ETERNAL SPRING

Anthology

Flowers, vacation, baseball, prom...what does spring mean to you? From unicorn hunters and teenage exorcists to Egyptian princesses and aspiring ballerinas, this collection of thirteen stories by some of the most exciting authors in Young Adult fiction explores young love and new beginnings during the most beautiful time of the year.

Praise for Eternal Spring

“Eternal Spring blooms with the freshest voices in the YA genre.”
- Gwen Hayes, author of Falling Under

“Fun, fresh and imaginative, these thirteen tales will delight readers of all ages. A breath of fresh air for the YA world.”
- Mari Mancusi, award-winning author of the Blood Coven Vampire series

“Readers will fall in love with this diverse and exciting collection of stories by current and future YA fiction stars.”
- Maureen McGowan, author of Deviants, Book One of The Dust Chronicles
Table of Contents
Camp Cauldron by Juli Alexander
Barre Hopping at Midnight by Amanda Brice
The Vanishing Spring by Carey Corp
The Princess of Egypt Must Die by Stephanie Dray
Spring Perfection by Leslie Dubois
Picture Not Perfect by Lois Lavrisa
Potionate Love by P.R. Mason
1:30, Tour Eiffel by Jennifer McA ndrews
Off Balance by Renee Pace
On A Field, Sable by Diana Peterfreund
The Language of Flowers by Rhonda Stapleton
Dating After Dark (With Clowns) by Tawny Stokes
Sometime by Alicia Street
About the Stories in Eternal Spring
About the Authors
My phone vibrated and I hit Ignore for the fifth time. I wasn't ready to talk to Sophie after the stunt she'd pulled. Turning back to the television, I tried to convince myself I was watching the show. If I'd known she'd be so stupid, I would have taken out that dusty cauldron and unused potion book and learned how to brew a common sense potion.

Mom had been on the land line for twenty minutes. Finally, I heard her hang up, and she stepped into the family room to check on me.

“Emma, I talked to Sarah.”

“Mm,” I said.

Mom had already kicked off her heels and was walking around in her top, skirt, and pantyhose. "She told me you're ignoring Sophie's calls."

“Yep.” I picked up the remote and muted the television.

Mom sat down at the other end of the overstuffed couch and sighed as she sank into the cushions. “I hate it when you girls fight. It takes so much of my energy.”

My mother and Sophie's mother were good friends, which was great most of the time, but not so great when we fought. “She told you why, didn't she?” I maybe whined as I said it.

Mom's brown hair, frizzy from her long day at work, bobbed as she nodded. “I'm sorry, honey. I know you were looking forward to that Spring Break trip.”

“What kind of idiot gets caught sneaking out of the house three weeks before Spring Break!”

My mother narrowed her eyes. “I'm going to ignore your emphasis on 'getting caught' for now.”

Sophie and I were finally old enough to have a modicum of freedom when her mother took us to the beach. I had been looking forward to this for months! My first Spring Break trip in high school. "Mom, this stinks! I'm already packed!"

With a frown, Mom said, “I noticed, and I'm pretty sure you would have needed some of that underwear before your trip.”

“Mother!”

“I am sorry, Emma. I wish we could take you somewhere, but your father and I both have to work.”

“I need a new best friend.” Sophie and I had grown up together. Our families were magic, and there weren't a whole lot of witches in Athens, Georgia. At least, not real witches. A whole lot of crystals and flowing skirts though.

“She let you down,” my mother said.

I had the perfect bathing suit ready to go. Five shopping trips and two Internet orders wasted. Instead of flirting with hot guys on the beach, I'd be stuck here in town. Alone. Everybody went to the beach for Spring Break.

The grinding of the garage door opener alerted us to my father's arrival.

“Don't tell Dad!” I pleaded.

My mother paused, and I knew I had her. “We have to tell him that the trip is off, but
maybe we could postpone telling him some of the details.”

Mom and I were well aware of my dad's opinion of Sophie. He didn't much like her. He thought Sarah was too easy on her, and every time he saw Sophie, he said, “That girl is headed for trouble.”

Dad walked into the room, taking off his suit jacket and laying in across the armchair. “Honey, I'm home.”

Dad said that every day. He thought it was funny. I guess.

He leaned down and kissed my mother. Then me.

“How was your day, Em?” he asked.

I glanced at my mother.

“Not so great,” I said.

“Sarah canceled the beach trip,” Mom added. “Emma's a little disappointed.”

“What?” He looked from Mom to me and back. “Isn't it a little late for that?”

“You would think,” I grumbled.

“She must have a reason?” Dad sat down in the recliner and waited to hear the rest.

“Um,” I said.

“Actually,” my mother interjected, “Sophie is going to be a counselor at Smack Camp.”

Smack Camp? “She is?” I hadn't listened long enough to find out what her punishment was going to be.

“Sarah just told me.”

My father grimaced. “Why would Sophie Singleton want to be a counselor at the Spring Supplemental Magic Management Camp? She isn't exactly the do-gooder type. Or the sleep in bunk-bed type now that I think about it.”

“Sophie is, um—.”

“—more mature than you realize,” my mother said, saving me.

“Well, good for Sophie,” my father said. “I guess I've been underestimating her.”

We should have taken that opportunity to come clean with him, but neither of us did.

Then it was too late.

My dad turned to me and said, “Can you get in on this, Emma? Was there a deadline to apply? You have the week free now, and I'm sure they could use the help.”

Me? I gasped. I hadn't seen this coming at all. I turned to my mother with desperation.

Wide-eyed, my mother stared at my father.

My dad laughed. “Why so shocked, Sheila? I'm surprised you didn't suggest it yourself.”

“I can't go to Smack Camp, Dad!”

“I'm not sure Emma is a good fit,” my mother stammered.

We were going to have to tell him the truth. It would feed his dislike for Sophie, but I would be saved.

“Mom!” I urged.

Mom stood. “I'll check into it, hon, but I'm sure it's too late. Let me make some calls.” She turned to me and gave me a pointed look over the top of her glasses. “I'm sure they've filled all the counselor spots by now.”

Dad got up and followed her to the kitchen. “Volunteering should buy her some goodwill from the Council. I don't know why we didn't think of this sooner. We've been
trying to find a way to get her more interested in her witch heritage.”

My dad had been freaking out, or as he put it, “voicing concern” about my reluctance to practice magic. He was never going to let this idea go. I grabbed my phone and texted Sophie. She had ruined my life just to spend a couple hours with her stupid boyfriend. Smack Camp was remedial camp for the kids who wouldn't follow the magic rules. These kids were walking time bombs, and now I was headed for the blast zone.

Three weeks later, my legs glowed neon white as I stood with the other counselors in my khaki shorts and navy Camp Cauldron hoodie. Sophie hadn't bothered to tell me she had used some self-tanning cream on hers. I glanced down at her golden legs, smiling when I noticed that she'd missed a spot behind her knees. Still, my legs were a one on a scale of one to ten right now. Hers were a solid nine. Well, maybe an eight. None of us were spared from goose bumps on the cool late March morning.

The two guys for cabin four were Greg and Greg. Seriously. The other two girl counselors were Jenny and Jenna. I was already thinking of them as “The two J's.”

“My fingers are twitching,” Sophie whispered.

The camp director, Mrs. Laverdiere was fiftyish with curly, red hair, a plastic sun visor, and heavily lipsticked lips, which had been curved into a big, bright smile since we'd arrived. She had confiscated all of our cell phones upon arrival. We were each allowed an hour in the evening with our phones to touch base with family and friends. Otherwise, the campers required our full attention.

“We'll survive,” I said. It seemed like I had lost a limb, and I'd already reached into my pocket three times forgetting I no longer had the phone. On the other hand, I didn't mind having some time with Sophie. She'd hardly paid me any attention since she started dating Cole three months ago. Even when we had girl time, she was constantly texting him.

Mrs. Laverdiere ended the call on her own cell phone and came forward to address the eight of us. “I apologize,” she said, tucking her phone into the pocket of her navy jacket. “I had to discuss some late developments with a parent.”

“Why does she get to wear pants?” Sophie whispered.

The camp director turned our way, and I elbowed Sophie.

Ignoring Sophie's resulting squeak, Mrs. Laverdiere said, “I'll be honest with you. We are short-handed. I don't know what we would have done if Sophie and Emma hadn't volunteered just in time.” She smiled in our direction. “Luckily, we have a light week. Most school systems in Tennessee and Georgia opted for other spring break weeks. If we work hard, stay alert, and pull together, we'll provide the campers with a terrific week of Spring Supplemental Magic Management Camp. Oh, and that reminds me, no one here is to use the derogatory term ‘Smack Camp.’”

One of the guys from cabin two, the tall, ridiculously good looking one, laughed. The shorter guy next to him rolled his eyes. They definitely weren't best friends, like the two J's, but the director had paired them in the same cabin. The taller one was Scott. Mrs. Laverdiere and the other, Ian, shared a look.

Kids had been calling this Smack Camp since it started a few years ago. Besides the acronym, S.S.M.M.C., the idea was that the kids who ended up here were going to get in trouble no matter how many times they got smacked upside the head. The kids were the
ones who kept brewing self-serving potions or using self-serving charms. All magic children went to Magic Orientation Camp after second grade. The ones who didn't learn to control themselves repeated the next year. I vaguely remembered a couple of kids who repeated their summer when me and Sophie went. Milo and Zoe were their names. They'd gotten kicked out the year before, even though the kids they'd made bald were all bullies.

The council had started with interim training a few years ago. Fall break weekends. Holiday camps. And the Spring Smack camp. The problem with self-serving magic was the punishment. Something bad would happen to our appearance. When your typical witch went bad, he or she ended up with green skin, rotting teeth, a crooked nose, giant wart, you know. The ugly witch stereotype. Kids' punishments were usually more bizarre and unpredictable. I wasn't a very good witch because I was terrified to brew a potion. I didn't even study the stuff they wanted me to. I just avoided it. I didn't want Dumbo ears or giant clown feet.

My mother usually defended my reluctance with magic, but I think it's because she loved her job at the University and was afraid she'd have to quit to homeschool me.

"Let's start with a tour of the grounds. It's been a few years since you guys went to Orientation Camp." We walked down the meandering path through the pines to the campfire site by the lake. The rock sculpture of a giant cauldron was smaller than I remembered.

We'd completed twelve hours of online training in the last two weeks, but apparently Mrs. Laverdiere had more to teach us. After the tour, we trained in CPR and environmental disaster aversion in the new building with the great room. We went over the camp policy—to avoid using magic unless a child's life was in danger. After all, we were training them to selectively use their magic. Then she briefed us on each of the campers with a high tech PowerPoint presentation.

After hearing about five of the “very troubled youngsters” as Mrs. L. called them, I realized we were in trouble.

Sophie covered her face with her hands. “Oh my God,” Sophie said, peaking at me through her fingers. “We're doomed.”

Later, as we stood in the parking lot waiting for the kids to arrive, Sophie continued her tirade. “We're going to end up in the hospital,” Sophie whined as the school bus pulled up with our campers.

“No kidding. And it's all your fault,” I snapped. “When are you going to apologize for losing our beach trip and getting us stuck in this nightmare?”

Sophie crossed her arms. “I'm not taking the blame for what happens here. I couldn't have known we'd end up here. Besides, if you're mad about the hot guys, there are hot guys here.”

She wasn't wrong. Scott and one of the Gregs were pretty cute. And Ian wasn't bad either. The second Greg was rather unfortunate looking. “Not the point,” I ground out. Not anymore.

The first kids climbed off the bus. The boy with the elephant trunk growing from his nose glared at the other kids as he walked.

Ian greeted him with a high five. “You're in my cabin, Owen. Lose the tough act. We
have a zero tolerance policy for bullying.”

The kid stiffened.

“You've got to take it easy on the other guys,” Ian finished.

Owen relaxed, and if I could have seen his mouth under the trunk, I thought he might have been smiling.

“That one's ours,” Sophie said, pointing to a cute, redheaded girl in a navy t-shirt.

“Thank God. She looks normal.”

We'd gotten lucky. Britney's dragon tail had shrunk down to about six inches. In the pictures we'd seen, the tail had been six feet long. Now, she was able to tuck it inside her shorts. Neither of us said it, but Sophie had to be thinking what I was. From behind, she looked like she had a big load of poop in her pants. Poor kid.

Our only other camper with an issue, Kelsey, had two quarter-sized knots on her forehead. A month ago, they'd been massive elk horns. At one point, the child hadn't been able to walk around without help due to their weight.

Stephanie, Kelsey, and Leslie hadn't gotten into any recent trouble. Kelsey had a mischievous past though, and we were supposed to keep a close eye on her. Stephanie had a permanent scowl, and Leslie hadn't stopped moving since she arrived.

Our first activity after the welcome lunch and name game was crafts. Britney didn't stay in her seat as we worked on making lanyards with the boys from Ian and Scott's cabin. I wasn't sure if it was hyperactivity or if sitting on the tail just wasn't comfortable.

I stood up and tried to communicate with Sophie. “My butt is killing me in this hard chair,” I said. Usually, I wouldn't be caught dead saying that in front of two teenage guys.

Sophie wrinkled her nose but didn't look up from the mess of plastic lanyard.

“I'm sure I'm not the only one,” I said, biting off each word in hopes that my friend might catch on.

“It's probably because you don't have a real behind. You're just flat back there.” Sophie handed Kelsey the lanyard she'd untangled.

I huffed, afraid I'd have to give up my attempt to help Britney. Sophie knew I was sensitive about my flat rear.

“Emma's right,” Ian said from the next table. “These chairs must be from some torture chamber somewhere.”

Shooting him a grateful look, I said, “I'll go ask Mrs. Laverdiere if there's something we can do.”

“There are some pillows in the closet by the kitchen,” Ian said. “Why don't we grab one for all the chairs?”

He led the way to the closet.

“Thanks,” I said. “Sophie wasn't getting my subliminal messages.”

He opened the door and handed me a stack of bed pillows. “No problem. I know this will help Britney. I wish Owen's problems were that easy.”

“Poor kid.” I couldn't imagine coping with that elephant's trunk.

After taking a stack for himself, he pushed the door shut with his foot. “I'm worried about the horseback riding tomorrow. The horses may not react well to his extra appendage.”

Walking back toward the craft room, I said, “I wouldn't have thought of that. I keep wondering if he snores.”
Ian stopped and groaned. “I should have realized. He picked the bed farthest from the others, and I already confiscated cans of Mello Yello from his duffle bag. He's afraid to sleep.”
“How loud could it get?” Elephants trumpeted with their trunks.
Shaking his head, Ian said, “No idea.”
“Do we keep any earplugs here?”
“Mrs. Laverdiere has just about everything. The problem is that I don't want to single out our cabin that way.”
“Tell them that you snore.”
His grin lit up his face. “You're a genius. I can even fake some snoring to sell the story.”
We stood there, smiling at each other, and I suddenly realized how alone we were. Ian had the most beautiful brown eyes, and I wasn't sure why I'd thought he was just average looking that morning. “Let's get these pillows on the chairs,” I said, walking as fast as I could toward the others.
“Oh thank goodness,” Sophie said, rubbing her backside as I handed her half the pillows, to signal that she had finally caught on.
“These are the same ones we use to sleep,” Stephanie complained.
“I'm not putting my head where somebody's butt has been,” Leslie said.
“No worries,” Ian assured them. “The ones in the cabins are brand new.”
“Good,” Stephanie said, sticking hers on her seat and sitting back down. “I don't want butt cooties.”
The girls giggled until Sophie and I had to laugh too. A glance at Ian confirmed that he was smiling.

Later that night, we had the kids put their coats on and we walked down to the lake. Once the kids were settled on the log benches around the campfire, Sophie and I sat down on the log behind them. My eyes were tearing up a little at the intense smoke. Scott came over and sat down next to Sophie.
“Hey,” he said.
“I have a boyfriend,” she said, not even sparing him a glance.
Scott leaned forward, looking around her to me. “Hey,” he said.
I ignored him while Sophie sniggered. She knew he wasn't my type. Hitting on every girl was never my type.
His arrogance undented, Scott stood up and headed to the other two female counselors, The Two J's.
I turned back to check on our campers and saw Ian.
“Do you mind?” Ian asked motioning to the empty spot beside me.
“Of course not,” I said. “Sit.”
“Thanks,” he said and settled onto the log. “I'm afraid to take my eyes off of Owen. The other kids have done well so far. I just don't want him picked on.”
“How long has he been homeschooled?”
“He had issues with social skills even before his magic came in.”
“These kids are making me sad,” I admitted.
“What's sad is that you never use your magic,” Sophie said.
“Better safe than sorry,” I said. “Not that you are supposed to tell anyone.”
“You never use your magic? You know what Chaucer would say,” Ian added.
“No,” Sophie said.
“Not a clue,” I admitted.
“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”
“Oh.” I didn't know that was Chaucer. I glanced at him. “Point taken. After watching all the trouble that Sophie got into—”
“Hey! This isn't about me.”
”—I didn't want to go through all that.” She'd been homeschooled twice, spent a week with a monkey tail that grabbed onto everything she passed, and grown giant eagle wings for arms, which made opening her, Christmas presents impossible two years ago. “You should reconsider,” he said. “You're older now. You can handle it.”
“The magic or the punishment?”
He shrugged. “Up to you, I guess.”
I kept telling myself that I didn't need magic, and right now, I didn't. Sophie and Ian did have a point though. If I ever needed it in the future, I would be in trouble. I should be learning the basics.

Mrs. Laverdiere signaled for everyone to be quiet. “We're going to sing campfire songs tonight,” she told us, “and tomorrow night will be spooky stories. Now, let's start with ‘Don't be Selfish.’”

The kids started singing the song, written to the tune of “Make new friends but keep the old.”

“Now let's do rounds.” Mrs. Laverdiere pointed to the fire. “If you're on this side, start first. This side come in with ‘Don't’ when the first group is on ‘You'll.’”

Don't be selfish
or break the rules
You'll be punished
and feel like a fool.

After several tries, the group sounded pretty good.
“What should we sing next?” the director asked.
“Stop Stop Stop and think!” A couple of kids yelled.
“Great idea.”

The group began singing to the tune of Row, Row, Row your boat.

Stop, Stop, Stop and Think
Before you make a scene.
Your magic has consequences.
And they can get mean.

“I still hear these in my sleep sometimes,” I whispered.
Ian laughed. “No wonder you're afraid to try your magic.”
“Sometimes I sing them to you when you fall asleep before me,” Sophie said.
“Seriously?” How evil!
“No, but I will from now on.” She laughed as I made a strangling motion with my hands.

“No we all know your weaknesses,” Ian said. “We can control you to our own ends.”

“Right,” I said. “I’ve always been in demand with the villainous set.”

Mrs. Laverdiere motioned for us to pass out the snacks—popcorn balls and juice boxes.

The girls sang all the way back to our cabin, and I was sure they'd fall asleep quickly. I was wrong.

On Monday morning, our cabin arrived at breakfast twenty minutes late. Sophie and I hadn't had time to wash our hair. Mine smelled like smoke from the campfire, and hers looked a little greasy. I had no doubt mine did too.

“Good morning,” Ian said, sliding up behind me in the line.

“Not so sure about that,” I answered.

“Rough night?”

“The girls didn't sleep. Did you know girls giggle?” I took a tray and grabbed some silverware and napkins. “Like for hours at a time?”

Ian's lips curved into a grin. “I probably shouldn't point this out, but, Emma, you are a girl.”

“Not like them. I never—” Actually, I couldn't count the number of times my mother and Sophie's mother had yelled for us to stop giggling and go to sleep. “It was a nightmare,” I said.

“I guess none of us got any sleep.”

“Oh no.” Owen. “Did Owen snore?” I'd been whining about giggling for crying out loud.

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“The ear plugs?”

“Couldn't begin to help.”

“How bad was it?”

“You wouldn't believe it. We were up until three.”

“Did he stop at three?” I grabbed some toast and scooped a serving of eggs on to two plates.

“No. At three, I finally figured out which charm would work. I didn't want to stop the snoring because I might interfere with his breathing, and I didn't want to alter everyone's hearing in case of an emergency. I finally used a charm to put up an invisible sound-muffling wall three feet from his bed in every direction.” Ian used tongs to grab a biscuit and a sausage patty.

“Wow.” I wouldn't have been able to do anything. I couldn't have helped Owen.

“Are the kids being mean to him?”

“No. They thought it was hilarious until about one. Then they pretty much begged for death.” He smiled. “I considered granting some of their wishes.”

“You would never!” I reached for two orange juices and added them to the tray.

“You're really good at this. How many times have you been a counselor here?”

“This is my first. I had to wait until I turned fourteen.”
“Ian!” One of the boys called.
“Come here!” Another said.
“Duty calls,” he said, and he carried his tray over to his campers.
I walked to our table and handed Sophie her food.
“I need Starbucks,” she hissed. “Not just a latte, the whole Starbucks.”
“Will you share?”
“I can't make any promises,” she said.
I glanced down the table at five tired, miserable girls. “We're doing a double hike today,” I told them. “And if this happens again, we'll do three hikes.”
“What?” Britney squeaked.
“Seriously?” Stephanie moaned.
Sophie grinned at me over her egg sandwich. “You can have half the Starbucks. Definitely.”

On Tuesday, as I passed out the marshmallows and chocolate bars for s'mores, I glanced over at the counselors for the other girls' cabin, the two J's. I didn't envy them. They'd woken to a camper with a giant frog's head. I had to make a serious effort not to stare. The head attached directly to her shoulders, and she had no neck at all. Somehow, her counselors had cut the neck out of her yellow Camp Cauldron t-shirt to make it fit.

Instead of being upset, the girl, Maggie, seemed to enjoy being different. I turned to check on her. Scott had both of her counselors wrapped around his finger, and neither was watching their campers. As I watched, Maggie used her giant frog's tongue to swipe another camper's marshmallow.

My line never ended as the kids went through their marshmallows and chocolate quickly. I knew better than to leave the chocolate unattended. Actually, for some reason, chocolate gives witches diarrhea, so this was fake chocolate. The camp had a "no candy" policy other than the official camp desserts. Sophie was busy helping our campers manage roasting their marshmallows and build their s'mores. I tried to catch her eye, but she didn't notice. The tongue flashed again and grabbed a full s'more this time.

“Scott,” I yelled. “Quit distracting them. They need to deal with F—” What was frog girl's name? Right. “Maggie!”

Three pairs of eyes turned to shoot daggers at me.
I made a face in return and turned to find Mrs. Laverdiere standing beside me.
“Aaa!” I said.
“Emma” she said, putting a hand on my arm. “You are doing a terrific job. I just wanted to thank you for working so hard.”
“You do. Really?”
“Really,” she said. Then she winked at me before moving on to the campfire.
Wow. She thought I was doing a good job. I'd never had a job before, and I stood a little straighter after hearing her compliment.

“Time for spooky stories,” Mrs. Laverdiere called from the head of the campfire circle. “You guys are in for a treat tonight. Ian is going to get us started with a spooky tale.”

Across the group, Ian turned on a flashlight and held it under his chin. “Have you heard the story about ‘Arthur and The Asylum for the Incurable?’”
I wandered over to the fire and watched as he told his tale with his ghost story voice. The kids were enthralled, and he performed like a master storyteller. The kids jumped as Ian revealed the sights inside the asylum.

“He's pretty great, isn't he?” Sophie whispered.

I was vaguely aware that she had moved to sit beside me, but I hadn't taken my eyes off of Ian. “Yeah,” I admitted.

“Kind of cute too.”

“Yeah,” I said.

“You guys would make a great couple.”

“Mm.”

She clapped her hands together. “Yay! I'm so excited to have a project.”

“No!” I hissed. “You stay out of it.”

“How could I do that? I care about your happiness.” She placed her hand on her chest to emphasize her sincerity.

“Don't embarrass me.”

“Fine. You promise to hook up by the end of the week, and I'll leave you alone.”

“Sophie!”

She tilted her head and waited, blinking the eyelashes that I hadn't seen without mascara in at least two years until this week.

“Fine,” I said. Then I ignored her and watched Ian and wondered exactly what it would be like to kiss him.

On Wednesday morning, my campers were marching past Ian's and Scott's cabin when Mrs. Laverdiere zoomed up in a white panel van.

“Get the girls to breakfast, Sophie,” she said as she rushed up the cabin steps.

“Emma, you stay with us.”

Sophie shrugged, downplaying her inevitable curiosity. “We'll save you something good,” she said and motioned for the girls to keep moving.

Between the van and the sense of urgency, I had enough clues to brace myself for something unsightly.

I climbed the steps and peered into the cabin. I couldn't see much. Ian and the director were stooped over something on the floor. I stepped closer and saw that one of the boys now had a giraffe's neck. Normally, the kid would have stood at just under five feet tall. The neck was at least six feet. He stretched across the entire cabin floor.

“Stay calm, Max,” Ian was saying. “Mrs. L is going to take you to the hospital. You'll be playing video games in no time.”

I looked up at the ceiling. The child couldn't stand up in here, much less clear the doorframe. “What's the plan,” I asked.

“Ian has an idea,” Mrs. L said.

In a faux whisper, Ian said, “Hey Max. You know that cute counselor from Britney's cabin. The one with brown hair?”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.

I grinned.

“Her name is Emma. Me and Emma are going to crawl out of here with you.”

“I can't, Ian. I really can't.”
“You can. We'll turn you over and you can get on your hands and knees. Then me and Emma will slip under your neck and get on our hands and knees. And we will all crawl out the door and onto the porch like giant caterpillar.”

I could picture it, but I had my doubts. Until this week, I'd had no idea how hard it was to be one of these slow learners.

Ian and I got down on our hands and knees. We counted to three and then he rolled and we carefully maneuvered his neck. Next we did as Ian had said. I'd never been up close and personal with a giraffe neck before.

“Okay, Emma,” Ian said from behind me. “Start crawling.”

We made it outside.

“Max,” Ian said. “It's going to be really hard to stand up and support your neck. It works for giraffes because they have a bigger base and four feet on the ground. You only have two. You push yourself up with your arms and legs and we'll do the same thing so that your neck can follow along. Once you are standing, grab me with your arms so I can help steady you and carry part of your weight.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Emma, are you ready?”

“Ready,” I said, hoping my voice didn't convey my concern.

“Tell us when, Max, and we'll all count. One, two, and then go on three.”

“Okay. I'm ready.”

“One. Two.”

“Three,” we all said as we strained to climb to our feet.

A split second later, and I was free of the neck. I turned to see Max actually smiling as he hunched over Ian, gripping his chest with white knuckles. Ian grimaced as he struggled to help with the weight.

The two of them stumbled down the steps and crawled into the back of the van in that position. Mrs. L guided Max's head carefully from the side door, and Ian crawled through and out of the van. Once Max was lying comfortably on his side in the van, he gave us a thumbs up.

Ian shut the door, and we waved as Mrs. L drove away.

“There aren't any windows in the van, you know,” I said. “He can't see us wave.”

“Thank God,” Ian said, and he melted onto one of the porch steps. “How much do you think that neck weighed?”

“I don't know. A hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred pounds?” I sat beside him and watched as he rubbed his arms.

“I was keeping up with my magic but I wasn't lifting weights.”

I laughed, and moved behind him to rub his neck and shoulders. All of it was so natural that it took a moment for me to realize that I was touching a guy. Massaging a guy. I didn't stop. I made myself keep kneading his muscles.

“Thanks, Emma,” he said in a rough voice.

I was excited, and terrified, and I had stopped breathing in anticipation of what might happen next.

Then we heard the shouts from Scott as he ran down the path. “You did it!” He jogged right up to us, and I dropped my hands in my lap. “I can't believe you did it.” He high fived Ian and then me. “Get moving, guys,” he urged. “Everybody's waiting to hear about Max.”
Ian stood, and held out a hand to me. He gave me the most adorable look of regret as I stood up too.

Scott clapped Ian on the back and pulled him along. “What a nightmare! I didn't know what was going to happen. I did good though, right? I didn't even scream when I saw him.”

Ian's popularity among the campers was through the roof, and I hadn't spent two minutes with him yesterday or today. The longer I went without seeing him, the more I started to look for him. After our dinner of hot dogs, I told Sophie to go ahead with the other girls while I waited for Britney to return from the restroom. When Ian and Scott gathered their group to walk to the campfire, I found myself following along behind. If Britney hadn't called out to me as I stepped out the door, I would have left her alone. I would have forgotten her!

I covered really well by telling her I was going to wait on the porch. At least I hadn't hurt her feelings. Still, I had almost made a huge mistake, and all because of a guy. I had to get my head straight. As Britney and I skipped down to the lake… What? I let her talk me into it. Anyway, I promised myself that I would stop obsessing. I wasn't going to get any time alone with Ian, and I was going to focus on my job.

At the campfire, I managed to avoid looking at Ian. Okay, I looked once. Or twice. Both Owen and Maggie stayed by his side at all times.

Sophie and I had decided to have card night at our cabin before bed. I let Sophie go ahead on her one-hour cell phone break while I supervised a Go Fish tournament.

When Sophie returned, she decided to start a second tournament. I didn't want to leave, but I'd promised my parents I would check in tonight.

I walked up to the great room. I didn't see any of the other counselors on my way. When I pulled open the front door to the building, I expected to find one or two other teens there. Instead, the room was empty.

After grabbing my phone from the desk drawer, I snagged the remote to the giant television. Then I pounced on the couch. I set my cell phone alarm for fifty-six minutes later and dialed my parents. After promising I was healthy, well-fed, and behaving, I said good night to each of them.

With fifty-three minutes left to enjoy the luxury of the empty great room, I kicked off my Keds and stretched my legs out on the sofa. I needed a blanket and a giant soda, and I'd be in heaven.

I clicked the remote to bring up the channel guide. Sophie had probably spent her whole hour texting or talking, but I couldn't imagine anything better than an hour of peace.

Until the front door opened and Ian walked in.

Suddenly, I knew the best way to spend my hour. I tried to play it cool. He probably had calls to make, and he wouldn't have any time for me. I selected the first decent show I saw and turned it on.

“Well, don't you look comfortable,” he said with a big smile.

I smiled back, fighting the urge to sit up. “If only I had a blanket,” I managed to say.

He walked past and I pretended to watch the show. He'd get his phone and make his calls, and I'd see him for a few more seconds before I had to leave.
I was wrong.
“Your wish is my command,” he said, handing me a patchwork quilt.
“Where did you-?”
“I know all the secrets,” he said.
“Can you find a Coke?”
“I wish,” he said as he came around to the front of the sofa and sat down at the other end.
My feet were practically touching him. Thank God I'd worn socks today.
He took the quilt and spread it over both of us. “You don't mind sharing, do you?”
“Of course not! Thanks.” After that, I couldn't think of anything to say. Finally, he started messing with his cell phone.
I'd been waiting for days to talk to him. What was wrong with me?
Not looking away from his phone, Ian said, “Thanks for helping with Max.”
I pounced on the opportunity for a conversation. “How is he?”
My heart pitter-pattered as Ian tucked his phone into his pocket. He was choosing me over his phone!
“Not great. He'll be in the Council's Atlanta Hospital for at least a month.”
“Poor kid. I never even asked what he did wrong.”
“I don't think you want to know.”
“Why not?”
“He used a charm to help him see through walls. I think he was trying to snoop on the girls in the shower.”
“Really. The girls?”
“Okay. The counselors.”
“Yikes.”
“I guess some kids don't need to hit puberty before they turn lecherous.”
I shuddered at the thought of being spied on. “When did he do this charm?”
“Don't think you want to know.”
When he glanced down, his wavy brown hair fell into his eyes. “Super.” I almost wished I hadn't helped the kid.
“If it's any consolation, it will give him something to think about for the next couple of months.” He barely finished saying it before he started laughing.
“Eww. Not helping.” Had the twerp really watched me in the shower? Better Sophie than me.
“His neck is about six feet long. Even if he did misbehave, I feel sorry for him. I'm not sure how he's going to eat. The food has a long way to go.”
“He'll probably get to live on milkshakes.”
“Probably.”
My stomach reminded me that I'd only eaten one hot dog at dinner.
Ian sighed. “I could go for a milkshake.”
“I wish.”
“Hang on.” He moved the quilt and stood up.
Sitting up, I crossed my legs to make more room on the sofa. “Are we breaking in to the kitchen?”
He laughed. “No.”
I watched him walk over to the bookcase by the desk. He moved a few books and
pulled out two vanilla pudding cups.

“No way!”
He reached again and came up with two spoons.
“You are my hero!” I said.
“I stashed them in here the other day.” He handed me a spoon and a pudding and sat back down.
I peeled the foil off the top. “This is so much better than the granola bar hidden under my mattress.”
I started to dip my spoon in, but Ian held up his pudding cup as if to make a toast.
“To us,” he said, and then he bumped his cup against mine. “We make a good team.”
We were a team? I so wanted us to be a team.
I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just sat there, holding my pudding and smiling at him.

Did he actually like me? Boys had liked me before, but never the ones that I liked. Their declarations of love always resulted in awkward and messy attempts to avoid hurting their feelings.

Ian was not the kind of guy I'd push away. I'd never seen eyes like his, like flecks of honey in warm chocolate sauce. I wanted to move closer, to really see them, but I couldn't without making it obvious that I had a thing for him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the front door open. I wanted to scream, “Go away!”

The cuter Greg came in. He gave us an inquisitive look.
“Hey, Greg,” I said and scooped some pudding into my mouth.
“Hey, man,” Ian said.
“Do I really get to talk to two people my own age? The non-stop babysitting is overwhelming.”
“I hear you,” Ian agreed.
Walking over to us, Greg said, “Are you kidding me? Where did you get pudding?”
With a sigh, Ian stood up. “I guess we'll have to buy your silence.” Then he went to give Greg one of his puddings.
I took another bite and pretended Greg wasn't interrupting. Before long, my alarm beeped. “Gotta go,” I said, hoping Ian would decide to walk with me.
“G’night, Emma,” Ian said.
“See you at breakfast,” Greg said.

Friday, our cabin was in the middle of our morning chaos when a frantic child from the other boy's cabin knocked on the door. “Mrs. L says for Emma to come to cabin four right away.”

He ran off before I could ask any questions.
I slipped into my sneakers, yelled to Sophie, and ran after him.
When I got to cabin four, I saw a boy lying on the bed, struggling to breathe. He was turning a little blue, but that clearly wasn't his punishment. His punishment was the giant pair of kangaroo feet that poked out from under the quilt. Mrs. L and the two Gregs were busy examining every inch of him.
“What's wrong?” I asked when I found Ian.
“We don't know.”

The boy's face was all rashy, and I looked at his hands. They were too.

Ian said, “All we know is that he made candy out of some leaves.”

“Emma, see what the children know. Ian, check the bathroom for any traces of the potion he used.”

I rushed outside to see what the boys had seen. Trying not to scare them, I said, “Do you know what he ate?”

“Candy.”

“What kind?”

They shrugged.

“Did he give some to anybody else?”

“No,” a kid with glasses said.

“He tried to give me a piece,” one boy answered. “I didn't eat it.”

I nodded. “Because it is against the rules?”

He shook his head. “No, because it looked like poison ivy.”

The rash on his hands and face! “You saw the leaves?”

“No, but the candy had three leaves, and I was afraid he used poison ivy.”

I turned and ran back into the cabin. “Poison ivy! He made the candy from poison ivy.”

“Of course,” the director said, relief evident in her voice. “Ian, get my medical kit.”

Ian mumbled a charm and the kit appeared in his hand.

Mrs. L pulled out a syringe and stuck the kid in the arm. “Scott, carry him to the van. The rest of you get the other campers under control.”

The campers were quiet and the mood had turned gloomy as we all watched the van pull away.

“I guess we need to feed them,” Ian said.

When we got to the kitchen, we discovered that Mrs. L had been interrupted in the middle of cooking breakfast. Ian grabbed a spatula and tossed the charcoal-like remains of pancakes from the grill into the sink. He turned off the grill.

“What do we do?” I asked Ian as I ran water over the charred mess.

“I know where the emergency cereal is,” he said. “We're covered.”

I went to the cabinet and pulled out the Styrofoam bowls. “Are there any fruit loops in there?”

Ian set three giant boxes of cereal on the cabinet. None of them were fruit loops.

Then with a gleam in his eye, he pulled out another box and said, “We're saving these for ourselves.”

Shouts from the other room sent terror through my heart.

“Ian, help!” Sophie yelled.

“Something's wrong,” I said, and the two of us ran to help.

Scott and one of the Gregs were standing with Owen. Only it wasn't Owen. It was another camper with an elephant trunk.

“Owen!” Ian yelled. “Where are you?”

Sophie motioned from across the room. We ran over to see the real Owen lying on the floor. My heart sank when I saw that he was lashing about desperately.
“What happened?” Ian asked Sophie as he crouched beside the boy.
“He must have used a charm on Tyler,” she said.
Owen whimpered, and Ian started feeling Owen's torso, then his arms and legs.
Finding nothing, he gently touched Owen's trunk. “Talk to me Owen.”
Owen made muffled sounds, and finally Ian lifted the trunk to reveal his mouth.
The boy had fish lips. A tiny little mouth and fish lips where his mouth had been.
The opening was smaller than a dime. Smaller than an app icon on my iPhone.
“Oh crap!” Sophie said.
“He was breathing through his mouth,” Ian said, frantic now. “He can't breathe
through the trunk, and this tiny hole is practically useless.”
Owen thrashed on the floor.
“Get everybody out of here,” Ian said. “Take them to the great room, Sophie. Emma,
when I'm finished, you need to calm him down. Scott, take Tyler down the lake, he likes
to be outside.”
Oh my God! We were going to have to give Owen a tracheotomy with a ballpoint
pen like they had on that TV show.
As the kids rushed to follow Sophie, Ian started chanting.
Owen calmed, and I could see his chest rising and falling as he breathed.
“How did you-?” I looked at Ian and saw that he no longer had a mouth. Instead, he
had a tiny fish mouth with itty-bitty fish lips.
I gasped, and Ian's face turned a deep red. I could see the misery in his eyes.
Owen started crying, and I turned back to him.
“It's going to be fine, Owen. You can breathe now. You don't have to worry
anymore.” I glanced around for Ian but he was gone.
The boy sat up and threw his arms around me, holding me tight.
“You're okay now,” I said, rubbing his back as his tears soaked my shoulder. “You're
okay.” How had Ian done that? He'd assumed Owen's punishment somehow. I didn't even
know it was possible. "Poor baby," I said to the weeping boy. Poor Ian. How long was he
going to be stuck with that fish mouth? How would he eat? How would he talk?

