his gaze to meet mine, his strange eyes glowed like fiery amethysts. In an instant, his attention flicked from me to the wolf. His mouth twitched and curled into a vicious snarl that displayed prominent, pointed incisors.

Panic squeezed the breath from my lungs. It wasn't possible—it couldn't be real. Was he some kind of demon? I opened my mouth to scream, but a strangled panicked squeak was all that would come out.

"You." Zeph pointed at me. "Don't freak out. Deep breaths. Got it?"

I squeaked again.

"And you," he snarled, his focus back on the wolf. There was

power in his voice that made me tremble. “Eldrick, you worthless scumbag, I should have known it was you starting shit over here. You’ve got a lot of nerve.”

As he came into the room, his shadowed form warped with every step. His head rolled to the side slightly as two tapered, spike-shaped horns emerged above long, pointed ears. His powerful shoulders flexed, hunching forward as two huge feathered wings seemed to unfold from somewhere within him. They glowed with a faint lavender light and shimmered as though each feather were made from beveled glass.

He walked right toward me. As he got closer, I could see strange markings on his powerful arms and chest coming to life like they were glowing under a black light. It was some sort of writing, but not in any language I recognized. It reminded me a little of the writing from my dad’s books, though. It was intricate and elegant, like spirals and swirls that flowed beautifully over his darkly tanned skin.

I was paralyzed with awe—torn somewhere between terror and mystification. He couldn’t be a demon. No, he was something else—something I didn’t have a name for.

The wolf growled and then recoiled. It flicked a glance back at me, as if it was trying to decide whether to attack.

“Do it,” Zeph sneered. “Give me an excuse to kill you.”

The wolf bristled and licked its teeth tauntingly, then answered Zeph in a breathy masculine voice, “As if you could.”

“Oh? Feeling cocky, are we?” Zeph laughed as he flexed again, making his broad wings stretch out farther and filling the room with that eerie purple light. He had a menacing smirk on his lips. It made a shiver run down my spine. “What’s your problem, anyway? You’ve always been a dick, but at least before you had some kinda reason. This girl’s not a threat to you.”

“What would you know about it?” The wolf’s body trembled with rage. “You think I am here by choice?”

Realization dawned on his face, making those violet eyes go

round for a second. “Ah, I get it. How ironic. So you’re stuck in a—”

“Do not say it!”

Zeph’s mouth curled into a wicked smirk. “Not that I wouldn’t enjoy giving you the public ass-whipping you deserve, but watching you bow to a mortal will be much more satisfying.”

The wolf growled even louder. I saw his legs coil beneath him. His fangs flashed. I squeezed my eyes shut and prepared for the worst.

“Josie!” Zeph shouted. “You can control him! He has to obey you! Give him a command!”

I threw my hands up to shield my face and screamed, “Stop it! Don’t touch me!”

I flinched up, waiting to feel his teeth clamp down on my skin, or worse.

The wolf didn’t attack.

He stayed crouched, still growling, his eyes boring into mine with scalding hatred.

Zeph grinned smugly. “Good, now tell him to sit, like a good little mutt.”

Was he serious? I swallowed hard, steeling myself. “S-sit.”

The wolf’s ears pressed against his skull. His snout wrinkled as he showed me all his pointed teeth. But he obeyed. He sat back on his haunches, his shaggy pelt trembling with fury.

“Excellent. Nice to see you back in your place.” Zeph was practically purring with satisfaction. Then he whirled around and started for me at a purpose-driven pace.

I screamed.

He looked like something out of a twisted thriller movie with fangs, spiked horns, and radiant wings. I didn’t understand what he wanted from me, and the fact that he seemed to know that wolf so well wasn’t reassuring at all.

“Josie,” he said my name in a disturbingly calm voice. “I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“S-stay away!” I couldn’t control my shaking. I tried to get away,

but there was nowhere else to run. All I could do was squeeze my eyes shut.

I could feel how close Zeph was even before I opened my eyes again. It was like his body gave off an invisible electric current that made every little hair on my arms stand on end.

When I did dare to look, he was crouched down right in front of me, his gleaming violet eyes staring right into mine and his voluminous wings closing around us like a cocoon.

It was too much to take in—the fear, the confusion, the giant shadow-wolf that apparently wanted to kill me, and the glowing, purple-eyed, vegetarian angel-monster living across the hall. I couldn't breathe. I leaned back against the wall as spots danced in my vision. My ears were ringing and my fingertips tingled.

"Looks like we need to talk." He arched one of his dark eyebrows. It was the same cocky expression he had given me the day before. Somewhere under all that purple, glowing, otherworldly strangeness, he was still the same Zeph.

"This is real." My own voice sounded far away. "I-I thought I was ..."

He smirked. "What? Crazy?"

I couldn't answer. My arms dropped back into my lap like two overcooked noodles. I couldn't keep myself conscious anymore.



I opened my eyes to the sound of my cell phone's alarm going off on my nightstand. I was lying on my bed amidst rumpled blankets, warm and comfortable. Soft sunlight filtered through the thin, lacey curtains over my bedroom window. Outside, I could faintly hear the sounds of morning traffic passing in front of the apartment building, and birds singing in the trees right outside.

This wasn't right. I didn't have mornings like this.

I sat up and scooted to the edge of my bed, leaning over to see down the hallway and into the living room.

There was no one else here.

My skin prickled with a cold chill.

I crept out of bed and down the hall, peeking around every corner before going from room to room. Nothing was broken. Nothing was cracked, flipped over, or spilled. Everything looked exactly the way it should have. My pictures were still on the walls. All the cabinets were closed. There was no grouchy tattooed man sitting at my breakfast table and no giant, evil wolf waiting to rip my throat out.

I stopped in the middle of the living room and scratched the back

of my head. Had it all just been another nightmare? That was the only explanation that made sense ...

Until I saw the feather.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted something sparkling on the coffee table. It was a slender, delicate feather that looked like it had been cut from thin purple glass. I held it up, watching it shimmer and shine in the morning light.

It hadn't been a dream.

The wolf, Zeph, and everything else I had seen these past few years had all been real. That one little feather shattered the dam of doubt and fear that had been building in my mind. This wasn't PTSD or an anxiety disorder. I hadn't imagined any of it.

I wasn't crazy.

Still wearing my pajamas, I bolted out the front door and ran across the hall to ring Zeph's doorbell repeatedly.

My mind was a tangled net of questions. If I wasn't crazy and if all of this was real, then why was I seeing it when no one else could? What was Zeph? What was that wolf and why did he have to do what I asked? What was he even doing in my apartment in the first place?

There was only one person who had those answers, and he wasn't answering the stupid door.

"I know you're home!" I yelled, trying the knob; but it was locked. "Zeph! Open up!"