All day long, I tried to find Ian. He wasn't anywhere to be found.
When I finally got my cell phone time that night, I stopped by the boy's cabin, but he
wasn't there either.
I couldn't think of anything but Ian. I'd comforted Owen until he'd calmed down.
Then he'd spent the day with the director. Who had taken care of Ian?
He was a hero. I don't know if I would have done that even if I had known how.
Tomorrow morning, the campers would climb back onto the school bus and go
home. Mom was coming to pick up me and Sophie soon after.
I had to find a way to see Ian.
My plan to stay up and sneak out after the campers and Sophie fell asleep didn't
work out. Every time I thought it was clear, I'd hear a whisper or a muffled giggle. I
cocooned myself in my covers and waited, but the next thing I knew, it was daylight. I
woke up scratching my leg.
Unfortunately, getting five girls to pack their stuff and clean a cabin took more time and energy than I'd anticipated. We led them up to the mess hall, but the other campers had finished and left.

“Everybody grab a muffin and a juice box,” Sophie said. “Then we have to march down to the parking lot.”

“I want cereal,” Britney whined.

“Tell your parents you want cereal for lunch,” I said as I grabbed some napkins. “We don't have time.”

“I've never heard of cereal for lunch,” Leslie said.

“You can't have cereal for lunch.” Kelsey rolled her eyes.

“Move it, girls,” Sophie snapped. “I've got a life to get back to.”

When we joined the others, we discovered that Scott had become Ian's mouthpiece. Each had their cell phones back, and Ian was texting Scott. Scott would then tell the campers what Ian was saying.

Ian had covered his mouth and nose with a dark blue bandana like an outlaw from the Old West. I was relieved that I didn't have to see the fish mouth again.

“Can I take a minute, Sophie?” I had to go talk to him. I didn't care if Scott or the kids heard what I had to say.

Before she could answer, the bus appeared down the road. I could not get a break. We hugged each camper, and made sure they had all their belongings. I had time to see Ian fist-bumping his campers and tousling their hair, and then Mrs. L was addressing all of us. She called us counselors' heroes and urged the campers to aspire to be like us.

I teared up, but Sophie went a step further and actually sniffled.

The campers cheered to thank their counselors, and then they climbed on the bus. We waved dutifully until the bus was out of sight.

Mrs. L turned to us and said, “Hallelujah! I think that was the longest week of my life. Let's head to the great room for pizza and cokes. You guys deserve a party.”

“When I get home, I'm going to sleep for a whole day,” Sophie said as we walked over.

“What about Cole?”

“I just want sleep. He can wait.”

“He doesn't get home 'til tomorrow, does he?”

“No. Which only means that I can't prove to you that I'd rather have a nap.”

“Whatever.” Ian kept to the outside fringes of the group as we made our way to the great room.

We walked up the porch to the great room, and Scott ended up holding the door for all of us. An idea hit me, and I stopped long enough to ask him a hushed question. “Can I see your phone for a minute?”


“I know.” Shedding my last ounce of self-respect, I gave him a flirtatious smile. “It's really important though. I'll give it right back. I promise.”

“Fine,” he said. Then he pulled his phone out and handed it to me. “I'm missing the pizza.” He went inside, leaving me on the porch alone.

The number he'd used to text Ian all morning was at the top of the text thread. I sent it to my own phone, afraid that I wouldn't remember ten digits in my state of exhaustion. Then I deleted the traces of what I'd done, and turned off the phone.
Sneaky liar much? Yes. If I'd just asked him for the number, he would have teased me or Ian mercilessly. Ian had been avoiding me, and I wasn't going to risk sending him running. Of course, he may be scared off by me texting him, but at least I would be the only one who knew.

I slipped through the door and joined the others. Scott was ready for the hand-off, and The Two J's didn't notice.

Mrs. L was applauding our work over the week, and she began a special thank you to Ian. "I especially want to recognize Ian for all he did to keep his campers safe. Not many teen witches would sacrifice themselves for a child. And while Ian had pointed out to me many times his own discomfort is nothing compared to the life of the child, I think we all know exactly how great his sacrifice truly is."

"Yeah, man," Scott said. He clapped his hand on Ian's back. "He's going to miss the rest of the school year, and he told me he was the starting goalie on his team."

A series of pitying noises filled the room.

Ian's face flamed around the bandana.

"Let's all give Ian a hand," Mrs. L said.

We clapped and cheered. Ian finally gave up the embarrassed act, and he started bowing. Scott hooted. The two Gregs broke into an unbelievably well-choreographed dance.

We all cheered more.

Finally, the group calmed down.

"Grab some pizza," Mrs. L said. "You deserve it."

The others made a dive for the pizza. Except Ian, who grabbed a coke and straw.

I took the opportunity to ask Mrs. L for my phone. "I know we get them back soon, and I'm not trying to cut in line. I just wanted to try to talk to Ian before we left."

Apparently, I'd said the magic words because Mrs. L beamed at me as we walked to her desk for my phone.

"Thanks."

"Thank you, Emma. I hope you'll consider coming back."

I had been dreading this week. I was exhausted, and I had poison ivy on my calf. "Of course," I answered. "I'd love to."

She handed me my phone. "Good to hear," she said.

I powered up my phone, turned off the ringer, and waited for the text from Scott's phone to come through. Then I looked back at the group. Sophie had two cans of Coke in front of her, and she was inhaling her pizza. The others, except for Ian, were happily munching on a slice. Ian had disappeared.

Sophie looked my way, and I held my finger to my lips. Then I backed away from the group to text Ian without everyone clamoring for their own phones.


I wasn't sure if he would reply. I stuck the phone in my pocket and ordered myself to go back to the others so I wouldn't obsess.

My phone vibrated before I had taken my second step.

I stopped, turned around, and whipped out my phone. Had he really answered?

He had!

"Sure, what's up?"
Here goes nothing. “I'm sorry your spring got ruined.”
“No big deal. I'll live.”
“I wouldn't have been able to save him. I'm going to start studying magic like you guys said.”
“Good. You should. But I knew because Mrs. L did it for me once. I was one of the slow learners.”
He had been a troublemaker? I couldn't picture it. I thought about him bonding with all those campers and jumping in to make them feel better about themselves. I could picture it. “If you hadn't been you, Owen might have died.”
He didn't answer, so I sent another text. “Can I text you?”
“Isn't that what we're doing?”
“I mean later. From home.”
"Sure."
“Good.”
Mrs. L was calling me over. “One last piece of business. Each of you has earned a bonus this week.”
“One free selfish potion?” Scott asked.
“No. Close. The punishment for your next selfish charm or potion will be attenuated. The punishment will be milder and shorter in duration.”
We all cheered.
“Now grab your things from your cabins. Your parents will be here any minute.”
Sophie busted me as soon as we were alone. “What happened with Ian?”
“How do you know something happened with Ian?”
“You're grinning like a love-sick idiot.”
“Thanks.”
She crossed her arms. “Tell me or die.”
“I texted him. We're going to talk. Well, text.”
Sophie hugged me. “He is so perfect for you. I'm proud of you.”
“Proud of me?”
“Yeah, you're so shy and reserved. I was worried you wouldn't talk to him.”
Shy and reserved? Really. I wasn't that bad. Sure, I didn't have her experience with boys, but…
“Let's go,” she said, grabbing her rolling suitcase and bags.
I grabbed my suitcase full of dirty laundry and went out the door of our cabin for the last time.
“You know what, Emma?” Sophie asked. “I had fun this week.”
“Me too. We should come back.”
Her upper lip curled in disgust. “Are you nuts?”
I was a little nuts.
We passed Ian's cabin just as he and Scott came out. I smiled at him, and I could tell he was smiling back despite the bandana covering the lower half of his face. I could see the smile in his eyes. Instead of avoiding me, he walked along beside me.
Rolling our suitcases on the pea gravel path was a bit awkward. Scott and Ian carried their duffels easily. They didn't walk ahead though. Sophie chattered to Scott about all of the things she would do when she got home.
As we walked, Ian caught my hand and threaded his fingers through mine. I
squeezed, and he squeezed back. The thrill of his touch chased away my fatigue.

I could see our parents standing near their cars in the parking lot, and I knew this was my last chance.

“Wait,” I said.

I stopped, and he stopped and turned toward me.

Sophie and Scott were a few feet away.

“Promise you'll text,” I said.

He nodded.

“I'm so glad Sophie got busted for sneaking out with her boyfriend.”

He tilted his head to one side in confusion.

“Never mind,” I said. Then I did the bravest thing I've ever done. I put my free hand on his arm and stood on my tiptoes as I leaned in to kiss his cheek, right above the paisley on his bandana. His cheek was a little scratchy and warm. Heat rose in my face as I met his eyes.

He put his arm on the small of my back and tugged me into a hug. The hug made me wish I never had to leave Camp Cauldron.

He released me and walked me across the lot and over to my car. Sophie and Mom were already talking, and I was sure Sophie had ratted me out.

“Mom,” I said. “This is Ian, and he can’t talk right now. But it isn't his fault. That he can't talk, I mean.”

“Nice to meet you, Ian,” Mom said. She shook his hand.

Then Ian loaded our giant suitcases into the minivan. He waved goodbye, paused for a second, and actually bowed toward me and Mom. He walked over to the SUV, where a man and woman were doing a pitiful job of hiding their curiosity.

I waved at them as the woman hugged him, and then I climbed into the van.

I hadn't been anywhere this soft, cushy, and high tech in a week, and every muscle in my body relaxed as I sank into the seat. Sophie had her head down and was texting already.

“So,” my mother said as she started the engine. “What have I missed?”

I didn't answer. I closed my eyes to keep the memory fresh. I couldn't fight my grin as the van crunched the gravel under its tires, and we pulled out of the camp.

Through the fabric of my khaki shorts, I felt my cell vibrate.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

For more magic, more kissing, and a cute guy who doesn't have fish lips, check out Zoe's story, Stirring Up Trouble.

***

Juli Alexander writes young adult romances and romantic comedies for teens. In “Camp Cauldron,” Emma shies away from her magic, but Zoe has a passion for potions in Stirring Up Trouble. She’s searching for a substitution for toad slime and hopes to cure disease. In the April 2012 release, The Karma Beat, Jen, a genie, risks getting banished to the other realm. And in May 2012, Ally deals with unpleasant realities as a teen with divorced parents in My Life as the Ugly Stepsister. http://www.julialexanderauthor.com
Life sucks when your boyfriend is a vampire. Fine, he’s not really a vampire. And if we want to get 100% technical, he’s not really my boyfriend, either. Sorta kinda maybe. But not really. I don’t know. It’s complicated.

Jackson leaned in closer, mere millimeters away, two-hundred-year-old ebony eyes locked on Robyn’s green ones with such intensity she found it uncomfortable not to look away. Yet she couldn’t. “I will love you until the day you die.”

Robyn shivered at his touch, despite heat from the nearness. She felt like a scorpion’s prey – paralyzed, standing as still as a statue, almost in a trance. “But...what would Eric say?” she finally whispered.

His gaze clouded over as suddenly as the vast desert sky before a midsummer monsoon. “I don’t give a damn what that animal would say.”

“But--”

His lips grazed hers in the lightest of kisses, sending a thousand watts of energy racing down her spine and cutting off any stray thoughts she might have had about his rival. “Hope springs eternal. Just like my love for you. Robyn Bell, do not deny your destiny. You are mine. Today, tomorrow, forever.”

Le sigh. Was there anything more romantic?

“Are you reading that stupid book again, Dani?” Analisa San Miguel’s voice snapped me out of my reverie. Why doesn’t she just splash a glassful of cold water in my face while she’s at it? That might actually be less jarring. “We’ve been backstage for what, two minutes at most, and you’re already at it?”

“Take that back!” I said, playfully batting her in the arm with the hard box of my toe shoe as she leaned over her outstretched leg to work out the kinks after our dress rehearsal. “I can’t believe you called it stupid. Bethany Beyer is a literary genius.”

Okay, perhaps a bit of hyperbole. But, cynic though she was, even Analisa couldn’t deny that the Midnight saga was an international sensation.Originally aimed at the teen market, the little-known indie e-book catapulted into the public eye when one of the ladies on The View mentioned she’d read it while post-op from giving Mother Nature a little help during her latest ride on the nip-tuck-go-round, claiming she’d discovered the fountain of youth in a self-published Young Adult paranormal romance novel. Suddenly Midnight was on everyone’s TBR list – daughters, moms, and grandmas alike. In fact, the average reader’s age was more than double that of the main characters.

Well, the human characters, at least.

Almost overnight Bethany had landed an agent, a seven-figure advance, and a movie deal, and was being called “one to watch” in both the indie community and New York publishing circles alike. Because she was a recent graduate of Mountain Shadows
Academy of the Arts, all my friends back home in Sparta thought it was “OMG, so cool!” that I went to the same high school as her. Of course, I’m just a freshman, so I’ve never met her because she’d graduated last June before I got here (plus the dancers and writers only have academic classes together – nothing in their majors), but my upperclassmen friends had.

Her prose was more than a little melodramatic and could probably benefit from a nice long waltz with a red pen, but a million readers can’t be wrong. It had that certain *je ne sais quoi* and tapped into our fears and dreams on a purely visceral level, with raw, emotional angst.

Oh, and vampires and werewolves. You can never have too many fangs.

“The Eric-Robyn-Jackson love triangle is classic!” I continued.

“Sure, it’s right up there with Catherine, Linton, and Heathcliff,” Maya Sapp said as she scrubbed off stage makeup so thick even Lady Gaga would call it a no-no.

“Who?”

An incredulous expression marched across Analisa’s face. “Um, *Wuthering Heights*? Emily Bronte?”

I shrugged. “I haven’t taken sophomore lit yet, duh.”

Maya laughed. “Not a big loss, Spevak. I couldn’t stand that book. Talk about a drama llama. And Heathcliff…hello? Controlling much? I kept rooting for them all to just die out there on the moor. Put us out of our misery already! Instead the book just kept going on and on and on…”

“What?”

“I mean seriously,” Maya said. “Catherine was TSTL. How she could put up with that crap, I’ll never know.”

Analisa furrowed her brow, her eyes turning to slits so small I couldn’t believe she could actually see out of them. “TSTL?”

“Too stupid to live. You know, like the dumb cheerleader in a low-budget horror flick who goes into the scary house where the guy with the chainsaw is.”

“It just happens to be one of English literature’s greatest masterpieces,” Analisa said with a disapproving sigh.

She didn’t look away from the dressing room mirror so I couldn’t be certain, but I was pretty sure Maya was rolling her eyes. Some things never change. Whatevs. My friends just don’t have a sentimental bone in their bodies. No wonder they didn’t have boyfriends, unlike me.

Or did I? Sure, we’d kissed – a lot – but it wasn’t like he’d asked me to prom yet.

I’d had a crush on Craig Washosky pretty much since the first time I saw him across the table in the cafeteria, way back on the day I’d moved into my dorm here at Mountain Shadows. Thick brown hair artfully tousled in a way that was supposed to look über-casual but took most guys a vat of gel to achieve (although in Craig’s case, he probably did just roll out of bed), eyes so piercingly blue you could lose yourself in the depths of the Caribbean, bronze skin perfectly kissed by the Arizona sun during hours of pick-up basketball on the quad…he epitomized the cliché of the tall, dark, and handsome Hollywood leading man.

Which he was, of course.

Oh, that’s right. You’d know him by his stage name, Craig Walsh. Yes, *that* Craig Walsh. At the beginning of the school year he was just an attractive young theatre student
in one of the nation’s most prestigious arts schools, but ever since his film debut in *First Down* got all that buzz at Sundance a couple of months back, he’s been “The Craig Walsh.” The critics are even talking about a possible Oscar nod. Even though it was a super small part, he’s spent more time recently doing the whole red carpet thing than going to class.

Ouch, that made it sound like I wished him ill will. I so totally didn’t. He deserves all the accolades being thrown his way. For serious. He’s enormously talented.

It’s just that he never would have gotten that role if it weren’t for me.

Not to mention the one he was away in LA filming right now. The one where he was playing Jackson to Amber Alexander’s Robyn. And that meant hours and hours of rehearsals and retakes of that super hot kiss on page 236 of Bethany Beyer’s bestseller. You know which one I mean. Yowza. I blushed just thinking of it.

Yes, *that* Amber Alexander. There was no way I could compete. Especially after that game of tonsil hockey, even if it was just acting.

At least I hoped it was just acting. No way to know for sure, unless you believed the tabloids.

And I didn’t. Believe the tabloids, that was.

Much.

“Give the girl a break, ladies.”

Once I’d determined the source of the voice, I wondered when Miss Piggy had sprouted wings and learned to fly. Clearly she must have, since Hadley Taylor was defending me.

Hadley unwrapped the satin ribbons of her toe shoes and shot me a smile so sugary sweet it would probably throw my dad into a diabetic coma. “Little Miss Dani just wants to know what Craig is doing out there in Cali. Or, if you listen to the *Informer* — who.”

I guess Miss Piggy was just as earthbound as Kermit after all.

“Why don’t you just STFU?” If looks could kill, Maya would be doing life without parole. Oh yeah, she had my back. “Just because he dumped your scrawny butt last summer—”

“Speaking of scrawny butts…Dani, you still seeing the counselor about that eating dis—”

“Play nice.” As always, Analisa was the voice of reason.

“—order?” Hadley let out an exaggerated overdrawn sigh. “Fine.” She pulled several bobby pins out of her bun and let her $300-a-month-blonde waves bounce over her shoulders, then glanced in a bulb-lit dressing room mirror straight out of a 1940s musical and smugly smiled, as if pronouncing herself ready for her close-up. She turned to me, a glint dancing in her cat-like green eyes. “I guess Dani doesn’t want to know where Craig’s filming next week.”

“That’s easy,” I said. “Studio G of the Sandler Brothers Pictures lot. He’s in makeup by seven every morning.” Wow, that sounded like I was stalking him.

Hadley’s laugh tinkled. “Aren’t we Little Miss Know-it-all? Only not in this case, apparently.” She paused for effect, clearly enjoying the attention. “He’ll be in Sedona all next week.”
The legendary Sedona Red Rocks have enchanted visitors for generations with their spectacular natural beauty. Huge rock formations almost glow a brilliant orangey-red, silhouetted against a bright blue sky, forming a breathtaking backdrop for, well, everything. Even the local McDonalds was prettier, with the only teal arches in the world.

It wasn’t surprising the director would want to film on location in the actual town in which Bethany’s book took place. What was surprising was that Craig didn’t tell me. Particularly since I was going to be there, too.

No, really. I wasn’t stalking him. I swear.

The Southwestern Teen Arts Festival takes place every year during Spring Break in Sedona. Mountain Shadows students always participate, showcasing their dancing, singing, acting, music, or studio art. He knew that. Craig had been going since his freshman year, but I guess now that he was a big Hollywood star he couldn’t be bothered to remember such a trivial matter.

So what if it also happened to be my fifteenth birthday? He was so above all that high school BS.

Mental wrist slap.

Bad Dani. I really needed to stop thinking poorly of him. He was probably just busy and forgot. Or maybe he thought it was a different week.

Of course, there was only one way to find out. I grabbed my purse and dug around.

Lip gloss, EpiPen, wallet, phone.

HEY! R U IN SEDONA? IM ALMOST THERE. MISS U!

I bit my lip as my finger hovered over the “send.” Was “Miss U!” too forward? Not forward enough?

Did I look as desperate as I felt? At least I didn’t type “Luv U!” Yeah, it had to go.

I deleted the message and tried again.

I HEAR U R FILMING @ SEDONA. ILL BE THERE FOR TEENARTS. WANT 2 GO OUT 4 MY BDAY?

Delete.

R U IN SEDONA?

Short, sweet, and to the point. That ought to do the trick.

I hit “send” and sunk back into my seat to wait for a response as the school bus chugged up the twists and turns of I-17.

An hour later, I still hadn’t heard anything. And this was the third text I’d sent him this week. Was he ignoring me? Maybe he didn’t want to see me anymore now that he was hanging out with Amber Alexander. Duh. That had to be it.

Why didn’t he like me?

“I’m going to sneak onto the set of Midnight,” I announced.

“Oh no,” Analisa said, shaking her head in punctuation. “No.”

“No what?” I asked, feigning innocence.

Analisa raised her arms almost in defense. Against what, I had no idea. “No more snooping, no more sneaking around, no more breaking and entering.”

“Why not?”

“Uh, perhaps because B&E is illegal?”

Okay, so she had a point. But I couldn’t help it – crazy stuff just happens to me. Besides, it’s all worked out in the past. And if we hadn’t snooped those other times, we never would have stopped some very serious crimes from occurring. Who cares if we
might’ve sorta kinda broken some laws in the process? The ends totally justified the means.

Right?
“Fine. We won’t break onto the set.”
“No, we’ll get on totally legally,” Maya agreed. Told you the girl had my back.
Analisa sighed. “Don’t encourage her!”
“She’s not encouraging me,” I said. “I’d go even if she didn’t come along.”
“That’s what I’m afraid of.” Analisa pushed her bangs off her forehead. “Fine, we’ll all go. But the movie set is not our priority. We’re here to dance. Not stalk celebrities.”
“We all know you’re not here to see celebs, Ana.” Maya stretched her long legs out into the aisle, alternating between pointing and flexing her toes. “You spend more time keeping out the Kardashians than keeping up with them. Your idea of a reality show is the Republican debates.”
“Well, you have to admit they’re this year’s must-see TV…drama, backbiting, trainwrecks, Cinderella stories…”
I tuned out my friends’ bickering and stared out the window. The bus turned a corner on the winding mountain road as we entered Sedona city limits, and we got our first glimpse of the Red Rocks.
Was this place for real? Surely it had to be a movie set. Or maybe the local artists colony down the road in Jerome spilled their watercolors and infused the landscape with a symphony of burnt sienna, mahogany, rust, teal, and aqua. The effect was spectacular, like the leprechaun’s rainbow come to life. Colors that vivid couldn’t be formed by nature. Could they?
There’s an old saying that God created the Grand Canyon but lives in Sedona. I now knew it was true.
No wonder my Grandma Rose loved coming here for New Age retreats. They say Sedona has one of the largest concentrations of spiritual energy vortexes and the conditions are perfect for meditation, prayer, and healing. Grandma Rose was here a decade before I was born for the so-called Harmonic Convergence, when thousands of people around the world gathered at sacred places simultaneously to combine their psychic energy to keep the Earth from slipping out of its “time beam” and spinning off into space – and create a new era of harmony and love in the process.
I wasn’t sure if I bought into it all. It seemed a little too woo-woo for me. Grandma Rose claims she’s psychic – my dad claims she’s crazy. But looking around at the scenery, I could totally see why she’d believe it. And ultimately the Earth didn’t slip off its orbit and spin into the Great Unknown. Besides, she’d helped me solve some crimes in the past, so maybe there was something to it.
But I wasn’t here to debate my grandmother’s spiritual beliefs. I was here to see Craig.
Er, I mean, I was here to dance. Focus, Dani, focus.

Chaîné, chaîné, chaîné, chaîné…
I spun off stage left in a series of quick turns alternating feet in progression, as if forming the human chain that gave the dance step its name. I couldn’t see them, but could hear the audience erupt in applause. Someone passed me a Dixie cup of coconut water. A
couple swigs was all I had time for before running on for the coda, which brought all the dancers back to the stage to dance in unison.

Two minutes later, we hit the final pose of George Balanchine’s abstract ballet Rubies and the audience roared. I smiled as I looked out at the audience in the open-air amphitheatre. What a view! We must have danced really well to command their attention. I’d be very distracted if I was in their place, surrounded by Red Rocks as far as the eye could see.

I stepped forward with the rest of my line to curtsey and spotted Craig in the crowd. He did remember! He must have gotten the text and wanted to surprise me. Maybe he wasn’t so “Mr. Hollywood” after all.

My smile grew extra wide as I tried to catch his eye, but he leaned over to whisper something to the girl sitting next to him.

Even though she was wearing shades to try to remain incognito, I could spot those fake boobs anywhere. Amber Alexander.

Damn.

I stepped to the side of the stage to let the next line come forward for their curtain call and craned my neck to catch a glimpse of Hollywood’s newest vampire royalty. They got up to leave, but were stopped by a swarm of fangirls who wanted their autographs.

So much for Amber’s sunglasses.

We ran offstage as the applause started to die down. The festival organizers expected us to change and join the audience to watch the other schools’ performances, but I had other plans. I needed to find Craig.

I stripped off my tutu and bodice and threw on my “Life without ballet is pointless” t-shirt and a pair of yoga pants over my tights. I would’ve preferred to dress a little more put together, but that’s all I had in my dance bag, and there wasn’t time to run back to the hotel first. At least my stage makeup wasn’t streaked, even though it was so cakey you could call me Betty Crocker.

Just as Craig finished signing, I emerged from the cave-like makeshift dressing rooms into the late afternoon sunlight. He flashed a megawatt smile at his adoring masses, put his arm around his costar, and ushered her towards the exit.

“Craig!” I called. “Wait!”

I ran in their direction, nearly tripping as I scaled the stadium seating, taking the steps two at a time. Good thing my muscles were still warm or I might have pulled something. And that would be bad. Very bad.

“Excuse me,” I said as I zipped past audience members, weaving so as not to barrel into anyone.

“Cuidado!”

I guess I did need to be more careful, I thought as I helped a toddler back to her feet, her mama rattling off a string of what I can only imagine must have been an entire palette of colorful Spanish curse words.

Oops. I apologized profusely and grand jetéed over a row of seats. Almost there…

Craig and Amber could not leave. Not yet. If this was my birthday surprise, he was going to have to do a lot better.

“Pardon me,” I said. “If I could just get by--”

“No.”

I looked up and saw a brick wall blocking my path. Well, no, not literally. It just
seemed that way. A beefy guy wearing a black satin *Midnight* cast jacket crossed his arms and peered down at me.

“I just have to see Craig,” I explained.

“Ms. Alexander and Mr. Walsh are leaving now, so if you’ll just go back to your seat...”

“But you don’t understand.” I pulled myself up to my full five-foot-three and tried to look as important as possible. Not easy given my casual clothes. “Craig’s my... boyfriend.”

“Sure he is.” Security Dude looked me up and down, and then smirked. “And Ms. Alexander’s my fiancée.”

“But it’s my birth—”

“Dani, let’s go.” Maya came up beside me and took my arm. “This next group is supposed to be really good. They’re from the Navajo Nation.”

Analisa appeared on my other side. “We should watch,” she agreed, leading me away from the big guy. “I saw them last year. They’re amazing. I think their town is on the other side of the state border with New Mexico, but I’m not sure.”

“But...” I trailed off when I saw the expression on Analisa’s face. This obviously wasn’t open for debate. “Fine.”

We climbed back down to a group of Mountain Shadows students and took seats next to my art student roommate, Bev, as the opening strains of music wailed and the next group ran onstage to take their positions. “Madame is watching,” Analisa whispered. “You’ll get in trouble if you don’t stay here and support the dancers from the other schools.”

Maya nodded. “And after this session is over, we’re supposed to head over to the art gallery. Then tonight are the one acts from the drama students.”

“But what about supporting one of our own? Craig’s from our school and he’s here to act. Why can’t we see him?”

“Chasing after him isn’t exactly supporting him,” Analisa said. “Besides, you really think that rent-a-cop is going to let you onto the set? Seriously?”

“Shh!” The dance was starting, and the audience members wanted to watch. I’m sure the Navajo dancers were amazing, but how could people be more interested in that than a major motion picture being filmed just down the street? Not just any motion picture. *Midnight*!

Madame Renaud, our French teacher-slash-chaperone, glared at me.

*Fine. I’ll behave.* I sat back, listened to the beat of the drums, and let the dancing carry me away.

To be honest, I didn’t really know where I stood with Craig. Our relationship – if you could call it that – has always been like a ride on the Coney Island Cyclone. Just when I thought he liked me, something always came up. It’s not like he’d asked me to prom yet anyway. And I’d texted him several times and he never responded. I could try calling, but what would be the point? He seemed to have forgotten my birthday entirely.

Besides, I was enrolled in the summer intensive program at the Manhattan Ballet Conservatory, and Craig was going to graduate and go off to Yale, and I’d never see him again. Well, other than on the big screen.

Kissing Amber Alexander.

But he kissed me, too. Me. That had to count for something.
Right?

Robyn’s breath hitched. Jackson and Eric. Fighting over her!
“Stop it!” She ran into the middle of the fray. “Stop! Both of you!”
Their eyes burned into each other as they lunged for Jackson’s jugular. Robyn screamed and threw her hands up in defense.
“I don’t give a damn what you think, Jackson,” Eric growled. “You must pay.”
“Please!” she yelled.
Eric paused for just a moment, his paws locked around Jackson’s neck, and looked her way. His eyes contained a vocabulary of their own, but just what he was trying to convey, Robyn didn’t know.
“You have to choose,” Jackson finally said, struggling to break free of the werewolf’s powerful grasp.
“I can’t,” she said, tears welling in her eyes. “I care about you both.”
“You must,” Eric agreed, still poised to kill his rival.
“Fine! You want me to choose,” she said. “I’ll choose. If you promise not to kill each other, I’ll choose.”

Robyn was a Taurus, and like her brothers and sisters of that sign, a very confused being. Emotions warred inside her, pulling her in both directions, battering their fists at her until she made the decision that would break one man’s heart. How could she choose?

But how could she not?

Analisa sighed. “We don’t even know where they’re filming.”
“Sure you do,” Bev said from over on her side of the room where she was playing a video game on her iPad. “You’ve read that book cover to cover, Dani. Where do you think it would be?”

It was a few minutes past ten. Lights Out was in about twenty minutes, but my friends were hanging out in my hotel room, Maya lounging on my bed while Analisa stretched diligently on the floor over by the bathroom.

I bit my lip as I tried to remember any places Jackson, Robyn, or Eric had visited in Midnight. I hated to admit it, but I hadn’t paid a lot of attention to the setting. I was way more concerned with finding out which supernatural being Robyn was going to choose— the vampire or the werewolf. Of course, Bethany Beyer planned to drag her characters through the whole series and make us wait until the fourth book. Damn her. “Oh wait, Snoopy Rock?”

“Yes,” Bev said all drawn out slowly, her frustration showing, like she was talking to a two-year-old. She didn’t have to be so snippy about it.

An hour later we’d arrived at the Snoopy Rock trailhead. Sneaking out was surprisingly easy since there were no dorm monitors, and the hotel staff didn’t seem to care who came or went as long as everyone had a room key. The chaperones were probably already asleep, so nobody stopped us.

The hard part was getting here without a car but we decided to walk, using the Sedona map from the hotel’s front desk as a guide. Now once here, I wasn’t certain what to do. Or where exactly in the vast desert wilderness they might be filming. It’s not like
there was a sign out front that read ‘Midnight set this way.’

“We can turn back,” Analisa said, a slight uptick in her tone.

Maya laughed. “Don’t be such a wimp, San Miguel.”

“Let’s go,” I said, stepping over a prickly pear cactus onto the trail, although I was going to hike out to the rock even if they didn’t come along. We’d already made it this far, so it would be stupid to turn back. A waste of sneaking out. Besides, even if Craig wasn’t in the cast, I’d still want to watch them film if I could. Midnight was my favoritest book ever!

“Fine,” Analisa grumbled, and fell into step beside me, with Maya and Bev following right behind.

I couldn’t believe we managed to get my roommate to join – usually she spent her waking hours doing her very best J.D. Salinger impression and avoiding the rest of the world – but I think she was just as eager as I was to see how the director was going to portray the vampires and werewolves. Bev may pretend to be this cynical urban rebel nonconformist, but I saw the full set of Midnight books loaded on her e-reader app. She wasn’t fooling anyone.

In the distance, a coyote howled. The full moon glowed brightly overhead, lighting the path and making our flashlights unnecessary. It looked like a scary Halloween moon, and I almost expected a witch to fly silhouetted across it on a broomstick at any moment. And to think it was April, not October! If I hadn’t known Craig was just acting the role of a vampire, I’d probably be worried.

Vampires aren’t real, vampires aren’t real, I silently chanted to the steady beat of our feet crunching in the gravel.

“Yes they are,” Bev said.

Oops, maybe I said that out loud.

“Don’t encourage her,” Analisa said through gritted teeth.

“But vampires are real,” Bev insisted. “The portrayals you see in the movies or in most books — most of those are poseurs. Fangs? Not so much.”

“No fangs?” I asked.

“Well, I guess technically they do, and they’re called canines. All humans have them.”

I scrunched up my forehead. “Then how do they drink blood?”

“Donors,” Bev deadpanned.

“Ew, seriously? So gross.”

“I want to bite your neck,” Maya said in an over-the-top old skool Count Dracula accent. Well, actually more like Count Chocula. Or even the Count from Sesame Street. But definitely not what Jackson would say.

“That’s full of crap,” Bev insisted. “It’s not like that.”

Analisa sighed. “Let’s just keep going.”

I could see a large outcropping of rocks up ahead, but from this angle it didn’t quite look like the shape of the famous Peanuts dog. Were we on the wrong track? I didn’t want to hike all night and never get there.

“They say Sedona is one of the best towns in the country for vampires,” Bev said a few minutes later.

“There’s no such thing as vampires,” Analisa said.

We fell into an eerie silence as we kept moving forward. With the full moon
overhead and the lunar-like boulders jutting up from the center of the earth, I could easily imagine vampires living here. Maybe they could run one of the many crystal shops around town. Ooh, or the fortune tellers. Of course, nobody would be able to read their minds. I mean, since they’re vampires and all. But that could end up as a professional advantage.

I was imagining what it would be like to get my aura cleansed by an immortal bloodsucker when all of a sudden there was a pinch at the back of my neck. Shivers raced up and down my spine and a chill of terror settled in my gut as I heard a blood-curdling shriek.

From me.

Bev was right – there were definitely vampires here, and not of the movie set variety, either. Of the creepy undead variety. Although if they looked anything like the vampires in *Midnight*, then maybe I wouldn’t be too upset. I mean, after all, Robyn Bell seemed thrilled to be caught in the middle of the love triangle between a vampire and a werewolf.

What did she know that I didn’t?

It was only after my friends erupted in giggles that I noticed Maya standing right behind me, her fingers mere centimeters from my skin threatening to tickle me.

“What the hell?” I asked.

“Relax,” she said. “You’re way too tense.”

“It’s not funny,” I said through gritted teeth.

“You’re right,” Maya said. “It’s not funny. It’s hilarious.”

Analisa stepped between us, always the moderator. If this whole dance thing didn’t work out, maybe she could be a judge. “Let’s just keep going.”

Bev plopped down on a rock. “We need to take a break. I’m tired.”

“Good call—what the?”

My question was cut off as I tripped. But not over my own two feet. And not Maya’s, Analisa’s, or Bev’s either.

Over someone else’s feet. Someone who was lying facedown in the dirt.

One quick glance at her shoes made short work of explaining how she got there. Or rather, the red soles did. Loubies instead of hiking boots? Dude. No wonder she fell.

And unless they were the knockoff Oh Deer kind, I had a sneaking suspicion those telltale red soles also explained who she was even before turning her face up.

Analisa leaned over. “Oh my God!” She gulped. “It’s – it’s a person.”

“And she’s not moving.” Yes, that’s me. Captain Obvious for the win!

“Is she dead?” Bev asked.

“I…don’t think so,” I said, although I had to admit that despite my previous adventures in amateur sleuthing, I’d never seen a dead person before.

I bent down to check for a pulse and realized I wasn’t sure where to find one. I turned her head to the side.

Yup. Those red soles were for walking the red carpet, not hiking the Red Rocks.

Amber Alexander.

Maya kneeled next to me, cradling Amber’s head in her lap as I placed two fingers against Amber’s neck. I don’t know. I guess I felt a pulse – a sort of shallow thump-thump-thump.

Unless that was mine. My heart *was* beating pretty fast. Maybe Analisa was right. We should have stayed back at the hotel. I had this really unfortunate habit of trouble
following me wherever I went. You couldn’t take me anywhere.
Although, with Amber Alexander out of the picture…
Analisa swatted my hand like a fly. “Here, let me see.”
And that’s when I spotted it. Two small round punctures in the side of her neck.
Apparently her shoes weren’t the reason for her fall.
I jumped. “Ohmygodohmygodohmygod vampires!”
“Someone call 911!”
My friends all started talking at once, a melee of confusion, excitement, and fear as they gathered around the unconscious actress. I kneeled next to her and tried to remember the CPR I’d learned in my babysitting certification course a couple of years ago but my hands were so shaky that I couldn’t perform the chest compressions. I leaned over and felt a faint hot puff of air on my cheek. Thank goodness.
“She’s breathing!”
“Are those fang bites?” Maya asked.
Bev shrugged. “I told you. It’s not like that. She must have provoked him if he bit her.”
Analisa shook her head in exasperation. “She wasn’t bitten by a vampire.”
Was she for real? I pointed at the wounds. “Look.” How could she ignore the evidence?
“She’s making a movie about vampires,” Analisa insisted. “That’s just makeup.”
An itching sensation spread all over my body, and I scratched my elbow trying to get rid of it. Could fear manifest itself in hives? I had no idea, but I had a feeling it was just my imagination. “No, it can’t be makeup. Jackson never bites Robyn’s neck in the book, so unless they changed it for the screenplay, that bite is not for the movie.”
“It looks pretty real to me,” Maya agreed.
Bev shoved a chunk of dyed black hair behind her row of piercings. “That’s because vampires are real. Why do you think Bethany set her book here in Sedona?”
“Cualquiera que sera.” Analisa pulled her phone out of her pocket. “What matters is that we get her medical attention. Now.”
While Analisa dialed, the rest of us heave-hoed Amber off the ground and started to carry her back to the street, struggling despite her light frame. She was all dead weight. Okay, bad word choice.
Analisa ran up to us. “The EMTs are coming. They’ll meet us out in that parking lot we passed on the way in and take her to the hospital.”
We’d been hiking for what, ten minutes before we found her? So hopefully we could get her to the ambulance while she was still breathing.
Not exactly how I’d planned to spend my last night as a fourteen-year-old. So much for finding Craig.
“She’s too heavy,” Bev said. “I gotta rest.”
Bev’s breathing suddenly sounded like a three-pack-a-day smoker. No, wait. That wasn’t Bev. That was Amber.
“What’s wrong her?” Maya asked. “Why’s she breathing like that?”
Analisa’s normally calm voice morphed into a Minnie Mouse squeak. “Is she having a heart attack?”
I shook my head frantically. “She’s wheezing. Does anyone have an inhaler?” My friends signaled ‘no.’ “We have to put her down and prop open her air passage.”
As we lowered her limp, convulsing body to the ground, I heard a sickening pop as a searing burn ripped through my left leg. No. No. No! This could not be happening.

A string of words that a nice Two-Day-Catholic girl should never repeat in public spewed forth from my mouth like ash from a volcano. Speaking of which, my knee felt like it was made of molten lava – warm and squishy to the touch.