I knocked as loudly as I could and rang the bell a few more times. Minutes crawled by, and I planted myself stubbornly on his doorstep.

He never answered. In fact, I didn't hear a single sound coming from inside his place.

I glanced down at the beautiful feather still in my hand. It caught the light and sparkled like transparent purple glass, and yet it bent easily with a silky softness that tickled my palm. I wondered if the rest of his wings were as soft. Had they been? I couldn't remember now. All my thoughts were hazed as I looked back up at Zeph's door.

He had to come back sometime. I could be patient until then.

I twirled the feather between my fingers as I wandered back across the hall to my apartment. This shimmering, delicate gift was the only evidence I had that I wasn't out of my mind. It was my prize now, so I placed it in an empty bud vase on the windowsill behind the kitchen sink. I stood back to admire how it caught the sunlight and sent a riot of bright reflections glittering across the room.

Then my phone started buzzing again. It was my secondary "seriously, get up now" alarm. There was no way around it this time; I had to go to school today.

Yanking a clean uniform out of my closet, I quickly got dressed. The pleated skirt, button down blouse, and tie weren't very flattering on me. If anything, they made me look younger. I felt ridiculous until I pulled the thick, navy blue knit sweater over my head and straightened my collar out on top of it. Somehow wearing that helped a little. It at least disguised the fact that I basically had no boobs.

I scarfed down half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich before brushing my teeth and racing out the door. The sky was cloudless and crisp blue and the wind was cold, but bracing. I dared to smile as I strolled the sidewalk on my way to school. Maybe this would be a fresh start. If Zeph had chased off that wolf for good, then I didn't have to be nervous about going home anymore. Maybe the strange things that sometimes happened at school would stop, too.

One look and all my hopes came crashing down around my ears.

Through the line of other kids filing into the building, I spotted Ms. Gear's puffy, bulldog face glowering in my direction.

It was going to be one of *those* days, after all.

I was in for it this time. Anger wafted off her like a gust from a furnace as I walked up the front steps of the school. Her eyes locked onto mine, and every muscle in my body went tense.

Ms. Gear opened her mouth, and I cringed as I waited for the inevitable verbal smack down I was about to receive in front of all my peers.

Out of nowhere, something heavy fell onto my shoulders.

I glanced up in surprise—right into the face of an extremely good-looking boy I didn't recognize. He was gazing back down at me like there was nothing at all out of the ordinary about him holding onto me. Even though he was wearing our school uniform, I was sure I'd never seen him before. I would definitely have remembered a face like his. He had perfect, glossy, golden hair that fell over his eyes like he should be walking down a fashion runway. His smile immediately made my insides gelatinous. He winked at me like we were sharing an inside joke. My breath caught—he had beautiful, enchanting, *purple* eyes.

My heart hit the back of my throat so hard I literally choked out loud.

"You okay there, babe?" he asked casually, standing there with his arm draped around my shoulders. Then he turned to Ms. Gear, who looked like she might be choking, too. "This is your counselor, right?"

I made some unintelligible, panicked sound like a mouse that'd just been stepped on.

"Ms. Gear, it's so good to meet you. Thanks for lending Josie to me yesterday. Man, having her there at the hospital was such a lifesaver. I don't think I could have made it through all that without her." He gave another bewitching smile that made my whole body shudder with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met," Ms. Gear finally spoke. Even she looked a little flushed. "Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! My name is Joe. Joe Noble. I'm new. I was supposed to start last week, but then my mom got diagnosed with an aggressive illness, and yesterday she had to have emergency surgery. It's pretty complicated. The doctors are still trying to figure out what's wrong," he explained, giving me a little squeeze that made me squeak out loud. "Lucky me, Josie was there at my side the whole time. I told her I would explain everything to her counselor, since she didn't get a chance to call. I know I made her miss detention and class

yesterday. I hope we can work something out. Can't you let it slide? Just this once?"

He blinked innocently—those big lavender eyes that suckered even me right into believing that crazy story.

"Is this true, Josie?" Ms. Gear's voice cracked, and she had to look away and fan herself a little as her flabby cheeks turned bright red.

"I-I-I ..." Joe elbow me in the ribs, and I managed a panicked, "Yes."

"Very well, then." Ms. Gear sighed, pointing back into the school. "Both of you inside, now. Joe, please come with me to the central office so we can get you settled into your classes."

"Great! Thank you so much. I owe you one." Joe laughed and combed his fingers through his perfect, glossy, blonde bangs. He bent down, and before I could react, he planted a firm, warm kiss on my cheek. "See you later, babe."

Oh, god. Had he really just ...

It took a few minutes for my brain to start working again after that. I didn't remember walking into the school or the entire hour of detention. I finally remembered how to breathe again once the bell for my first period class rang, and realized that somehow I had ended up at my desk.

"*Pssst*," someone whispered from behind me.

I glanced back, surprised to see one of the popular girls sitting directly behind me, leaning forward.

"Is it true? Is that cute new guy really your boyfriend?" She cupped a hand over her mouth so no one else would hear. "Is it true that his family is loaded? You're so lucky!"

I blushed. "N-no, I think he must have me confused with someone else!" More like he was some deranged relative of Zeph's that had been coerced or blackmailed into being my boyfriend. He'd said the eye thing was genetic, right? That's the only explanation my frazzled brain could come up with.

The classroom door opened, and every head in the classroom turned as Joe Noble swaggered in.

My stomach did a spastic backflip as our gazes met.

Joe waltzed right down the aisle of desks and stood in front of the popular girl sitting behind me. “Hey, sweetie. Can I have this seat? I want to sit by my girlfriend, if you don’t mind.”

He flashed her that charming grin and the poor girl tripped all over herself to give him the seat. Joe plopped down in the seat behind me, looking very pleased with himself.

All through class, I could feel his gaze on my back like a tingling heat. Was my hair straight? Had I ironed this shirt? Was there lint on my sweater? Had I remembered to put on perfume this morning?

When the teacher finished giving his lecture, we were allowed to talk quietly while we finished our worksheets. I finally got up the nerve to turn around in my seat and look at Joe again. He leaned back his chair, his hands folded behind his head and a bewitching grin on his perfect lips. It was like a snapshot from a magazine.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked him as quietly as I could. “I don’t even know you. I’ve never seen you before in my life. Are you related to Zeph?”

“Seriously?” He asked, like I’d just asked the stupidest question ever. He arched one of his brows up in an eerily familiar way. Even his voice sounded a little familiar, like maybe ...

My heart hit the back of my throat. But—when—how—what the *hell*? It couldn’t be! It was impossible!

“Zeph!” I practically screamed.

Everyone in the room looked up with varying expressions of terror, bracing for the school psycho to have another meltdown. The teacher narrowed his eyes at me, and I instinctively shrank down farther in my seat.

“Nice,” he mumbled with a sly grin. “No wonder everyone thinks you’re nuts.”

“Zeph, how are you ... When did you ...” I tried to settle on

just one question to ask first, but I was having a hard enough time coming to terms with how Zeph had somehow made himself look like an incredibly cute teenage boy.

“Call me Joe,” he reminded me. “And keep it down. You must love detention or something.”

“Joe,” I forced myself to whisper. “Why are you doing this?”

He just shrugged, like it was no big deal. “You said you didn’t have any friends and the counselor was giving you a hard time. You were right about her, by the way. She’s scary as shit.”

“Is this some kind of mask? Like in a spy movie?” I poked his cheek with my pencil just to make sure.

“Pfft. Don’t be ridiculous. I’m way cooler than that.”

“You can’t just barge in here and not explain any of this to me,” I insisted, my voice growing louder as I lost control of my nerves. “You said we were going to talk. What about last night? What about that wolf? And your wings!”

Zeph put a hand over my mouth to shut me up. From across the classroom, the teacher was glaring at me again.

“Geez. Do you have any common sense at all? We can’t talk about that here. Wait till after school. Now turn around and do your schoolwork’n crap. Go on. Shoo.”

I scowled and slowly turned back around in my seat.

Even if he was being a jerk about it, it was . . . kind of nice knowing he was sitting back there. Somehow, it made me feel so much safer. It was the first day all year that I had gone from class to class without feeling terrified of what might be waiting for me around the corner.

Not that everything was normal. No, I wasn’t *that* lucky. But when I noticed one of the big ivy plants on the windowsill in my English teacher’s classroom beginning to move, stretching out like it was going to grab the girl sitting in front of me—Zeph appeared like he’d just materialized on the spot. He paused on his way down the aisle of desks and stared at the plant. His eyes narrowed. One corner of his mouth curled into a dangerous half-snarl. The leaves shivered

as though a breeze had passed through the room. Slowly, the plant recoiled back into its pot and became perfectly still. Zeph gave an approving snort, and I never saw the ivy move again.

My mouth fell open.

He had seen it, too! Now I knew it wasn't just a fluke that he'd been able to see the wolf in my apartment. Whatever he was, he could see and sense the same things I could.

I wasn't imaging any of it.

That realization put tears in my eyes. Relief washed over every inch of my body. I hid my face with my hair, keeping my head down as I struggled to keep it together.

Someone poked me in the back with the eraser end of a pencil.

"Hey," Zeph whispered. "What's wrong?"

I shook my head slightly and rasped, "Nothing. I'm fine."

Apparently, "Joe" had done a real number on Ms. Grear, as well. He had charmed her into putting him in all the same classes I was in, and made a point to sit right behind me in each one—even if that meant he had to bat those dazzling purple eyes at the teacher to get the seating chart rearranged. Each time he did that, I got a strange chill. Sometimes I heard something, too, like a whispering melody in my ear. It came and went so quickly, though. Could I even be sure it had anything to do with Zeph?

By the end of the day, the school was buzzing with rumors about my new "boyfriend" and how cute we were together. I didn't understand that at *all*. It's like they'd forgotten all about me being a walking disaster. Did Zeph have something to do with that, too?

After the last bell, we left school holding hands. I kept my head down, trying not to make eye contact with any of my peers as we left. It probably confused anyone else who saw us. Why wouldn't I be thrilled to be holding hands with an attractive guy like that?

It wasn't until we rounded our street corner that he finally released me and let out a huge, growling groan. "I forgot how much high school sucks."

Yeah, school sucked. He had no freaking idea! He wasn't the one who had to pretend everything was perfectly fine while plants and fire were coming to life and attacking anyone who stood too close. I gritted my teeth, biting back a scream. I'd been patient enough. I was done waiting. He owed me some answers, and I wanted them *now*.

I waited until we were alone, standing in the hallway between our front doors, then I whacked him over the head with my purse. "What is going on? You said we would talk! I deserve some answers!"

He dodged my purse as I swung at him again. "Calm down. It's not that big of a deal."

"Not a big deal? Are you kidding me? I've been tortured every single night by that—that monster in my apartment! Then you show up! And at first you look like a grunge rocker, then a glowing violet angel-vampire, then like some model from a clothing advertisement!" I yanked my purse back, and went to shove him instead. "So you better start explaining this to me right now. I'm not even close to kidding!"

Zeph lunged at me suddenly, his jaw clenched and teeth bared. I caught a glint of those pointed canines again.

I panicked and tried to run back down the stairs, but he grabbed the back of my coat and picked me up like a crash test dummy. He threw me over his powerful shoulder and carried me into his apartment.

I yelled and struggled until he set me back on my feet. Then I got a good look at the rage skewing his handsome features. He slammed his front door and backed me up against it, looming over me with a smoldering glare.

I dropped my purse as he planted his hands against the door on either side of my shoulders, leaning in to put his face uncomfortably close to mine. His heavy breaths puffed against my cheeks, and his earthy scent sent a warm shiver down my spine. My fingers slowly curled into fists.

I couldn't look away.

His features shifted. His body shape changed, growing taller. His hair became a different style and color. In a matter of seconds, he was back to looking like the tattoo-covered, delinquent Zeph I'd known before.

"H-how did you do that?" I whispered.

"Magic." He pushed away from the door and turned his back to me.

"No, I'm serious. How?"

"I *am* serious." He stormed away into the kitchen and began rummaging through his cabinets for food. I got a little twinge of satisfaction when I saw him pull out one of the containers of cookies I'd made for him. "I'm not like you, in case you hadn't noticed. I'm not human."

That was the understatement of the century. "Oh, I noticed. The glowing wings and fangs were a dead giveaway."

He returned my dirty look even as he crammed a whole cookie into his cheek like a hamster, and chewed loudly.

"So what are you, then?" I walked around the kitchen island to stand in front of him, grabbing the container of cookies and plopping it on the counter so I had his full attention. "I need to understand. Please, Zeph."

He chewed, swallowed, and avoided my gaze like a rebellious child. His face turned a little pink over his nose. "You won't believe me. Or you'll laugh. Or both."

"I was almost mauled to death by a giant wolf in my living room last night and I just saw you transform into a completely different person right before my eyes. I'm pretty sure I'd believe anything you tell me at this point."

I grabbed one of his big, rough hands and squeezed it.

His cheeks and nose turned a dark shade of red, and he scrunched his mouth up uncomfortably.

He took in a slow, deep breath. "I'm a faerie."

I struggled to keep my lips sealed tight until I was sure I could talk

without a giggle slipping out. “A faerie? You mean like Tinkerbell?”

“Is that supposed to be a joke?”

“I just, um, I’m trying to wrap my mind around it. What do you mean, exactly? What kind of faerie has wings, horns, and fangs, anyway?”