Visions of physical therapy danced in my head as I tried to bear weight and instead winced in pain. If it was what I thought, then I was currently living my worst nightmare. Potentially career-ending devastation.

But I didn’t have time to think about that right now if we were going to help Amber. Bev grasped Amber’s hand and squeezed. “Don’t tell me we have two invalids now.”

“I’m fine.”

But I wasn’t. Not really. The pain was debilitating, but I didn’t really have a choice. We had to get the starlet to the hospital.

“Let’s go.” My fingertips grazed Analisa’s shoulder as I steadied myself. I would not let myself cry. At least I was still conscious.

I looked down at Amber’s now nearly listless form, covered in red welts. Wait a second. Did she have those before? Her skin was swelling right in front of my eyes. Heck, in front of her eyes, too. Closed they were mere slits, like the knife indentations pinching into the rising dough of a baguette as it baked.

“I don’t think vampires cause that kind of reaction, do they?” Maya had obviously noticed it, too.

That’s when I remembered I was wearing flip-flops. How did I know? Because I felt a tickle on my toe, followed by a brushing sensation, but was able to jump out of the way despite my hurt knee.

I bent over and took a closer look at Amber’s neck. I’d been so focused on the punctures that I totally missed the tiny little red bumps at the sting site earlier. I slung my off my backpack and dug around inside until I found what I was looking for, then wound up and jammed it into her as hard as I possibly could.

No, not a wooden stake to the heart. Total cliché. Besides, even though she was my rival for Craig’s attention, we’d been trying to save Amber, not kill her. Anyway, duh, everyone knows vampires aren’t real.

Analisa yanked the curtains closed after the doctor left. “I still can’t believe how fast you reacted, Dani.”

“No kidding,” Bev said as she leaned against the exam table. “I’ve been stung by a scorpion before but it was nothing like that.”

Maya tossed me my shorts. (I couldn’t wait to get out of this ugly hospital gown.)

“Amber’s lucky you were there.”

Oh, I forgot to tell you. We never did make it to the road. The EMTs, who had to hike into the wilderness to find us, confirmed my suspicion. Amber Alexander had a rare anaphylactic reaction to a scorpion bite. Like all kids with peanut allergy, my EpiPen is more precious than an American Express card – I never leave home without it.

Analisa smiled. “You saved her life.”

Yeah, I guess I did.

So she could go right back to kissing Craig.
Using crutches to take my weight off of the injury, I limped away from the ER behind my friends. Yay me. The scorpion bite wasn’t all I was right about tonight. Forget barre exercises at the prestigious Manhattan Ballet Conservatory summer intensive program. Or even yoga exercises at one of the little New Age shops lining the streets of Sedona. The next few months would be spent doing PT exercises on the long road to recovery.

If I was lucky.

I didn’t even know how I hurt it, but the doctor diagnosed it as chondromalacia, which is basically just a fancy name for when the knee cap rubs up against the thigh bone instead of gliding smoothly against it, roughening the cartilage underneath in the process. Freak accident? Repetitive stress injury? Who knows? Not that it mattered. Serious dance careers have been over before they even began for much, much less.

Shit.

“Dani!”

For the second time today, a guy blocked my path as Craig’s unmistakable voice crashed my pity party.

Er, make that the first time today. If the clock above the registration desk was to be believed, it was nearly three AM.

Tomorrow already. My birthday.

“Uh, hi.” Wow, when did I become such a sparkling conversationalist?

He rushed over and enveloped his arms around me. “Are you okay?”

The wrap on my knee and crutches under my armpits should have been his first clue.

But even though I’m fluent in sarcasm, I decided to play it straight this once. “It hurts,” I said with a shrug.

“Then I guess I’ll just have to coordinate my tux to your crutches,” he said.

“What are you talking about?”

He raked his fingers through his hair. “I guess I never got around to asking you, did I?” He shot me a sheepish grin. “Will you go to prom with me?”

Good thing I had the crutches to prop me up, because I nearly fell over from the shock. “But what about Amber Alexander?”

“The doctors said she’ll be okay. We’re just going to film some scenes without her for the next few days, and then she’ll be back at it next week, so you don’t need to worry about her.” He smiled. “You saved her life.”

“Yeah.”

No wonder painkiller abuse was so rampant. I must have only imagined he’d asked me to prom. It was nice while it lasted.

“So, you never answered,” he said. “Will you go with me?”

Craig nodded, his bright blue eyes silently pleading with me to answer. I felt a hot flush in my cheeks.

“But I thought you liked Amber.”

“As a friend.”

“You kissed her.”

He laughed. “It’s called acting.”

“That’s not what the L.A. Informer said.”

He laid his hands on my shoulder and held me an arm’s length apart. “Do you really
believe everything you read in the tabloids?”

“But Hadley said—”

“Oh, come on,” Maya said. (I didn’t even realize she was standing right there.) “Just answer him already!”

Before I could respond, Craig’s mouth was on mine. Kissing me. Slowly at first, then with more urgency. Tingles danced throughout my body as I kissed him back.


AUTHOR’S NOTE

The adventures continue in the Dani Spevak Mystery Series – Codename: Dancer, Pointe of No Return (June 2012), and Pas De Death (2013). This short story stands alone and can be read in any order, although chronologically it is #2.5. 😊

***

After writing her first manuscript (which she now realizes was blatant Nancy Drew fanfic) at the ripe old age of nine, Amanda Brice took a nearly twenty-year hiatus before returning to the craft. She is a two-time finalist for the Golden Heart® award, and is president of Washington Romance Writers. An attorney by day, Amanda is also a popular speaker on the writing conference circuit with her copyright law workshops. For more information, please visit www.amandabrice.net.

Back to Table of Contents
The Vanishing Spring
By
Carey Corp

The first time Tyler Diaz heard the Legend of the Vanishing Spring, he was sitting on an intricately carved bench overlooking the tiny pond next to the “Members Only” clubhouse, wishing he could disappear.

Face tipped skyward, he let the sun’s first powerful rays of spring banish the chill from his veins. Letting his eyes drift shut, he indulged in a moment of homesickness. The more the earth warmed, the more he would miss La Villita: the heavenly aroma of the taquerías wafting on the breeze, the swirling rainbow of festive colors adorning both shops and shoppers, the soothing cadences of español rolling off a thousand tongues in heated conversation.

Here, no one spoke Spanish, not even in school. Kids studied only the most pretentious romance languages, plus Japanese, and—ugh—Latin. Even everyday conversation was a crazy Stepford blend of stuck-up English, ghetto teen, and French.

“We’re going to La Petite Mais’ for lattes. Wanna come?”

Tyler shook back his dark curls and blinked at the blonde Barbie flanked by her silicone regime. No matter how long he lived among them, he’d never get the kids of Quimby Acres—especially the girls. They seemed to have an endless supply of money to waste on crap—clothes, electronics, and the other various, over-priced accoutrements that accompanied a life of privilege. Often when he stared at their expensive haircuts and European wardrobes, he wondered how they would fare if their families ever fell from grace.

Not that he knew what it was like to be poor. He wasn’t from el barrio, didn’t have cousins with gang affiliation doing time for drive-bys. He came from an average, middle class Mexican-American family. His great grandparents had emigrated from Mexico City before his abuelo had been born. Since then, three generations of Diazes had grown up less than a block apart in Little Village on Chicago’s West Side. Well, almost grown up.

That was all B.C.

Before his papi met Carmen.

Carmen was an overpriced accoutrement, herself. Totally absurd. Ty still couldn’t comprehend how an honorable, hardworking family man like Hector Diaz had fallen under Carmen’s evil spell. She wore eight hundred dollar, bubblegum pink warm-up up suits, worked out like a prison inmate, and treated her ridiculous little chorkie like she’d given birth to him. It—the freakin’ dog—had gone to the Bahamas with Carmen and his dad, riding in the luxury of a handbag that cost more than most people make in a year!

The first thing Carmen had done, as soon as she’d gotten the obscenely large engagement ring onto her French manicured, anorexic finger was to get his papi to sell the lucrative property he owned. Her second nefarious act was moving them out of La Villita to the gated community in Wilmette. The third and most unforgiveable feat was to convince Hector Diaz he owed it to himself to see the world, while his only son—a minor at that—deserved a first rate, private education under the custodial eye of their housekeeper, Helga.
What Carmen had really done was strip the vibrancy from Ty’s life: the colors, smells, cacophony of sounds, and, most importantly, the rich familial relationships. In *La Villita*, he was an average seventeen-year-old boy surrounded by *su comunidad*; in Wilmette, he was treated like a two-dimensional Latino Versace model. But even as they appreciated his good looks they still managed to make him feel like a minimum wage pool boy. Which reminded him why he was sitting by the pond trying to shake of his foul mood in the first place—because he’d been mistaken for landscaping staff and ordered to sweep grass clippings up from the communal sidewalk. Which he’d done, much to his humiliation and the confusion of the actual grounds crew. But it was easier than trying to explain. He wondered if there’d ever come a day where that kind of *mierda* didn’t bother him. Not likely.

“Well?”

The blonde, whose name was Paxton—or maybe Payton—interrupted his pity party. She thrust her ultra-glossy lower lip at him in full on pout mode. Clearly, she expected more attentiveness from the Quimby pool boy. “Are ya coming, or not?”

“No.” Ty knew that he was just another accoutrement to these girls. A piece of hot Latin arm candy. He might as well be dead on the inside, for all they cared. He’d give anything to meet a genuine girl, one with real relationship potential. *Maybe in the next lifetime…*

Provoked by his rudeness, five surgically perfected faces puckered into a singular expression of dismay. So he added, “I mean, no, thank you. I’m just going to chill for a while—enjoy the sunshine.”

“What ever.” Blondie was clearly “out.” As she circumnavigated a precarious spin in her brand-new stilettos, one of the brunettes in her entourage stepped forward. It appeared that Blondie had competition for the final word.

The brunette, Alayna,—or possibly Aylana—arched her brow in a manner that could only be described as *très* supercilious. “Don’t sit too long by the Vanishing Spring,” she chirped with a smirk. “We’d be totally bummed if you ended up like Eleanor Quimby.”

“Who’s that?” Apart from the logical connection of sharing a last name with Quimby Acres, Ty had no clue who she was talking about.

“You haven’t heard the story of Eleanor Quimby?” Scandalized by Ty’s ignorance, she paused until he confirmed her accusation with a twist of his head. As gleeful as a reality TV junkie in the throes of watching someone’s private humiliation become public spectacle, she continued, “Quimby Acres used to be a farm. Back in eighteen seventy-two, seventeen-year-old Eleanor Quimby threw herself into this very pond to escape being married off to an old man. Eyewitnesses saw Eleanor tumble into the water, but by the time they got to her, she was gone. Everyone assumed she drowned. They tried to dredge the pond for her body, but they never reached the bottom. That’s how they figured out the pond was a spring. Some think Eleanor was swept away by an underground river. Others believe she’s down there, still. Waiting.”

Ty suppressed an eye roll at the girl’s excessive dramatics—no wonder she hadn’t gotten the lead in the fall play. “Waiting for what?”

“For you!” The brunette’s bespangled hand shot forward and grabbed Ty’s shoulders. He flinched while the audience cackled in delight. Apparently, it was an old joke and he was its newest victim.
Regaining his composure, he leveled his gaze at the gaggle of pampered, urban princesses. “I think I’ll live dangerously and take my chances.”

“C’est la vie,” she giggled.

Not to be outdone, the blonde turned back, her eyes holding a slightly different invitation for Ty than the one that fell from her lips. “Drake’s parent just left for Paris. He’s throwing an epic party tonight. Meet me there? Ten o’clock?”

Whether because he wanted them to leave, or because he couldn’t face another dismal night watching Discovery Channel with Helga, he said, “Sure. I’ll stop by.”

Clearly the victor, if only in her own vacant mind, the blonde flashed her dark-haired friend a satisfied smile that declared “Game on!” and ordered, “Let’s go, Biatches.”

As the Quimby girls sashayed away, Ty picked up a small, white stone and plunked it into the spring. Small ripples danced across the previously smooth surface as the rock sank into the bottomless depths. Maybe it would come out on the other side of the world. In China.

As he mused about the opposite end of the earth, the water rippled again. Then the rock broke the surface with a faint pop. It curved through the air to land at his feet, which was undeniably weird.

Ty raised himself off the bench and walked to the water’s edge. Something shimmered like sapphires just below the surface of the water. He knelt for a better look, ignoring the jagged rocks pricking his knees and shins. The brilliant sun cast a reflection of Ty’s surroundings onto the glassy surface of the spring. The effect was like looking in a mirror. Except, in the center, where his image should’ve been, was something else. Something entirely unexpected. A girl—with lovely, peculiar eyes that moved him in a profound, intimate way.

Ellie May Quimby blinked down at the reflection on the mirror surface of the little pond and reckoned she’d dallied too long in the sun. In place of her cornflower eyes, inquisitive brown ones peered at her from beneath long lashes. Short, unruly curls replaced her straight, black braid. And perhaps most importantly, the image was of a comely boy.

He was a stranger to these parts, certainly not anyone Pa had occasion to do business with. Nor did he attend Sunday Mass at St. Joseph’s—a dandy like him would’ve been the talk of the congregation. She didn’t recollect his likeness from the brief time she’d attended the parish school, neither.

As she puzzled over his unexpected appearance, the boy’s image moved closer. He furrowed his brow and pressed his lips into a whitened slash. His peculiar stare swept her face as if answers to a particularly hard arithmetic question were written across her skin. When his eyes locked on hers, his dark lashes flutterin’ in a powerful fetching way, Ellie feared she might swoon. Not because he was awful nice to look at—which he certainly was—but because he looked through her plain exterior and into the beauty of her soul.

Heart hammerin’ like she’d just run to town and back, Ellie leaned over him. Mouth agog, she watched him lift his arm. Slow and tentative, his fingers reached toward her. The surface of the pond began to ripple, the tiny wave obscuring his gesture.

“Ellie May!”

The shrill voice made Ellie start. With a gasp, she clasped her hand to her breast and
clamped her eyes shut. Across the field, Mama called again, “Ellie May!”

Still shaking with fright, she opened her eyes and looked at the pond. The calm surface was smooth as glass. It reflected the fine spring day, a sky dotted with gossamer clouds and the occasional crow. She leaned closer, gawking at her own likeness, which gawked back.

“Eleanor May Quimby—you come here right this minute!” Mercy, Mama sounded in a state.

Rising to her feet, Ellie brushed the soft earth from her skirt and took one final look at the water. No matter how she squinted, the picture didn’t change. The boy had vanished.

Ellie vaulted the low wooden fence and wove her way in between the green and purple rows of alfalfa toward the old farmhouse. Truth be told, it was more shack than farmhouse, and in dire need of a coat of paint. As Ellie drew close, she frowned, noticing another shutter that had rotted from its hinge and now hung askew.

Mama had long given up on the idea of improvements of any sort. Beaten down by life, her daily aspirations seemed centered on not provoking her husband’s wrath. Way to aim high, Mama.

When Ellie came within spitting distance of the house, she stopped. A strange sense of foreboding—similar to the day Pa had come and removed her from St. Joseph’s school for good—gripped her. Storm’s comin’.

A glance overhead revealed nothing more ominous than a huge expanse of spring sky, the same pale blue as robins’ eggs. Ellie shut her eyes and listened to her surroundings. Birds chirped. In the distance, a dog barked. The shrieks of her brothers and sisters carried from where they played round back. Nothing amiss.

Perhaps it was the peculiar incident at the pond. Not only had the boy been uncommonly beautiful, his ways had been familiar. He’d held her in his gaze as if she were someone special, not some poor sharecropper’s daughter. For an instant, she’d felt pretty and smart—precious. Surely a boy who could make a girl feel like that didn’t actually exist. And if he did, he’d be too fine for the likes of Ellie May Quimby.

Best get on with it.

Ellie stepped into the squalid house, anticipating Mama’s pinched face. She braced for the unavoidable tongue-lashing. Instead, Mama lavished her with a tight-lipped smile.

Mama’s nervous glance flitted from her daughter to her husband. Pa gave a nod as powerful as a slap and his wife’s attention snapped back to her oldest child. “Ellie May, we have company.”

She stepped aside to reveal their nearest neighbor fidgeting impatiently in his Sunday best. Hezekiah Betts owned half the farms in Cook County. Known for being an illiterate heathen, he didn’t intermingle with polite society. And he never had occasion for social calls. He was a man of business, who, despite his crude demeanor, had made himself very rich.

Farmer Betts lumbered to his feet. He ran one thick hand through his gray mat of hair while he inspected Ellie with beady eyes. His critical stare never wavered as he demanded of Pa, “You say she’s had book learnin’?”

Pa spoke, his high, wheedling voice fluctuating with obeisance. “Yessir. Three years at the Catholic school.”

Farmer Betts grunted. “She’ll do then.”
“And you’ll see to my debts?”

The question seemed to give the old man pause. He turned on Pa quick as a wink. “She’s not given to gambling and drink, is she?”

“No, Sir.” Pa seemed to take no offense to the accusation that Ellie and he share the same weaknesses. “She’s not even my blood.”

That was fact. Mr. Quimby was her pa—the only one she’d ever known—but he wasn’t her daddy. Days after Ellie had come into the world her daddy had left it, thrown from his horse in a riding accident.

By all accounts, Ellie’s daddy had been a fine upstanding man, despite his being impoverished. Although his profession had been farming, he’d been awful fond of books. Father McGinty claimed her daddy knew all kinds of facts about the natural world—and that he’d committed all the psalms to memory. As the kind priest had explained, Daddy had been too good for this world, and from all Ellie knew of life, she was inclined to believe it.

Godless Farmer Betts searched Ellie to determine the truth of her parentage for himself. His penetrating scrutiny caused Ellie’s cheeks to prickle as he wet his nonexistent lips. With a satisfied nod, he announced, “I’ll come for her on the ‘morrow.”

Without another word, the old neighbor trudged into the waning afternoon.

Ellie May turned to Mama for an explanation. “What am I to do for Farmer Betts?”

Mama grimaced, so that her lips disappeared into a bloodless gash, and ducked her head into her sewing. After a brief pause, Ellie tried again. “Mama? Am I to be of service to Farmer Betts?”

From across the room, Pa helped himself to the few coins kept in the tin above the fire before regarding Ellie with a pinched brow. “Quit pesterin’ your mama, girl. You best be fixin’ supper now.”

“Yessir.”

Ellie scrambled to make biscuits. As she measured out flour and cut in the milk, she thought about how differently she’d do things when she had a family of her own. Her children would complete their primary schooling and perhaps even go on to college. If they had questions, she’d do her best to answer them, plainly and with honesty. They’d always feel safe and loved. She’d never arrange for them to go work for someone as mean as Hezekiah Betts, no matter how desperate the circumstances.

Most importantly, when she was grown, Ellie would marry for love. Her home would be one of learning and joy. And she’d treat each day with her family as a gift. And her husband—well, she’d look at him the way the boy in the pond had looked at her.

Partying with the Quimby kids had been a bust. Ty spent most of the time dodging Payton—Paxton?—and obsessing over a girl that didn’t exist.

When she’d first appeared at the Vanishing Spring, he’d rubbed his eyes trying to correct what had to be a hallucination—clearly the brunette’s creepy tale had him imagining things. The girl looked nothing like Quimby girls. Raven black hair framed her makeup-free, freckled face and accentuated her bright sapphire eyes. She’d peered at him a bit shyly but with undisguised curiosity, not the artfully practiced look of boredom that greeted him on a daily basis.

She was genuine and sweet—and he’d gotten all that from sixty seconds of soulful
connection? Ty didn’t believe in love at first sight, and yet the girl in the water felt like a kindred spirit. She felt more real than anything had in a long time.

What was she? Ghost? Water sprite, selkie, mermaid? Whatever she was, those sparkling eyes had haunted him all evening. After he’d bailed on the party, he’d spent the rest of the night researching water creatures and the unsettling case of Eleanor Quimby.

Alayna/Aylana had been right. The most popular theory was that Eleanor had drowned in the spring. The city of Wilmette website had a whole page dedicated to this version of Eleanor’s tragic demise. But there were others who speculated she’d run away, gone West. A couple of the fringe groups claimed she’d been abducted by aliens. And one wacked-out site hypothesized that she’d stumbled onto a time portal and traveled to another time.

While it amused Ty to think he’d stumbled into a scene straight from Ray Bradbury or Phillip K. Dick, common sense said otherwise. Eleanor Quimby was long gone from this round ball called Earth and no amount of Sci-Fi supposing could change that.

So what about the chick in the water?

The day was promising to be exceptional, and Ty had a whole lot of nothing to do. Under normal circumstances he might’ve gone to La Villita; eaten tacos from Ernesto’s corner stand and fibbed to his grandparents about being happy in his new home.

Suddenly glad he had all the time in the world and none of the accountability, Ty figured he’d camp at the Vanishing Spring and try to get to the bottom of the mysterious girl.

Ellie fidgeted in Mama’s best dress. Slightly short in the arms and awful tight in the bosom, it was too fine for bookkeeping and cleaning. Accented with lace and tiny covered buttons, it was the kind of garment one wore to baptisms and weddings. Mama herself had only worn it a handful of times, all very special occasions.

Tugging at her sleeves, Ellie hunched her shoulders in an attempt to give her cinched ribcage some relief. She stood on a chair, doing her best not to wobble as Mama took out the skirt’s hem. Pa was still sleeping off his “celebration” in the loft and her siblings had been sent out back to play. So for now, it was just the two of them.

She needed to change before their old neighbor came to fetch her. But Mama was being uncharacteristically kind in giving Ellie her finest dress, and she hated to spoil the moment. Eventually, Ellie’s good sense won out.

“Mama,” she said hesitantly. “Shouldn’t I get changed back into my housedress before Mr. Betts gets here?”

Mama paused mid-stitch. Her nervous eyes shifted up toward Ellie and back to the task at hand. When she spoke, her voice sounded as dilapidated as their house. “You do know what’s comin’, doncha?”

What’s comin’…

Ellie had thought on it most of the night. Farmer Betts had hired her. It seemed the most logical conclusion. Ellie had some schoolin’ and she was good with figures. Of course, she would’ve been even better if she’d been allowed to finish school. Father McGinty claimed he’d never seen such a natural inclination for arithmetic.

Realizing Mama waited for her answer, Ellie tested her hypothesis. “Aren’t I to keep Farmer Bett’s books?”

Mama jerked her head forward in a single nod. “And keep his house, cook his meals,
and see to his needs.” Her explanation ended severely. Ellie waited for more, but it never came.

Farmer Betts lived a half dozen miles down the road. By the time she saw to his supper, it would be night. Ellie shivered at the idea of walking back in the dark. “At the end of the day, will Pa come to fetch me home?”

“This ain’t your home no more, Ellie May.” Mama’s words were like stepping barefoot into the snow, instantly freezing her to the core. Ellie took a moment to recover, reckoning she’d misunderstood.

“Surely, I’m not to stay under the same roof as an old bachelor?” What would people say? Shame pricked Ellie cheeks as she imagined sitting through mass at St. Joseph’s surrounded by a cloud of respectable condemnation.

Mama hadn’t the decency to look at her. Instead she focused on a scrap of bone the dog had left half gnawed under the table. “You’re to be Mrs. Betts. Hezekiah has agreed to give your Pa the deed to the farm in exchange for your hand. It’s done—so there’s no use cryin’ about it.”

**Marry Farmer Betts?**

Bile rose to choke Ellie’s throat as she stared at Mama in disbelief. Leaping from the chair, she pushed out the warped front door of the shack that was no longer her home. Plump, bitter tears rolled down her cheeks as she blindly wove her way through the purple rows of alfalfa. The newly hemmed skirt of Mama’s dress caught on a nail as she jumped the fence. It tore, but Ellie didn’t care. That dress would become her funeral shroud before it would see a wedding!

Ellie stopped. Her spirit and body collapsed as one onto the damp grass. Was death the only way out? She had no other family, no distant kin she could appeal to for shelter. After Pa had pulled her from school she’d lost all her friendly connections. In truth, she was alone in the world, except…

Her gaze caught on flat surface of the little pond. A dark shadow shimmered where there should have been sun. On her hands and knees, she crept to the edge of the water. Her breath caught as two beguiling brown eyes stared back at her. The instant he saw her, the boy’s face lit up like a Forth of July firecracker. His relieved smile welcomed her into a place she didn’t know existed—a home not of wood and earth but of living flesh.

Tyler watched the girl intently, trying to discern the words rapidly falling from her lovely, trembling lips. Although he couldn’t hear her, he understood the language of her sorrow. The tears coursing down her cheeks were a plea for help. Not just any help, but his help.

“It’s going to be okay.”

She blinked. Her attention flickered to his mouth and then back to his eyes as she shook her head. She couldn’t hear him either.

“It’s going to be okay,” Ty said again only this time slower and with exaggerated enunciation. Then he touched his chest with his fingertips. “I’m going to help you.”

Her eyes filled with questions as she waited expectantly to see what he would do next. Ty had no clue what that would be. If the girl was Eleanor Quimby, as he suspected, she’d died over a century earlier. No not died—disappeared. They never found her.

**Where did you go?**
He probed for answers in those tragic blue eyes. If only he could reach down and snatch her from the jaws of misery. Sharp stones cut into his knees and he readjusted impatiently. There had to be something he could do. Just like the memories of his life in *La Villita*, the answers were within his grasp. He just needed focus—but first, he needed to get rid of the freakin’ boulder slicing his kneecap in half.

Ty shifted and reached down to remove the offensive chunk of rock, fully intending to hurl it into the pond. Then the heavens parted and he saw the small, white rock in a new and wonderful light.

Lordy, he was somethin’ to look at. Even in her agitated state, Ellie May’s thoughts were full up with him rather than her own troubles. She watched him lift a ragged white stone with thoughtful contemplation.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted movement coming through the alfalfa: Pa and the odious neighbor who would make her a wife against her wishes. Panic lodged in throat like curdled buttermilk.

The boy’s eyes widened in concern. His neck craned, but if his view was anything like hers, there was only room for each other and little else. Frustration pulled his features into a scowl with soft edges. As his gaze snapped back to her like a tether, his dark brows lifted.

Ellie leaned down over the water, getting as close as she dared to her only ally. What was it about him that made her feel so safe?

“Please,” she begged. “Help me.”

His demeanor, despite being troubled for her sake, was as warm as a waterin’ hole in July. Some might suppose him to be a devil, sent to tempt her in her most difficult hours. Satan’s tormentor he might’ve been, except she reckoned she’d rather suffer torments at the hands of this particular devil, than earn her salvation by marrying horrible Farmer Betts with her Maker’s blessing. But as the boy’s face broke into an earnest smile that reached from the hollows of his soul into the depths of his eyes, Ellie decided he was her angel. Her savior.

His eyes silently pleaded for her to trust him. Believe in his salvation.

Slowly, his hand reached toward her. The surface of the pond rippled as four fingertips broke the surface like a wide-mouth bass after a bug. Ellie extended her hand and touched warm, living flesh. Answering his dazzling smile with one of her own, she whispered, “Save me.”

Then intertwining her fingers with his, she tumbled headlong into the spring.

The group of girls collectively recognized Ty Diaz’s tousled head and froze in various states of disbelief. It had been nearly a week since the last time they’d purposely run into him. Only this time, he wasn’t alone. Someone rested against his shoulder, her shiny, ebony mane cascading over the back of the bench next to the Vanishing Spring.

Hoping the girl was horsey or at the very least, flamboyantly Goth, they tottered closer for a better look.

As they flanked the couple, Ty greeted them, looking mildly uncomfortable but mostly jubilant. His eyes sparked in a way they’d never seen in all the months they’d
known him. His smile made them feel all gushy and weak in the knees. Under Ty’s charismatic spell, it took a second for the girls of Quimby Acres to greet him back.

Clinging to one another for support, they turned their attention toward the girl—and unanimously hated her on sight. She was ravishing. From her dark lashes and luminous blue eyes, to her peaches-and-cream complexion and button nose. She even had a little mole above her upper lip, the kind no amount of cosmetic surgery could replicate. Her cobalt designer warm-up suit accentuated the deep blue of her eyes. Those same eyes ebbed with a joyous vibrancy that mirrored Ty’s own happiness in a truly unsettling way.

“This is my girlfriend, Elle,” Ty proclaimed, his voice full of unmistakable pride. Elle tipped her head and fluttered her lashes in a gesture far too genuine, too lacking in refinement for the Quimby girls’ tastes. “Pleased to meet you.”

She had a hint of a country accent that unfortunately did nothing to lessen her appeal. In her lap, she clutched a book. Her fingers reverently cradled the small volume of Shakespeare’s sonnets that they recognized from last quarter’s literature unit.

Tottering forward, Blondie’s heavily-lined eyes narrowed as she attempted to do damage control. “Wow, Ty. Your old girlfriend came to visit. That’s so sweet.”

“Not visit,” Ty corrected her. “Elle’s living here…with me.”

“Really?” The brunette arched a heavily penciled brow. “That’s strange.” Ty lifted his shoulders, tightening his muscles in a sexy shrug. “Not really. There’s more than enough room at my house, especially with my parents away.”

Blondie elbowed her uncouth friend in the ribs. “Alonna means it’s quite a surprise.”

Ty chuckled, his eyes drifting back toward Elle like the girl was his anchor. As their gazes locked in reverence, Ty murmured, “More than a surprise. It’s—”

“A miracle,” Elle breathed. “A true miracle.”

* * *

Carey Corp lives in the greater Cincinnati area with her loveable yet out-of-control family. She wrote her first book, a brilliant retelling of Star Wars, at the prodigious age of seven. She harbors a voracious passion (in no consistent order) for mohawks, Italy, musical theater, chocolate, and Jane Austen. Her debut novel for teens, The Halo Chronicles: The Guardian, earned her national recognition as 2010 Golden Heart® finalist for best young adult fiction. For more information, visit her at http://www.careycorp.com/

Back to Table of Contents
"Remember that you are a royal princess of Egypt," my mother says, wiping tears from my cheeks.
  "But I'm not the only one," I say, miserably. There is also Lysandra, my half-sister. The source of my tears.
  "You mustn't let Lysandra bully you."
  My mother uses clean linen strips to bandage my bleeding knees, both of which were scraped raw when Lysandra nearly trampled me beneath the hooves of her horse. "She's never punished for it," I complain. "She knows she can do as she pleases just because she is the daughter of the king's chief wife."
  "Not for long," my mother vows. "Soon, I will be first wife here."
  My father's harem is filled with women who wait upon his every whim. He has wives and concubines and even hetaeras like Thais, who sells her favor to the king. But my mother, Berenice, is fast becoming the king's favorite wife.
  My mother is young and clever. Many of the Macedonian lords who have been snubbed by Queen Eurydice now turn to my mother. My mother has allies, beauty, and a keen mind for intrigue. "I swear, Arsinoë, one day I will be the king's first wife. When that happens, I will see that Lysandra is punished for her cruelty. Until then, you must stand up for yourself."
  "How can I? Lysandra is taller than me. She's prettier than me. The king notices her; he gives her a horse just for learning to play the lyre, but I can't have one until I copy all of Plato's writings onto papyrus scrolls."  
  "That may be true, but Lysandra isn't smarter than you are, Arsinoë," my mother says. "You must outsmart her. You must make the price for hurting you so steep that she won't want to pay it. You must teach her to expect revenge."
  I bite my lower lip, sniffling all the while. "I don't want revenge."
  "Then what is it that you want, my soft-hearted little fool of a daughter?"
  "I only want us to be sisters," I cry, the sting in my heart sharper than the sting of my bleeding knees.
  "You and Lysandra are not sisters," my mother hisses. "You're rivals. Never forget it."

My mother is a brilliant peacock in my father's court, but I grow up in shadow. I never learn to stand up for myself against Lysandra. She teases me when I get my first woman's blood. She points at the spreading red stain that ruins my white linen gown. She whispers behind her jeweled hand and her friends laugh. Yet, I do nothing but slink away from the feasting hall in shame.
  I tell myself that when my mother is the king's chief wife, Lysandra will ask my forgiveness. And, struck with a sadness in my heart, I decide that I will forgive her. Then we can be true sisters.
Unfortunately, that is a far off day. And in the meantime, she tortures me. The king never defends me. Sometimes he even forgets my name. Though he is Pharaoh, worshipped as a god, it's as if he can't even see me. I wonder if I'm even truly, alive. Perhaps, I'm only a shade from the underworld who lurks the palace halls.

Still, when my brother calls to me, I think I wouldn't be able to hear him if I were only a shade.

Of all the children in the harem, Ptolemy is my only full-blooded brother. He's named after my father. Ptolemy is older and prefers the company of other boys his age, but sometimes he invites me to come to the stables with him.

Those are the best days of my girlhood.

After all, horses don't mind that I'm shy. They eat from my hands even if I am a soft-hearted fool. They see me, even if I don't shout. Even if I don't fawn and flatter at court. And so I spend much time in the stables, though I have no horse of my own. Ptolemy lets me ride his horse, though the steed never goes as fast as I want to. I want to gallop in the fields or ride a fast chariot. And one day, after a ride on the banks of the Nile, I dream that I will become Pharaoh.

I dream that, like the great pyramids, I endure forever.

Eventually, that dream fades and I tell myself it no longer matters. The day comes, when I am fifteen years old, that I have stopped waiting for anyone to notice me at all.

And that is the day I meet Cassander.

I mistake him for a slave boy, when first I see him with the reigns of a sleek black filly in his hands.

Oh, why do I lie? It is not the young man that I see first. It's the horse.

With long graceful legs, a powerfully muscled chest and fur as black as night, the horse is a marvel. She is so beautiful that I overcome my shyness to ask the stranger, "What is she called?"

"Styx," the young man replies. Styx. That is the river between the world of the living and the midnight world of the dead. It's a good name for this horse, because she looks so fierce I would believe she belongs to Hades himself. "She's a gift for Princess Arsinoë of Egypt from my lord, King Lysimachus of Thrace."

I am so stunned that I cannot believe him. Surely there's some mistake. "A gift for me?"

"Yes, Princess."

The filly turns gentle eyes to me. She may be a fierce and dangerous creature, but she longs for love. I know it. And I'm afraid to take her reigns unless she is truly mine. It is this fear that forces me to speak. "I've never met the King of Thrace. To what do I owe this kindness?"

"It's the first of many such gifts, Princess, in accordance with the terms of your betrothal."

Betrothal. I am betrothed? This is the first I hear of it. That I'm to be married without my consent or knowledge is so humiliating that I strive not to show the slightest bit of surprise. "Please thank my bridegroom...whoever you are."

"I'm Cassander," the young man says with a smile.

The sting of his announcement--that I'm to be married to a stranger--lingers. And
makes me silent.
"I'm named after Alexander's companion."
"It is a big name for a groom," I finally murmur.
He shrugs. "It was chosen for me by my father, the King of Thrace."
In an instant, my shame is compounded. Before me stands a prince! I should have
known it. His leather boots are too well-made, the laces wound with golden thread. His
tunic is simple homespun, but the cord tied around his waist is ornamented with beads of
turquoise and jade. His shy smile isn't what I'd expect from a prince, but his green eyes
and handsome face mark him as a Macedonian nobleman.

I dare to hope. Could this young man be my intended bridegroom? Mortified at
having thought him low-born, I want to sink into the ground and disappear. With my
cheeks burning, I can do nothing but beg his forgiveness. "I apologize, Prince Cassander.
I--I didn't know."
"Prince?" Now his smile bends with mischief and a sparkle lights his green eyes.
"No, that is my brother Agathocles. I'm merely an illegitimate son. One of many."

Why do I swallow back disappointment? Why should it matter whether or not he is a
prince, a groom or a bastard. I've known him for only the space of a few breaths. Yet, for
a moment, I wished I was betrothed to him. "So then, I will marry your brother?"
"You will marry my father," he says, turning my disappointment into despair. "It
seems absurd, doesn't it? After all, I'm older than you are."
"I'm fifteen," I say, straightening my spine, for my tattered pride is the only thing
holding me up now.
"Then we're of an age. But you're too pretty to be my step-mother." He speaks with insolent boldness. In my place, Lysandra would strike him for it. I
only veil my face in helpless modesty as his words echo in my mind. He thinks I'm
pretty? I've seen my reflection in the polished mirror and worried over the length of my
nose. Does he not see the flaws?
The black filly gives an impatient snort, then nudges against Cassander's shoulder.
"Your gift, Princess Arsinoë," he says, holding out the reigns to me.
When I take the leather straps from Cassander, our fingers brush. I flush. To hide it, I
press my cheek against the horse's long neck. Styx smells of the olive oil that has been
brushed into her fur to make her gleam. She nickers gently in appreciation of my touch.
Then Cassander flourishes me a bow. "It seems as if you've made two new friends
today."

I look for my mother in the women's quarters. Instead, I find Lysandra playing a game
with one of the slaves. Lysandra's pretty head is bent in concentration as she races her
agate stones across the game board. I hope she doesn't look up and notice me. I almost
make it round the lotus-capped pillar before I hear Lysandra crow, "There she is! The
new Queen of Thrace."

I should run away before she can tease me. I should run to my mother's arms and ask
the meaning of my betrothal. But a boy noticed me today. He may only be a king's
bastard. He may only be a stable-hand. Still, he noticed me and said that I was pretty.
And so I find the courage to square my shoulders and face my half-sister. "What do you
know of it?"
"I know you're to marry a very old man," Lysandra says.
"But my bridegroom is a king, isn't he?" I ask, pretending pride I don't feel.
She laughs, cruelly, letting the dice fall from her hand before moving more agate pieces on the board. "Only the King of Thrace. My husband will one day be the King of Macedonia."
So then Lysandra is to be married too. She must be miserable inside and afraid to show it.
"Will we have to leave Egypt?" At fifteen, I'm too old to cry. Nonetheless, I'm blinded by sudden tears. My home is here in Alexandria where the green Nile River flows into the vast blue sea. Here where the hieroglyphics scroll down temple walls. Here where the scent of lotus perfumes the air and the white marbled buildings gleam in the sun. Here, where I dreamed I would be a Pharaoh. "I would rather be Queen of Egypt than any other place."
Lysandra snorts. "You would. And I don't care if you do. Go be the broodmare of some old man. Call yourself queen of barbarians here or in Thrace. I'm returning to the place our ancestors ruled. To the place from which Alexander the Great conquered the world."
I realize that I may never see Lysandra again. It should make me gleeful. Instead, it forces the tears to spill over my cheeks. Now, there will never be any chance for us to be sisters. Only rivals, as my mother said.
Or strangers.
My mother sweeps into the room wearing light Egyptian garments, the finest linen made anywhere. She sees the tears in my eyes and demands, "What are you doing to my daughter now, Lysandra?"
"Only telling her about our betrothals," Lysandra replies, with an expression of innocence.
My mother glares at Lysandra. "Run along. Queen Eurydice is looking for you."
It is a lie and we all know it. Lysandra's mother and mine are locked in combat for the king's favor. Never would one rely upon the other to carry any message. Nevertheless, Lysandra casually tosses her game pieces on the floor for the slaves to clean up. Then she leaves us alone.
"You knew of my betrothal?" I ask my mother. "You knew that I was to marry some old man?"
"Of course I knew," my mother replies, beaming with pride. "You're to marry Lysimachus, the King of Thrace. He was one of Alexander's bodyguards. One of his successors."
Which means he's old enough to be my father, several times over. "He's a stranger."
My mother shrugs. "It was the best bargain I could make for you. Egypt needs Thrace for an ally. Your father needs you to assure his alliance. This is an opportunity. It's also an honor, Arsinoë."
"Not as great an honor as my father shows to Lysandra!"
My mother strokes my hair. "Is that what you think? Lysandra's husband is only the second son of a king. Lysandra will still be a princess while you become a queen. Be glad that your bridegroom is an old man. I've arranged that you'll be his chief wife. You'll also be younger than any of the other women in your husband's harem--none of them will be able to steal his love away from you before he dies."
These things I don't want to think about. The scheming at court. The lies and manipulations. The women all currying for favor. One rising in fortune, the other sinking into obscurity. How will I fare in such a nest of vipers? "But Mother, when the King of Thrace dies, I'll be a widow. I'll be alone in a strange place."