“It’s complicated,” he snapped defensively. “Humans understand next to nothing about us, which is generally better for everyone.”

A thick silence settled between us as I stood watching him cram an inhuman amount of cookies into his mouth.

If this was some kind of psychological game of chicken, I wasn’t going to lose. I wanted to know more about him, and more importantly, I wanted to know why I was involved in all this. Unfortunately, he didn’t seem willing to tell me anything more.

“So it’s some kind of secret?”

He made a flustered, growling sound. “I don’t have time for this. Besides, we shouldn’t be talking about that kinda thing here.”

I frowned. “What? Why not?”

“You wanna know about the fair folk? You’re going to have to come with me then. I’ve got work to do. We can talk there,” he grumbled sheepishly through a mouthful of cookie. “Go change into something that makes me look less like a pervert.”

Glancing down at my school uniform, I couldn’t help but agree. It was bound to look strange for someone like him to be seen walking with a high school girl in a short, pleated skirt and knee-high socks. Someone might call the cops.



Zeph stood waiting for me in the hallway when I returned. I’d taken my time dressing in a much more sophisticated outfit with skinny

jeans and a nice sweater. I'd even put on a little makeup and fixed my hair into a long French braid.

I was hoping for some praise, or at least some acknowledgement as I walked up to him. I should have known better. Zeph never looked up from where he was typing away on his cell phone. He had one of those strange cigarettes between his lips and the collar of his black wool coat turned up, hiding his neck.

I cleared my throat to get his attention, wrapping my favorite wool scarf loosely around my neck. "Where are we going?"

He crammed his cell phone into his back pocket with a sigh. "Angry Hank's Bar and Grill down on 31st. I bartend there some nights."

I nodded, suppressing a proud smile. I was right about his job, after all. No wonder he kept such strange hours.

He stopped right outside the door to fish through his coat pockets. He pulled out a silver metal zippo lighter, lit his bizarre parchment cigarette, and took a few deep puffs of it. The smoke was much more delicate, fragrant, and earthy—not like something that might be illegal, rather something that had been made without a hundred dangerous toxins added to it. Now that I'd been around him for a little while, I actually found myself liking that smell. Where did he get those things, anyway?

I caught him glancing down at me. "What?"

"They say smoking kills, you know," I baited.

Zeph snorted like that was funny. "Maybe smoking that shit you humans make does."

I shrugged. "Some people think it's gross."

"So is picking your nose, or biting your nails. I've seen you do both, by the way."

My face flushed and I tripped over my own feet. "T-that's—I would never—"

It made him chuckle. "I'm just teasing. Lighten up. You get ruffled way too easily."

He might have been right about that. But I wasn't used to this—having someone to talk to, joke with, or even walk next to. Already his presence beside me felt comfortable, as though he belonged there.

“There's that creepy smile again. What's wrong with you?”

“Nothing, according to you,” I deflected. “So why are we going there? Is it safer to talk at a bar?”

“That's what Hank claims. Anyway, I already told you, I have work to do. I need to restock the bar before the start of tonight's shift.” Zeph shrugged as he began walking down the sidewalk again.

It was still early in the afternoon, well before rush hour, so the streets weren't crowded. I kept close to him anyway, stealing glances up at his face whenever he wasn't looking. We walked in silence for several blocks. I tried to think of something to say, something not weird or related to him being a faerie, but my mind just kept going back to all the strange things I'd experienced in the past twenty-four hours. There was so much I wanted to ask him, and I wasn't sure where to start.

“So this cousin of yours, does he have a last name?”

A bolt of panic coursed through my body.

I couldn't meet his eyes as I scrambled together the best excuse I could think of. “O-of course. Same as mine. We're cousins, after all.”

“Anyone ever mention that you're a terrible liar?”

“Oh, shut up. I don't know his real name, okay? He's always just called himself my benefactor. I call him “Ben” for short. He's never told me what his real name is. That was part of the deal he struck with my dad, apparently. He'd take care of me, but I wasn't allowed to know who he was.”

“And you never asked?” Zeph sounded even more suspicious now.

“No,” I admitted. It was embarrassing to even think about it, let alone say it out loud. “It's not like he'd tell me, anyway. It was made pretty clear to me at the beginning that I would never have a relationship with him. He doesn't share his personal information with me.”

He made a thoughtful noise as he puffed more smoke into the cold evening air. "So why is he taking care of you? Where are your parents?"

I winced, and then steeled myself against the pain. I knew Zeph wasn't trying to be hurtful; maybe he just didn't know any better. Anyone would wonder that after seeing how I lived.

"Dead." I turned my face away so he wouldn't see my chin trembling. I bit down hard to try to make it stop. He was right; I wasn't a good liar. And I wasn't good at hiding my feelings, either.

I could see him leaning around to peer at me out of the corner of my eye. I expected to see pity or sympathy, since that's usually how people respond to that kind of news. Instead, he just looked confused.

"Both of them?" He flicked his ashes onto the sidewalk.

I nodded. "It's sort of a family curse, I guess. My mom died when I was little. I don't remember anything about her. My big brother, William, was killed in a car accident when I was in middle school. And then my dad ..."

My voice died in my throat as the more recent memories of my dad's death clouded my mind. Time had numbed me to the pain of losing my other family members, but the loss of my dad was still fresh in my heart. Just the thought made my insides burn like they were on fire. It was a deep, aching pain that rose up and made my eyes well with tears. God, I missed him.

"That's ... uh, strange."

"Not any stranger than being a glowing demon-faerie-thing."

He didn't retort.

We walked in silence again, passing block after block with a weird tension in the air between us. We passed apartment buildings, shops, restaurants, and bus stops. Other couples walked by on their way to the downtown business district, but they looked a lot happier than we did. They were holding hands or leaning on one another. It wasn't hard to imagine that they were going out for a nice evening together,

maybe for dinner and a movie.

My hand was empty, and even though Zeph was walking close beside me, I could imagine how he might react if I reached out to him. Still, my fingers ached, wishing I could cross that tiny bit of distance between us. It was a purely selfish desire, though.

Zeph grabbed the hood of my coat, snagging me before I stumbled into the busy street like a dog on a leash. “Watch it,” he murmured before letting my hood go. “Where’s your head?”

I wasn’t sure. I looked up at him through bangs frizzed by the chilly wind. I was remembering how he had kissed me on the cheek earlier that day. Sure, I knew it probably hadn’t meant a thing to him. The whole Joe Noble ruse was probably just to jerk me around and snoop around in my personal life. And when he’d kissed me, it was most likely just to make his story more convincing.

But that was the first time in my life a boy had ever kissed me.
“Zeph.”

He glanced down at me, taking the last few puffs from his cigarette before flicking the butt onto the sidewalk. “What?”