My mother sighs as if I were a very stupid girl. "You'll be wealthy and the mother of son with a claim to Thrace, Macedonia, and Egypt besides. When your husband is dead, you'll have no man to rule over you. And you can eliminate your rivals. That's the best gift I can give you, Arsinoë."

"But I don't want rivals!" I cry. "I don't even want a husband. I want to live in Egypt, forever."

"Then you shouldn't have been born a royal princess," my mother snaps. "This is the fate of royal women. To be traded by men in power. Or we become hetaeras like Thais and trade ourselves away. One way or another, Arsinoë, life is a bargain."

"You're no broodmare, are you?" I ask Styx, petting her withers as we walk side by side. She is eager to get out and away from the stables. The moment the hot sun of Egypt glows upon her glossy flanks, she trots, shaking her long mane as if preening for the other horses. She knows that she's special; she's barely tamed and her wildness calls to me.

Not waiting for the guards or the grooms that oversee the stables, nor even for the eunuchs who chaperone me, I leap up onto her back.

Having given her no warning, I'm not surprised when she rears up.

To stay on her, I squeeze her sides with my thighs. I am reckless. Let her throw me, trample me, I don't care. So long as I have this moment.

Styx whinnies, pawing at the air. Then while the grooms and guards and palace eunuchs shout warnings, she's off like an arrow shot from a bow. I cling to her back, every muscle straining to make her accept me. Behind us, I hear hooves clattering against the stone path as mounted men give chase.

But I don't want to be saved.

She gallops past the gardens. There is a low wall facing the ocean and she makes for it. It's her escape. Our escape. Knotting her black mane in my hands like rope, I hold tight, leaning forward to encourage Styx to jump the wall. She's like the wind beneath me, a power that surges up and up and up.

We land hard but I don't fall. We ride on through loamy soil, which gives way to sand, and Styx never loses her footing. I half hope she'll gallop into the ocean even if we both drown. But at the last moment, she turns from the surf, pounding down the shoreline.

It's glorious.

We ride past the agora where merchants do their trading. We ride past bricklayers straining and sweating in the sun to build our library. We ride out the Moon Gate.

The wind tears the ribbon from my hair, and together, we fly free.

Thirsty from our long ride, Styx dips her muzzle into the sweet waters of Lake Mareotis. She drinks for a long time while I watch the fishermen in their flat boats.
pushing their way through the marshy reeds with long poles.

The sun is low and red in the desert sky when I hear someone call my name.

Styx is munching on the grass, but her ears prick up in alarm. I think it's one of my father's guards sent to fetch me. Instead, I see the gilded sandals of Cassander.
"How did you find me?" I ask.
"I looked for Styx," he says, making his way through the shrubbery. "She has a taste for tall grasses, so I thought she might take you to the lake."

Picking at the wild grass, I say nothing, which Cassander takes as invitation to sit beside me.

"I don't want to marry your father," I blurt out. "I don't want to go to Thrace."

Cassander nods, taking up a handful of pebbles and skipping one across the surface of the lake. "So what do you plan to do then? Jump into one of those reed boats and offer yourself as a wife to a local fisherman?"

His mockery gives me sharp offense. "I am a royal princess. Do you think I would lower myself?"

Cassander shrugs. "I'm just a bastard boy; what do I know of royal honor?"

He skips another stone over the water. To his surprise, this one comes up under a rush of white froth. And a hippo lifts its snout from the water to roar at him.
"Zeus Almighty!" Cassander shouts, scrambling to his feet.

The hippo must have slipped past the patch of reeds without our notice. Now it has our full attention. Styx whinnies in sharp fear. I'm the only one who doesn't move, even though I know how truly dangerous a hippopotamus is. This one fixes black eyes on me, rivulets of water streaming down its pinkish grey flesh. It opens its mouth in another roar and shows enormous teeth.

Then it rushes me.
"Run!" Cassander cries.

As the great creature closes in on me, I only close my eyes. I'm too terrified to move, or too resigned to my fate. Perhaps this is no ordinary hippo, but the Egyptian goddess Taweret come to claim me for Egypt forever. I wait for the painful crush of a hippo's jaws. Instead, Cassander's steely grip closes around my wrists and I'm yanked to my feet.

He's strong and swift. "I said, run!"

So we run.

With my horse, we clamber up the bank onto the road, away from the hippo—who, in spite of its blubber could probably catch us if it really tried. We don't speak until we are well away, leaning against the city wall, doubling over from our efforts.

Styx is still on alert from our narrow escape. She trots in a circle, head high, making her outrage plain.

I rub the sore spot on my wrists where Cassander's grip left marks. "You saved me."
"Only by a hair!" His eyes are clouded with anger, his face red with exertion, and he pants like the breath has been stolen from his lungs. "Why didn't you run?"

"I don't know."

He stares at me. "Did you want to be eaten alive?"

I lower my eyes to the ground. "I don't know."

"What's wrong with you? Thrace isn't so bad. It's a barbarous land, but there is a palace and all the luxuries you find here."

"You don't know me well if you think all I care about is luxury."
Cassander snorts. "I don't know you at all, Princess. And I can't get to know you better if you're inside the belly of a hippo."

Dusty and glowing with perspiration, I'm surprised he wishes to know me better. Moreover, given his rank, I'm acutely aware that he should not be so familiar with me. Nonetheless, he's become my own personal hero, so I confess, "I'm afraid."

"You can't know what will come, Princess. None of us can. The world turns in strange ways. We can't change how we're born, but we have some say over everything after."

I marry before Lysandra does. In this one thing, I finally come first.

Before the wedding, I sacrifice all my childhood toys to Artemis. It's a goodbye, for the virgin goddess can't protect me anymore. I will belong to Hera now. After, I wash in a sweet-smelling bath of milk, honey and water drawn from a ritual spring and carried by a special vase. The servants anoint me with oils, style my hair, and swath me in veils.

My brother Ptolemy is garbed in a crown of thorn and nuts. He is to be my companion at the wedding and pass out bread at the wedding feast. "I'll miss you, Arsinoë," my brother says, his voice thick with emotion.

I wish he could come with me to Thrace, but he's part of my mother's plans. When she becomes the Pharaoh's chief wife, my brother will become the heir to the throne. He must stay here and be King of Egypt after my father.

It now seems like a childish thought that I should have ever remained here, so I embrace him in fond farewell.

The wedding feast is a raucous affair with men and women celebrating together, though they eat separately on either side of the hall. All the while, Lysandra sneers at me, as if hoping to provoke me to tears. She nearly does. Or perhaps I am upset only because when I look for Cassander, I don't see him.

At last, my father calls to me. I go swiftly because it may be the last time I ever hear the Pharaoh speak my name.

I'm presented to my groom, Lysimachus, the King of Thrace. "Before this assembly," my father intones. "I give this girl to you that you may beget legitimate children upon her."

Daring to peek at my groom from beneath my veils, I see a hard face with a furrowed brow and hollows in his cheeks. This stranger will be my husband. My lord. He's at least sixty years old; his hair thins over his brow. He is old. I make the mistake of thinking he is also frail.

I'm surprised when he grabs me hard by both wrists, his fingers digging in where Cassander's had been the day before. My new husband shakes me like a captive, for that's what I am, and a cheer goes up from the crowd.

Then I am carried off into the night to be unveiled.

Thrace is not Egypt. My husband is not Pharaoh. The land he rules holds no wonders. No pyramids rise up from the sand to amaze and inspire. Thracians are fierce fur-clad tribesmen who dwell in the mountains, climbing up to their fortress villages each night like sure-footed goats.
"They are barbarians who must be taught to live like civilized men," my husband says to me in the early days of our marriage.

It's one of the few things Lysimachus says to me at all. Like my father, he takes little notice of me. If there is anyone or anything my husband loves, it is his hunting dog. The hound is always close at his master's knee, peering up with open adoration, keen to amuse by fetching sticks or performing tricks.

But the dog hates all others. Come too close to the king and the dog snarls and growls. Try to pet the dog, and you may lose a hand to his snapping jaws. The king never scolds his dog for this. To the contrary, I think it makes him love the dog more.

I'm given a banquet to welcome me as the new queen of Thrace. The host is Prince Agathocles, a youth of no more than eighteen years. He looks like Cassander, but with a narrower mouth and a haughty bearing. I worry that he might resent me; a replacement for his dead mother. But he welcomes me to Thrace with a toast. Lifting a goblet he cries, "To Queen Arsinoë. May she give comfort to my father in these golden years of his life."

The guests all cheer to honor us, but I see that my husband the king isn't pleased. He doesn't like to think of himself as elderly and he narrows his eyes at his son as if he were a danger to him and not the bearer of his blood and his legacy.

Nonetheless, the prince offers me a place of honor and I'm obliged to take it. "My father is a hard man to please," Prince Agathocles says to me. "As I'm sure you've noticed."

I lower my eyes. I don't want to speak ill of his father. And with my eyes lowered, I spy a young girl under the table feeding the dogs from her fingers. When I gasp, Prince Agathocles reaches down and hauls her up into his arms. "There you are, Bunny! Meet our new step-mother."

I thought she was a slave because princesses do not crawl under tables to feed dogs. But I soon learn that like the king's favorite hound, this girl is allowed a very long leash. "She is my father's darling," Agathocles announces. "My father calls her his little bunny, so we all do."

Bunny is a girl of twelve with fair hair who curtsies to me. "I am the Princess Eurydice."

An unfortunate name. It's the name of my father's chief wife--my mother's rival. It's a name that makes me think of my stepsister Lysandra. But this little girl with her pink cheeks and upturned nose could never be so cruel. I smile at her. She cleaves to my side, so giggly that I realize she's had wine. Girls aren't supposed to have wine. Someone should send her to bed. But it's my celebration and I don't want to make trouble.

"Later, I'll show you the palace," Bunny says. "I'll teach you our dances and our songs. We'll stay up late."

"I should retire early," I say, remembering my mother's example. "In the morning, I'll weave with the women in the harem. Would that please your father?"

"Let the old women do the weaving," Bunny says, removing her sandals so she can join the dancing girls. "You're young, like we are. You should have fun."

As we watch his sister spin away, Prince Agathocles agrees. "You need not worry about pleasing my father too much. His last woman was a Persian witch. Most of his concubines are leftovers from the harem in Susa. You won't have many rivals here."

I glance over to where the king's women gather. I wonder if one of these women is Cassander's mother, but I'm afraid to ask and give insult. Most of the harem women are
as old as my mother--some of them much older. They don't stare at me with resentment, but my mother would tell me to view them as deadly enemies.

For once, I'm glad she isn't here. I don't want to see enemies behind every pillar. "And what about you?" I ask Prince Agathocles. "Do you have rivals here?"
"None here or anywhere," he boasts, then leans in as if to charm me. "And no wife, either."

I wonder why he mentions this to me. Does he want me to speak to his father on his behalf?

Then he stuns me by saying, "Perhaps when my father passes into the underworld, you can be my wife, Arsinoë."

My mouth falls open and I fight the urge to whip round and see who is listening. Surely this is a jest. A cruel trick mean to humiliate me. The kind of trick Lysandra used to play on me in Egypt. I choose my words carefully. I have my duty to my father to think of. To my family. To Egypt. "I'm quite happy to be your father's wife."

It is a bald-faced lie. I think Prince Agathocles knows it because he smirks. "Then my father chose the most virtuous bride in the world. You see. Other girls might resent being forced to touch wrinkled old flesh. They would prefer young arms, like these." He holds up his arms so that I can look at them. "Other girls would cringe at kissing a mouth filled with yellowed teeth--"

"You've had too much to drink," I break in, the heat of offense burning from my toes to the tips of my ears. "In the morning, you'll wish you didn't say these things. As a kindness, I'll pretend you didn't."

He reels back as if I slapped him. He's a handsome prince; perhaps no girl has ever turned away his flirtations. I worry that I wouldn't have turned him away if he weren't so reckless...or if my heart didn't already belong to someone else.

"My queen," Cassander says with a flourishing bow, as if we stood in the marbled palace instead of the straw-laden stables. A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth as I stroke Styx. It's the first moment since I arrived in Thrace that I have been able to visit my horse...or Cassander. And now I feel shy.

"I haven't seen you since the wedding, Your Majesty," Cassander says courteously.
I gasp. "I didn't think you were there!"
"Of course I was there."
"But I didn't see you..."

Holding a piece of fruit for Styx to munch on, Cassander looks absurdly pleased. "So you were looking for me? My place was in the shadows; my father likes for me to make myself scarce with the other servants at court."

"But you aren't a servant," I say, as it seems to be an injustice. Certainly the children of my father's concubines never made themselves scarce. "You're the king's son."

"But not a royal one," Cassander says with a rueful smile. "That is my brother."
"I've met him."
"Did you like him?" he asks.

No. I did not like Prince Agathocles. But I'm afraid to say so.

At my silence, Cassander tilts his head. "Did he mistreat you?"
"Why would he?"
"Because you can destroy all his dreams. If you bear my father a son, Prince Agathocles will no longer be the uncontested heir to the throne."

I stare so long that Cassander raises a brow. "Don't tell me you haven't dreamed of bearing sons for my father."

"I've never dreamed of such a thing," I say. Those were my mother's dreams, not mine.

"No?" Cassander asks. "What else does a queen dream of?"

I dream of Cassander.

On my wedding night, I dreamed of Cassander.

In the journey across the sea, I dreamed of Cassander.

I have dreamed of Cassander every night since he rescued me from the hippo. I can't tell him this. I'm married. I'm his father's wife. I'm his queen. Even if none of that were true, I wouldn't be brave enough to say it aloud. Nonetheless, the words lodge themselves painfully in my throat.

And I can say nothing at all.

"Did you have sisters in Egypt?" Bunny asks. She is always at my side now. She's a clever girl for her age, quick at games and funny, too. I think this must be why she is her father's favorite.

"Yes, I had sisters," I say, remembering Lysandra.

"Do you miss them?"

I don't know how to answer. I don't miss Lysandra. My life is easier now with no one to taunt me; none of the girls in Thrace would dare. And yet, there is an emptiness in my life where Lysandra used to be. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you seem so lonely," Bunny replies. "If I were Queen of Thrace, I'd have a wonderful time. I'd order everyone to do my bidding. I'd wear sparkling jewels. I'd visit all my lands--you do have lands, don't you?"

Part of the betrothal arrangement provided that I should own lands surrounding the city of Ephesus. I was eager to ride out to see them, and not only because it meant I would see Cassander in the stables before mounting my horse.

"Anyway," Bunny continues. "I thought maybe I can be your sister here in Thrace."

Her upturned nose twitches in delight. "Yes, sisters. We'll watch out for one another and keep each other's secrets. That's what sisters do, isn't it?"

"I'd like that," I say with a hopeful sigh.

"I have a secret. Of course, it isn't really mine."

"Whose, then?"

"My brother's. Prince Agathocles. He fears he offended you at the banquet and that you'll never forgive him."

Did the Prince send his little sister to tell me this? Since the banquet, I've pretended that Prince Agathocles never said those reckless things. I'm always polite when we pass one another in the corridors. I never speak against him; I didn't tell the king. I didn't even confide in Cassander. "I'm sure anything Prince Agathocles said that night was said in jest."

"Everyone loves my brother, you know. He cannot bear to think anyone dislikes him. It pains him like a thorn in the paw of a lion. He won't be able to sleep until it is plucked
out. Will you forgive him?"

Never in my life has anyone asked forgiveness for offending me. Back in Egypt, I imagined that one day Lysandra would beg my forgiveness. And that I'd give it to her. Since that may never happen now, I want to forgive Agathocles, in her place. "Of course."

"Oh, he'll be so pleased. I'll tell him you'll meet him in the garden beneath the mulberry tree!"

Bunny throws her arms around me, then runs off.

When we meet beneath the mulberry tree, Prince Agathocles is humble, his head lowered in deference. I don't know why Bunny chose the garden. There's little privacy here. A hundred servants and soldiers pass by, but at least they can't hear our words unless they strain to hear.

"I fear that I've made your first days here in Thrace uncomfortable," Prince Agathocles is saying. "It was never my intention. I was drunk and can't even remember what I said. But I am sorry."

"I forgive you," I say, and feel quite wonderful as the words come out.

He gives a grateful smile. "Would you tell me, Queen Arsinoë, what exactly it is that I said?"

"I'd rather we forgot it entirely."

"It's only that I worry--" he cuts off, as if embarrassed but no blush stains his cheeks.

"I fear you'll break my heart."

Something twists in my belly.

"You see, I love you," he says.

I don't believe him. He's teasing me. And I hate that the first time I ever hear a man say this to me, it's in jest. In Egypt, many boys professed their love for Lysandra. She knew how to turn them away, to laugh at their flattery as if it were nothing. But I don't know what to do. I feel like a fish on a hook. I'm gasping like one too.

Seeing my panic, Prince Agathocles hastens to add, "But it's a chaste love."

He says this too late. I lift my skirts and turn to run. Prince Agathocles chases after me, calling, "I want only your friendship, Arsinoë! Nothing more."

He has me confused. Rattled. We draw stares from the gardeners who snip at sprigs of rosemary. The guards at the palace doors turn their eyes our way, too. I'm embarrassed to even look at him when he catches up to me. "Just let me go, Prince Agathocles."

"I've offended you again," he says with a dramatic sigh. "I've made things terrible for you here, and all when I know you were fearful to come to Thrace."

"Who told you I was fearful?" I ask, biting my lower lip.

"My bastard brother," Prince Agathocles says. "Cassander speaks very highly of you."

Just the mention of Cassander's name stops me in my tracks. "W-what does he say about me?"

Prince Agathocles raises one eyebrow. "Why do you care?"

I hear myself swallow. I blush. The heat of it sweeps over me. Watching my face, Prince Agathocles gives a little start. Then something turns behind his eyes. "Are you fond of Cassander?" When I don't answer, he says, "He knows how to behave himself better than I do, surely."

It hurts me to lie, but I must. "I'm no fonder of him than any boy. It's only that he
saved me once, in Egypt. I owe him a debt of gratitude."

After a long pause, the prince says, "Arsinoë, I've made a mess of things. Let me make it up to you. If you find Cassander good company, I'll arrange to have him chaperone you on a tour of your lands."

I've never heard of a stable boy like Cassander serving as a chaperone to a queen, not even if he is of royal blood. But perhaps things are done differently in Thrace. Or perhaps I'm simply too eager to see Cassander again.

Agathocles is good to his word. He arranges for Cassander to accompany me on my rides. All I must do is wait until the king is busy with envoys and dismisses me. Then I'm free to slip away from the harem and visit the stables.

When I go, Styx is always pleased to see me, her tail high. Adorned with my royal livery, a bridle ornamented with golden lions fit over her face, she preens. I think Cassander is pleased to see me too, though it's more difficult to tell. A horse can show disrespect to a king or queen; a groom must always behave as if he's honored by one's royal presence.

Cassander makes a good choice for a guide, though. He knows the roads, the streams and the mountain passes of Thrace. He points out the plants I don't know and tells me about the different Thracian tribes. And though we always ride out with an accompaniment of the king's soldiers, we sometimes forget they are there.

I'm now glad that my father insisted I copy the writing's of Plato because Cassander knows them too. We debate the nature of the soul. Plato thinks a soul is made up of appetite, reason and spirit. I agree, saying it explains why people are torn between what they want and what they should want. Cassander scoffs. He says that everyone assumes their soul is ruled by an enlightened spirit and that everyone else is ruled by animal desires.

We talk about Egypt, and I even confess my dream that one day I would become Pharaoh.

Cassander doesn't laugh and that makes me like him even more.

When we reach one of my estates, Styx breaks into a gallop over the field. I let her run. Cassander gives chase on his own brown stallion. The hooves of our horses crash against the ground even as my heartbeat pounds inside my own breast. I feel giddy as ride and delighted when we stop in an orchard. Cassander and I pluck apples from the trees, and we're both breathless and laughing.

"That's my favorite sound," Cassander says, biting a juicy chunk from the fruit.
I listen, but hear only the wind, the chirp of a bird. "What sound?"
"Your laughter," he replies.
I blush hotly. With Cassander I'm always blushing.

"He's very handsome isn't he?" Bunny asks one night when she finishes teaching me a Thracian dance.
"Hmm?"
"Cassander. He's a groom now, but one day soon he will join my father's cavalry. He'll make a fine warrior, don't you think? And if he fights well, the king may grant him
lands and a wife."

A wife. The thought of some girl in Cassander's arms is so horrible that I close my eyes.

"It's better if he marries," Bunny chatters on, oblivious to my distress. "I think it will ease his pains."

"His pains?" I ask, instantly alert.

"Surely you've noticed that Cassander is sick with love," Bunny says. "He sighs dreamily. He doesn't eat with the rest of the lads from the stables. And whenever anyone asks him if there's a girl he fancies, he stammers and stares at his feet."

My breath seems to catch in my throat. "I didn't know."

"He's not likely to show it before his queen," Bunny says. "But I hope the girl he loves is suitable. As the king's bastard, he must choose wisely. If he fell in love with the wrong girl..."

"What?" I ask, breathless. "What would happen?"

She motions over her throat with one finger. "If the girl is unsuitable, she'll lose her head and Cassander will be strangled."

"Oh!" I clap my hand over my mouth. It's too terrible to contemplate.

Bunny continues. "If he's in love with a shepherd's daughter, that poses no threat. But if he fell in love with a noblewoman...why people would think he intended to make a play for the throne."

She doesn't have to tell me this. I know it. These are the kinds of things my mother always tried to teach me. My mother wanted me to see rivals. To unravel court intrigue. I never wanted to think that way. I never wanted to listen to it before and I don't want to hear it now, either. But I can't close my ears to it. Not if it has to do with Cassander.

"Do you know the name of the girl he loves?" I ask.

"I think you should ask him," Bunny replies. "Then you could warn him if the girl is unsuitable. You might save his life!"

I don't have the courage to ask Cassander about the girl he loves. I don't go to the stables that day or the day after. I avoid the feasting hall too. When I see Cassander in the palace, I turn the other way and disappear. I wish my mother was here. I wish there was any woman of any experience I could turn to. Even Lysandra. If she were here now, I would humble myself before her and ask her advice.

It takes more than a week before I am brave enough to face him.

"Your Majesty!" Cassander says, smiling to see me. "Styx has missed you."

"I've only been away a few days," I say, my eyes turned away so he cannot see how I love him.

"It seemed much longer than that," he replies.

I clear my throat. "I'm told you're unwell."

"Just an aching heart," he says, his words filled with unspoken meaning. "Nothing fatal."

I wince and my courage abandons me. If he loves another girl, it will destroy me. If he loves me, it will destroy us both. I must know, but the knowing will ruin our happiness. Better we never ask anything, never admit anything. I could be happy with Cassander's friendship. But what if Bunny is right and he loves an unsuitable girl?
"Cassander, is there--is there anyone you would marry? If you could?"
His gaze drops to his feet. He is silent for some time. Then he says, "Yes...if I could."
"Who is she?"
He glances up, only once. "I think you know, Arsinoë."

_Arsinoë_. He should say _Queen Arsinoë_. He should never use my name like that, without a title. He does it because he loves me, I think. I never believed Prince Agathocles when he said he loved me.
Cassander has not said it, and yet, I believe.

_He loves me!_

I never thought I would be loved by anyone. To be loved by Cassander... the joy brings tears to my eyes. But the tears are for other reasons, too. He _cannot_ love me. He should not love me. This is a dishonor. It is also dangerous. Cassander was wrong when he said his aching heart was nothing fatal.
"If the king knew, he would kill us both!" I cry.
This time, Cassander's gaze is steady. "We all must die someday."

It's a torment, but I must stay away. Every moment of every day, I think of Cassander. From the time I wake up till the time I go to sleep, he haunts my every thought. But I won't go to him even though being without him makes me miserable. All I wish to do is sleep, because I see Cassander in my dreams. It is only when I awaken that I remember, with a horrified start, that it would be better for us both if I never saw him again.

I repeat the facts to myself, over and over, as if it will help me to accept them. I'm the Queen of Thrace. I'm married. Cassander is my stepson. Even if he weren't, he is a bastard. He is a stable boy. To love him is to bring dishonor upon the house of Lysimachus and to shame my father and Egypt besides.

One evening, Bunny climbs into bed next to me, whispering, "I've a note from Cassander."

"How puzzling," I say, in a desperate attempt to disguise my aching heart. "Why should a stable boy send a note to the queen?"
I can't fool her. It's no good. Bunny is too close to me. She sees through me. She must feel the way I go hot all over. Then cold. Then hot again.

Bunny says, "I'm your sister here in Thrace. I'll keep your secrets. Take the note, and I'll tell no one."

I nod in surrender. Then, unfolding the little piece of papyrus, I see the words etched in a spidery lettering.

*Why won't you see me? I've been thinking of Plato. I care nothing for reason. I care nothing for lofty honor. My soul is made up of appetite and if I do not feed it, I'll die. I love you. Meet me somewhere. Anywhere. -- C*

This note is the most beautiful thing anyone has ever written to me. It's also treason.
I want to press this paper to my lips. I want to sniff it and catch the scent of him. Instead, I throw it on the fire. Bunny gasps, trying to catch it before it lands in the flames. But she's too late and we both watch it burn.
"Will you meet him?" she finally asks.
"No." But I can't leave him with silence. I call for a pot of ink and a sheet of papyrus to write upon. Bunny swears she'll deliver my message as soon as it's written, but I take my time, laboring over each word.

* I am the Queen of Thrace. I am married. You are my stepson. Even if you weren't, you are a bastard. You are a stable hand. To love you would be to bring dishonor upon the house of Lysimachus and to shame my father besides. I will not do it. I will not meet you. The only favor I can bestow upon you is my silence. For your own sake, I implore you to burn this letter and never write to me again. -- Queen Arsinoë

Writing those words, those horrible words, opens a gaping wound in me. It hurts. It pounds behind my eyes, giving me headaches that keep me in bed for days. It churns in my stomach so that I eat very little, and what I do eat, I can't keep down.

Cassander sends another note. Then another. I burn them all.
I'm so sick, so often, that the king believes I'm with child. In a fit of exuberance, he sends midwives to prod at my belly. They swear that I have good hips for birthing and that I'll one day have sons who will be kings. Like my mother, they think this is the greatest protection a woman can have.
Even Prince Agathocles brings me a congratulatory basket of pomegranates. "In case I'm not here to give you a gift when you are with child..."
"Why wouldn't you be?" I ask. "Where are you going?"
"To war," Prince Agathocles says, stoutly. "I'm going to lead the cavalry into the mountains against the tribesmen."
"May you win a great victory and return home safe," I say.
I mean it, too. Since the day Prince Agathocles apologized for his behavior, he's treated me with respect as his father's chief wife. Since that day, he and his sister have been my friends. I would be sorry if he died at war.
He tries to encourage me by saying, "I'll have Cassander with me. That boy knows the mountain passes as if he were a native tribesman himself."
My throat tightens and my voice comes out as a distressed squeak. "Cassander is going to war with you?"
"He must grow up sometime," Prince Agathocles replies. "He knows how to use a spear. Now he must wield it for our father."
By the gods, Cassander could die in war and I might never see him again! I've been so foolish to stay away from him. Now I regret every moment we've been apart.
When Prince Agathocles is gone, I nearly dash the basket of pomegranates to the floor in my haste.
"Where are you going?" Bunny asks.
"To the stables."
"No!" she cries, grabbing at my arm. "Someone might see you."
"So what? I've visited the stables a hundred times before."
"This time you aren't going to see your horse," Bunny argues. "You're going to see Cassander. It's better you meet him beneath the mulberry tree when everyone is asleep."
She knows. She's carried messages for him. She carried one from me, as well. But before now, I've behaved honorably. I've done nothing shameful. That is about to change. Even though I know Cassander loves me and I love him, I must see him. I am ashamed of myself, but it will not stop me.

"Yes," I say, a tingle of thrill in my blood. "Tell Cassander to meet me under the moon and the mulberry tree."

A servant undresses me for bed. The moment I hear her footsteps in the distance, I slip out of my room. In bare feet, I race down the back stairs. All I can think of is Cassander. To see him again! To hear his voice. To be warmed by his shy smile. I don't even feel the ground beneath my toes. It is as if I float through the moonlit garden to the mulberry tree where I see him silhouetted in the darkness.

"Arsinoë?" he whispers.
The sound of it makes my heart leap with joy. "Yes! Cassander. It's me."
"You came," he says, reaching for my hands. I let him take them. His hands are warm, his fingertips rough on my own. "Have you come to say goodbye, Arsinoë?"
"To wish you luck," I say, hurriedly, not wishing to give him cause for worry.
"I intend to become a great warrior," he says.
"And then?"
His eyes glisten. "Who knows...the world turns in strange ways."
We're silent a moment, holding hands.
"I'm not afraid to die in battle," Cassander says. "I am only afraid to die without ever having heard you say it."
I blush. I burn. I know what he wants to hear. I can't deny it anymore. "I love you, Cassander."
He smiles. It's a beautiful, dazzling smile. "Will you say it again? I think it has become my new favorite sound."
"I love you, Cassander. I love you."
Nothing in my life has ever been so easy to say.
And once I've said it, we stand there, staring at one another with grins upon our faces.

We are still standing like that, moments later, when the king's soldiers burst into the garden and arrest us.

I'm brought before King Lysimachus. His deranged dog takes my place on the throne, barking madly. In only my dressing gown, I'm utterly shamed before the court. I'm accused of unspeakable crimes. And I cannot stop trembling for my fear--and my anger.
All my life I've been someone's victim. Bullied by Lysandra in Egypt. And now, betrayed, most cruelly, by the girl who called herself my sister in Thrace.
I should never have called her Bunny.
I should have remembered that her real name was Eurydice.
I should have seen her as a rival.
"I carried notes for Cassander," she confesses to her father, big crocodile tears in her eyes. "But only because he swore to me they were innocent. I didn't know any better,
Father. The moment I realized the queen meant to betray you, I told the guards everything I knew."

The king turns his cold eyes to me. "How will you defend yourself, Arsinoë?"
Lifting my chin, I say, "I've done nothing."
"Nothing!" The king roars. "You stand before me having been caught in the night with another man."

Not another man, I think. His son. Cassander is his son, I remember. Surely that must count for something. "We only clasped hands in farewell," I say, choosing my words carefully. If I want Cassander to live until morning, I must use my wits. "We clasped hands. Nothing more. Not tonight. Not ever."
"You cannot trust her," Prince Agathocles says. "She's an immoral girl."
"Careful," King Lysimachus says, snapping a finger in the prince's direction. "She's still your queen."

"She was my queen when she professed love for me at your welcome banquet," Prince Agathocles says.
My mouth falls open in horror.
"And why is this the first I'm hearing of it?" King Lysimachus snarls.
"You seemed so happy to bring home your new bride," Agathocles says. "I thought she was young and naive. I didn't want to believe she was wicked."
In Egypt I never learned to defend myself. I hope it is not too late to learn now. "He's lying."
"Oh, but there's more," Prince Agathocles says. "A few days later, your queen asked me to meet her beneath the mulberry tree--yes, the very same tree under which she betrayed you tonight."
"That's not true!" I cry.
"Ask Bunny," Agathocles says. "Ask your guards and gardeners if you don't believe me. Some of them were witness to it. Your queen professed her love for me, and when I rebuffed her, she ran from me in anger. I called after her that I wanted only to be her friend."

The blood drains from my face as I realize how expertly I've been maneuvered and manipulated by Prince Agathocles. The king's children planned it all from the start. Bunny called herself my sister; but she's his sister.
And they both want me dead.

I fall to my knees before King Lysimachus, reaching for his feet to plead for his mercy. When I do, the horrible dog snarls, lunges, then sinks its teeth into my arm. I wrench away, too late. Fangs have pierced the tender skin of my wrist and I'm bleeding. The courtiers all gasp; even though I am a queen near disgrace, they're horrified by the sight of the bright red blood that trickles down my hand.

My blood fascinates me, however. The vibrant color. The sharp scent of it. It focuses my mind to perfect clarity.
The king holds back his dog, but smirks indulgently at the cursed creature.
And I know what I must do.
I must attack.
"Your ambitions to take your father's throne don't deceive anyone," I say, pointing at
Prince Agathocles with a bloody finger. "You wear expensive jewelry to remind all his lords that you outrank them. You lead the king's cavalry. You take it upon yourself to host in his banquet hall, welcoming his bride by saying she is only fit to give him comfort in his golden years. You said this to remind the lords of your father's age and to make them think you should take the throne from him."

Another gasp comes from the crowd. My accusation seems to startle the prince, whose eyes widen. He is so startled that he cannot stop himself from self-consciously hiding his bejeweled fingers behind his back.

"Now you drag your poor sister into it," I continue, glancing at Bunny--no, Princess Eurydice; I will never again forget her name. "You made her lie. You made her scheme. All in an effort to do away with me before I stopped you from stealing your father's throne."

Before anyone can reply, I whip my head to face the king. My hair must be wild. My face must be pale. I cannot keep my lower lip from trembling. But I force myself to look into his hard face. "Prince Agathocles hatched a plan the moment we arrived in Thrace. He saw me and he was jealous of what you have. Ask yourself, would a loyal son wait all this time to tell you of an unfaithful wife? He waited until you sent midwives to me. He waited until the moment he was most afraid I would give you another, better, son."

Prince Agathocles shouts an objection, but the king raises a hand to silence him. Then the king looks at me and his eyes narrow shrewdly. "Yet, you were caught tonight in the garden with Cassander."

I'm not guilty of what they accuse me. Still, I'm not innocent. It doesn't matter. To save Cassander's life, I'll say anything. I'll pretend anything. "I was lured there," I say.

"Do you claim that you sent no messages to Cassander?"

"I wrote only once." This is actually the truth. "And I wrote nothing shameful. This I swear on the River Styx."

I spend that night locked away. Under guard. My wrist hurts badly. The dog bite still seeps blood and throbs with pain. Still, that's drowned out by the sound of my racing heartbeat.

I'm afraid for my life. I'm more afraid for Cassander.

Why wasn't he dragged before the king as I was? What have they done with him and where is he now? Unable to sleep, I shuffle on the tile floor, back and forth, until I'm so tired and thirsty, that I sink to my knees.

In the morning, a servant dresses me in my finest garments. The expensive linen from Egypt. The pearls that were a gift at my wedding. The jeweled diadem for my hair. Whatever fate I meet today, I'll meet it in royal fashion.

Led into the throne room, I see the court assembled. The king doesn't look at me. He is dressed formally, standing the way he does when he makes judgments. I'm the one to be judged. He'll pronounce me guilty or innocent.

I'm so afraid I must push hard on the floor to keep myself standing.

King Lysimachus holds forth a scrap of paper, and begins to read.

I am the Queen of Thrace. I am married. You are my stepson. Even if you weren't, you are a bastard. You are a stable hand. To love you would be to bring dishonor upon
It is the letter I wrote to Cassander. How horrible to hear my harsh words, spoken with the king's contempt. This letter absolves me, but condemns Cassander. He should have burned this letter. He should have burned it! I glance at Princess Eurydice wondering what trick this is. But the girl they call Bunny is dressed in a simple gown today, she looks as surprised as I am. From his spot beside his sister, Prince Agathocles gapes, then snaps his mouth shut.

My husband the king takes a long, shuddering breath, then says, "This letter was found amongst Cassander's belongings. It's proof of Arsinoë's innocence. Proof of her virtue." I begin to wilt with relief, until the king says, "Let the stain and the sin fall upon Cassander. He's confessed to an intention to betray me by seducing my queen. Tomorrow he'll be put to death."

Now I swoon. No! How could Cassander confess to such a thing? And why should he pay for it with his life? "B--but he is your son. Cassander is your son!"

"My bastard," the king says, letting his eyes fall upon Prince Agathocles. "But let Cassander's death be a warning to all my sons."

The sentence having been pronounced, the court files out. King Lysimachus and I are left alone in the throne room, burning oil lamps throwing silent shadows on the walls.

"Come, take your throne," the king says.

I'm shaking all over. I don't think I can walk. But I must convince him, somehow, to change his mind about Cassander. Tentatively, I sit beside him, cradling my wounded wrist in my lap.

"Do you know why I spared you, Arsinoë?" King Lysimachus asks.

"The letter," I say.

"That was only a convenient excuse."

Such hatred is burning in my belly, that I dare to ask, "Then why did you spare me? Because my father is the Pharaoh of Egypt?"

"That is the main reason," the king admits.

He does not want to cause a war with my father, so he will not kill me. It's an advantage I will not forget again.

"But there's one more reason, Arsinoë."

"What is it?"

"I spared you because you worry Prince Agathocles," the king says, merrily. "So long as you're my wife, he'll plot against you. And better you than me."

It's clear to me now. He is happy that I lashed out at those who might harm him. He wants me to become like his horrible dog.

I plead with him. "But Cassander isn't a threat to anyone. Please, have mercy--"

"Cassander has embarrassed me," he says, bluntly. "He has also confessed. And he must die."

I stifle my sounds of anguish. Inside my head, I am screaming. No, no, no!

The king tilts his head. "Cassander did not ask for his life. He only asked to see you
once before he dies. That was the price of his confession, and we made our bargain. So go to him tonight, because he dies at dawn."

Cassander is a prisoner in a small room with bars that keep us from rushing together. I don't wait to see if the guards watch me. I don't care if this might be a trap to test my loyalty. I don't care about anything but seeing him again. Rising from a palate in the corner, Cassander comes to the bars, his eyes murky with emotion.

A guard puts a burning oil lamp on the floor near my feet, then withdraws to the hallway.

And we are alone.

"Why, Cassander?" I ask, my voice high and shrill. "Why did you confess?"

"To save you," he says simply. "I told the king that I loved you but that you had nothing for me but scorn."


He lays a finger over his lips to hush me. "I knew they would find your letter, Arsinoë."

"Why didn't you burn it?" I cry, wringing my hands.

Cassander's lips tilt into a smile. "It smelled like you. I didn't know if I would ever see you again, so I kept your letter. I traced the words, imagining you writing it. I couldn't burn it; it was the only thing you ever gave me."

Oh, how that pains me. I would have given him so much more...

"Arsinoë, I'm not afraid," he says, reaching through the bars to twine his fingers with mine. "I said that we have no choice about how we're born, but we have some say over everything else. I have a say over how I'll die."

"Then I want to die with you!" I cry.

He shakes his head. "No, Arsinoë. You have to live. You have to live for both of us."

I won't believe anything he says now. I'm sobbing. I'm going mad.

"Remember your dream that you'd be Pharaoh of Egypt? Live for that..."

He must know that I can't ever return to Egypt. "It was a silly dream of a silly girl."

He brushes the tears from my cheeks. "Arsinoë, when I die, I will blow my last breath to you. Take it in, and I'll be with you all the days of your life. We'll be one person, one soul. Everywhere you go, I'll go. Everything you see, I'll see. Every time you laugh, I'll laugh. Every time you ride Styx, I'll feel the wind on my face. You must survive, above all."

"No," I say, shaking my head. "He can't kill you. He can't kill his own son. This isn't happening."

"He can," Cassander says calmly. "And he will."

He's so brave, but I feel his fingers trembling. I clutch at him. He pulls me as close as he can, though the metal keeps us apart. His breath warms my face and I look into his beautiful eyes. These eyes, filled with fear. Filled with love. Love for me. And I'm breaking.

We kiss. It is soft. It is sweet. I breathe him in.

And when we break apart, he says, "Thank you for that. Now, nothing can hurt me. You're already breathing for me, Arsinoë. I'm already half gone."
When the rooster crows, we go out into the warm spring morning where a platform is being erected for the execution. It takes longer than it should for my husband's harem, all his children, and all of the most important nobles to assemble. Then we wait beneath blooming almond trees that weep pink and white flower petals down upon us.

King Lysimachus is solemn. This is his fault, I think. Men like him. Men like my father. Men who marry so many wives and make so many children that we must compete for attention, for power, and for survival. But it isn't only his fault. Prince Agathocles played his part. So did his sister. Now they sit here to watch the murder of their own brother.

The soldiers lead Cassander onto the wooden platform. His hands are tied behind his back. When the executioner places a knotted rope around his neck, Cassander doesn't move. He stares straight at me—and my heart batters against my ribcage. I should run to him, even if it means my own death. But his eyes beseech me to live for him; it is a horrible choice.

The king nods to the executioner and Cassander blows out his last breath.

The springtime breeze carries it my way and I gasp, filling my lungs. I hold it inside me as the executioner twists the rope, cutting off Cassander's air.

My beloved begins to strangle. As I watch, I squeeze my hands into fists, wanting nothing more than to batter at the executioner and make him stop. I want to save Cassander. I'm desperate for him to live. Then, as Cassander's lips begin to turn blue and his eyes bulge in agony, I want nothing more than for him to die.

Die. Die swiftly. Be free of these pains! Be free of this world and its betrayals.

But if Cassander lives inside me now, he'll never die. For as I watch them murder him, I make this solemn vow.

I will have revenge.

I will have revenge on King Lysimachus. I will have revenge upon Prince Agathocles and his sister. I will destroy each and every one of them. From this day forward, no one—not even Lysandra, wherever she is now—will ever hurt me or anyone I love without paying a price. And I will make it steep. My enemies will pay in blood. For I have Cassander's breath inside me. To hurt me now is to hurt him and I'll defend him with the ferocity of a hippopotamus.

Until now, I've been only that soft-hearted Princess of Egypt who did not want to listen to my mother's warnings. That fool of a girl who did not want to see rivals or learn to play political games.

That girl, that princess, dies with Cassander. She must die.

For today I'm born anew.

Today I'm born a true queen...and an avenger. My rivals will learn to fear me. And when I've destroyed them, I'll take those dreams I had on the banks of the Nile and make them true. Somehow, I'll make them true.

For Cassander, I will return to Egypt.

I will become Pharaoh.

And we will both live forever.

AUTHOR'S NOTE
Based on the life of Queen Arsinoë II who was born into the Greek-Macedonian Ptolemaic Dynasty that ruled Egypt, this story imagines an explanation for the ruthless woman who would become one of history's greatest survivors. Except for Cassander, I based all the characters upon known historical figures. King Lysimachus would go on to lose the support of his people--in part--for murdering a son. That's what gave me the germ of my story idea.

It took Arsinoë years, but she eventually *destroyed* the royal family of Thrace. She eventually returned to Egypt, became queen, and was anointed Pharaoh in her own right. She planned victorious wars. She won an Olympic medal for horse harnessing. And she was deified as an incarnation of the goddess Isis, whom the Greeks believed was the eternal goddess of spring.

***

Stephanie Dray writes historical fiction, fantasy and magical realism. Using the transformative power of magic realism, Stephanie Dray illuminates the stories of women in history so as to inspire the young women of today. She remains fascinated by all things Egyptian and has–to the consternation of her devoted husband–collected a house full of cats and ancient artifacts. Her critically acclaimed debut novel, *Lily of the Nile*, begins the epic story of Cleopatra's daughter. The sequel, *Song of the Nile*, has been nominated for a RITA® Award. The third book in the trilogy is expected to release in 2013.

[Back to Table of Contents]
Spring Perfection
By
Leslie Dubois

I love the smell of springtime. To me, it smells like hot dogs, linseed oil, and the tight stitching on a new baseball. Spring brings my favorite pastime, the happiest time of my life. But not today.

It’s the top of the fifth inning. We, Charleston Preparatory School, are ahead one to zero. I’m pitching a perfect game. It’ll be my first perfect game since joining the baseball team last year as a freshman. A perfect game is the dream of any pitcher. I mean, in Major League Baseball there have only been twenty perfect games ever! Ever! And I was on my way to getting one as a sophomore in high school. A perfect game means no one gets on base—no walks, no errors, no mistakes. Unfortunately, I don't know if this is possible.

My head is not in the game. It’s somewhere else completely. With Reyna. I made a promise to her and because of this stupid game, I don't know if I’ll be able to keep it or not. Of course, the game isn't stupid. Baseball is the greatest game on the planet. And if you ask my mother, she'll say it’s the most important game of my life. But then again, she'll say every game is the most important game of my life. That's just the way she is. It will take too much time to explain my mother. And this isn't a story about her.

In her defense, this is a special game. It isn't every day that a high school team gets to have a spring training game with a college team. And it certainly isn't every day that the high school team beats the college team. But winning will mean nothing without Reyna by my side.

I look over at her normal place in the dugout, where she usually sits next to Doc. She wants to be a doctor one day, so he lets her tag along to all the games and watch how to take care of different sports injuries. It’s free medical training for her future career.

Today she isn't there and I know why. The reason tears at my heart. I momentarily step off the mound in order to get my emotions in check. Most people think nerves are kicking in. They think I realize that it's been five innings and I haven’t allowed a single batter to reach first base. But that’s not what is eating away at me like termite in a tree house. I’m a bad friend. I should be by her side instead of worrying about my baseball stats.

I stick my face into my glove and inhale the scent of the linseed oil. It calms me for a moment and I step back on the mound.

How did I ever get to this point? How did Reyna grow to be so important in my life that I find myself thinking about her instead of pitching my perfect game?

I shake thoughts of her from my mind and throw out a pitch.

Strike three.

I’ve survived another inning. Finally, I can retreat to the dugout and get my head together. I try to purge thoughts of her. I try to concentrate. I try to focus on Carson at bat, but I can't. Instead, I think of how Reyna and I first met.

The Day that Changed my Life
The day my life changed was November 13th, 2002. It was a Tuesday in English class, which meant reading time. But to sixth grade boys, reading time was a synonym for a little game we called Flame it and Blame it. It was a highly intellectual game in which a winner was anyone who could fart in class and successfully blame it on someone else. I was a "Flame it and Blame it" champion three weeks running.

The nation had just celebrated the one-year memorial of the September 11th terrorists attacks, yet at that time, the most serious thing I thought of was how to keep my fart game-winning streak alive. What can I say; I was a pretty superficial kid.

That was the day Reyna Lewis breezed into my life. I couldn't take my eyes off of her from the moment she walked into the door and handed her schedule to Mr. Eckhart. Then her eyes scanned the room, looking for an empty seat.

She had a big, dark, curly Afro that seemed like it bounced in slow motion. She had an arm full of shiny bracelets that played music with each step she took. I had never seen anyone wear so many bracelets on one arm at one time in my life.

At the wise old age of 12, the girls and boys of Charleston Preparatory School were convinced of only of two things:

Boys were gross.

Girls were as boring as watching paint dry on grass.

I was pretty sure both of those facts were engraved on bathroom doors somewhere. It was almost sacrilege for the two groups to mix at that age.

As Reyna made her way through the classroom, stuck-up blond girl after stuck-up blond girl refused to let her sit down. Not because she was black, but because she was new. She hadn't yet proven what social group she belonged. No one wanted to take a chance by including her and later figuring out she didn't so they'd made a mistake. Most people thought it was best to adopt a wait-and-see attitude.

Reyna lifted her head unphased and continued walking toward the back of the class where all the stinky—literally stinky—boys were found.

"You can sit here," I said, offering the empty seat next to me. I heard my voice before I even thought the words.

Reyna looked at me and smiled. Suddenly my mouth went dry and my legs turned to putty. Thank goodness I was sitting down.

After taking the seat next to me, she asked what I was reading. At least, I think that's what she said. The rest of class was a blur. All I remember was meeting her for lunch later that day.

"Why are you being so nice to me?" she asked as we shared a table in the cafeteria.

I shrugged. I really didn't know why. I had never sat with a girl at lunch. Ever.

Something about Reyna just felt right though.

She smiled again and I felt that funny feeling. If she kept smiling at me like that, I might not be able to walk again. "That's okay. You don't have to explain. I don't think I've ever eaten a meal with a white person before. I just feel comfortable with you, though."

"You mean, you don't know any white people?"

She shook her head. "I've spent most of my life in Puerto Rico."

"You're Spanish? You're black and Spanish, just like Roberto Clemente."

She started babbling rapidly in Spanish. When she noticed my confused look, she stopped short and covered her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry. I was just really excited you knew
about Roberto Clemente. I love baseball.

A girl who loved baseball? This was going to be an amazing friendship.

Just then, my cell phone buzzed. Cell phones weren't exactly allowed at Charleston Prep for most people. But I was Scott Kincaid. I wasn't most people. A lot of exceptions were made for me.

I dismissed the call and stuffed the phone into my pocket. I couldn't deal with my mother right at that point. She was probably just calling to yell at me for not finishing my workout that morning or to remind me to run extra laps after school.

"You don't want to answer that?" my new friend asked.

I rolled my eyes. "It's just my mother. She'll have plenty of time to yell at me later. Right now, I'm trying to eat."

Reyna looked concerned. It was like she could somehow sense the pain in the relationship between my mother and me.

"In my village in Puerto Rico, there was an old woman nicknamed La Cienega who once told me that someone can only make you unhappy if you let them."

I thought about this for a second. No one had ever put it that way before. And three different therapists had tried.

"Is that why you were able to smile, even though those girls in class rejected you?"

"That wasn't my smile. That was La Cienega's smile."

I looked at her, confused.

"I'll tell you about her later. Not today. You're not ready. You'll just think I'm weird."

She was right about that. I did think she was weird. And different. And exciting. And unique. She was the most fascinating person I had ever met in my life.

**Top of the Sixth**

We fail to score in the bottom of the fifth. Now it's my time to go out and keep my perfect game going. As I walk out to the mound, I feel that maybe I'm still that superficial kid from the sixth grade. I like to think that I've changed a lot, that my friendship with Reyna has made me a better and deeper person. But sometimes I'm not sure.

Now is a good example.

What am I doing here? This is just an exhibition game. It really means nothing in the long run.

I throw a strike. The batter doesn't even swing. He expected me to throw high and away, like the last time he was at bat. But this is why I'm so good. I have so many pitches in my artillery, they never know what to expect from me. I have an awesome slider, curve ball and even a knuckle ball. And don't get me started on my fastball. I've already broken the high school record for fastest pitch ever thrown.

I retire the first batter then look out into the crowd. I carefully avoid my mother's eyes. I don't know what to expect from her. Yes, I'm winning the game, but sometimes winning isn't enough for that women. I know she wants this perfect game. It's not like I'll get a trophy or anything for her to add to my side of the trophy room at home. Although I could totally imagine her going to a trophy store just to create one for me.

My mother wants this so badly because of the publicity it will bring. I know she thinks it'll help me get signed with a team. But I'm only a sophomore in high school.
There's no telling what can happen between now and when I graduate. And what if I get injured or something? One stinking ACL tear, and my career is probably over. I shiver at the thought. I don't know what I'd do with myself if I wasn't able to play sports. I love sports, but always having to win is starting to wear me down, like tires on a racecar. It's too much pressure. Besides, I want to go to college anyway first before jumping into professional sports.

Instead of looking at my mother I look in the stands at Kimberely Mierson, my current girlfriend. Why isn't Reyna my girlfriend? I'm not sure. Maybe I'm too afraid to lose her friendship. Or maybe I'm just plain afraid.

The rest of the inning is a blur. I throw six strikes so fast that my arm gets a little sore. I know better than to rub my shoulder in public though. Besides it being bad luck, my mother would be in the dugout before I could say 'Bengay,' making sure I was okay and demanding the trainer give me something so my performance doesn't suffer.

Instead of massaging my shoulder I plopped down in my seat, crossed my arms and closed my eyes. Then I thought about La Cienega's smile.

La Cienega's Smile

Weeks after that first encounter in English class, we sat together on the merry-go-round in the playground.

"I dare you to kiss me," Reyna said suddenly.
"What?" I said, nearly choking on my tofu turkey wrap. I wasn't a vegetarian or anything, but Reyna was. And there was just something about her that made me want to be wherever she was and do whatever she did. That included eating this disgusting concoction.
"I said I, dare you to kiss me."
"I heard you, but…but why?" I really couldn't believe what I was hearing. Did she really want us to kiss?
Reyna drew in a breath and made her cheeks big like a blowfish. She always did that when she needed to think. She held her breath for several seconds then let it out as she said, "According to my sources, we're the only two sixth graders who haven't had a first kiss. Most everyone in our class has gone beyond kissing."
I stared at her, completely confused. I remember totally not understanding what she meant by 'beyond kissing,' but I knew I wanted to try it. And I wanted to try it with her.
"I mean, I know you would rather kiss Amanda Stratfield, but I figure you can practice on me. That way, when you finally kiss Amanda, you'll be really good at it."
I didn't really want to kiss Amanda Stratfield. She was actually kind of annoying, the way she always asked me stupid questions about baseball just so she could have an excuse to talk to me. I mean, really, she doesn't even know what a sacrifice fly is. Reyna does. She would never ask me that.
"Um…" I managed to say. I couldn't think of anything else. I didn't know what I was supposed to say in this situation.
"We can go behind the slide if you want, so no one will see," Reyna said.
"Um…okay."
Reyna grabbed my hand and pulled me to a secluded spot behind the slide at the edge of the playground, a spot hidden from the rest of the field. And then we did it. We
kissed. We kissed a lot. Reyna was a little bit of a perfectionist, so I knew we’d be at it for a while until we got it just right.

"Did you feel that?" she asked me after our fifth attempt at a successful kiss without teeth getting in the way.

"What?"

"A flutter in the pit of your stomach. I felt it in mine."

I closed my eyes and thought about it. Yeah, I’d felt the flutter. Whatever it was, I had felt it everywhere.

"Yeah, I felt it, too," I said.

"La Cienega just smiled."

I looked at her and smiled. I couldn’t stop smiling. I probably had the biggest, stupidest grin on my face. But I couldn't help it. I was just that happy. "You always talk about this Cienega person. Are you finally gonna tell me who she is?"

Reyna sat cross legged on the ground and pulled me down next to her. She closed her eyes and rested her head on my shoulder. She seemed as though she was being transported to another time and place. I just sat there, quietly waiting for her to speak. And secretly hoping that soon the kissing would start again.

"In my village in Puerto Rico," she finally began, "there was this old blind woman named Milagros. That means Miracle, you know?"

I nodded as if I knew. I really didn't.

"It was an appropriate name. She was the miracle of the village. If there was someone having a hard time paying their bills, they would miraculously find a wad of cash under their door. If someone didn't have enough to eat, they'd miraculously find a bag of rice and a chicken on their doorstep."

"Wait, a live chicken?"

"Yes, a live one. That's how we roll in Puerto Rico." She laughed for a moment and then suddenly became serious. "Everyone knew the gifts came from her. She was so giving and caring. She took care of everyone. She even tried to take care of my mother when...when she got sick." Reyna paused for a moment as if holding back tears. "After my mom died, I thought my world had ended. I thought I would never be happy again. It actually made me mad to pass Milagros on her porch every day and see her smiling at nothing. I honestly believed that no one in the world should be happy, because my mother was gone." She paused again and took a deep, calming breath. "Anyway, one day I got too angry to hold it in. I marched up to her and asked her why in the world was she smiling? Actually, I think what I said translates more accurately into, 'Why the hell are you smiling?' But do you know what she said?"

I shook my head.

"She said she smiles because she's blind."

I looked at Reyna oddly.

"Yeah, I was confused too. But then she said, 'It's not what you see that makes you truly happy. What you see may not always be there. Oh, but how you feel never has to go away. There's nothing better than that tingly happiness that courses through your body and lands in your face, causing your cheeks to rise into a smile. Because I'm blind, I don't get distracted by what's really there and what's not. I get to have that feeling all the time.'"

I sat in silence for a while as I let those words sink in. I had to admit, those were probably the most beautiful few sentences I’d ever heard in my life. No wonder the words
had stuck with Reyna for so long. But I was still confused about something. "Rey, I thought you said her name was Milagros. Where does La Cienega come in?"

"That was her nickname," Reyna said. "It's not actually even a real word, but it's roughly translated to something like 'the marsh.' I used to sit on her porch for hours and watch the sun rise or set over the marsh. It was beautiful and peaceful and made me feel like...like...home."

"Well, we have marshland here. This is Charleston, after all. Do you feel at home here?"

Reyna shook her head. "It's not the same. Yes, there is marshland here, but this isn't an island. There's something different about living on an island. There's something different about the feel of the wind, the smell of air and the taste of the breeze. The sunset on an island surrounds you and feels like warmth is hugging you."

For a moment I thought she was getting confused in the English language. Her English was nearly perfect since her father was American, but sometimes I noticed she couldn't exactly translate things the way she wanted. But after I thought about it for a moment more, I realized she had said exactly what she meant. I also realized that one day I was going to help her have the feeling again.

Top of the Seventh

The sixth inning still brings no score. We are still ahead one to zero.

I find myself hoping the other team will hit a home run or something and take the pressure off of me. Then I can fake some shoulder strain and get out of the game. I will head out to the locker room and sneak off to the surprise I had for Reyna. Yeah, that can work. I just have to get out of here.

I throw a fastball straight down the middle. Just as I thought, the batter hits a long one down the left field line. The ball is so out of here. But then Derek suddenly turns into Spider-man and nearly scales the wall to make an incredible catch.

The crowd explodes in applause. The batter is out.

This means I have to continue my perfect game. I catch a glimpse of Sam in the bleachers. She’s standing with her hands on her hips and glaring at me as if I’ve just beaten a baby seal with my bat. My behavior is unacceptable to her. Somehow she knows what I’m trying to do. She’ll kill me if I ruin this chance at a perfect game. She already told me at the beginning of the season that there’s a brand-new Mustang convertible waiting for me if I accomplish this. To be honest, this game means more to her than it does to me.

Returning to the dugout, I try to block out Coach, who is yammering in my ear about being only nine outs away from making history. No high school student has ever pitched a perfect game against a college team. Even though this is just an exhibition game, I’m sure it’ll be on the local news tonight. It might even make the national news.

I’m not sure why I’m so on today. Why can't any of the College of Charleston players hit against me? It's like I'm unstoppable, and I'm not even trying that hard. I don't even want to play. It was a last-minute addition to our schedule. I had my day with Reyna all planned when Coach called me in his office yesterday afternoon and told me I would be pitching.

At the beginning of the game, I just wanted it to be over as soon as possible. That
was why I kept throwing strike after strike. But by the bottom of the fourth, when no one had made it on base, I started hearing whisperings of a perfect game. And now, I start to feel the pressure of the possible perfect game.

I lean my head back and close my eyes, trying to drown out all the sounds of the cheering fans, the crack of the ball against the bat, even the sound of cleats on grass. These are sounds that I usually love. But today, I just want it to be over. I have to get to Reyna. I can't let her down again… I shudder at the thought of the last time I’d let her down.

**Seventh Grade Dance**

*I’m not in love with Reyna. At least, that’s what I’ve been telling myself for the past five years. Even though she was my first kiss due to a little playground experiment in the sixth grade, and even though she was the only person who actually knew me...the real me, I loved her like a friend and nothing more. Or so I thought.*

I thought taking her to the seventh grade dance would be no big deal. But if she was only a friend to me, why was it so hard to ask her to go to the dance in the first place? Why did my palms get sweater than a pork chop wrapped in plastic on a porch every time I thought about asking her? Why did it take me two days to gather up the courage? And why did my heart nearly stop when she took a deep breath and blew out her cheeks after I finally did? While I stared at her with her cheeks puffed out, I knew she was searching for that tingle in her stomach. She always looked for some feeling or sign from La Cienega in order to know whether to do something or not. I sure hoped La Cienega wasn't taking a nap or something and would send her the sign she needed.

Truth is, I wanted to feel that tingle too. The last time I’d felt it was when we’d kissed on the playground the year before. We’d never tried anything else since. Reyna was so convinced I liked Amanda and not her. I don't know why I never corrected her. Maybe this would be my chance. Maybe I would get to kiss her at the seventh grade dance and if I felt that tingle again, I would know. I’d know for sure she was the one.

Instead of responding with a simple yes or no, Reyna said, "Are you sure, Scottie?"

"Yeah, I’m sure. I want to take you to the dance."

She sighed and said, "Does your mother know?"

My mother. Samantha Kincaid. She was a like gale force wind of hate and irrationality. The only time I ever spoke to her was about sports. Even in the seventh grade I knew not to give Sam too many details about my personal life. She would just find a away to criticize me.

"Yeah, sure, she knows," I lied. Of course my mother didn't know. If she knew I was contemplating going to a dance with a black person, she'd probably pack me up and ship me off to some sort of ridiculous and unnecessary sport camp until I changed my mind. She'd done it before. When I told her I wanted to quit track for baseball, she sent me to a sprinting camp in Oregon. I didn't even know there was such a thing as a sprinting camp. Anyway, I didn't change my mind. And when she saw how fast I could pitch, she was the one who cleared off a space in our trophy room for my future baseball trophies.

Reyna smiled and said, "Okay, let's go." It was the happiest I'd ever seen her. She almost skipped off to her next class.

But things didn't go as planned. The dance never happened.
I remember getting Coach to help me rent a tuxedo. That was something Sam would never agree to, so I knew not to even ask. The most formal piece of clothing she owned was a pair of running shoes my little brother Stu spilled glitter on.

The night of the dance, I put on the suit and held Reyna's corsage in my hand as I stared in the mirror. I looked like a complete dork. What other seventh grade boy would wear a tuxedo? Most of the other boys didn't even have real dates. They were just planning on showing up and hanging against the wall for most of the night. I was making too big of a deal about this. Reyna would think I was crazy.

I quickly stripped, threw on a pair of khakis, a Carolina Panthers jersey, and the tuxedo jacket. I stared at myself in the mirror again. I looked pretty good, if I do say so myself.

Next it was time to get Sam to take me to school. Unfortunately, I was only thirteen, which meant no wheels. Sam still held a lot of power over my life. If I was sixteen and had my own car, I would have just driven myself. I would have snuck out the window if I had to. But at this age, I needed her permission.

"Can you give me a ride to school?" I asked Sam as she sat on the couch watching a game on ESPN.

"School? Why do you want to go to school? It's Thursday night," she said without taking her eyes off the television. She was watching Duke play and wanted to make sure they lost. She hated Duke. They rejected her college application because the fact that she could run a four-minute mile didn't outshine her lackluster grades. Sixteen years later, she was still holding a grudge.

"There's a dance tonight. I want to go." I was way too innocent back then. I should have concocted some story about a mandatory basketball practice or something, but I never expected the evening to proceed as it did.

Sam tore her eyes away from the television and looked me up and down. "You look ridiculous," she said before turning her attention back to the TV.

"Six minutes on the clock. Just wait ‘til the end of the game." She waved me off.

In a basketball game, I knew six minutes on the clock could very well be fifteen or twenty actual minutes. I went upstairs to obsess over my look for another twenty minutes.

When the game was over, I went back down. "Can we go now?" I asked her.

She was in the kitchen making one of her God-awful protein smoothies. The way she angrily slammed cabinets shut, I knew Duke must have won. She was in a really bad mood. "You're not going anywhere, Scott." "Why not?"

"I did some research. Made some calls. You're going with Reyna Lewis?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Unacceptable."

"Why?" I asked, completely in shock. How had she found out about Reyna? I bet she called Coach. Sam was a pro at spying on me. I should have told him not to tell her anything in case she asked.

"Don't be stupid, Scott. She's a gold-digging whore. All she wants is your money."

This was typical Sam speak. She had this idea in her head that I was worth millions in future sports contracts.

"I don't have any money, Sam. I'm only thirteen. She's my friend. She's my best
friend. I promised her."

Sam turned on the blender. She probably didn’t hear a word I’d said. When she finally turned off the blender, I repeated myself but she didn’t care. She poured two glasses and sat down at the table.

"Sit," she said, placing a glass of the disgusting protein junk in front of me. "Drink that. Then we're going for a run."

"No, we’re not. I'm going to the dance."

"The hell you are. Dating a girl like Reyna could ruin your persona and irreparably damage your future earning potential. It’s out of the question. Drink."

Tears stung in my eyes. I absolutely refused to let her see me cry. To avoid an onslaught of tears, I chugged the protein drink just to distract my emotions. When I finished, she proceeded to lecture me about my responsibilities as a future professional athlete and how I had to lay the groundwork now in order to have a successful future. An hour later, we went for a run and I never made it to that dance.

The next morning at school, I waited for Reyna by her locker. She took one look at me and then chose a different route to her first class. She could avoid me for first period, since we were in different math classes. But she'd have to talk to me in English.

All through first period, I rehearsed what I would say. I had to figure out something to tell her that would make her forgive me. That something didn't include what my insane mother had said. I thought she’d be even more hurt if she knew how my mother felt about her.

So instead, as soon as she entered English class, I said, "I'm so sorry, Rey. I got caught up playing video games and totally lost track of time."

She stared at me incredulously. "Video games?"

I nodded.

"Which one?" She crossed her arms and stared at me.

She knew I was lying. She had to. I was such a bad liar and she knew me so well I wouldn't be able to lie to her if I’d planned it for weeks. She was sure to see through this last-minute fib.

"Grand Theft Auto," I said, naming the first game I could think of.

She raised an eyebrow. "Grand Theft Auto? You hate Grand Theft Auto. You say it's depressing."

She was right about that. We'd had a conversation about it almost a year ago. How did she remember things like that? She’d caught me lying and I had no idea what to say. Instead, I just stood there with my mouth hanging open.

Reyna rolled her eyes and stormed off to the other side of the room, away from the seat next to mine where she always sat.

Before sitting down, I went and placed her corsage on her desk. "I really am sorry, Rey," I said before taking my seat.

I spent the entire class period staring at Reyna as she stared at that red hibiscus. The flower was actually called La Flor Maga and was the national flower of Puerto Rico. I had to have it specially ordered.

Reyna continued to avoid me for the next two periods. But at lunchtime, she sat down in front of me and said three little words that I’d been waiting for all day. "I forgive you."

And that was that. We never spoke of it again.
Top of the eighth

It is now 5:15. I check on the watch Reyna gave me for my 14th birthday almost three years ago. The sun is scheduled to set at 7:43 pm tonight. I know because I checked about thirty-five times that morning. Her surprise is located an hour away by boat. If the game ends in the next twenty minutes, I'll still have time to shower, change, pick up Rey and get her to the special spot before sunset. That is, if there's no traffic. There’s always traffic. I’m running out of time and options. I’m beginning to panic.

This day is such an important day in Reyna's life. I have to be there for her. I just have to. If this game doesn't end in twenty minutes, I'm going to have a very difficult decision to make.

I take my stance and get ready to throw out the first pitch of the eighth inning.

The Surprise

Ten years ago today, Reyna's mother died. Usually, she and her father try to make it back to Puerto Rico to visit her grave, but this year they couldn't. Her father had to travel to Florida to take care of his sick mother, and he didn't want Reyna leaving the country on her own.

I think it’s sad how most people feel spring is a time of rebirth and new beginnings, but for Reyna it will always be a time of loss and mourning. That's why she wasn't at the game. She was probably sitting alone in her room, trying her best to feel La Cienega's smile.

When I looked in the sky and noted the hour, I dashed to the locker room faster than a cheetah on roller skates. I know my teammates think I’m odd, but I have someplace to be. I have a promise to keep.

After the quickest shower ever, I hop into my Jeep and speed over to Reyna's house. Her front door is locked, so I scale the wall and look into her bedroom window. Just like I thought, she’s lying on her bed when I arrive.

"What are you doing here?" she asks as she opens the window and helps me in.

"How was the game?"

"Don't worry about the game," I say as I climb through. I fold her into my arms. She knows why I'm there and it makes her start to cry softly. I want to tell her that no game could mean to me as much as she does, but I don't know if that’ll make her cry even more. So I just hold her and let her cry. I know she isn't really crying over a baseball game anyway.

When she calms down somewhat, I say, "Let's go. It's time for your surprise."

"What? You're still doing that?" she asked, wiping away tears. "I thought because of the game you would cancel."

"Nope, we're still on. Get your stuff."

"What kind of surprise is it? Where are we going?"

"Well, if I told you that, it wouldn't be much of a surprise, now would it?"

She smiles and mumbles something in Spanish. I’m just about to ask her what she said when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I take a deep breath, hoping it isn't my mother. Unfortunately, it’s worse.
"Who is it?" Reyna asked.
"Kimmie."
"Yeah, Kimmie. Your girlfriend, remember? Do you have plans with her tonight? Maybe we can do this surprise thing later."

Technically, Kimmie is my girlfriend. At least, I think she is. I honestly think she broke up with me last week. But that could have been Karly. I have trouble keeping girls’ names straight sometimes.

I always thought the term ‘girlfriend’ was kind of odd in my situation. None of those girls are really my friend. I mean, most of them didn't know the difference between a strike and a touchdown. Reyna is my only real friend who is a girl. Actually, she’s probably my only real friend, besides my brother. But for some reason, we’ve never dated. None of my relationships ever have happily ever afters. Maybe I’m too afraid to ruin what Rey and I have to try something more with her.

I dismiss the call then send a quick text to my brother, letting him know I'm okay and not to expect me home. Then I toss the phone on Reyna's desk. I plan on leaving it there. I don't want any distractions. "No. Today. It has to be today," I say to answer Rey's question. "You got five minutes to get ready. We're losing daylight."
"Losing daylight?" she asks. "Where exactly are you taking me?"
"Don't worry about that. Oh, and bring a sleeping bag," I add before leaving the room.

"Sleeping bag? Sleeping bag?" I hear her call out after me.
Reyna won't stop asking questions during the entire car ride to the marina. I just smile and let her keep guessing. It’s fun to hear all of her conjectures. She guesses everything from Detroit to Disney World. Though I have no idea what possesses her to think I would take her to Detroit.

"The marina?" she asks as I park. "Scott, did you buy me a boat?" She smiles. Though many of our classmates do own their own boats, she knows I can't afford one. Not until I get that big MLB contract, anyway.
"We're using Harrison's." I say, referring to our classmate, Harrison McKinley III. He's a senior on the football team who owes me a favor.
"Where are we going?"
"Stop asking questions and grab your stuff."
I practically run to the dock and toss in my gear. Reyna is a step behind giggling with excitement.

I'm not an expert at sailing by any means, but Harrison taught me enough so that we make good time to the little island I've picked out where we’ll spend the night. One that has the perfect balance of marshland and view of the sky.

Charleston has lots of little privately owned islands along the coast. It took me two weeks to find the perfect one for us and then another three weeks to convince the owner to let me use it.

Reyna is quiet and reflective the entire boat ride over. It's like the sea air awakens a familiar part of her. She is staring off into the sky. I know she’s thinking of Puerto Rico.

I dock the boat on the island, toss out our stuff then reach for her hand. She pauses as she looks at the shore. She spies the blanket, the radio and the cooler. Then she sees the picture of her mother that I placed in a frame of the Puerto Rican flag.
"Oh, Scottie," she says as she starts to put things together.
"I hope this is okay," I say as I help her out of the boat. "I know this is a hard time for you and I know you’d rather be on your home island, remembering your mother. But I thought, just for this year, you could share this island with me, your best friend, and I could think of your mother with you."

She’s quiet and I think for a moment that I’ve made a mistake. I was too presumptuous. What made me think she’d want to spend this day with me? What made me think she’d want to wallow in the sadness of her mother's death? This was a stupid idea.

"You're so much more than a friend to me, Scottie," she says, burying her face into my chest. I wrap my arms around her and kiss the top of her head.

I'm not much of a cook, but Reyna seems to enjoy the sandwiches I made. We wash it down with virgin pina coladas, which didn't stay as cold as I’d hoped. Reyna doesn't seem to mind.

As the sun sets, I wrap my arm around her and say, "So, is La Cienega smiling?"

She looks at me and says, "We both are."

Real Perfection

Reyna and I stay up most of the night talking. She tells me stories about her mother and about Puerto Rico. Though I’d heard them all before, I don't mind hearing them again.

We take our time gathering our things the next morning. It was a perfect night and neither one of us wants it to end. Reyna is the only girl I can spend the night with on a completely pure and platonic level. Our relationship transcends anything physical.

Reyna is an excellent student and I think she will be upset with me for making her late for school the next morning, but she isn't. Instead, she suggests we go somewhere for coffee and continue our conversation. How is it I never get tired of talking to her?

Around noon, I drop her off at home and then drive the few blocks over to my own house.

My little brother Stu is sitting on the curb. This worries me. He should be in school.

"What's wrong?" I say, hopping out of my car.

"What's wrong?" he says incredulously. "What's wrong? I should be asking you that. Where have you been, Scott?" He stands and starts looking me up and down, as if searching for an injury.

"I'm fine," I say, grabbing my stuff out of my car.

"Well, not for long. You better hope you have a broken achilles or an enflamed tendon or whatever it is you athletes get. That is the only way Sam's going to forgive you for what you did."

"Is she really mad?" I ask, even though I know the answer.

"Scottie, I love you, so don't take this the wrong way. But that is the dumbest thing you've ever said in your life. Of course she's mad. You walked out during the eighth inning of what was supposed to be your first perfect game. A perfect game. Perfect! What were you thinking? I thought this was what you wanted."

I shake my head. "Nah, I thought that was what I wanted. But I think I found what true perfection is."
AUTHOR’S NOTE

Continue the story of Scott and Reyna in Nothing Else Matters.

***


Back to Table of Contents
Being a seventeen-year-old guy without a car sucks big time. The possibility of not being able to afford to go senior prom with your girlfriend blows too. However, working at an ice cream shop and having to wear a dorky paper cap is by far the worst.

“Can you work late and close up by yourself?” Mike, my manager, asked me.

“Yeah.” Wiping down the black marble countertop, I glanced up at the clock. It was 9:00 p.m., an hour left before we closed.

“Have you asked Gabrielle to prom yet?” Mike asked. He took off his paper cap and ran a hand through his thick brown hair.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I kind of want to make sure I have the cash first. This week’s paycheck should be enough, I hope.” I grabbed a bottle of blue glass cleaner and made my way to the front window to scrub off the sticky fingerprints.

“It’d really suck if she said yes and you couldn’t afford to go,” Mike said.

“Yeah, sure would,” I replied. “Then again, it would suck if she said no.”

“No kidding.” I watched a blue drop of cleaner slide down the glass, the smell of ammonia mixed with the sweet smell of waffle cones.

“Isn’t prom, like, this weekend?”

“Saturday night.” Today was Thursday.

“Glad you gave yourself plenty of time,” Mike crumpled his paper hat and threw it at me.

I caught it, then lined up my shot and tossed it in the trash. “Two points.”

“Good shot. I’m heading out. Thanks for taking over.” Mike untied the white apron from his waist and tossed it over his shoulder. As he exited, the bells on the door jingled.

A woman with a huge multi colored purse slung over her shoulder walked in as Mike left.

“Good evening and welcome to Leonardo’s. Savannah’s most famous ice cream parlor, established in 1919. The city’s best ice cream and sandwiches. My name is Tim,” I greeted her with our standard spiel.

“Your hat says Tim ICG, what does ICG mean?”

“Ice Cream Guy,” I replied.

“Creative.” She smiled.

“I try to come up with something different every time,” I said. Each shift we got a new paper hat. We took a crayon and wrote our name on it. Some employees drew pictures on their hats as well. “What can I get for you?”

She looked through the glass display case. “There are so many choices here.”

“Forty three flavors, all made fresh right here,” I said, motioning toward the back room. “In our kitchen.”

“You sure have a lot of Hollywood memorabilia,” she said as she pointed at the wall.

“The owner is a movie producer and this is stuff he’s collected over the years. Plus,
there are a lot of original pictures and things from the three original owners.”

While she walked over to a wall adjacent to the ice cream display case, I noticed she stood about five and a half feet tall, half a foot shorter than me. Her short red hair poked out from under a straw hat. Her pale skin had a few slight wrinkles. I guessed her around my mom’s age, maybe late thirties.

“Are you from around here?” I asked.