“Why are you doing this?” I dared to ask. “Helping me, I mean. Going to school with me. Rescuing me from monsters in my apartment. You do realize there’s nothing I can do to repay you. I ... I don’t have any money.”

Zeph looked shocked for a moment. Standing there, just a few steps away, we stared into each other’s eyes. There was something strange in his expression, almost like he was trying not to panic.

“I just feel sorry for you, I guess.” His tone was stiff and uncomfortable as he turned away to cross the street.

That jerk—he was an even worse liar than I was!

A decorative, ornate frame containing the number 5. The frame is dark grey with intricate, symmetrical scrollwork and floral patterns. The number 5 is centered within the frame in a light, serif font.

There was a large neon sign over the door of Angry Hank's, depicting a stomping bull with a ring through its nose. Even from a distance, I could sense that there was something strange about the place. Just looking at it made my insides get all jittery.

Zeph started picking up the pace as we crossed the street. He was practically jogging by the time we got to the door. He hurriedly unlocked the door then shoved me inside ahead of him before locking it behind us. Overhead, an old brass bell jangled to announce our arrival.

Once we were inside, he let out a relieved sigh and switched on the lights. He shrugged out of his heavy winter coat and draped it over the back of one of the tall, leather-backed stools.

"Fantastic. He's not here yet. Let's get this over with." He talked to himself as he made his way behind the bar.

I followed slowly, letting my eyes roam over the dimly-lit room. The old wooden floors creaked as I walked after Zeph, and the glass panes on the big windows facing the street looked wavy and ancient. A dozen matching barstools lined the bar where Zeph stood, flipping

through a notepad for an empty page.

“Take a seat, small fry.” He pointed at one of the stools with the end of a ballpoint pen. “I have to take inventory and restock. It won’t take long.”

“Okay.” I struggled to get comfortable on one of the barstools. Unfortunately, my legs were so short and the barstool was so tall that my feet didn’t even come close to touching the floor.

I caught Zeph grinning as he quickly filled a glass with ice and soda.

“No alcohol for the short girl,” he teased with a roguish grin, winking as he topped the drink with a straw before sliding it toward me.

I was beginning to suspect that his habit of calling me annoying pet names was some bizarre way of showing affection. Two could play at that game.

“No tip for the butthead.”

He laughed, which caught me off guard and completely stole my thunder. He had a wonderfully deep, rich laugh. I loved it instantly. “Good one. All right, sit tight. I’ll be right back.”

I sipped at the soda as he disappeared into the back room through a pair of saloon doors. When he came back, he had brought out boxes of imported, bottled beers and liquors, packages of straws, boxes of limes and oranges, and other materials.

“Can I ask questions now?” I leaned over the bar to watch him work.

“Sure,” Zeph grunted as he squatted down to open a huge freezer door hidden under the bar.

My heart beat faster, and I chewed furiously on the straw in my drink. “What are you, exactly? I mean, I know you said a faerie before. But, what does that even mean?”

“Faerie is a broad term. It’s like calling you a mammal.” His tone was relaxed and casual as he distracted himself with refreshing the materials behind the bar. “There are lots of different kinds of fae, and

history has slapped its own labels and explanations on us. Most of them are completely false. Every culture calls us something different: gods, angels, demons, ghosts, yōsei, mermaids, werewolves, spirits, vampires ... blah, blah, blah. You get the idea.”

“What kind are you?” I interrupted.

He was quiet for a moment, like he was trying to decide whether or not to answer. “A changeling,” he spoke at last in a quiet, reluctant voice.

“Changeling ...” I repeated that name. “And what does that mean, exactly? Is that why you can change your appearance? I thought changelings were swapped with children or stolen babies or something.”

His lips thinned and his brow crinkled slightly as he leaned over the liquor bottles. “No. There are lots of stories about my kind. Most of them aren’t true. Not that it matters. Humans tend to believe what they want to believe regardless of what the facts are.”

“You said it was magic. So magic is real?”

Zeph turned and pointed a finger at me with a mischievous smile. “Nuh uh. You get one question, and then I get one. That way it’s fair. I’m not gonna have you pilfering through my personal life unless I get some payback. Got it?”

I frowned and sank down in my seat a little. I could guess what he was going to ask about, and I didn’t want to talk about that anymore.

“Come on, don’t sulk like that. I’ll be nice about it. Scout’s honor.”

I sighed. “Fine.”

“Why’d your dad leave you in the care of someone you don’t know? Do you even realize how bizarre that is? It sounds like you don’t know anything about him at all. He could be a drug lord for all you know.”

So much for being nice.

I slammed a hand down on the bar top angrily. “My dad would never leave me with someone like that!”

“Probably not, but you don’t know that.” He arched a brow at me, giving me that candid, skeptical expression that was so unique to him. “Why haven’t you ever asked Ben about any of this?”

“I don’t want to invade his privacy. Like I said, after Dad died, the lawyers made it very clear to me that I wasn’t being adopted. I wasn’t Ben’s child.” It sounded like a pitiful excuse, even to me. “And besides, Dad promised he was a good person. He said Ben would take care of me. That’s all I need to know.”

Zeph shook his head and looked away.

“Hey! You didn’t know my dad, okay? So don’t act all cocky. My dad was a wonderful man! I may not understand why he chose Ben to be my legal guardian, but I have faith in his decision.” My hands curled into fists. “And it’s my turn again. Tell me about magic. What is it? How does it work?”

“You might as well ask me to explain the meaning of life to you.” I got another scathing, exasperated Zeph-glare from over one of his broad shoulders. “Magic isn’t what you humans think it is. It isn’t sparkly dust that makes you fly or happy thoughts, rainbows, or wishing on shooting stars.”

As he began putting new liquor bottles up on the shelves behind the bar, the muscles of his back pressed against the fabric of his shirt. There were no traces of wings there anymore, and no horns hiding in his messy dark hair. I’d seen three different versions of him so far, and I had to wonder ... which one was the *real* Zeph?

“Magic is like water. It’s required for all things on this earth to live and it cycles through the world to be reused over and over again. Some things, even some people, soak up more of it than others or require more of it to live. Children are usually more attuned to it than most. They soak it up like little sponges.” Each word from his lips carried a weight I could feel hanging in the air. “Any being on earth is capable of using it, although humans lost interest and forgot how to do that a very long time ago. Most of them can’t even see it or feel it anymore. Their minds have turned to things of metal. It can

be that way for faeries, too. In fact, a lot of us have fallen from our former glory to be fed by the machines of the modern world.”

A strange, wild hunger rose up in me so suddenly it made my body stiffen. If magic was real, then surely it had something to do with all the strange things that had been happening to me. I needed to know more—I needed to understand.

“Where does it come from?”

“The moon.” He paused, holding a liquor bottle in each hand as he turned to look me in the eye. “Or at least, that’s what the old songs say. No one knows for sure. But magic is raw energy that we can use as we choose. Even a small amount can accomplish miraculous or even terrible things.”

I swallowed hard, already poised with my next question.

But Zeph interrupted with his own. “So, when did you start seeing things?”

I thought back for a moment. “A few months after my dad died. The doctor told me I had post-traumatic stress disorder. At first, it was just dreams. I had nightmares every night, and when I would wake up, my clothes would be soaked with sweat. Actually, last night when you rescued me from that wolf, it was the first time I had seen something so clearly. Before then, it was just shadows.”

I stared down into my lap as I listened to the glassware clinking while Zeph put things away. “The wolf I saw—it wanted to kill me, didn’t it? Was that a demon?”

“What, Eldrick?” Zeph sounded surprised. “Well, like I said before, it’s not that simple. He’s not a demon. He’s a puca.”

“A puca?”

He nodded. “An ancient spirit of darkness.”

“And he’s evil?”

He snorted, suppressing a chuckle. “Oh, he’d love for you to think that. But no, I said dark, not evil. The two things don’t always go hand in hand. Misguided, stupid, arrogant—Eldrick is a lot of things. But he’s not evil.”

I had to let that sink in for a moment before I could speak again. “Then why was he trying to hurt me?”

Zeph smirked as he came back to the bar and began making lists of all the supplies he had restocked onto the notepad. “That was kinda your fault. Well, it was probably more your dad’s. He should have warned you about him.”

“W-what! My fault? I didn’t do anything to him! And my dad never mentioned anything about a puca!”

“Exactly.” Zeph pointed his pen at me accusingly again. “Look, spirits like Eldrick are a type of faerie, too. And all faeries, at one point or another, ran wild in nature—some of them for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years. Some still do to this day. And after all that time, they’ve absorbed massive amounts of magic from the earth. It’s rare, but if Eldrick is living in your apartment, then it’s because he’s somehow bound to it—or to you. Believe me, if he could leave, he would. Faeries don’t like being trapped like that. Eldrick is old, way older than me, and very powerful. To be living in a human dwelling like that, your dad must have caught him in a contract somehow. It’s the only explanation that makes sense.”

My head was spinning. “What are you talking about? What contract?”

Zeph shrugged again and went back to writing. “It’s in a lot of the old stories. I’m sure you’ve heard that old wives’ tale that if you catch a faerie, he has to grant you a wish, right? That’s a contract. If you capture a fae, even an old powerful one like Eldrick, he is obligated to do something for you in exchange for his freedom.”

“That wolf—er, Eldrick—had a contract with my dad?” Somehow, hearing that he had been basically held prisoner in my apartment, made me feel a little sorry for him. Not too much, though, since he’d been torturing me for the past several years.

“Most likely,” he agreed. “You’d have to ask him about it, though. It must have had something to do with you; otherwise your father’s death would have released him from the contract.”

“That’s why he has to do what I say?”

Zeph gave me a playful wink. “Now you’re gettin’ it.”

“I can’t believe it’s that simple,” I murmured. “It’s just ... if I’d known sooner. If he’d just talked to me about it once, maybe we could have avoided all this.”

“Well, you gotta understand something about Eldrick. He hates humans, probably more than any other fae.”

“Why?”

Zeph cleared his throat. His hand stopped scribbling on the paper and he flashed me a quick glance. “It’s, uh, not really my story to tell. Let’s just say that his past run-ins with the human race weren’t exactly positive. Being caught in a contract is basically the most insulting thing that could’ve happened to him.”

“Has anyone ever had a contract with you?”

He waggled a finger in my face. “Nice try, kid. You already slipped an extra one in there. It’s my turn.”

I frowned. Not again. Which painful or embarrassing topic would it be this time? Details of how my dad had died?

“Was that really your first kiss?”

My face instantly began to burn. My mouth hung open in total humiliation.

“Whoa, that’s a yes.” He laughed and poked my forehead tauntingly with the end of his pen. “What a shame. I should have made it more meaningful.”

“H-how did you know that?”

“Aw, come on. Your face was even redder than it is now. You looked like someone had put a wig on a red party balloon.” He kept on chuckling even as he finished his supply list.

I shut my mouth quickly. My heart pounded so loudly; I was afraid he might hear it.

“Okay, then. Why didn’t you ever talk to me before? We’ve been neighbors for years, and you never said a word to me.” I sat back in my chair proudly. If Zeph wasn’t going to play fair by asking me

embarrassing things like that, then why should I?

Immediately, his brows snapped together and his mouth set into a hard line. That question must have stung him—maybe even more than I'd intended. He leveled a no-nonsense gaze on me that made my skin prickle. "Because the things that scare you, beings like Eldrick, are attracted to me. Sure, my aura might frighten off the little ones, like the ones who have been picking on you at school, but there are other monsters out there. Creatures so horrible that there aren't even words for them in your human language. My presence will drive them into the open."

Every hair on my body stood on end. "I might not be so scared of them if I understood them."

"No. It's not good for me to be around you. The closer we are, the more danger you'll be in. You being able to see us in our natural forms isn't going to make it any easier, either. In fact, it just makes it more fun for them to watch you be terrified." He looked away, his voice tight with frustration. "Most fae will ignore humans altogether. Some might try to protect them, if the occasion called for it, but there are others who don't like humans, and go out of their way to harm them."

I couldn't shake the feeling that he was trying to scare me off. He wanted me to be frightened enough to invite him out of my life forever, but that wasn't going to happen. For the first time in years, I didn't feel alone. Even if he teased me and acted like a jerk sometimes—I liked him. I wanted to get to know him, even if it was dangerous.

"You've protected me more than once, even though I never asked you to." I said quietly. It wasn't that I was looking for trouble, and I certainly wasn't trying to use him like a shield against Eldrick. I just didn't want to lose him. "Why? Why are you going to all this trouble for me?"

Zeph's expression hardened further. He stopped writing. "That's complicated, too."



“Well, even if this Ben guy is a felon or a CIA operative, you need to tell him what’s been going on at school and at your apartment.” Zeph had finished the restocking work and had shoved his list of supplies folded up underneath the cash register. “He’s supposed to be taking care of you, right? How can he do that if you don’t tell him anything that happens? He might even know why your dad was mixed up with Eldrick in the first place.”

He was right, but I wasn’t about to give him the satisfaction of letting him know that. “I’m already a financial burden to him, Zeph. I can’t ask for more. Besides, what’s there to fix at this point? You said Eldrick has to do what I tell him, right? So, I can stop him from torturing me. And if you keep coming to school as Joe, the faeries there won’t bother me either, right?”

“What makes you think I’m going to keep going to school with you every day? I do have a job and a life, you know.”