“No, I’m from Pennsylvania,” she said. Her back was to me as she stood in front of a shadowbox on the wall. Lining the entire wall were pictures and posters. So many that only very small areas of the red wall was visible. I knew each item on the wall by heart, having cleaned the glass on every piece many times.

“Is this your first time in Savannah?” I asked, trying to make small talk. Rule number twenty in Leonardo’s employee manual is to show customers southern hospitality. That meant small talk.

“No, I visited here as a child. I had family who lived in the Victorian district.”

“Well, they are still here?”

“No.” She turned to face me.

“How long are you staying?”

“Just until Saturday.” She reached in her bag and pulled out Leonardo’s brochure and laid it on the counter. “The concierge gave this to me. He said it gives patrons ten percent off.”

The front of the brochure had pictures of the interior of Leonardo’s and a history of the store. The backside had a stamp from the Marshall House.

“Just let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll be glad to take your order,” I said.

“Can you give me a few more minutes?” she said as she looked at the wall of pictures.

I figured she was finished with small talk. The back door buzzer sounded. I ignored it. Then my phone buzzed. I looked at the caller id. It was my brother.

I texted him: What?
He texted back: Open back door.
I texted back: No can do. I’m working.
The buzzer went off again.
Then he texted: emergency
Rats. “Would you excuse me a sec?” I said to the lady customer.

“Hmm. Sure,” she said, sounding distracted as she studied the pictures.

I locked the register, and put the tip jar under the counter then I jogged through the kitchen to the back door. Looking through the peephole, I saw my twin brother, Theodore. He was my mirror image; slim build, six feet tall, curly black hair, olive toned skin and chocolate brown eyes.

After unlatching the locks, I opened the door. His bike leaned against the brick wall adjacent to the door.

“Listen, I could get in big trouble. What’s the emergency?” I asked.

“I need twenty bucks, I’m kind of short this month and I really want to take Vicky to the movie. You know the vampire one.”

“That is not an emergency.”

“To me it is.”

“Anyway the movie is horrible. I’ll give you money not to go.”
“Yeah, I can’t stand it either. But she sure gets cozy with me after seeing that lead actor.” Theodore winked.

My wallet had exactly twenty dollars in it, and it was going toward my prom fund.

“It starts in thirty minutes, and I promised her. But I’m tapped out with all the prom stuff I had to pay for,” Theodore said.

“I’m broke and I need the money for prom.”

“C’mon, please, you’ll get it back tomorrow. Promise.” He motioned across his heart.

“You better.” I raised an eyebrow.

He was always tugging at my heartstrings, and I usually gave in. I pulled out my wallet and handed him my twenty. Perhaps my being born a minute ahead of him gave me a big brother protective complex. On the other hand, maybe I was just a sucker.

I put my now empty wallet back into my pocket. Just then, my stomach growled.

Thankfully, my one free meal per shift of a sandwich and chips was waiting for me in the fridge.

“Thanks, bro,” Theodore said. Then he hopped on his bike.

“Don’t forget, pay it back,” I said to him as he rode off. With that twenty and my next check I’d be able to afford prom.

Within seconds, I heard purring. I looked down and saw Leo, the grey striped stray cat the employees had sort of adopted. Leo liked to be petted behind his ears. “Hey buddy, you having a good night?”

He tilted his head and then licked my hand.

I went into a storage closet and got a scoop of dry cat food from the bag we set aside for Leo. I emptied the scoop into the bowl we kept outside the back door. Leo rubbed against my leg, let out a soft meow then went to town on the food. I shut and locked the back door then washed my hands.

Nearing the register, I looked around and noticed that the lady, who had been in here earlier, had left.

The front door bells jangled again.

“Hi, Timmy, I love the hat,” Gabrielle said as she strolled in. “What does Tim ICG mean?”

Stupid paper hat. “It’s the initials for Ice Cream Guy. I thought that would get people talking to me, like you just did.”

“Hmm, why don’t you just put ‘Tim cute boyfriend’ on it?”

“Right, and on yours I’d write ‘hot chick.’” My heart seemed to be sprinting. The common reaction I had whenever I was around her. Gabrielle was tall with long blonde hair and gorgeous big green eyes. “I thought you were busy tonight with your debutante meeting?”

“Oh?!” her eyebrows scrunched. Then she cleared her throat. “Oh, yes. That was cancelled. Father decided that I should decline the invitation to join. With us being new in town, we didn’t want to come on too strong. Maybe next year. Unless, of course, we move to our chalet in France.” She ran a long finger along the glass display case. Her eyes were wide as she gazed inside.

“Can I get you something?” She looked thinner than when I first met her a few weeks ago. She said she’d transferred here from some private boarding school in Maine.

“Our chef is off tonight, and I am such a mess in the kitchen. You know having had
servants, it’s so hard to even figure out how to make something as simple as a sandwich. I’m all thumbs.” She gave me a weak smile.

“Hey, I’ve got a sandwich in the fridge. Why don’t you just take it?” I said.

“Oh, no. You don’t have to give my anything. I can pay for it.” She dug into her purse. “Rats. I must have left my wallet at home.”

I reached into the fridge, took out my bagged dinner, and handed it to her. “Please take this, I insist. Are you okay?”

“Huh?”

“You are just getting so thin.”

“Yes.” She twisted a piece of her hair. “You can’t be too skinny or too rich.”

“I think you look perfect the way you are. You don’t have to go on a diet.”

“I’m not on a diet.” She clutched the white paper bag. “Thank you. I’ll get you the money as soon as I can.”

“No, I won’t take it. Plus, it’s my free meal.” I decided it was now or never. “Listen, I’m glad you’re here. I’ve been meaning to ask you, what are you doing this weekend?”

“Not sure.”

“Are you busy Saturday night?” I asked. My words felt thick and stuck like peanut butter in my throat.

She cocked her head to the side. Her eyes slit. “Why?”

“This is super short notice and all, and I would have asked sooner, but I’ve been saving up and...well...what I’m trying to say is, would you like to go to prom with me?”

Her eyebrows raised and her mouth opened.

Shoot. That was not the response I wanted. She did not look happy. Was she mad that I dared ask? Or was she just surprised? “I mean, I know I’ve only known you a few weeks, but this is senior prom. And I would love to take you.”

“No. I mean, I can’t go. I have to go now. Really, I am so sorry.” With that, Gabrielle turned on her heels and went out the front door.

What happened? Did I push too hard? Maybe she was breaking up with me. I wished I could call her, but she didn’t have a cell phone. She said her dad was getting her a new smart phone, but it was on order.

I let out a big sigh, my feet feeling like lead. Maybe, if I kept myself busy cleaning, I could forget about being shot down by my girlfriend. I wiped the white Formica tables and turned the black wrought iron chairs upside down on them, then got the mop out of the cleaning closet. All the while, I thought about Gabrielle.

By the time I finished mopping, it was time to lock up.

My girlfriend turned me down for prom and I was broke and hungry.

And I had to wear a stupid paper cap. Life sucked.

As I walked toward the door, my eye caught a patch of red on the poster wall. Red wall paint I shouldn’t be able to see.

Something was missing.

Then I knew what was gone.

A twelve by twelve inch shadowbox, which held an original signed script from a famous motion picture, as well as a five by six inch black and white picture of Leonardo’s great grandfather with the two original founders.
By the time the police completed taking my statement, it was almost midnight. Stanley Leonardo, the owner, had been called to the store as well. The police wanted to see if they could get videotape from the surveillance camera.

“The security camera broke down last week.” Stanley scratched his head. His glasses slipped down his long skinny nose as his salt and pepper hair fell on his face.

“I’m so sorry about all of this,” I said to Mr. Leonardo as the police walked around the store.

“That was an original signed move script,” Stanley said as he looked at the empty spot on the wall. “Last week on eBay, something similar went for over twenty thousand.”

Twenty thousand? Holy smokes. My head spun. Guilt strangled me, I’d left the store, and someone took it.

“Mr. Leonardo, we think that it could be a snatch and grab. We’ve had a few reports this week of other local business having the same type of theft.” The officer flipped open his notepad.

“Oh?” Mr. Leonardo looked around the store.

“Yes, the store owners on either side of you had their tips jars stolen when a perpetrator ran in, grabbed it and then escaped,” the officer said. “Usually, it’s just petty theft. Well, except for your shadowbox.”

Mr. Leonardo shrugged his shoulders and turned his palms up. “Why would they take that instead of the tip jar?”

“These types of criminals know what they are after. They do their research. More than likely, they were in your store earlier and cased the place. They knew exactly what they would grab if they had had the opportunity.”

“But my employee was here the whole time. Weren’t you?” Stanley furrowed his eyebrows.

“No sir. I left for a minute to go to the back door.” I looked down at my feet. I studied the scuffs crisscrossing along the tops of my brown loafers.

“You left a customer in the store alone?” His face scrunched like a crumpled paper hat.

“Yes, sir. I did.” I felt a rush of heat go from my chest to my head. I wanted to tell him that I had locked the register, and hid the tip jar, but decided against it.

“Then you are fully responsible for the cost of that picture. You were in charge, and you know better. Rule number 23 is to never leave the store unless it’s on fire.”

“Yes, sir. I am sorry,” I said. Rule number 1, the owner is always right.

“You leaving the store unattended made the store an easy target for the crime.” The officer strolled to the front door. “Someone could have been sitting right there across the street. Saw you go in the back and then made their move.”

I nodded. This night skidded downhill fast.

Mr. Leonardo sighed and put a hand on my shoulder. “The contents of that
shadowbox are irreplaceable. I hate that this happened on your watch, son.”

Again, I nodded. What could I say?

“If you weren’t such a great employee, I’d fire you right now.” Mr. Leonardo cleared his throat.

“I’ll work overtime. All weekend even. Whatever I need to do,” I added.

“Son, don’t worry, I have insurance. But I have a five hundred dollar deductible.”

“I’ll pay the five hundred, it’s the least I can do.” It was also better than getting fired.

The irony. Had Gabrielle said she could go to prom, now I wouldn’t be able to afford to take her. In a weird twist of fate, it was lucky that she turned me down. Then again, if I didn’t go to the back door to lend Theodore twenty bucks, then the picture wouldn’t have been stolen and I wouldn’t be out a gazillion dollars now.

The universe sure had it in for me that day.

Mr. Leonardo paced the floor. “I have to get it back. Maybe, if I offer a big reward, someone will come forward and return it.”

“I sure hope so,” I said under my breath. Mr. Leonardo talked with the police officer for a while as I locked the doors and finished cleaning the store.

Maybe I could try to find that lady from Pennsylvania. Maybe she saw the person who stole the picture while I was outside.

I had to take a chance. I had nothing to lose. It looked like I’d be without pay for a long time. There goes any chance of upgrading from my bicycle to a car.

Or ever affording to take Gabrielle out anywhere.

The next morning I slunk into the kitchen, my whole body slumped. “Morning, Mom. How are you?”

“Okay, honey. And you?”

“Don’t even ask. I’m in debt for a million years,” I said. Last night, my mom waited up for me and I had told her what happened.

“Sweetie, forget about what happened. It really wasn’t your fault.” My mom hugged me. She had that same sad look in her eyes she always got when something bad happened to me, like when my frog died.

“It was stolen on my watch. So I can’t forget about it.” I kissed her forehead as she handed me a brown bag lunch. “Can I just live with you and Dad forever?”

“Of course you can, but trust me. You’re a good egg. Things will turn around for you.” She reached up and brushed her hand along my cheek.

“I sure hope so,” I said.

“Theodore the bus will be here soon!” Mom screamed up the stairs. She took a five-dollar bill from her purse, and pushed it into my hand. “Here, just to hold you over a little. But you know the rules of our house, no money unless you earn it. I expect that five back.”

“Thanks mom, I’ll pay you back as soon as I can.”

“After prom, then pay me back.”

“There is no prom.”

“Did they cancel it?” My mom asked.

My Dad walked in and gave my mom a kiss.

“No. I can’t afford to go, plus Gabrielle said no,” I said.
“Bad luck, hey champ?” My dad poured himself a cup of coffee into a to go cup that said ‘World’s Greatest Dad.’
“Yeah bad luck.”
“You’ll figure it out.” He snapped the lid on the cup shut.
“I guess.” I stuck my lunch in my book bag and zippered it up.
“Prom is tomorrow, and I know that you want to go and you’re broke. But you know the rules around here—-” My dad gave me the ‘you’re shit out of luck’ look.
“No free money,” I recited to him.
“You shouldn’t have left the store, you know.” Dad grabbed the newspaper and his car keys.
Turning my hands over, I shrugged my shoulders.
“I love you son. I know it’s a tough lesson to learn, but you’ll be stronger for it,” Dad said before he walked out the door.
Stronger for it, yeah right. If that were correct, I’d have Herculean strength afterward.
A yellow school bus for Savannah Arts Academy pulled up in front of my house. The bus driver honked and pulled to a stop in front.
Theodore stomped down the stairs and grabbed his lunch. We both ran out the front door into the bright morning sun and boarded the bus. The air hung heavy with humidity and smelled like fresh cut grass.
On the bus ride to school, I told Theodore about what happened at Leonardo’s. Fifteen minutes later, we were at school. Theodore ran ahead of me to meet his girlfriend.
I went to my locker. That was when I remembered that I had a calculus test I hadn’t studied for. Damn. By the time I gotten home from work I’d just enough energy left to take a quick shower, talk to Mom, and crash. As usual, I hadn’t had a second to spare in the morning.
Eighties-themed posters and streamers announcing the prom lined the hallways. I bumped into a table as I left my locker.
“Get them while you can, only forty dollars for a pair of tickets,” said a smiling chubby girl with short curly black hair. A sign hung from her table that read, “Get your prom tickets here.”
“Did you get yours already?” she asked.
“No. But it sounds like fun,” I said.
“You’re a senior, right?”
“Yes.”
“This is your last chance to go to prom. Can I count on you for two tickets?”
“Well, I’d like to but …”
“You have a date right? That new girl, Giselle?”
“Gabrielle.”
“Yeah, Gabrielle. So, you’re taking her?” she asked as she opened her cash box and got two tickets out.
The bell sounded. I shook my head, and then ran down the hall to class. Fortunately, the calculus test was easy. Maybe my luck was turning around. After class, I went to the entrance lobby where Gabrielle and I always met before AP literature class.
“Hey, how are you?” Gabrielle stood alongside me as I leaned against the wall. Horrible, awful and rotten. “Fine and you?” I asked.
“I’m sorry,” She said as she brushed my hair from my eyes. Just her touch made my heart ache. It’s like she was my girlfriend, but yet a complete stranger at the same time. “About what?” Breaking my heart? I tried playing it cool.
“Prom. I want you to know that I can’t go, not because I don’t like you, but well, it’s complicated.” She looked out the glass front door.
“No biggie. I mean I really didn’t want to go anyway. It’s a huge waste of money. Plus, you’ve probably been to fancy balls and all that, so this rinky-dink little prom would be a joke to you,” I said.
Her eyes welled up. “Yes, you’re right. Prom would bore me.” She closed her eyes and a tear ran down her cheek.
“Are you okay?”
“Yes. Fine.” She straightened her back and smoothed out her shirt. “Let’s go. One more tardy and I’ll have detention.” She grabbed my hand and we walked to class.
Throughout class, I watched Gabrielle. I half listened to Miss Ely talk about the alienation that Holden felt in Catcher in the Rye. She talked about the young man’s struggle to find himself.
Right then, I felt like the lead character.
As we walked out of the classroom, I asked Gabrielle, “So, will I see you in the cafeteria today?”
“Um, I’m not sure. I forgot my lunch.” She pulled her still damp hair into a ponytail.
“You know my mom always makes me a bagged lunch, I’d be glad to share with you.”
Gabrielle smiled and said, “Thanks. I feel so bad you’re always sharing your food with me. One day, I’ll make it up to you.”
“When your chef gets back he can make us lunch, right?”
“Huh?” She raised an eyebrow. “Yes, of course. He would love to.”
“You are always welcome to have anything I have.” I gave her a big kiss. She smelled like chlorine. “Did you have swimming in gym today?”
“Why?”
“Nothing. I’ll see you at lunch.” The bell sounded and we went our separate ways. I sat in the back row of my AP history class. Theodore plopped down next to me.
“Hey, was it because of me that you got robbed?” Theodore asked.
“You’re a jerk. You told me it was an emergency.”
“To me it was.” He grinned and tapped my shoulder. “Sorry.”
“Forget it. I shouldn’t have left the store. I know better.”
“Do they have any leads?”
“Not sure. The officer said it could have been a snatch and grab thing. I told them about the lady that was in the store at the time, but they didn’t seem interested. Maybe I can find her on my own. She might be able to tell me if she saw somebody else come into the store.”
“So, you’re going to talk to her?”
“Maybe I’ll do a little poking around to find that lady after school,” I replied.
“Sucks huh? If you don’t find the stolen picture thing then you’ll be working for
weeks without a paycheck ‘cause you have to pay the insurance deductible.” Theodore smiled. “At least you’ll have twenty bucks soon ‘cause I get paid tomorrow.”

I pulled out some paper and a pen and began to scribble circles. “Just give me fifteen and give mom five, okay? She loaned me five this morning.”

“Okay.” He scooted his desk a little closer to mine. “You know, I got a great deal on a tux at the Formal Shoppe on Bay Street. Mine has an eighties like frilly shirt and pastel belt. It’s hilarious.”

“That’s great.” I hadn’t told him yet that Gabrielle turned me down for prom.

The teacher began class. I half paid attention as my mind traveled back to what that lady, my last customer, had said. She used to have family who lived in the Victorian district, and she now lived in Pennsylvania. She was in town until tomorrow and the Marshall House had given her a brochure on Leonardo’s.

Now I had to fit all of the pieces together.

Or in the future, I’ll end up being the only eighty-year-old still living with his parents and working minimum wage at an ice cream shop.

“May I ask if there is a red-haired lady, with a really big multi-colored bag staying here?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, sir. We aren’t allowed to give out information about our guests,” replied a man behind the front desk of the Marshall House. He wore a dark green blazer with a pineapple emblem on the pocket.

“Right.” My heart plunged into my stomach. She was my only lead. I wondered if I should wait in the lobby for a while. Maybe the lady would wander in, and I could talk to her. I had to go to work in an hour, so I guess it wouldn’t hurt to kill some time.

Sinking into a deep leather armchair, I looked around. The lobby looked like it came from an earlier time. It smelled like a combination of flowers and wood cleaner. Heavy dark furniture sat on hardwood floors. Large oil paintings, with ornate gold frames, adorned the walls.

I grabbed a handful of mints from a crystal container on the coffee table. The sign beside it read, “Help yourself.” I unwrapped one and plopped it in my mouth and then put a few in my pocket. A guy never knows when he’ll need fresh breath.

Looking through the large picture window, I saw Gabrielle walk past. I jumped out of my chair and left the hotel in search of her. I quickly abandoned looking for the red-haired lady. Instead I went in search of my girlfriend.

Rounding the corner, Gabrielle was already half a block away. Then she disappeared into an alley behind the Pink House restaurant. I wanted to shout to her, but then an ambulance screamed by.

I decided to trail after her at a fast walk. She was just faster than me. By the time I got to Martin Luther King Drive, she had walked behind a bridge beyond the bus terminal.

A man stood in front of me, “Excuse me sir, but can you spare some change?”

He blocked my view of Gabrielle.

“Listen, I don’t want to bother you, it’s just that I need some help.” The man put his hands together in a prayer.

Damn. I lost sight of Gabrielle.
“Please? I have a job interview soon, and I need to take the bus.” He pointed to the bus stand.

Jeez. It seemed he had intentionally stopped me.

“No, sir?” He asked again.

He seemed sincere. I sighed and reached in my pocket and pulled out the five-dollar bill and some mints. “This is all I have.”

“God bless you son,” the man said. His beard was scraggly, but he looked clean and fairly well dressed. His eyes sparkled like green emeralds. Where had I seen those same green eyes?

“Good luck with the interview,” I said.

“Thanks. I need it. Been out of work for almost a year now. Savings are gone. We keep moving around hoping to get a break.” The man smiled, showing straight white teeth.

He looked about my dad’s age, and he seemed rather decent. Just down on his luck. I wondered if my mom would mind if I brought him home so that he could have dinner with us.

I scanned the area.

“You looking for someone?” the man asked.

“Yes, my girlfriend.” At least I thought she was still my girlfriend.

“Girlfriend, huh?”

“She just walked by a minute ago, tall blonde, around my age.” Where could she have gone? There was nothing across the street but a bunch of abandoned buildings near the highway.

“I know her,” the homeless man said.

“You do?” Something in my gut felt weird.

“Better than that.” The homeless man stood up. “I know where she lives.”

I had never been to her house. She said she would have me over after she got settled.

“Follow me,” the man said as he crooked a finger.

“By the way, I’m Tim.”

“My name’s Ed, a free living spirit. I guess you could call me a homeless bum.” He winked.

“No sir, I wouldn’t call you that.”

“You’d never know that I used to own a construction company, drive a Hummer, even had two Rolex watches and take month long vacations. My kid got everything she wanted. And now, I can’t give her anything. We even have to shower at the YMCA.” His eyes began to tear up. “The economy tanked, no one is buying houses. I lost everything.”

“I’m sorry.” My stomach felt like a big tangled knot.

“I work hard and I’m an optimist. So this will all get better.” Ed smiled.

We walked along the sidewalk, and eventually ended up in a vacant lot behind some abandoned buildings.

He tapped me on the arm. “Right over here.” He pointed to a powder blue conversion van.

“There?” I asked.

“You’ll find her in the van.”

“Oh?”

“That’s our home.”
“Whose home?”
“Gabrielle and I. She’s my daughter.”
My head was spinning. My God. She’s homeless.
Why hadn’t Gabrielle told me? Didn’t she trust me? Why had she put on such a
front? All lies. I was angry and confused. Shoot. I was pissed. Damn, I was an idiot for
falling for her lies. My face twisted as I shook my head.
“I’m sorry, Tim. Didn’t she tell you?” Ed asked.
“No, sir.”
“She’s embarrassed, and I can’t blame her. Listen, I have to go now and catch the
bus, cheaper than paying for gas for the van. It was nice to meet you.” Ed jogged away.

My legs felt like they were stuck in cement. The van sat a few feet from me. What do
I do, knock?

Just then, the van door opened. Gabrielle climbed out. She saw me, and her face
turned white. Her hands clenched. “What are you doing here, Tim?”
“Your dad, I mean I saw you by the hotel…” the words jumbled as they came out.
“Leave…Now.” She was shaking.
“Why did you lie to me?”
“You wouldn’t understand.”
“How do you know I wouldn’t understand? You didn’t even give me a chance. And
all along I thought you were too good for me.”
“Oh so now you’re too good for me, a homeless girl?”
“No, I didn’t say that. I said, with all the stories you told me, I assumed you were
embarrassed of me.”
“So, now you’re embarrassed of me?” She was waving her hands around.
“No, that’s not what I said.” I put my hand up, as if to say hold on.
“But it’s what you meant.”
“No, you’re wrong.”
“Get out of here. Whatever we had is over.” She flailed her arms as if shooing away
an annoying fly.
“Obviously, whatever we had was based on lies.” I felt a lump in my throat. My
hands trembled.
“Get the hell out of here,” Gabrielle screamed and her face turned red. “Go. I never
want to see you again.” She climbed in the van and slammed the door.

I ran.
I didn’t stop to catch my breath until I reached the Marshal House.
Why didn’t she trust me? Why did she lie to me? I liked her for who she was, not
because of what she had or didn’t have.
“Excuse me,” a lady said as she bumped into me.

It took me a second to register that it was the red-haired lady with the big bag I’d
been looking for. “Hey, Miss. Miss.” I caught up to her as she walked into the hotel
lobby.
“Yes sir, can I help you?” She asked.
“Remember me, I’m Tim from Leonardo’s Ice cream shop,” I said. “The ice cream
guy.”

She clutched her big bag and held it tight against her. “Yes, that’s right. I met you
last night.”
“Can I please ask you something?”
“Okay.”
“Do you remember when I left you alone for a few minutes? Well, it’s just that I was wondering if anyone had come into the store while you were there.”
“No. Why?”
“Something was taken, and I’m in big trouble.”
She tightened her mouth and bit her bottom lip. She let out a sigh. “Come over here for a minute.”
I followed her to a quiet corner of the lobby.
She reached into her big handbag and pulled out the missing shadowbox. “Is this what you’re looking for?”

Mr. Leonardo and the lady sat near one of the tables in the ice cream shop. The shadowbox had been returned to its original spot. The lady told us that one of the three original owners of Leonardo’s was her great grandfather. When she saw the picture inside the shadowbox, she felt compelled to borrow it so she could make a copy. She said she was so emotional seeing her great grandfather in the picture that she said she couldn't think straight.

Turns out that Stanley was more than forgiving. He offered to make her copies of any other pictures of her great grandfather that he had. He was so relieved to have the original autographed script back, that he decided not to press charges.

After the lady left, Stanley said, “You know there is still the reward.”
“Don’t worry about it. I should never have left the store. I don’t deserve any reward.” I continued sweeping as he talked to me.
“No. You deserve it. My word is my word. I got everything back intact. And I have you to thank for it.”
“It was also my fault it was stolen.”
“No matter.” He pressed five one hundred dollar bills in my hand.
“I can’t take it.”
“I insist. Don’t you want to go to prom?”
“Yes, but there are people who need this more than I need to go to prom. Would you please give this to Ed and Gabrielle?”
“Who are Ed and Gabrielle?”
I explained their situation to Mr. Leonardo. I told him that I could not take the money to Gabrielle because she was mad at me. I grabbed a sheet of paper and scribbled directions to their blue conversion van on a piece of paper. “Please give them all of the reward money, okay?”
“Sure son,” Stanley patted my back. “You’re a good kid.”

**Saturday night.**
Paper cap: check. White apron: double check. Stuck at work while everyone else is at senior prom: triple check.

While I waited on customers, I glanced out the store window. Limos drove up and down Broughton Street. The Thai restaurant next door had a steady stream of guys in
tuxes and girls in long dresses entering their door.

The dance would start in an hour. Pretty soon, I wouldn’t have to see any more of my classmates doing something I wanted to do. They would all be tucked away at the dance.

A group of girl scouts dressed in green shirts and their trademark hats walked in. I began taking their order.

As I served the last girl scout, Mr. Leonardo entered.

“Good evening,” I said to him. “Welcome to Leonardo’s. Established in 1919.”

He smiled. “Good greeting, rule number 2.”

I gave him a thumb up.

“By the way, you’ve got the night off.” Mr. Leonardo grinned.

I dipped a scoop in the ice cream and filled a cup. “No sir, I’m sure I’m on the schedule. Remember, after the picture thing? I couldn’t afford to go to prom, so I signed up to work.”

“Well.” Stanley put on an apron and grabbed a paper cap. He snatched a crayon and wrote his name on it, and put the hat on. Then he took the scoop out of my hand. “You’re off now. I’m training someone new tonight.”

“Oh.” I just got fired. My face probably looked like it had slid off my skull.

“You’re not fired. You just have the night off.” He smiled.

“Really, I don’t mind working. I have nothing else to do.”

Just then, the bells clanged on the door. Ed and Gabrielle walked in. Gabrielle was dressed in a long ruby red dress, her hair up in a bun. She looked gorgeous.

“Hi, Timmy,” she said.

“Hey.” Obviously, she was wearing a prom dress and not going with me. Did she come here to gloat? “You’re all dressed up. Are you going to prom?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?” My heart sank.

“I’m so sorry about the other day. I’m sorry about lying, about everything.” She reached over the display case and touched my face.

“Me too. I was a jerk. I just thought you didn’t trust me.” Seeing her again made chills run up and down my spine like an electric current. “Why did you lie to me?”

“I was embarrassed.”

“You don’t have to be. I mean, there are a lot of people in your shoes.”

“Size seven and a half red stilettos?” She smiled.

“Except me. I have brown loafers.” I grinned at her.

“We’ll have to fix that.”

“My shoes?”

“Yeah I think you need shiny black patent leather shoes, size eleven right?”

“Huh?”

“Come over here.”

She grabbed me, and we embraced in a long hug. Our mouths met in a passionate kiss.

All the while Stanley was behind the counter serving a customer. Ed walked over to Stanley and shook his hand. Stanley handed Ed an apron and a paper hat.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“When Mr. Leonardo came over to give us your reward money, my dad and he talked. Dad has a job, plus we’ll get to live in the two bedroom apartment above the
“Wow. That’s great.”

A white limo pulled up right outside of Leonardo’s.

“Timmy, will you go to prom with me?” Gabriele asked as she squeezed my hand.

My mom and dad got out of the limo. My dad was holding a garment bag. My mom carried a boutonniere in a clear container.

“What’s going on?” I felt confused.

“This is all for you, for us.”

“Are you kidding me?” I asked.

“No lies. It’s all true. We’re going to prom. That is, if you’ll go with me.”

For a moment or two I couldn’t speak then I said, “Of course.”

My mom and dad grinned from ear to ear.

“We’re proud of you, son. You did the right thing. You helped a family in need. Stanley called us and told us everything.” My dad handed me the garment bag and a pair of shiny black shoes. “You earned this.”

My mom gave Gabrielle the flower.

Ed and Stanley stopped working long enough to give me a thumbs up.

Gabrielle grabbed my hand, “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready.”

“Then you should take this off,” she pulled the paper hat from my head. She grabbed a crayon and wrote, “Cute boyfriend” on it. “Now it’s perfect.”

I took another paper hat and wrote 'Hot chick' on it, and then gave it to her.

We laughed as we made our way to the limo while my parents, Ed and Stanley looked on.

Oddly, our paper hats were the envy of every person at prom. Sometimes, the worst things turn out to be the best.

***

Lois Lavrisa writes “mystery with a twist.” Her first novel, *Liquid Lies*, asks the question “Would you tell the truth, even if it meant losing everything?” The main character, Cecilia “CiCi” Coe, has to answer that question, before anyone else is killed. Lois is now working on her cozy mystery series, *The Chubby Chicks Club*, about sassy southern sleuths who are neither all chubby nor all chicks, set in Savannah, Georgia. They’re a rag tag group of friends who find themselves investigating a friend’s mysterious death, with time running out for them to find the killer before the killer finds them. Book One in *The Chubby Chicks Club* should be available in Summer 2012. For more information, visit [www.loislavrisa.com](http://www.loislavrisa.com).

[Back to Table of Contents](#)
"There's only one way I'm going to get him," I whispered to my friend Gracella as the math teacher droned on. "A love potion."

The object of my adoration, Ronny Tallsman, sat in his first row, corner seat, blissfully unaware of my feelings or the plot. From my position in the second row, on the opposite side of the classroom, I had a perfect view of his profile. A faint wave curled his chin-length blond hair. His eyes—which I knew were a shade of vivid azure—darted between the board and his note pad as he scribbled with his pencil. He frowned and bit his full bottom lip before scrubbing at the paper to erase a line of writing. Then he shook his head, sending the curls swaying.

"You gotta take me to see your great aunt, the voodoo priestess," I continued to Gracella.

"Root doctor, Tina." She shot the correction under her breath from the seat beside mine without her head turning. If I didn't know better, I'd believe she was concentrating on what Mrs. Blake was writing on the chalkboard.

"Root doctor. Voodoo. Same thing."

"Not really," she said.

"But she can do a love potion, can't she?" I pleaded. "You told me she did one for your cousin and now your cousin's married."

"Yes but...Oh, I wish I'd never told you that."

"Constantina Dimas," the math teacher called on me.

My attention snapped forward.

"Here, Mrs. Blake." I thrust my hand in the air.

"Can you answer the equation?" She tapped the stick of chalk against the board three times while glaring at me. She obviously knew I hadn't been listening to a word she'd been saying.

I glanced at the foot-long problem and threw out the answer. "u/c = 9.352."

"Correct," Mrs. Blake said between grinding teeth, her eyes narrowing to slits.

"Thank you, Constantina."

My being a math prodigy came in handy to cover for my lack of attention in class. My parents insisted that next year I enroll in Senior honors math. I had to take advantage of this year to coast. Only trouble was, my attitude irritated Mrs. Blake and she relentlessly tried to catch me out.

"There's something unethical about this," Gracella whispered.

"Ronny's not going out with anybody, so it's all right."

"Why do you want to go out with him?" My friend Nathan asked from the chair behind mine. "He's a stupid jock. He plays football."

"Yes but he also plays lacrosse," I hissed back.

"So what?" Nathan argued.

"That means he's cultured," I said.
Nathan gave a disgusted huff. "This is dumb. You can't make someone want you with a love potion. I thought you were going to be a scientist. This is totally a contradiction to anything scientific or logical."

"It fits perfectly," I spoke under my breath and over my shoulder. "I want Ronny to take me to the Spring Science Fair Fiesta Dance this Friday."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Nathan's breath was hot on my ear.

"That makes it science-related."

"Constantina Dimas," the teacher demanded, making me cringe. She was really trying to get me today.

Not hesitating, I answered, "10x minus 3."

The teacher stared at me silently for a moment and then nodded before turning back to the board for more scribbling. "Does everyone else see how Ms. Dimas reached her solution?"

"Besides," I continued to Nathan. "The Chinese part of me may be good at math and science, but the Greek part is superstitious."

"What Greek part?" Nathan asked. "You're adopted. You're all Chinese."

"Constantina Dimas," the teacher demanded. "Can you give us the answer to the next problem?"

"Y equals x squared over 3x minus 2," I said almost immediately.

Her mouth pursed so tightly I could count the twenty-three lines wringing her mouth. "Correct," she finally said.

I raised my hand again and the teacher fixed her gaze on me before nodding to give me permission to speak again. "Yes? What is it?"

"Mrs. Blake. I'm not calling myself Constantina anymore."

"What?" She gaped at me.

"Right." Nathan inserted himself into the conversation. "Now it's Istanbul, not Constantina."

His comments produced a few snickers quickly quelled by the furious glare of Mrs. Blake. "Do you both realize this is a serious class?"

"My point is serious, Mrs. Blake." I ignored an unrepentant Nathan chuckling behind me. "I want to be called Tina. Just Tina."

"Just Tina doesn't have the same ring as Istanbul," Nathan inserted to the whole class. "Besides, calling yourself Just seems like you're bragging."

This time the chuckles bounced loudly around the room until Mrs. Blake pounded the chalk to pulp on the board.

"Students. Come to order," she yelled, clapping. She wiped both hands against each other trying to get rid of the white dust. "As to the comedy team of Nathan Whitefield and Constantina Dimas, both of you report to the principal's office immediately."

Fantastic. I glanced at Gracella and grimaced. She shot me a sympathetic smile in return. Slipping from the seat I gathered up my textbook and other things to slink out of class in humiliation. Nathan, on the other hand, seemed to take a bow.

The hall was silent and empty of everything except the aroma of dirty gym clothes. The classroom door had barely closed behind Nathan when I scream-whispered at him, "How could you get me thrown out of class? We'll probably get detention."

"If you're serving detention, maybe you'll give up this stupid idea about going to a voodoo priestess."
"Root doctor."
"Same difference."
"Aghhhhh." I whirled on one heel and marched down the hall.
Nathan followed on my heels, chuckling. "I'm sorry."
I didn't answer.
"What can I do to make it up to you?"
My silence left his question hanging.
"Okay," he said, as we rounded the corner to the administration offices. "No more jokes about Istanbul."
My disgusted harrumph should have warned him not to continue.
"But it's funny," he went on. "You know that song? It's Istanbul, not Constantinople."
Stopping mid-hall, I turned on him, giving him my best evil eye. "Nobody but a nerd like you would know that old song."
"I'll have you know there was an excellent cover version in 2006." When he continued he sang, "Been long time gone, Constantinople."
"It's not funny. My name is the bane of my existence," I said.
"Turkish delight, on moonlit night."
I had to smile at that despite myself. "Why do I hang out with you?"
"Because you're secretly in love with me and you want my hot bod?"
"Right," I said with sarcasm. Not that Nathan was ugly or anything. In fact, he was kind of cute. But in that brown shirt, with his shaggy hair dyed green, he could pass for a palm tree. The glasses did spoil the tree effect somewhat. Besides, Nathan was smart and funny. When he wasn't teasing me about my name, I usually considered him my best friend, although I wouldn't have admitted that tidbit to Nathan.
"I'm true to my love for Ronny," I added.
"Ronny's never even spoken to you."
"That's immaterial to the equation."
"What equation?"
"Me plus love potion plus Ronny equals date to the dance."
With Nathan's laughter ringing in my ears, I opened the office door and went inside.

The tire of Gracella's 1987 Buick LaSabre hit a rut in the dirt road, and my head hit the inside of the car roof.
"Ow," I yelled. "What the heck was that? A landmine?"
In the backseat Nathan shouted, "Doesn't this thing have any shocks?"
"Quit bitching. I can barely see. It's so dark. And we're only out here so late because you two had to serve detention." Gracella clutched the wheel. In the dim glowing light of the dashboard speedometer, her knuckles appeared white despite her cocoa color.
She was right about the darkness. With no street lamps and barely a sliver of a moon, the headlights of this old beater hardly made a dent in the inkiness of the night. The rotten egg smell told me this marshy area must have a lot of sulfur in the soil.
"We're only here because Miss Istanbul wants a love potion," Nathan remarked.
Gritting my teeth, I didn't answer him. If I stopped reacting to that nickname, maybe he'd drop it.
"Good point," Gracella exclaimed.
"Let's go back to Savannah," Nathan said.

"No." I braced against the dashboard with one hand and the door with the other to keep from bouncing wildly again. The seatbelt could only do so much. "We're almost there."

"Maybe," Gracella said. "It's been a while since I was out here."

"Great. Now we're lost," Nathan whined.

"We aren't lost," Gracella snapped. "At least I don't think so."

Nathan unbuckled himself and leaned up between the front seats.


"Come on," Nathan said. "If we head back now we can make it to Buddy Burgers before they close. I'm buying."

Gracella slammed on the brakes, and I threw out one arm like a railroad crossing gate to hold Nathan back.

"There it is." Gracella pointed down an offshoot from the road.

The house sitting alone in the midst of the woods was a small, square box. But even in the darkness, it seemed well kept. Whole conch shells marked the outline of the front yard.

Gracella pulled down the driveway and parked. We tumbled out of the car, and my legs wobbled as if I'd been out to sea and tossed in a storm. As we walked toward the house, the path crunched under our steps and, glancing down, I observed a mixture of broken shells and dirt spread along the way. The porch light revealed yellow clapboards on the house, Haint blue on the porch ceiling and trim, and white pickets on the banister.

"What's with the blue?" Nathan asked.

"It's supposed to keep away evil spirits," Gracella answered.

"Doesn't seem to be working. You're here," I teased Nathan as we reached the porch.