I grabbed his arm. “But, Zeph! I—”

He jerked away from me suddenly, like I’d shocked him or hurt him somehow. He looked almost ... afraid. Was it something I’d said?

Zeph’s shot his gaze toward the front windows. His broad shoulders tensed, and he moved away from me before ducking back behind the bar.

What was going on? Was he hiding from someone?

The brass bell over the door jangled, and a burly, mountain of a man stepped inside. Instantly, the atmosphere became much heavier. He was scratching at his scraggly, white goatee, staring right at me with ominous silence. The closer he came, the more detail I could

see under the dim lights. He was impressively tall and dressed out from head to toe in black leather motorcycle cuts. The jacket he wore seemed old, and many of the patches sewn onto it were beginning to fray around the edges. He was nearly bald on top, but what remained of his hair was long and pulled into a ponytail at the back of his neck.

I slid off the barstool and shrank back against the wall. If anyone looked like they had the potential to turn into some big, scary faerie-monster, it was this guy. Zeph seemed too busy pretending to be busy rearranging glassware to notice my panic.

The massive man stopped right in front of me. He stared down at me with his dark eyes glittering. His crinkled, aged face was set deeply with wrinkles that made it impossible to tell if he really was scowling at me, or if that was just how he looked.

I yelped as he stuck a hand out toward me. “And who’s this?” His voice was throaty, gruff, but surprisingly kind. When I dared to look at his face again, he was smiling down at me curiously.

“My neighbor,” Zeph piped up from across the room. “I’m babysitting today. Don’t scare her, Hank. She’ll start crying again.”

All the fear drained out of my body, chased away by a sudden burst of rage as I glared at Zeph’s back. Babysitting? Crying? Was he serious?

Hank must have noticed my response because he let out a dry chuckle before turning around to make his way back behind the bar. “A little young for you, isn’t she?”

Zeph’s face went white. “Shit, Hank! Don’t say that kinda stuff. I gave her some soda, that’s it! I’m not into puny redheaded girls. Do I look like an idiot?”

Puny? Okay, so maybe I was small for my age. I was short and petite, so I got mistaken for being a freshman all the time. But I was almost eighteen—*not* a kid. It took everything I had to keep my mouth shut as I stood there, fuming.

“Yep,” Hank answered with a snort. “And I can see you fooling around back there like one, too. If you’re done, then get outta here.”

I'm not paying you to stand around and flap your gums."

"You barely pay me at all." Zeph snatched his coat from the chair and swung it back over his shoulders on his way toward the door. He grabbed the hood of my coat on his way out the door and dragged me along with him. "Come on."

"Hey," Hank shouted. His voice seemed to make the room shudder and my stomach flip.

Zeph came to an abrupt halt with his hand on the doorknob. He didn't turn around or even look back. I looked back to see Hank frowning ominously.

"I got wind of another case." The hushed somberness in Hank's voice made me anxious. "Just a few blocks from here. I have it on good authority that a few priests are already over there, trying to run them out. You could go lend a hand."

I couldn't see Zeph's face because of how he was holding onto my hood, but I could feel his grip on me tighten. "I can't get involved in that right now," he said through his teeth.

"I know you don't have much time left," Hank murmured. "I can go with you. Your presence alone might be enough to scare them out."

The two men exchanged a long, unblinking stare. A minute passed, and neither of them said a word. Gradually, Zeph's chest and shoulders grew tense. His jaw clenched.

"There's a kid involved," Hank added quietly. "I wouldn't be asking otherwise."

Zeph flashed him a dangerous look, his mouth twitching like he wanted to snarl. I held my breath, waiting for an explanation.

Zeph was eerily silent as he turned back to us, apparently thinking it over. "Fine." He sighed at last and let go of my hood. "Bring the car around."

Hank nodded and quickly left out the back entrance.

For a few seconds, Zeph didn't move. Then he stormed across the room and switched off the neon sign with a curse. He started

haphazardly jerking the blinds down on the bar's windows, banging drawers and cabinets shut, and growling under his breath. He slammed the door hard, making the whole frame rattle, and locked it.

My hands trembled as I studied him, unsure what to say. We were both standing out on the curb, braced against the cold evening wind. My head was swirling with questions. What was a case? What did that mean—that a kid was involved? What had set him off like this?

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "Where are we going?"

Zeph was lighting up a fresh cigarette, puffing on it like a furious freight train. "We aren't going anywhere. You're going home."

I squared my shoulders, burying my hands deep in my coat pockets as I met his eyes with rebellion. I didn't want him to see them shaking. "What? I am not! I want to go with you. Quit treating me like a child. I can take care of myself."

"Not a chance. This isn't anything you need to get involved in."

I narrowed my gaze. "Maybe I should tell Hank about spending the night at your place, then? Seems like a *responsible* adult might want to know we live right across the hall and that you have a nasty habit of coming into my apartment whenever you want—day or night."

Zeph sputtered furiously, making sounds that could have been the beginnings of words, but I couldn't understand any of them. At last, he turned his back to me and fumed. "Fine. Just keep your head down and don't talk to anyone."

I grinned in triumph. Right on cue, an old, black Cadillac pulled up to the curb. Hank waved us inside.

Zeph put a hand against my back as he ushered me to the car and opened the rear passenger door. I expected him to ride shotgun, but instead he climbed in after me and practically shoved his way into the middle seat so that I was squished between him and the door. I would've been excited to be in the backseat with a handsome guy ...

but there was nothing romantic about the way Zeph had me smashed against him. His elbow was practically in my chest, and not in a fun way.

Hank put the car in gear and pulled away from the curb at a startling speed. We weaved through traffic, and I found myself gripping the seat until my knuckles were white. We swerved just a little too close to every car we passed and zipped through intersections while the lights were yellow. Was he trying to kill us before we even got there?

“Is Freddy there?” Zeph asked casually as he cracked the back window so he could flick his ashes outside.

“I’m not sure.” Hank made a grunting noise. “No one from the Seelie Court was on scene when I passed by earlier. Typical. This is a small matter. They won’t bother with it.”

Zeph held his cigarette between his teeth as he opened the center console of the car and began pulling out a series of strange objects—a long, golden feather, something that resembled a dream catcher with little bones tied to it, and bundles of a strange-smelling herb. “So, what are we dealing with? Bogles again?”

Hank nodded. “I think so. Two, maybe three. It was hard to get a good feel for it from such a distance. I’ll have more to tell you when we get there.”

I swallowed hard as Zeph handed me those strange objects one by one. He took his time inspecting each one. He smelled the herbs and tested the point of the golden feather before handing each to me.

“What is this?” I asked as I smelled the herbs, too.

“Sage.” Hank smiled at me in the rearview mirror. “Fae find the scent very pungent. You can use it to drive them out of places you don’t want them to go.”

“I thought that was for keeping out demons?” I asked.

Hank’s smile widened. “Sometimes there’s not much difference between the two.”

The sage didn’t smell bad to me, but just a few sniffs of it seemed

to make Zeph uncomfortable. His eyes watered and he sneezed. “Smells like butt to me,” he murmured. “Keep that in your pocket, will you? At least until we get inside.”

I nodded and stuck the little bundles of dried sage into my coat pocket. “We’re going to fight dark spirits with sage? Can I use this to drive the puca out of my apartment?”

Hank let out another dry, hoarse laugh. “Sharp kid, isn’t she? Nah, sweetie. Sage only works on weaker fae. Pucas are about as strong as they come besides sidhe. Besides, we don’t want to have to fight anyone, if we can help it.”

“We’re just serving an eviction notice.” Zeph had a menacing, scheming smirk on his face as we pulled onto a suburban street.

“So, if it bothers you ... does that mean you’re a weak fae?” I stole a quick glance at Zeph.

He didn’t answer. Instead, his jawline went tense and he turned his face away to look out the window. His hands slowly curled into fists, making veins stand out along his forearms. Confusion whirled through my brain, and I fought the urge to touch his hand. Anything to let him know I hadn’t meant that as an insult.

We passed house after house, and nothing looked out of the ordinary. People were out walking their dogs, sitting on their front porches, or checking their mail. We were several blocks away from the hustle and bustle of the downtown area, in a neighborhood that clearly housed middle-income families. This didn’t seem like the right place to find bogles or monsters.

Then I looked up at the front of the house. There was a car parked in the driveway, and two men dressed in robes like catholic priests standing outside it. They were talking to an older woman who stood with two younger girls on either side of her. One of them looked to be in her mid-twenties, while the other was probably in middle school.

Everyone in their group turned to stare as we parked on the street, right in front of their house. I got the feeling these people hadn’t been expecting us. The mother and her daughters all looked

concerned, maybe even a little afraid—not that I blamed them. Hank was officially the scariest looking person I knew, besides maybe Zeph. The priests, however, seemed irritated when they saw us getting out of the car. Their noses wrinkled with disapproval and they leaned together, muttering to one another secretively.

“Got anything for me?” Zeph murmured as he dropped his cigarette butt on the pavement and ground it with the toe of his shoe.

Hank grunted thoughtfully. “Three bogles. Smells like swamp spirits. They’ve made themselves a nice little nest in there. This is gonna be interesting. I’ll deal with the family, you get it done.”

“That’s not what I meant, old man.”

Hank scrunched his lips. I watched him go digging through his pockets and take out a small paper box about the size of a deck of cards. He passed it to Zeph, who immediately opened it to smell the contents. It was more of those strange cigarettes.

I arched an eyebrow. So that’s where they came from. Interesting.

“Alright, then.” Zeph nodded firmly. “Josie, you’re with me.”

The instant my feet hit the pavement, a fresh wave of pure anxiety washed over me. It made me nauseous just to look at the front door of the house, and the closer we got to it, the heavier the air became. A strange mixture of fear and excitement made my chest tighten, like I was about to go over the first big drop on a roller coaster. I wanted to grab onto Zeph, but he’d seemed so upset when I had done that before—I couldn’t bring myself to try it again. Not to mention the only reason I was even here in the first place was because I’d insisted on it. Now was not the time to chicken out.

Hank went directly to where the family and two priests stood and struck up a conversation. The priests sneered as though they were already well acquainted and wanted nothing to do with him. The mother and younger daughter seemed curious, but the older daughter stared at Zeph with wide, love-struck eyes.

My eye started to twitch. Seriously? Didn’t she see me walking *right* next to him?

If Zeph had noticed her though, it didn't show. He looked straight ahead, his gaze calm and focused. "Don't be afraid," he whispered to me.

"I'm not," I attempted to lie.

He slowly opened the front door, and we were met with a rush of cold air like we'd just opened a freezer door.

Inside, there was nothing but darkness.

"You can sense them, right?" Zeph whispered. He reached for my hand, lacing his warm fingers through mine, and drawing me closer to his side. It made my stupid heart pound sloppily again. "Tell me what you feel."

What did I feel? That idiot ... I couldn't feel anything right then except how his hand was big, strong, and warm as it held firmly onto mine. I felt like I never wanted to let go. I felt like I wanted him to kiss me again. I swallowed hard and tried to focus. Now was not the time and I was not some love-struck little child.

I let out a slow, controlled breath and forced my mind to go quiet.

"It's different from Eldrick." A tingling warmth crept up my spine. "I think they know we're here."

A strange smirk curled up his lips. "Of course. I told you, my aura draws a lot of attention. They know I'm coming to kick them out, so they're gonna be pissed. Stay with me, okay? Don't leave my side."

My palms were getting sweaty. The sneer on Zeph's face kept me mute as he walked into the house.

"Don't talk to them," he warned. "Don't acknowledge them in any way. If I end up having to pull one of them off you, I'm going to be seriously pissed. You'll be making dinner for months as payment."

Wait ... what? Pull one *off* me? I dug in my heels, but he jerked me closer and shut the door. The darkness swallowed us whole. My pulse raced. Something wasn't right. I didn't belong here—in this situation. I was getting in way over my head.

The house was an absolute wreck from one end to the other,

which wasn't an unfamiliar sight for me. Things were scattered all over the floors, furniture was upturned, and there were marks all over the walls as though someone had gone crazy with a permanent marker.

"Notice anything different?" Zeph asked.

I let my eyes wander around the room.

In my own apartment, the chaos had always been random, like the result of someone throwing a violent tantrum. But here, all the items on the floor were arranged in lines or strange, specific patterns. Spray bottles of household cleaner were arranged in a circle, stuffed animals had been placed in lines going around the room. Even the marks on the walls appeared to be writing of some kind.

"W-why is it like this?"

"Because they're trying to run those humans out of here. Someone had to have invited one of them in first, though. They can't just move in whenever they want. It's an ancient law; a fae can't take up residence in the dwelling of a human without a direct invitation. They'll sometimes play tricks to try to get an invitation. They'll take the form of someone familiar, pretend to be the ghost of a dead child, appear like a divine creature bringing some heavenly message—you name it, it's been done." He kept his voice low as we walked from room to room, surveying the damage. "By the contract, Eldrick is bound as your servant, so there'd be no point in him trying to run you out. He's just been throwing a fit—like the spoiled brat he is."

As we moved into the kitchen, the familiar sight of food spilled on the floor gave me an eerie feeling. There was a big, three-toed footprint clearly pressed into a mixture of ketchup and mashed potatoes right in the middle of the floor. My blood ran cold at the sight of it.

"What a lovely little nest they've built in here." Zeph held out his hand. "All right, let's get to work. Hand me the sage."

END OF SAMPLE