"Yeah, Nathan. Could you please not be such a tool in front of my great aunt?" Gracella added. "She could put the bad mout curse on you, and turn you into a toad or something."

"Ha," Nathan scoffed, although he did squirm a bit.

Gracella knocked at the door and it swung open.

The woman inside couldn't have been more than thirty-five. She wore a flowered caftan with a scarf tied around her hair, enhancing her ebony skin color.

"Titi," she greeted Gracella and embraced her. "You is so tall dese days."

"Aunt Vandi." Gracella smiled broadly as she pulled back. "Thank you for seeing us. These are my friends Tina and Nathan."

"Aye ya." Aunt Vandi took my hand, speaking with her Gullah accent. "You da one what need the love potion joso."

As I nodded, Nathan inserted, "No. She doesn't need any mumbo jumbo magic stuff."

Aunt Vandi reeled around to examine him with narrowed eyes. "Mumbo what, bohbo?"

Nathan blanched, obviously seeing his future life as a toad. With head lowered he mumbled, "Nothing...Ma'am. Sorry."

After a few seconds Aunt Vandi cocked her head to the side. "A'ight I see you good bohbo what jes wanta p'otect your gal."
Nathan mumbled something unintelligible.
Aunt Vandi turned back to me and took my hand again, examining the palm. "Why you want this potion, zactly?"

"I ummm. Want ummm..."
"You nervous gal?" she asked. "If you not sure the josó not work."
"I'm sure," I replied. "I want the love potion so this guy I like—Ronny Tallsman—will ask me to a dance."

"Dis strong magic you play with." Her eyes locked with mine, and it seemed as if she was seeing straight down through me to the calluses on my soles. "You okay if he has love for you dat last long time?"

Swallowing down a lump, I nodded.
"A'ight," she said, twisting to pick up scissors from a table next to us.

Before I could say anything, she snipped two of my fingernails. Then sweeping my shoulder length hair back, she took a lock from the nape and cut it off too.

Coming out of my stunned shock, I glanced at my friends and saw them as surprised as me.

"Hopefully, that won't show," I joked. "I'll never get Ronny to take me to the dance if I have a bald spot. Potion or no potion."

Nathan scowled. "If you wanna go to the dance so bad, Istanbul, I guess I could force myself to take you."

"Thanks," I said through clenched teeth, trying to tamp down the kernels of hurt his words caused. He had to force himself?

"Thanks," I said through clenched teeth, trying to tamp down the kernels of hurt his words caused. He had to force himself?

"Yeah," he continued. "You clean up okay. You wouldn't be a total embarrassment."

The kernel popped like Orville Redenbacher's in a microwave. "Wow, what a fantastic offer," I retorted. "But I wouldn't want you to lose your creds with the other geeks. I know you guys only date supermodels."

"It's okay," he said with a smirk. "Any sacrifice for a friend."

Reaching up, I gave a yank to a clump of his hair. "I wouldn't be seen on a date with anybody who had a messy mop like this."

"Oww," he protested, rubbing his head. "Sheesh. Are you trying to give me a bald spot to match yours?"

Aunt Vandi, peering down her long nose, contemplated Nathan and me for a few moments before making a tut tut clucking noise with her tongue.

"I take these to make potion. Beeback." With that she swept through a beaded curtain and disappeared into the bowels of the house.

About five minutes passed with Nathan harping at me and me sniping in response.

"Honestly you two," Gracella said. "If you don't knock it off, I'll leave you here and you can get back to town through the gator-infested marsh."

As she finished the last word, her aunt stepped back into the room. Aunt Vandi walked past Nathan, and he jumped, startled.

"What is it, bohbo? You act like I may turn you into toad or sompin."

"Hehe," Nathan tried to laugh.

Aunt Vandi stopped in front of me and held up a capped vial. Inside was a brownish red powdery substance. "Dis potion. It make this Ronny guy take you to the dance and it bring you love. Dis what you want?"

I nodded, and took the vial with trembling fingers.
"Take care no one but your guy swallows dis mixture."
"Swallows?"
Nathan snickered. A genuine laugh this time.
_Duh, Tina._ Somehow it hadn't occurred to me I was going to have to get Ronny to _take_ the love potion.

Gracella held one side of the sign against the lip of the table as I held the other. Applying a piece of the tape, I affixed my side before standing back to take a look. The signed screamed in block letters: _Lacrosse Team Fundraiser Bake Sale. Brownies $1._

We'd set up in a corner of the cafeteria, and a few pre-lunch students milled around us, eyeing our progress. On the table, we had three-dozen brownies. Each had been wrapped in plastic and decorated with a slender ribbon bow. The ribbons were red and blue on the _normal brownies_. We'd decorated two _special_ love potion-filled brownies with yellow ribbon and then hidden them safely inside a picnic basket.

"Tell me again why we have two special brownies?" Gracella asked.
"We have a spare, just in case something happens to one."
"Like what?"
"Like it falls to the ground."
"This isn't going to work." Gracella shook her head and wrung her hands.
"It will work," I said, arranging the brownies in precise spaces on the table. "Our target loves brownies. I've noticed him getting one every time they have them in the lunch line."

"Why would we be fundraising for the lacrosse team? We aren't on the team, and we aren't on the insipid cheer squad."
"So? Anybody can have school spirit," I defended. "It's common knowledge the school board cut funding for athletics and everything but football is suffering. Besides, we'll actually donate the money, so we aren't cheating anyone."
"What if Ronny doesn't eat lunch inside today?" Gracella asked.
"Shhhhh," I whispered. "Don't say his name. Just say target."
"Okay, what if the target—"
"He _has_ to eat lunch inside. If he doesn't, we're walking the halls with the brownie until we find him. The dance is tonight. This is the last chance."

Gracella frowned, and her lips formed a pout. "How do we sell these things?"
Pushing past her with a huff, I swiped one of the trays from the table and put two brownies on it before thrusting the tray at her. "Just hold this out and say, 'Would you like to buy a brownie? Only a dollar to support the lacrosse team.' Can you remember that?"

"Maybe I should write it down." She glared at me, hands on hips. "Of course, I can remember that."

When the bell for lunch period rang, we were inundated with customers. We quickly got down to our last dozen brownies.
"Crap," I said when we reached a lull. "I didn't think we'd sell this many. What if we run out of cover brownies before he shows up? Sell slower. Let's raise the price."
Nodding, Gracella got out a sharpie and was drawing a line through the dollar price when Nathan sauntered up.
"Poison Ronny yet?" he asked with a chuckle.
"Shhhhh." Scanning the nearby students, I didn't see anyone who seemed to have heard him. I grabbed his arm. "I'm warning you, Nathan. Shut the frig up or else. Don't mess this up for me."

"Okay, okay," he said, twisting out of my grip and throwing his arms up in surrender. "I'll be good."

He walked over to the table. "Can I have one of these things?"

"Oh all right," I said, waving in his direction.

I began to worry. What if Ronny didn't show up? I'd discounted Gracella's comment earlier, but we were getting to the end of the lunch period and he still hadn't come in.

"I'm not gonna get a tainted one am I?" Nathan picked a brownie with a blue ribbon and eyed it.

"No, of course not. Those are hidden."

At my answer, Nathan opened the wrapping and stuck the entire thing into his mouth.

Just then, Ronny entered through the cafeteria's swinging doors. My heart leaped into my throat before racing as if I'd started a fifty-meter dash. Whirling on my heel and giving an excited hop, I ran to the table and opened the basket.

"He's here," I whispered to Gracella as I got out the two yellow ribbon brownies and put them on my tray. "This is it. Keep Nathan busy so he doesn't interfere."

She nodded, and I turned back only to see the target had passed us and was on his way toward the lunch line.

"Ronny," I called in a panic. "Fundraiser for the lacrosse team?"

He glanced over his shoulder. Tossing his blond hair back and out of his eyes with one motion, his brows converged in confusion. "Fundraiser?"

"We're selling brownies."

"Brownies?" He smiled and crossed to me as he inspected the contents of the tray.

Then he examined my face. "Do I know you?"

"Yeah."

"You aren't on the girls' team are you?"

"Team?"

"Lacrosse."

"No. I'm in the science club."

He frowned.

_Stupid, Tina. He can't understand why you're doing this._

I hastened to add, "But I love to go to the games and it's a real shame about all the funding that was cut."

"Yeah." Nodding, Ronny thrust a hand in each of his pockets. After digging around, he shrugged. "Sorry. I don't have any money today."

He started to walk away. Damn, damn, damn.

"That's okay," I said before he could take more than two steps. "Brownie's on me."

He turned back. "Really?"

"It's for a good cause."

"Hey," he said, taking one brownie and appearing to toast me with it. "Thanks."

"You're more than welcome." Relieved, I smiled and placed the tray on the table.

He pulled off the yellow ribbon, opened the plastic and took a bite. After making a yummy sound, he swallowed. "I love brownies."
"I know."
"What?"
"I mean that's good."

After he finished off the brownie, he gave me a half smile.

_Woohoo. The love potion was already working._

"I know where I've seen you before," Ronny said. "Math class. You're the girl who always knows the answers."

Better to be known as the beautiful one, but at least he'd noticed me. No need to be choosey.

"I've been wanting to talk to you about something," he continued.

"What?"

"Well." He glanced around him. "It's kind of a long story. Can we meet somewhere later?"

Omigod, that brownie was a miracle. He'd already asked me out.

"A date?" I said, trying to keep my excitement hidden but failing completely. _Be cool, Tina._

"Ummm." He glanced around again before turning back to me. "Okay. A date. But I'm not sure where we should..."

"How about the Science Fair Fiesta Dance?" _Way to be cool._

He blinked. "Why not?" He grinned. "How about if I meet you out in front of the school about seven?"

_He's not going to pick me up?_ was my first thought. _Don't look a gift jock in the mouth._ At least he's going to the dance with you, was my second thought.

"Yeah, sure," I said.

"See you there," he tossed over his shoulder as he walked away.

With an excited wiggle, I ran over to Gracella who was selling a brownie a few feet away. I clutched her arm mid sale, and her tray of brownies spilled.

"Hey—"

"Never mind those," I said as the customer gave a disgusted huff and stalked off.

"Ronny asked me to the dance."

"You're kidding." She jumped up and down, giving a little clap. "That's great. Wow that was fast. Now we can rub it into Nathan that we told him so."

In concert, we turned to the bake sale table and saw Nathan stuffing another brownie into his face. Three wrappers lay abandoned on the tabletop: three pieces of plastic, a blue ribbon, a red ribbon and... a yellow ribbon. _The yellow ribbon._

"Oh my God. Nathan what have you done?" I exclaimed.

He gawped at us as he swallowed the last of it. "What?"

Pushing open the door to the boys' restroom, I yelled, "Make yourself throw it up."

A freshman washing his hands at the sink, reeled back as if I'd struck him. Staring at me goggle-eyed, he quickly fumbled with the faucet handles to shut off the running water. He checked his fly. Was he concerned he hadn't hidden the equipment?

"You said that already and it isn't helping. I can't just barf on cue." Nathan's tortured voice bounced off the tile walls and echoed out to me.

"Stick your finger down your throat," I shouted.
"It isn't working. I'm trying."
"Try harder."
"Tossing my brownies wouldn't be necessary if you hadn't poisoned me."

The freshman flinched then swayed, close to fainting. Trembling, he made for the door without drying his hands. When he passed by me, the kid leaned away as if he was playing limbo and I was the pole.

"What are you looking at?" I demanded.

At that his eyes widened further, and after clearing the door, he began to run down the hall.

Gracella, who'd gone to get her cell phone from her locker, rounded the corner and came in to view. She almost collided with the freshman going the opposite way.

When she reached me, she shook her head. "It's no use. I can't reach Aunt Vandi. I left a message but that's the best I can do right now."

"Great."
"How's it going here?" she asked. "Is Nathan—"

The flush of a toilet interrupted her question. Nathan staggered out of the stall and lurched to the sinks. Turning on the water, he first washed his hands and then cupped some water into his mouth. After sloshing it around and spitting it out, he splashed some water on his face.

I backed out of the door with a grimace and a shrug. "It might be okay. He didn't seem any different. In fact, the way he's been yelling at me, I'd say he's not in love."

"Good. Maybe we won't need my aunt."

Nathan came out of the boys' room.

"How do you feel?" Gracella asked.
He nodded. "Fine. Great, in fact."

"I'm so sorry, Nathan." Shaking my head, I grasped his arm. "I don't know how to make it up to you."

"I do," he replied, grabbing and then pulling me toward him.

Gracella gasped, covering her mouth with her hands.

Before I could react, Nathan planted a kiss on my lips. But what began as a quick peck soon turned into a long smooch. The worst part—or the best part—was that Nathan used his lips like a kissing god. Who would have thought he had it in him? I tried not to be affected, but I couldn't help moving my lips beneath his. Almost as if I had no control over them, my arms wound around his neck and I clung to him as sparklers ignited in my brain. I could have lost half the gray cells controlling math prowess, and I wouldn't have cared.

Me. Clinging. Incredible.
I wanted my best friend's kisses.
Surreal.

Reality intruded. Nathan doesn't care about you. He's not attracted to you. It's that darn brown sprinkle that caused this. How could I take advantage of him like this? I didn't want him to kiss me just because he was under the influence of a love potion.

I pulled away from him.

"Oh no," I murmured.

"Oh yes." He grinned. "You're my girl now and you're going to the dance with me, not that jerky jock."
Standing in front of the school that night waiting for Ronny to show, I resisted the urge to put my head in my hands and tear my hair out. First, it would do no good to break down and go crazy. Second, if I was going to go crazy, I might as well do it with hair and make-up intact.

After the kissing debacle, we'd bundled Nathan into Gracella's car with the idea she would drive him out to her aunt's house in search of a cure. He'd protested.

"Cure?" he'd said. "I don't need a cure. I feel free. I'm free to finally show what I've felt since freshman year."

"It's worse than I thought," Gracella had responded.

"Please do it for me," I pleaded with Nathan. "Go to see Aunt Vandi."

Giving a reluctant nod, he'd stopped struggling and subsided into the passenger seat. When I suggested going with them, Gracella shook her head. "No. You'll only make things worse. We should minimize the effects of this potion thing."

"What does that have to do with it?" I demanded.

"Having you around only accentuates its effects."

"I guess you're right," I said.

"Besides," Gracella leaned in to whisper as Nathan strained to listen from the car. "You can't stand Ronny up."

"I suppose." Suddenly, going to the dance with Ronny was the last thing I wanted to do.

Five hours had passed since Nathan and Gracella left, and I hadn't heard a thing from either of them. Neither of them answered their phones or responded to my texts. Was no news good news or just no news?

Fear clenched at my stomach. I should go after them, but how? With no car and parents who weren't going to loan me one, I had no options. Ride around on the bus? Hardly an effective vehicle for a widespread search.

After taking my cell phone from my purse, I examined the face. Still nothing.

"Ring you stupid thing," I shouted at it.

A footstep sounded behind me, and I heard Ronny laugh. "Is that the factory installed voice activation command or did you specialize it?"

"Ha. No," I tried to joke. "I'm just expecting a call."

As if on command, the face lighted and my ring tone played. A name displayed on the screen: Gracella.

"This is it!" Turning my back to Ronny, my fingers shook as I punched at the accept call button. "What's happening?"

"I lost him."

"What! When?"

"Two hours ago."

Issuing a noise I classified between a groan and a whine, I pounded the cell phone against my forehead. Nathan was out there wandering around in a drugged state. Anything could happen to him. Fear made me lightheaded...or maybe it was the blows from the cell phone.

Gracella was still talking, and I put the phone back to my ear. "I thought I'd find him again."
"Come get me and we'll look for him together," I said.
"No. Stay put. Before he jumped out of the car, Nathan said he had to get ready to take you to the Science Fair Fiesta. More than likely he'll come to you at the dance."
"If something hasn't happened to him," I choked, blinking back tears.
"Nothing's happened to him," Gracella replied.
"Have you at least located your aunt?"
"Not yet."
"Fantastic."
"I'll be there as soon as I can," Gracella said. "But I don't know if Aunt Vandi can do anything."
"We have to try. I don't want Nathan to love me because he's drugged."
"But you want him to love you."
I punched the end call button and turned back to Ronny.
"Is something wrong?" Ronny asked, concern shadowing his eyes. "Do you want me to take you home?"
"No." Gracella had been right. Nathan would come here. "No. It's no big thing. Let's go in."
"You look really great by the way," Ronny said. "Is that an Angelo Arguella dress?"
Blinking, I glanced down at the purple silk mid-thigh length dress I'd thrown on. "Is it? I'm not sure. I don't really know designers."
"I don't either. But my sister has one of his and makes a big deal of it."
His hand went to my waist, and he led me into the school and to the gym where the dance was already well under way. The place was packed. Who would have thought there'd be such a turnout for a science related event? Any excuse for a party, I guess.
Bruno Mars' *It Will Rain* played over the speakers as couples hung on each other on the dance floor.
We stood in awkward silence at the entrance until a couple of kids came up behind us. The guy stepped on my foot and hit my shoulder as he pushed past.
"Excuse you," the boy said in a nasty tone. He glared at us, before he walked away pulling his laughing girlfriend behind him.
"We should get out of the way," I murmured.
Ronny nodded, staring off across the room. "You wanna..." He cleared his throat before finishing. "Dance?"
"Sure. I guess."
He didn't even wait for my reply and was already heading in the direction of the swaying couples. I trudged after him.
Worry about Nathan ruined any enjoyment I might have had in the moment. And Ronny wasn't nearly as fun to be with as I thought he'd be. He didn't have that acerbic sense of humor I loved. By this time, Nathan would have made insightfully amusing comments about half the people in the room.
When we reached the edge of the dance floor area, Ronny took hold and pulled me to him. His hands rested at my waist, and mine lay on his shoulders as we moved with a six-inch gap between us. Our dance steps consisted of shifting the weight from one foot to the other.
The brownie sure didn't seem to be working. Not that I wanted it to anymore. I was
so over this whole thing and now bitterly regretted I'd ever started it. However, if the love potion had worn off Ronny, could it have worn off Nathan too?

I couldn't think of anything to say, and the silence stretched. Finally, I recalled something Ronny had said earlier.

"So ummm. What did you want to talk to me about?" I asked.
"Oh yeah," Ronny said with a smile. "You're really great at math."
"Thank you." He'd asked me on a date to say that?
"And I'm really trying to keep my athletic team eligibility," he continued.
"Okay? But what—"
"I'm really bad at math. So I thought you might agree to help me."
"You want a math tutor?" If he hadn't eaten the brownie, I would have thought he'd only asked me to the dance to get my help to pass math.
"I'd pay you," he offered.
"Yeah. I'll tutor you. I already have a lot of other kids I tutor. What's one more?"
"Really? Great," he said, a relieved sigh escaping him.

Another slow song started, and we danced with neither of us seeming to make the conscious decision to continue. As we moved, the tutoring thing bugged me more and more.

"Is that why you asked me to the dance?" I asked. "So I'd be your math tutor?"
"Well..." Ronny stared at his shoes, his head hanging. "Yeah."

When I didn't respond he hurried to add, "Don't get me wrong, you're kinda cute. And you're very sweet agreeing to be my math tutor but I..." His eyes strayed to a guy standing at the edge of the dance floor. I knew him as one of Ronny's teammates, but I couldn't remember his name. I didn't know much about the guy except that I'd seen him with Ronny. A lot. Then, I remembered I'd never seen Ronny with the same girl more than twice. Like tumblers of a lock falling into place, the truth occurred to me.

"You're gay," I said. Obviously, the love potion couldn't trump sexual preference. No wonder it hadn't really worked on him. "I should have seen it before when you mentioned the dress."

"What? No," he protested, fear filling his eyes. "I'm so not gay. You can't believe I..."

"It's okay," I reassured him. "I won't say anything. I'm totally not into outing anyone."

"No one would believe you anyway," he said almost to himself.
"You're right. But, you know, there's nothing wrong with being gay."
"Don't say that." He pushed me away. "I'm not...what you said. Just because I'm not attracted to you, you get all insulting."
"Okay, okay. You're not...what I said. Just don't get so upset."
"I'm not upset!"

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a movement as someone approached us. Nathan.

"Hey." Nathan grabbed Ronny's shoulder and whirled him around. "You better not be yelling at my girl."

"Your girl?" Ronny shook his head as if to clear it.

"Yeah, she's mine, and you better keep your jock hands off her," Nathan shouted.
"Whatever, man." Ronny held his hands up in surrender and stepped back. "You can
"Just what do you mean by that?" Nathan demanded, taking two steps forward, his fists clenching. "Are you insulting her now?"
"No, dude. Chill."
"Let it go, Nathan," I pleaded, putting my hands on his shoulders and holding him back.

My best friend twisted around and smiled down at me. "For you, I will."
Taking me by the waist, he swung me further onto the dance floor. I fell against Nathan's chest, and my arms went around his neck, clinging. As we moved, I couldn't help noticing how different dancing with Nathan was. No awkward distance spanned between us. We were plastered together as we moved in rhythm with my head on his chest. And I wasn't bored. Even though the dance was slow, my heart pounded and my breath chugged in and out as if I was doing a tap routine.

Suddenly, I lifted my head so I could examine Nathan. Something I'd vaguely noticed during the altercation now became more important. "Hey," I said. "You look different."

Nathan was dressed in a blue sport coat over dress shirt paired with khaki pants. His famous mop of hair had been dyed back to its normal color and styled into a tamer version of itself. Instead of a nest of tight curls, his inch-long hair was a shiny mahogany wave decorating his head.
"You cut your hair," I observed. "And you aren't wearing glasses. Can you see without those things?"
His lips quirked into a wry smile. "Contacts. I had 'em at home but never bothered with them. But I wanted to look good tonight. For you."
He did look good. He looked great. This hottie version of Nathan overwhelmed me. Oh Lord. Why couldn't he want to impress me because he wanted to and not because of some root doctor spell?
Flinching, I jerked out of his hold, pivoted and marched toward the exit.
"What's the matter?" he asked as he followed behind.
"What do you think? You ate the brownie. This isn't you."
Just outside the gym, I almost collided with Gracella and her Aunt Vandi.
"Thank heavens, you're here." I said to the older woman. "You have to do something about Nathan."
"I don't need anything done about me," Nathan protested. "Things are just fine."
"No—" I began and he interrupted by grasping my arm and pulling me to him for a quick kiss. I twisted in his grip, turning tear filled eyes to Aunt Vandi. "See what I mean?"
"Come on," Nathan said. "You like me. I know you do."
"Of course I like you," I replied. "You're my best friend."
"It's more than that." He gave me a little shake before placing a hand against my cheek.
My eyes rose to his and our gazes locked.
"You responded to my kisses," he said. "You enjoyed dancing with me. You like me like me. You don't just like me."
"Yes," I admitted. Tugging out of his hold, I felt my face twist in misery. "But you don't like me like me. You just like me. It's the brownie that likes me likes me."
"How can a brownie like you like you?" he joked. "A brownie is inanimate...except for those singing ones in the TV commercial."

"You know what I mean," I screamed in frustration. "The brownie made you like me when you don't really—"

"Before we's lost in 'like mes'," Aunt Vandi inserted. "I tell you nothin in dat potion I gave you 'cept cinnamon, mint and a few red pepper flakes."

We all fell silent at her words. A few shocked seconds passed before I fully realized the importance of what she'd said.

"Then Nathan wasn't drugged," I mumbled.

"Yeah," he said. "I already told you that eating that brownie only gave me the excuse I needed to act on feelings I've had since freshman year."

A happy bud of giddiness took root inside me. "So really, there was no magic at all involved."

"I won give powerful magic to the irresponsible hands of chil'en," Aunt Vandi said. "I couldn't really protest the irresponsible part. We had accidentally poisoned Nathan. Or we would have if the brownie had been truly tainted."

Aunt Vandi gave an enigmatic arch of her eyebrow and one side of her lips curved up. "But aint it nice you got zactly what you wished fo?"

I thought about it, and she was right. She'd said the love potion would get Ronny to take me to the dance and that I'd get love. Even though she hadn't given me an actual love potion, I couldn't help thinking the root doctor had done something magical. But anything she'd done had only nudged Nathan into admitting feelings he already had and had kind of made me do the same.

"You're right," I said. "I didn't get what I thought I wanted but I got what I really wanted. Thank you."

Aunt Vandi inclined her head. "You mose welcome, chile."

Nathan took my hand and dropped a kiss on my smiling lips.

"Come on, Istanbul. Let's go back and finish our date. There's a refreshment table to explore. Maybe they have my new favorite food: brownies."

"I think they're my new favorite too." Squeezing his hand, I went up on tiptoes and kissed him back.

***

P.R. Mason is the award-winning author of young adult paranormal romance and urban fantasy, including Entanglements, Fated Hearts, and The Banshee and the Linebacker. Pat escaped from the Midwest winters of her youth by moving, in 2001, to the strange and wonderful city of Savannah, Georgia. She now lives there, happily spending her days as the subject of her cat overlord's mind control experimentation. You can learn more about Pat and her work at her website, www.prmason.net.

Back to Table of Contents
My name is Rachel Healy and I am not special. I have light brown hair that’s not quite blonde, an okay figure that’s not quite full, and a propensity for breaking out before any remotely formal event. I am not going to save the world, defeat the Big Bad, or lead a revolution. I will be lucky to pass my physics final. Just so you know who you’re dealing with.

This is my first trip to Paris. Almost forty kids from the junior class at MacArthur High School arrived yesterday afternoon to spend spring break in the City of Lights, including me and my best friend, Stacy.

To be precise, Stacy and I were best friends, and we’re trying to be again. We had what people on television would call a “falling out” over the identity of the person who let slip the news Stacy lost her virginity to her boyfriend Mark. For a long while she believed that person was me. I finally convinced her otherwise, but it’s been a struggle getting back to the way things were with us.

Right now, she’s gazing at diamonds in the gem collection of the natural history museum in Paris, one of the educational stops on the trip. While Stacy fantasizes about a planet-sized engagement ring, I wander into a small side room drenched in darkness save for the small gem cases lining the wall.

Here, fluorescent lights bathe a selection of gems, showing off the secrets and potentialities within them, the spectrum of colors a stone will exhibit when subjected to unusual conditions.

“Now this is cool.”

I don’t have to turn toward the voice to identify the guy it came from, but I do anyway. Stacy’s boyfriend Mark has joined me in the small space.

“Don’t you want to look at diamond rings and tiaras with your future prom queen?” I ask, making no attempt at keeping the distaste from my voice. We have our differences, Mark and I. We make an effort to be civil whenever we’re all together, but when it’s just the two of us, there’s no point in pretending.

Mark scowls and gives an exaggerated shudder. “I’m not ready for that kind of permanence.”

“No, huh?” I say it to fill the space between us, to buy time to process this information. Mark and Stacy have been together since sophomore summer. He promised her he loved her, told her they were destined for forever. “Stacy know about this?”

“Come on,” Mark says, “I’m young. There’s a lot of life left ahead of me, you know?”

“What, you think Stacy’s going to lock you in a basement as soon as you graduate?”

“All right, I’ll put it another way,” he says, leaning closer, looking all serious. “There’s some stuff I want to explore.”

I loosen my lips to ask ‘like what?’ Before the words can form, Mark’s hand cups the back of my head, holds me in place so he can crush his mouth against mine. He wraps his free arm around my waist and hauls me against him.
The sweaty boy smell of him fills my nostrils. His hand on my head holds me immobile while his tongue invades my mouth. My responding protest sounds like a whimper.

I struggle and squirm to get my hands up against his chest then shove him hard. My slight strength against his athlete’s body is insufficient to completely dislodge him, but he breaks the ‘kiss’ and steps back all the same.

“I was right about you,” he says. “So desperate for attention you’d throw yourself at your best friend’s boyfriend.”

Shock, humiliation, and disbelief all rush my mind at once, clogging my throat and silencing my defense.

“I’ll tell you what,” he says. “I’ll let this be our little secret. You don’t want to get on Stacy’s bad side.”

He winks, turns, and strolls away, leaving me alone and hugging myself in the darkness.

We eat an early dinner at a restaurant that falls somewhere between casual café and elegant eatery. The wooden tables are bare and the floor is linoleum, but the walls are painted a warm sunflower yellow and hung with old paintings in gilt frames.

Stacy insists on eating with Mark and his buddies from the basketball team who made the trip. I pretend regret when I tell her I promised to sit with some of the kids I know from show choir, but slink off feeling more relief than regret and not a small amount of self-disgust. Avoiding Stacy makes me a coward, maybe. Probably. But I have no idea what to tell her, or how to pretend nothing has changed if I don’t.

The show choir crew has staked out the bench and chairs stretching along the back wall of the restaurant. My appearance at the end of table is met with a half-dozen stunned expressions but everyone quickly recovers.

“Move over.” Bowie, a smooth-toned tenor elbows the kid next to him. They slide left and Bowie pats the seat beside him, eyes on me. “Have a seat.”

I mumble my thanks, fearing the burn in my cheeks tells more than my words.

“We were just talking about everyone ordering something different,” Bowie says, sliding a single sheet *prix fixe* menu toward me, “and making one big sharing meal.”

“Think you can handle sharing?” Noreen, a second soprano, sits across from me, her dark eyebrows arched in challenge.

“Yeah, pretty sure I can remember stuff we learned in kindergarten,” I counter.

“Ladies, ladies. This is truly arousing, but can we all have something to eat before you entertain us with a girl fight?” Bowie raps his knuckles on the tabletop and the remainder of the group laughs a little. They resume what conversation I interrupted, closing Noreen, Bowie and I off in our own little bubble.

Noreen straightens her shoulders and shakes her shaggy, multi-colored hair out of her eyes and looks at Bowie, humor in her gaze and the lift of her lips. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? A girl fight?”

“That’s what Paris is for, isn’t it? Wish fulfillment?” He knocks the side of his knee against mine. “Isn’t it, Rachel?”

I turn to him. “I guess that depends upon the wish,” I say. Though I mean the statement to be lighthearted, even joking, my voice conveys neither emotion. Instead, I
sound like my hamster drowned.

Bowie’s brow rumples, his gaze locks on mine. The warm clear brown of his eyes shines with unspecified sympathy.

I nearly shake my head to toss away the absurdity of the idea he cares, but I’m caught by him, caught by this guy I’ve shared no more than a nodding acquaintance with since freshman year. He’s looking at me like he knows me—not like he’s drawn a conclusion about me based on who I hang with or how I dress, but like he truly knows me.

I tear my gaze away from Bowie, glance down at the dings and scratches in the table, out across the room to where Stacy sits with Mark. The strain of guilt and anxiety blend into a single nauseating wave in my stomach.

“So. Free time tomorrow morning. Where’s everyone planning to go?” Bowie’s tone is boisterous. He’s either truly interested or intentionally changing the subject. The answers around the table cover the Opera House, Notre Dame, and the Arc de Triomphe. No one mentions returning voluntarily to a museum.

“What about you, Rachel?” Noreen asks, the slightest bite in her voice. “Got plans with your friends?”

The sting in her words catches me square in the gut. Even though I mix my voice with theirs twice a week and in the occasional performance, I am not one of them. And I have no desire to be a part of the crowd on the other side of the restaurant laughing at Mark’s antics.

For just a moment I feel like I’m falling…

I let Noreen’s question and its implication about who my friends are hang unanswered in the air. A waiter approaches with a basket of bread and an order pad. From that point on I lose myself in the flood, barely participate in the world around me, waiting for the bad dream to end.

The school instructors and trip organizers are intent on acclimating us to the time zone through the simple means of sleep deprivation. I want nothing more than to return to the hotel, crawl into bed, and pull the covers over my head. Instead, I board the Metro like we’re told and sit beside Stacy while Mark and his buddies stand over us holding handrails.

“Please tell me you haven’t promised to spend any more time with the choir people,” she says. The train lurches into motion, knocking Stacy and I against one another before settling us into a synchronized swaying rhythm.

“You say that like there’s something wrong with those guys. Choir doesn’t cause plague.” My line of sight has me trying not to look directly at the waistband of Mark’s jeans and the checkered boxer shorts peeking out over the top. I focus on his hideously overpriced sneakers instead.

“Of course there’s nothing wrong with them. It’s just we planned to spend this trip together. I don’t like you ditching me.” There’s a little break in her voice. I glance at her but she’s fixating on her manicure, keeping her eyes hooded.

I sigh. “I didn’t ditch you. It was one stupid meal.” Just a meal. Nothing at all as personal as lurking in the darkness, letting her boyfriend kiss me.

“Stick with us tonight, ok? You have to, it’s safety in numbers.” Her blue eyes dance
with mischief. “Besides, we’re going to a champagne bar the waiter told us about.”

“Are you serious?” I scan the train car for our group chaperones, the parents of some French-club kid. They’re engrossed in their own conversation, unconcerned that a group of under-aged teens in their charge are planning an evening of alcohol consumption.

A hint of excitement buzzes in my veins. A champagne bar. In Paris. How awesomely cool is that?

Once the train pulls in to Abbesses station, we all troop onto the platform and loiter beside the sparkling tiles, the molded plastic seating. In contrast to what I’m accustomed to seeing back home, the station walls curve and rise to the ceiling, an overhead arch seemingly formed to the shape of the train. It seems only right that in this place there is not a single sign in English - or Spanish - as there is at home.

The group leaders inform us we have until ten-thirty to explore on our own. Whoops and cheers bounce against the tiling and swoop up to the curved overhead, echoing and intensifying. Stacy gives me a quick, one-armed hug and grins. I smile back, sharing the thrill of the unknown and unapproved. “Come on,” she says. “I’ll race you to the top.”

Laughing, she starts up the stairway of one of the deepest Metro stations in the city. I pause to take a breath, and that’s my error. Mark takes hold of my elbow; I flinch despite the barrier my spring jacket provides. He tugs me out of the path of the rest of the group, and I move away from the stampede as much for my own safety as from his pressure.

As soon as I’m clear I wrench my arm out of his grasp. “Let go of me.”

“Hold on.” He reaches for me again, catching my sleeve. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Why would I do anything for you?”

His lips twitch in a slithery smile. “You don’t want me telling Stacy how you threw yourself at me today, do you?”

“It would really suck to have her thinking she can’t trust you, wouldn’t it?”

“Asshole. You really think —”

From midway up the steps, Stacy shouts, “Hey you guys! Come on!” There is still laughter in her voice; she believes Mark’s smile. She will believe him over me.

My throat aches as I face him and force out the question. “What do you want?”

He smiles wider, slimmer. “You’re going to tell Stacy - come on, up we go - you’re going to tell Stacy that you want to go to the champagne place just you two. Girlfriend shit.”

“And why am I doing this?” Before he answers, the realization dawns. “This whole thing was a set up. That disgusting come-on at the museum… just so you could get me to agree to this plan.” I feel the wrinkles of disbelief forming on my face. “You really are an idiot.”

If he had only asked, I would have agreed. But he’s too self-absorbed to realize that, to even consider Stacy might want to spend an evening without him.

“I’m not an idiot.” He lowers his voice as we close the distance to where Stacy waits. “I’m smarter than you give me credit for.”

“What’s going on?” Stacy asks. Her eyebrows draw together, her gaze darts from Mark to me and back again.

Mark jogs the last few steps toward her. “Rachel needs a favor.”

My jaw drops, but Stacy hasn’t taken her eyes off her guy. My gut reaction is lost to
her. By the time she turns to me, I have control of my expression.

“Really, what do you need, Rach?” she asks.

“We’ll tell you upstairs,” Mark says. “Come on, let’s get going.”

Trailing the crowd of MacArthur kids, we hustle up the remaining steps and into the twilight over Montmartre.

“Oh, my God, this is amazing.” Stacy hits street level moments before I do. She bounces on the balls of her feet and dances a small circle before Mark rushes her from behind and catches her up in a spiraling hug. Her laughter cuts through the clear air, draws smiles from passersby and classmates streaming past. She wraps her legs around Mark’s waist and he walks a few steps with her before one of the chaperones cautions them on behavior. But not even Mark putting her down dims Stacy’s enthusiasm. “Come on, Rachel! Let’s go.”

I swallow down the combination of anger and unease and walk with Stacy and Mark toward where the basketball crew has gathered at the corner beyond the station entrance. On the surface, spending the evening just me and Stacy knocking around Montmartre and hitting a champagne bar sounds ideal. The fact Mark orchestrated it makes me more than a little suspicious.

Someone is running, the sound of feet hitting pavement muffled by the green leafy trees and putter of cars easing past. “Rachel!” It’s not a shout so much as someone singing out my name.

I turn but do not slow, keeping pace with Stacy until we reach the rest while Bowie approaches at a jog.

“Hey Bowie,” one of the jocks calls. “’s up man?”

“’s up?” Bowie responds. He and the jock share a fist bump, but nothing more, and his attention falls on me. “Bunch of us are headed over to Place du Tertre to see if any of the artists are still hanging around. Want to come with?” He stands at the edge of the group, not quite a part, not quite separate.

“Umm…I…” I’m caught. I’m committed, as it were, to staying with Stacy, but a tug in my chest and a thread of anticipation in my gut make me want to abandon that plan. Why am I suddenly so attuned to Bowie Theissen and his brown eyes and big, easy smile? “I…”

He grins and holds up his hands, palms out. “Say no more. I can see you’ve hit the point where you’re afraid you can no longer resist me so you’re safer keeping your distance. I understand.” His words bubble beneath his laughter. “We’ll see you around.”

And he jogs off, back to where a cluster of choir kids waits for him beneath an old-fashioned street lamp. They shuffle into motion before he’s quite arrived, but he turns back to me and waves before losing himself in that crowd.

“Who was that?” Stacy stands shoulder to shoulder with me, leaning her head close to keep her voice soft.

I’m not sure how to answer. Saying his name suddenly feels like exposing a seedling to the light before its time. “Nobody,” I say.

“Not ‘nobody.’ You were sitting next to him at dinner.”

“Just one of the guys from show choir,” I say. I can feel my forehead wrinkling, so I must be looking at her like she’s insane. “Don’t you remember seeing him at concerts?”

“Well duh, Rachel, I know he’s in choir with you. Not that I go to concerts or anything.” She slips her arm through mine and turns me toward the basketball crew. “I
just wanted to know his name. He’s kinda cute.”

“Relax. You have Mark,” I state.

The party is over.”

“I do have Mark, don’t I?”

I follow her gaze to where Mark is horsing around at the front edge of the group, pretending to jump onto his buddy’s shoulders. That curl of guilt knocks against the wall of my stomach. “Listen,” I say, “about Mark…”

“Yeah, he said you wanted a favor from him. So spill it.”

Again my tongue is caught at the back of my throat, tangled with words. I look to Mark, find his cold glare on me. I don’t know what his endgame is, but I know my option is to go along with his plan or spend the evening with the whole crew, and by extension, with him.

“I, uh — What would you say if we let the guys go off and do their thing and just you and me go to the champagne bar?”

She releases my arm, pivots so we stand face to face.

“And that’s what you asked Mark? Or did he put you up to this?”

Moments like this make me wonder if hidden way deep inside Stacy carries a seed of distrust in Mark. But then something happens to make me realize I’m crazy.

She purses her lips, eyes bright. “He did this, didn’t he? This was his idea because he thinks you and me should spend more time together wasn’t it? And he wants you to pretend it was your idea.”

Now the words make it all the way to my lips but no further. Stacy darts away from me, runs straight for Mark and throws her arms around him. She squeals and tells him how wonderful he is; I fold my arms and grit my teeth. In a flash she’s grabbed my arm again and is turning me away from the guys, waving to Mark over her shoulder.

“He’s so sweet to think of this, isn’t he?” She sighs, a little squeal revealing contentment. “Okay, according to the waiter we have to head toward the basilica. He said you can see it from nearly every road so it’s easy to find.”

While I push down the irritation, she leads me across a narrow cobbled street, points up the hill to where one of the basilica’s white stone domes glows against the darkening sky.

“Mark was just saying at dinner how I should probably spend more time with you, that this trip is a good time to…you know.”

The silence between us fills with the memory of all the ugly words we exchanged, of the jealousy and hurt that surfaced and has yet to fully heal. I never felt as alone as I did when Stacy and I weren’t speaking, never cried so hard or felt so wrenched apart. Plenty of friendships fade away, you know? But the ones that are torn to pieces, those are the ones that make you grieve.

“I know you’re still not crazy about him,” Stacy says softly, “but he’s a good guy, he really is. Think about it. How many guys do we know who would give up the first free night in Paris with their girlfriend so she could hang with her best friend?”

Every bite of dinner churns in my stomach, rolling in the acid of Stacy’s delusions. We pass a bakery whose ovens are still venting savory aromas into the air, and I swallow down the threat of nausea.

“I wish you two could really learn to be friends.”

The memory of Mark’s tongue shoving into my mouth washes over me and pushes
me to the limit of my endurance.

“Ooooh.” Stacy swings me to the right, stopping in front of a shop window where a headless mannequin is draped in a scrap of sheer fabric in which Stacy would look great and I would look like a hooker. “How much is that in American?” she asks.

I read the little price placard, do quick and rough calculations. “About a hundred and twenty bucks.”

She pulls her bottom lip in between her teeth. This is her thoughtful pose. “I might need to get Mark to bring me back here tomorrow. We have free time until when?”

“I don’t know. Stacy, listen for a sec.” I don’t know what Mark is up to, but I can’t stand my friend thinking he’s so wonderful any more.

“I’m listening,” she assures me. She turns away from the window, turning me with her.

Newly conscious of the drop in temperature accompanying the gathering night, I fold my jacket closed across my chest rather than bother with the zipper “Remember this morning when we were at the museum and you were looking at the diamonds and stuff?”

“Like I could forget the diamonds?”

Dumb question, I guess. “Yeah, well you remember when I left you to go look at the fluorescing exhibit?” I shuffle sideways a little to make room for a trio of women coming at us from the other direction.

Stacy’s laughter makes them smile as they pass. “Yes, you wanted me to go with you,” she says to me, untwining her arm and giving me a good-natured, low-effort shove. “As if I was going to leave the diamonds, hello.”

The hill grows steeper. At the top of the cobbled street the white stone of Sacre Coeur basilica glows brighter than the emerging stars. The shock of white against the dark sky is otherworldly; to me, spooky, and not at all comforting.

“So what?” Stacy says, burying her hands in the pockets of her jacket. “You’re going to tell me you saw something cool and didn’t come get me?”

What I saw… fluorescent lighting shadowing Mark’s face like a cartoon villain. I wouldn’t call it cool.

“Rach?” she prompts.

I can’t figure a way to make the words gentle, so I blurt, “Mark kissed me. At the museum. He kissed me.” I’m surprised by the scratch in my throat, the burn of unexpected tears.

We stop on the sidewalk, in front of a little shop, dark for the night, with a hanging basket reaching out from beside the front door, greenery trailing halfway to the ground. Stacy’s eyes are wide, her jaw slack. There is a blankness in her gaze, a lack of comprehension, I think.

“He caught me by the fluorescing exhibit and kissed me.”

“I heard you,” she croaks out.

I rush on. “He told me not to tell you, but then—”

Her voice is firm and shaky at the same time. “You lying bitch.”

“No, Stacy, I’m not lying. I wouldn’t lie about this.”

“Yes, you would.” She nods swiftly. The motion reveals the glitter of tears in her eyes. “Just like before. You lied to me before and I let it go. Not again.”

“Stacy, listen to me. I don’t know what he’s up to. He did it on purpose. He did it so I—”
Her shove this time is not gentle. It is filled with the strength of anger and pain and I stumble backward. My heel teeters over the edge of the low curb, and I backpedal into the road, trying to capture my balance.

“Stay away from me,” she hisses. She swipes at her eyes and turns away.

“Stacy, stop. Listen to me.”

She turns to walk backward. “Stay away from me!” And then she’s trudging up the hill, head bent, hands deep in the pockets of her jacket.

I stand in the street, slowly growing aware of the ache in my ankle and my knee and my heart. Tears of frustration burn down my cheeks. I should have known Stacy wouldn’t believe me. Mark knew it, of that I was certain. Mark knew if I told her what happened she would call me a liar.

So why did he do it?

I should go after Stacy, but I know this drill already. She won’t talk to me, won’t listen to me. And really, get right down to it? We’re roaming together — along with a couple of French club girls — so it’s not like I won’t have an opportunity to speak to her. Right now, she needs to … whatever. Calm down, maybe. Curse me while I’m not there to hear it. Or plan the curses to hurl at me when I am there to hear it.

The only way she’s going to believe me is if Mark admits the truth to her. So I need to find the son of a bitch.

I return to the sidewalk and head back down the hill. The ache in my knee and ankle from my stumble off the curb slows me, but downhill is better than up. I don’t know where Mark and the guys went, but I have a pretty good idea. I just have to figure out how to get there.

At a tobacconist I review a tourist map of the area, locating the Abbesses station, deciphering where I stand. I figure if I continue down the hill, cross past the station and walk in a few blocks on the other side, I should be able to spot the windmill marking the Moulin Rouge. It’s only a guess, but it’s the best guess I’ve got as to where a bunch of guys would head off to on their own. Not that they’re the type to take in a can-can show, but there must be a bar nearby where they’ll be able to get a drink and whistle at girls and otherwise be annoying.

As I walk I forget a little of the drama that’s left me on my own. All around me the buildings are lit to stunning perfection; colored floodlights on pale stone walls, amber street lamps that could pass for gas light, and little white fairy lights wound through trellises and trees. I don’t know whether these lights are for the residents or the tourists, but I fall in love with them either way.

This is Montmartre, home of the Moulin Rouge and Picasso, sinners and artists, basilica and bars. I traveled thousands of miles to experience this city with my friends, and I only have a few short hours here on this hill. I might as well enjoy the scenery for this brief time, forget about Mark’s kiss and Stacy’s anger and Bowie’s eyes. I can snack on a crepe and laugh at the stars and leave the worry of smoothing over friendships for another day. I can….

…until I turn the corner onto a road I know at once I shouldn’t be on. I shouldn’t be here alone, at night. I shouldn’t be here at all. I should be back in the bustling heart of Montmartre, I should be exploring Sacre Couer, I should be wondering about Bowie in the Place de Tertre. Instead I stand rooted to the spot, staring slack-jawed at Mark and one of his basketball buddies as they throw their arms around the shoulders of a pair of
half-dressed hookers and disappear indoors.

Room service leaves continental breakfast in the room I’m sharing with Stacy and the French club girls. Thankfully, the little substitute for a meal includes coffee — heaven bless Paris — and I pour a half cup and grab a plain croissant and sit cross-legged on the end of the bed, waiting for Stacy to emerge from the bathroom.

The French club girls are stretched out on the other bed, heads bowed together over a map of the city, whispering their plans for the morning. They’re nice enough, really, and I feel bad they had to put up with the tension and silence Stacy and I dragged into the room last night, but a girl can only apologize just so much.

I nibble on the edge of the croissant and regret - out of the clear blue nowhere - not bringing my mp3 player along. I would feel better if I could just hear some familiar music, some sound that could shatter the silence with memories of home.

The latch on the bathroom door rattles. The moist croissant goes dry in my mouth. On the next bed, the club girls each suck in a breath.

I wash down the croissant with a swig of coffee, cough at the bitterness as Stacy emerges from the bathroom. “Stacy, you got a second?” I ask.

“Not for you.” She breezes past, her pajamas and makeup bag tucked in her arm. She’s already dressed for the day, makeup in place, hair twisted and pinned with decorative chopsticks.

“I need to talk to you,” I say.
As she passes by, she slams her makeup bag down on the dresser. “I don’t want to hear any more of your bullshit.” She throws her pajamas into the closet and rips her jacket off its hanger. “Ever.”

The club girls whisper in French and scramble off their bed.

“Stace, I know you’re pissed and I understand it, I do. But you have to believe — no.” I shake my head. “I don’t care if you believe me about the museum, but there’s something you need to know, something more important.”

I spent the bulk of my free time in Montmartre last night sipping Orangina at a dusty café near the Abbesses station. Watching the clock, waiting for my classmates to return, I turned over all the options in my mind. No matter how else I arrived at the conclusion, the conclusion remained the same: Stacy needs to know her boyfriend was with a hooker. And that the hooker was the plan all along and I wasn’t lying about the kiss.

Stacy shrugs into her jacket and turns on me, leaning over me, her face inches from mine. Her skin is flushed and her eyes are narrowed. “I know everything I need to. You’re jealous of me and Mark, you always have been. And you’ll make up any bullshit lie to try and break us up so you have someone else to be lonely and pathetic with.”

“Stacy, that’s—”

“I have. Nothing. To say to you. Ever.” Her nostrils flare, her lips pinch, and she storms out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

I flinch at the noise, splashing coffee over my hand. “Shit.”

French club girls scuttle past me and flee the room wordlessly. I’m left alone with a croissant and a cup of bitter coffee. A hollowness fills my chest. How did I get myself into this? Why? Why does telling someone the truth, telling a friend the truth, end up being a punishable offense? And how long will it take before I learn to keep my mouth
I take my time dressing, polishing off the croissant as I do so, leaving the bitter coffee in its pot. By the time I leave the room it’s after nine. The MacArthur High group is required to assemble at the Eiffel Tower at 1:30. I have hours to kill and no idea how. But it’s Paris. There must be something.

Grabbing my camera and my jacket, I head out. The little shop in Montmartre had a map of attractions. I figure I can find something similar close enough to the hotel.

When the elevator reaches the lobby I realize the concierge might have a map. If only I can find the concierge desk.

I approach a cluster of chairs, eyes on the line of bronze marble check-in desks stretching against the far wall.

“Hey, Rachel!”

Bowie. He stands among that same cluster of chairs, and I realize the rest are occupied by kids from school - choir kids and drama kids and kids I only know from passing in the halls. I freeze, not certain what to do.

And then Bowie smiles. A flutter tickles my belly, and I smile in return. Without further doubt or question, I turn toward him, cross the lobby in his direction. One by one the rest of the kids are slowly rising from the chairs, pulling on their coats and checking phones.

“We’re going to do the ten o’clock tour at the Opera House. Want to come with?”

There’s a hopeful glint in his dark eyes, and a sudden melting in my spine. “Sounds good.”

“What about your friend Stacy? You two don’t have some other plan?”

Again I experience the sensation that he sees more than the face I present to the world. I look at the carpet rather than hold his gaze. “She’s, uh, off with her … Mark.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see him nod. “All right. Let’s go then. This way.” He sweeps his arm in the direction of the antique revolving doors, and walks beside me as we cross the lobby.

“So after you blew off my invitation to Place de Tertre, what’d you and Stacy end up doing last night?” he asks.

I search for something to tell him, something so dull he won’t ask more questions. The words are nearly formed when I hear Stacy accusing me of lying when I was telling the truth. I realize I’d rather tell Bowie the truth than a lie. “We ended up fighting,” I say, and step by myself into the revolving door.

On the street Bowie gazes at me with concern and a kindness that makes my throat ache with the warning of impending tears. We are surrounded, though, with the rest of the crew. Bowie steers the chatter effortlessly toward their discoveries in Montmartre - a cross-dressing painter, a drunk crepe maker, and a street corner busker whose skill they prevailed upon to back them up in singing some classic Beatles tunes. Their stories and reminiscences continue until we board a morning-crowded Metro, and the tales are swallowed by Paris residents starting their day.

It’s not until we’re standing at the foot of the Grand Staircase within the opulent Paris Opera House, gazing up at the sweeping steps, the ornate candelabrum, the carved archways that Bowie pursues my remark about Stacy.
“So, bad fight, huh?” he asks.
“‘You could say that.’ I wander away from him to study the sculpture atop the newel post. Noreen and one of the drama kids shuffle up the stairs while the rest of the tour group meanders around the spacious lobby, oohing and aahing and snapping pictures.
“Sorry, it’s not my business,” Bowie says, coming up next to me.
“No, it’s not.”
“It’s just…” He sighs, folds his arms. “You’re not you, you know?”
“I’m not me?”
“The girl that sat with us at dinner last night was, like, distracted. The girl I’m looking at today is on a whole different plane.”
I shake my head, amble toward the center of the lobby. High overhead, a circular domed skylight lets through the meager morning sunshine. “You know me so well you can determine my moods?”
“No, I don’t know you that well.” He smiles a little, shuffles closer, eyes on the classic marble floor. “I just, you know, pay attention is all.”
His statement draws my attention away from the ceiling. I try to read the emotion on his face, get some clue from his eyes, but he’s studying the floor as though memorizing the pattern. I want to ask him what he means, but I’d rather not be embarrassed if I’m reading too much into things.
But I can’t stop looking at him, and wondering. So when he glances up, he catches my stare. The thoughtful, almost sad slant of his lips transforms to his usual broad grin. He stands straight and his gaze sweeps the lobby. “What do you think the acoustics are like in here?”
“Umm… I think they’re excellent for changing the subject?”
The curve of his ears flush pink, and he returns his focus to the floor. “I could help. I mean, I could listen or… whatever.”
I can’t keep back the giggle. “You?”
“Yeah, me. Why not?”
“You’re offering to listen to me whine about a fight I had with Stacy that didn’t involve wet t-shirts or mud?”
He appears puzzled for a moment then his brow clears. “Oh, the girl fight thing. I get it.” He nods, edges closer to me. “I’m a good listener. Really. I have sisters. Twins. I spend a lot of time mediating while my mom’s at work.”
“Somehow I think this particular issue hasn’t come up.”
Our tour guide bustles to the center of the lobby, orders us to gather together so we can move into the theater itself. She gives us the history of the place, naming rulers and architects, and runs through an impressive list of luminaries who performed here.
My mind, however, has returned its full attention to the question of Stacy and Mark and what I should do. I can apologize - but for what? I told the truth. The apology might buy me time to tell her about Mark and the hooker, but I’d only be right back where I started from as soon as I give her the news. She won’t believe that either. I could say nothing, but then isn’t that lying, too?
I slump into one of the red velvet chairs filling the opera house auditorium. Leaning back I can admire the elaborate painting on the ceiling, the chandelier the tour guide says weighs seven tons, but the wheels of my mind are stuck on ugly things.
As I gaze at the velvet theater boxes ringing the balcony, Bowie drops into the seat
beside me. Somehow I feel like I should be annoyed at his persistence, but I find myself
comforted by it. And that means a lot right now.

“All problems,” he says in a voice like a mellow whisper, “boil down to very simple
questions. Get it down to its simplest form, and the answer is easier to find.”
I roll my head against the back of the chair, meet his eyes. “Thanks, Yoda.”
He gives me The Smile. “Happy to help.”
We stay where we are, face-to-face, silent, while the tour guide yammers about “The
Phantom of the Opera” and Noreen softly sings “Think of Me” - as if no one’s ever done
that before.
Bowie is the first to move, shifting forward in his seat and crossing his arms on the
chair in front of him. “Bottom line. The only time fighting with a friend is worth it, is
when not having the fight makes it impossible to live with yourself.”
I turn the words over, looking for some sensibility in them. “Umm…”
“So is it worth it? Whatever you two are fighting about, is it important enough to risk
the friendship?”
The friendship is already at risk, already fragile, maybe beyond repair. And that’s
going to make for a long week in Paris, and a longer school year. But I can’t think of a
single solution, no way to undo what’s been done, only make it worse.
I’m not a liar. Stacy thinks I am; Mark will tell her I am. Even if she doubts herself,
she’ll believe him.
I let me eyes slip closed. Low in a chair in a two hundred year old theater,
surrounded by ghosts and classmates, I am once again lost. But this time, at least, I begin
to have a sense of where I need to go.

The group from MacArthur High assembles at a cluster of stone benches beneath the
Eiffel Tower. At one-thirty, chaperones count heads, teachers look annoyed, and my
classmates laugh and wander and make the chaperones’ job harder and the teachers more
annoyed.
I stick close to Bowie and Noreen. Noreen, at last, has decided I’m not an enemy, so
the tension constricting my chest is all of my own making.
As far away from me as she could possibly be and still remain with the MacArthur
group, Stacy stands wrapped in Mark’s arms, her back to his front. He talks over her head
to his buddies while she shoots daggers in my direction.
“What exactly did you say to her?” Bowie asks quietly.
“The truth.”
He sucks air in between his teeth. “Ouch.”
The chaperones and teachers herd us toward the elevator that will take us to the
second level of the tower. We shuffle into a semblance of a line, waiting for the double-
decker cars riding the outside leg of the tower to take us up. Stacy and Mark are further
along in the line, frustrating my plan to corner her on the elevator. Instead, at Bowie’s
insistence, I gaze out the full-length window, peering past the cross-hatched iron of the
tower out onto the city of Paris.
“Pretty cool,” Bowie says from behind me. His breath is warm on my neck, and I’m
surprised how much I enjoy the sensation.
“How many decades do you figure it’s looked just like this?” I ask, certain I’d seen
old movies from the fifties that showed precisely this view.

Bowie exhales. I shiver. “Centuries, more like it. You know, except for the motor boats and cars.”

I’m forced to wait until the entirety of the MacArthur group has collected on the second observation deck before I can hunt down Stacy. My palms are moist and my knees are weak but they manage to hold me up while I circle the deck in search of her.

I find her looking out across the Seine, nestled under Mark’s arm as expected.

I pull in a deep breath, proud that I don’t shudder as I do so, and tap Stacy’s shoulder.

The smile she wears when she turns falls away instantly when she sees me. “I’m not speaking to you, remember?”

“Yes, I remember,” I say, forcing my voice calm, telling myself not to back away from the venom in Stacy’s eyes. “But I’m not here to talk to you. I’m here to talk to your boyfriend who doesn’t want me to call him an idiot or tell you how I threw myself at him which of course I would do because I think he’s so amazing and irresistible, right?”

Mark drops his arm from Stacy’s shoulders and turns his back on Paris. “Look, I already told Stacy what happened, how you begged me not to tell her what you did, ok? Now just leave us alone.”

More than anything I want to do as I’m told and slink away, but I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. “Okay, good, that’s good, I’m glad you told her your side of the story. Because you tell her everything, of course. Which means you told her about the hooker, too, right? I just want to be sure about that because, you know, I’d hate for you to give my former best friend any kind of disease you may have picked up.”

His face contorts - eyes narrowed, teeth bared. “You bitch.”

“So I’ve been told.” I cut my gaze to Stacy. The hatred in her eyes sends an ache through me. “If being honest makes me a bitch, I’ll live with it. But I won’t live with a friend who thinks so little of me she’d believe I would lie to her.” My throat is raw with impending, pain-filled tears. “I’ve told you what happened at the museum, and now you know what I saw last night and I tried to tell you this morning. Whoever you choose to believe is your decision.”

Without waiting for a response, I back away, pushing through the little audience we attracted. My eyes sting with tears and my vision blurs. Through the fog I make out Bowie reaching a hand to me. I lace my fingers with his, his grip warm and solid, and let him lead me to the opposite side of the deck.

I know I need to track down a chaperone and beg a room change. I know Stacy will never believe me over Mark. I know it’s going to be some time before I can think of the friendship we lost without wanting to cry. But right now, I’m in a crowd of classmates. I’ve just handed them a story to whisper about and embellish from one side of the ocean to the other. I don’t want to add my personal display of heartache to their tale. The most important thing for me to do is take a breath, take control, and look at Paris.

We find a vacant section along the railing and I release Bowie’s hand, lean my elbows against the curved metal and gaze out over the old city. Squat stone buildings with rounded roofs line up in neat rows on either side of a swath of green grass park bisecting the roads. A traffic oval sits at one end, while the other end seems to point to the surprising sight of a skyscraper, point to the future.

“You okay?” Bowie asks when the silence has gone on too long.
I nod, not trusting myself yet with words. “Good, because there’s something I want to talk to you about.” He sidles closer to me, his chest inches from my shoulder. “I’m thinking when this trip is over and we’re back home, I’m going to ask you out. And I was wondering if, you know, you might say yes.”

An unexpected giggle bubbles up within me and escapes as a snort. Before he has time to take offense, I rush to reassure him. “I might say yes. That is, yes, I would say... yes.”

This time his smile is not broad, not showy, not sad. It’s a smile of sly pleasure, and I am powerless to stop my own smile.

“So, given that fact,” he says, “and I realize this is out of order, but...isn’t this a great spot for a first kiss?”

The giggle escapes as a proper giggle. A tiny piece of me marvels at how easily Bowie has turned my mood, and how grateful I am for that.

“’cause, I think it’s a pretty good spot.” He leans in - just a little, just enough - and brushes my lips with his, soft and tentative. He slips his arm around my waist, hold me loosely as the kiss grows confident.

The hollow feeling I experienced earlier slips away, replaced with a sense of possibility. Before I can get used to this new sensation, Bowie pulls back, just far enough to allow us to see eye to eye.

“Good spot,” I say.

He nods, smiles. “What’d I tell you? Paris is for wish fulfillment.”

He leans in to kiss me again. And on the observation deck of the Eiffel Tower, during my first ever trip to Paris, I have a sudden memory of fluorescent lights shining through stones, illuminating the secrets within, proving that under the right conditions, something unexpectedly wonderful can be revealed.

***

Jennifer McAndrews is a 2010 Golden Heart Finalist® in the Young Adult category and author of the time travel adventure Braving The Titanic. Her most recent latest release, Deadly Farce, is a humorous mystery featuring Hollywood hunks, pizza, and murder. A lifelong resident of New York, Jennifer is a mom to three dogs, four cats, a mouse, and two actual humans. Find her on twitter: @jenmcandrews

http://www.jennifermcandrews.com/

Back to Table of Contents
What the hell? Is that Jen pushing a stroller?

Shit, after all the frigging time I spent writing her those stupid letters, after she dropped me like a used cigarette, I can’t believe she’s the first person I see on my leave. That’s the type of karma I’m having these days. First I find out that Eje’s going to be late returning to Halifax, and now this. I glance around and wonder for a second if I can walk past her like she doesn’t exist. That’s probably what she’ll do. I never thought of her as being that cold, but not once did she respond to my letters. All I wanted to know was why. Why was it over? I get that a long-distance relationship is hard, but it’s not like I was going to be away for freaking forever. Maybe she’s seeing someone else. Christ, the thought of that makes me want to puke up the donair I wolfed down faster than a souped-up car.

With my palms sweaty I feel more nervous walking toward her than my first day at boot camp, which sucked. For once the movies got something right. Boot camp is downright ugly. It was all running, learning how to function on little sleep, and forcing yourself to eat crappy sludge military food. That was the first week. Then it became more running, which alternated between pushing your sorry legs through large motherfucking knee-deep water the Sergeant called puddles—I swear to God, if he said that one more time, I was going to drown him in one of those so-called puddles—and lots of time spent cleaning weapons. After fourteen weeks of the same routine, with the only deviation being waking up earlier and earlier and learning to heave your tired, beyond-achy body past the breaking point, it was hit-the-books study time.

“Wow, guess who I get the pleasure of running into.” I hate that when I look at Jen, my heart drops to my feet. She’s changed but the same. She’s skinner than I remember and there’s a wary deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes that makes me want to check over my shoulder. I resist that urge and hope to God I’m not drooling. Her chestnut-colored hair is pulled back in a ponytail, but wisps of it frame her pixie-like face. Her cheeks look flushed and she smells like fresh, clean air.

“Nice to see you, Charlie.”

Nice to freaking see me. It’s on the tip of my tongue to shout at her, but one thing the military ingrained in me is that it’s always best to keep my big mouth shut. The few times I did speak up, I paid for it with sweat, and there’s nothing fun about working out when everyone else has gone to the barracks.

“Yeah, great to see you too, Jen.” I’m so lame. Small talk was never my strong suit. I find myself shuffling my feet and I don’t want to keep walking. What I want more than anything is to sweep Jen into my arms and kiss her like I fantasized about night after night.

“So, how is the military?” she asks, making sure to keep the stroller moving. She must have taken a nanny job. Funny, I never thought of her as suited to clean poopy diapers and all. I’m glad the kid’s asleep and oblivious to us.

“Great.” The kid, a baby I realize, starts to squirm around in the stroller. I attempt to
peek in but Jen moves the stroller forward. I can’t see the baby. Fine. Whatever. With expertise, Jen pops the soother back in the baby’s mouth and then turns to face me.

“So you really like the army?” she asks, again.

I nod. “It’s hard though. Lots of physical work, and the school stuff is a lot harder than the stuff taught in high school. But yeah, guess I really do like it.” I know now I’m rambling but hell, she was the one who asked. “So, what have you been up to?”

For a weird second her eyes dart back to the stroller, and then she looks up at me.

“Not much. Stuff.” she says, which is so unlike Jen I think I must be making her uncomfortable.

“Well, I was supposed to meet Eje tonight, but since he’s not in town yet, are you interested in getting together? You know like old times. I’d really like to see the gang.” Sweet Jesus, I must be nuts. Why not put a bullet through my heart while I stand? I honestly can’t believe I blurted all that out.

Jen looks down at her sneakers and for a second I let myself hope. “I can’t tonight. Sorry, Charlie.”

“Oh, okay, that’s fine. Listen, I’ve got to go, but it was really great seeing you again, Jen.”

She nods but doesn’t say anything. I force myself to walk away from her and feel more than ever that I should run back and kidnap her. What we had felt special. Where did I go wrong? What did I do to make her hate me so much?

Oh my God. I think I’m going to be sick. Of all the people to run into, Charlie. God, he looked so good he made me want to cry. Instead I acted like a fool and said nothing. I can’t help but glance over my shoulder to see if he’s still there, but he’s gone. Out of my life for good and he doesn’t know. Maybe I should have told him. Would it have made a difference? Who knows.

Danny starts to cry and for once I like the distraction. I turn the corner, put the stroller in park and pick him up, holding him tight. At six months now, he’s looking more and more like his father. The man I let walk out of my life for good. I cuddle Danny close, amazed at how bright his wonderful, big brown eyes are. He’s got light cinnamon-colored skin, thick, dark curly hair and eyes so alert and intelligent he makes my heart soar.

“You, my little man, must be getting hungry.” I watch his mouth suckle hard on his soother. It will take me three more blocks until I get to my sister’s place. Tucking him back into his stroller, I make sure the baby blankets keep the chilly September day from his body.

Shame you didn’t do one of your famous cries for your daddy. The mere thought of Charlie holding Danny unlocks something I’ve tried hard to keep closed for months. I fight the tears wanting to fall. Months ago I willed the emotional side of me to shut off. The words my father screamed at me still haunt me. I made my bed and now I’ve got to lie in it. A giggle escapes me. At least I get to hold Danny in that bed.

I haul the stroller up the two flights of stairs and open the door. Ella, my big sister, is there, holding the door open for me. I don’t know what I’d do without her. Unlike my father, she’s been my rock. When Dad found out I was pregnant, he hit the wall, literally. Things got worse from there so a few weeks before I delivered Danny, I took up my big
sister’s offer and moved in with her. She hasn’t asked me for rent yet and when I offered to pay what I could, she told me not to worry about it. Thank God she’s got a big paying job at the bank because the truth of the matter is, I don’t have much money saved.

“Did the walk calm him down?”

“Yeah, the minute we hit the street he conked out as usual,” I say, moving the stroller into the living room. No way am I taking him out of that until he wakes up screaming for his food. His last feeding frenzy meant three nights of no sleep, and my breasts are still sensitive. Maybe I should start him on a bottle soon.

“Your friend Shannon just called. You really should go out with her.”

I look at Danny and give a silent chuckle. “Can’t.”

“Well, when you’re ready I’ve got formula and bottles for you, and maybe when he wakes he’ll be so hungry he won’t miss you.”

“Why do I get the impression it’s you who wants him to take the bottle more than me?”

Ella walks over to the stroller and adjusts one of his blankets. At the age of twenty-six she’s still single and I have no idea why. She’s dated lots of men, but according to her, none have met her criteria. I should have drawn up a list of must-haves too. Maybe that would have helped me resist Charlie. I feel heat creep up my flushed cheeks and hope my sister doesn’t notice.

“I just love him so much, Jen. He’s so adorable. I’d like to try the bottle with him to see if he’d take it. I won’t push you. I know it’s totally up to you, but he’s just so cuddly.” I’m sure Ella’s coworkers would kill to hear how she speaks when she talks to Danny. Normally, my sister is all business, but not when it comes to her nephew.

I look at Danny sleeping peacefully still in his stroller and nod. “Okay, you win. I’ll give Shannon a call and maybe if you’re lucky, I’ll meet her for a coffee.” I head down the hall to my bedroom. I swear to God, my sister almost jumped for joy. Obviously we both need to get out more.

I give Shannon a hug the minute I see her. She squeezes me back and then punches my arm.

“Why’d you do that?” I slide my butt onto the worn leather seat. We’re at a greasy spoon so I wouldn’t be out long, in case Danny doesn’t take to the bottle my sister eagerly got ready.

“You didn’t tell him.”

“Tell who what?” I ask, pleading ignorance.

“Don’t play that game with me. Charlie’s in town. He just called me to say he ran into you. He didn’t mention anything else. So, I’m guessing you didn’t tell him.”

Shit. I knew I shouldn’t have said anything to her. She’s never been good at keeping secrets. I stare hard at her. “Listen, how was I to know I’d run into him? He’s busy. I told you, this is my burden.”

Shannon looks at me like I’m nuts and maybe I am, but it’s my call. She doesn’t know Charlie like I do. If Charlie knew I’d been pregnant, he’d never have gone into the army. He’d never get that opportunity to do what he wanted with his life. No way was I going to be the anchor around his neck. Especially after he told me straight up how he grew up in the projects. What’s that expression? If you love something enough, set it free.
Well, hell, that’s exactly what I promised myself I’d do for Charlie. My love for him gave him his independence.

“That’s not right, Jen, and you know it. Charlie deserves to know about Danny. That’s not a secret you hide from his father.”

I’m tempted to stand up and leave. I don’t want to have this conversation. Especially since I’m feeling vulnerable. Seeing Charlie today knocked that barrier I’ve built down a bit. I spent the rest of the day reminding myself why I did what I did.

I lean across the table to stress my point. “Shannon, this hasn’t been easy on me, but you’ve got to trust me. The decision I made is the best thing for Charlie.”

She sits back and studies me. God, I hate when she does that. Shannon’s been my good friend all my life and the one thing she knows is when I lie, my eyes twitch. I feel overly conscious of my facial movements.

“You’re full of shit. You still have feelings for him. Jen, tell him. What if someone else does?”

“What? Did you tell Eje?”

She shakes her head. “No. I promised you I wouldn’t, but I hate that. Eje and I don’t have secrets between us. We promised each other we wouldn’t after all that happened and honestly, this…this is killing me.”

“Don’t you dare tell him, Shannon.”

“Then you tell Charlie. He deserves to know. Trust me, you’ll hate yourself if you don’t. Listen, Eje’s going to be in town tomorrow night. I’m giving you twenty-four hours before I spill my guts to him, and you know how tight they are.”

This is blackmail. I can’t believe Shannon is doing this to me. After everything I’ve endured, she’s going to ruin it. I’m so mad at her it takes me a full minute to realize I’ve got tears in my eyes.

Shannon takes my hand in hers and gives it a squeeze. “This isn’t fair to you. Charlie’s done his basic training. Didn’t he tell you he’s been stationed here in Halifax? Tell him. He might surprise you.”

I wipe the tears from my cheek and remove my hand. “The only surprise is how much he’ll hate me. I can’t tell him. It’s too late. Just leave it alone. Please stay out of it.”

“I can’t. Either you tell him or Eje will. I think news like this should come from you.”

Her words haunt me all through the stupid meaningless meal we have. I practically race back to the apartment, needing more than ever the feel of Danny. Telling Charlie might be the right thing, but deep down I know it’s going to be more painful than childbirth.

To say I was surprised Jen called me is an understatement. After our awkward talk on the street I thought for sure I’d never lay eyes on her again. I walk into Linda’s Diner and I’m so glad someone invented bacon I can’t help but grin. My stomach grumbles loud with pleasure. The military has bacon, but one bite is all it takes for you to never touch that stuff again. You’d swear it was made from real leather and not the swine type. The smell reminds me of home.

I’m early, so I cop a seat near the door to watch for Jen. I order coffee and tell the waitress I’m expecting someone. I see Jen a minute later. She’s brought the kid again.
guess her nanny job must be full-time. I get up and hold the door open for her as she hauls the stroller awkwardly into the small restaurant. “Thanks,” she says.

She looks terrible. She’s got dark circles under her eyes and it looks like she’s been crying. If her father’s been yelling at her again, I’m going to say something. Jen’s home life hasn’t been easy and while she might have a fancy house in a good neighborhood, her father is an asshole. Most cops are.

“Everything all right?” I take her jacket and hang it up on the peg beside our table. She accepts a coffee from the waitress and attempts a smile.

She still hasn’t answered my question. I try again. “Jen, is everything okay?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” She gives me a pleading look that I don’t understand. She blows on the hot coffee and then asks without looking at me, “Charlie, you really like the army, right?”

“Sure, I do. It’s great. I get to study and get paid. I’m saving up for a house for my mom and me.”

Jen sputters on the coffee she’s attempting to sip. “Wow, that’s great. Your mom must be so proud of you.” She sounds even more not like herself. Jen’s always been the optimistic, perky one. Today, she’s definitely off.

“She is. You know it’s not easy being a single mom,” I say.

“Trust me, I know,” says Jen, her voice so low I almost missed it. What the heck? I lean closer to her. “Jen, what’s up? And don’t tell me nothing. I know something is. Tell me.”

Her eyes dart nervously to the stroller, and then it hits me. Christ, the kid in the buggy is hers. Instantly I feel angry. The thought of Jen with another guy hurts like hell.

“Jen, are you telling me that baby’s yours?” I’m clenching my fist under the table and hope she’ll deny it.

Emerald eyes full of tears stare at me. “No, Charlie. I’m telling you he’s ours.”

Ours? An army truck could have creamed through the diner and for the love of God, I wouldn’t have been able to move. Ours? The word rings loud and then louder as the reality of what she’s told me hits me. What the fuck? Frantically I recall the two times we made out. Both got heated fast and we hadn’t used condoms. I am such a fucking idiot. More than that, I’m furious. I’m so mad I can’t speak. The waitress comes over and automatically we order. The normalcy adds to the surreal moment.

“Are you sure?” Instantly I regret asking that question. Jen’s eyes narrow and a red blush of embarrassment curls from her pale neck to her freckled cheeks. “Trust me, I’m sure.”

I lean closer to her. I want more than anything to yell and scream at her but I force myself to be calm. “Jen, why didn’t you tell me?” Moving my head my eyes dart to the stroller. I’m dying to see the baby. What does he look like? Christ, I’m a dad. I don’t even know his name. I have a thousand thoughts zinging through my mind and can’t focus. One minute I’m angry and the next I’m overwhelmed.

She takes a sip of coffee and picks up the sleeping baby. I want to hate her but she looks so damn hot and sexy holding him, my son, that I can’t pry my eyes from her.

“Charlie, if I told you, I was sure you wouldn’t accept the army.”

“You got that right. I should have been here for you.” My voice has a bark to it I’m finding hard to control.

“No, that wouldn’t be right. The army is your way out. You said that yourself a
hundred times. I really did want to tell you. I read all your letters and wrote back a dozen times, but I couldn’t get the nerve to mail them. When you texted me, I had to erase them. Please, don’t hate me. I’m okay. He’s okay. And more importantly, you’re okay.”

What the fuck? I’m okay. This isn’t about me. This is about her and our baby. She made a decision…a decision I should have been involved with from the start, but she left me in the dark. I force myself to take a sip of coffee to calm down.

“What’s his name?” I find myself leaning over the table to get a better look at him. My son.


My heart flips over. I look at her hard for a long moment. Silently she holds him out to me. Without a word I take my son into my arms. “You remembered.” My voice cracks with emotion. That rush of being overwhelmed hits me like a bullet—hard and piercing straight through my heart.

For the first time since she walked in Jen, cracks a smile. It transforms her instantly into her beautiful cheerful self. The girl I fell in love with. The girl I still love. “Trust me, that tickling session I remembered.” Jen leans across the table. “I wanted him to have a piece of you, Charlie.”

I’m drowning with the emotions cascading through me. Was it only ten minutes ago I was pissed at her for not writing to me? Shit, the thought of what she’s endured in the last year makes me feel sick. I want to stay mad at her, but holding the baby, my son, our child, in my arms is doing something to me—it’s unraveling a piece of me I don’t want to examine too closely. Knowing she named our son Daniel, which is my middle name and my father’s name—keeping a piece of history tied to him—isn’t helping me stay angry. And right now I need to be in control. I have the right to be mad. She didn’t tell me. In fact, when I think about it, she downright lied to me. Liars are people I can’t stand, I remind myself as I gaze for the first time into the face of my son.

I feel sick. There’s a part of me that’s acting calm, I can feel that—it’s that frozen part I locked away months ago when I realized the only person I could rely on was myself. I had to be strong for my son.

“Jen, he’s so beautiful,” Charlie chokes out. He’s gazing at him with love shining in his eyes.

I wonder what he’s thinking, holding his son in his arms for the first time. Does it feel totally overwhelming? Like the best instant love you’ll ever experience? That’s exactly how I felt when I gave birth to him. “Yeah, he’s beautiful and he’s a good baby. Only cries when he’s hungry, which might be soon.”

Charlie’s gaze turns from our son to look at me. “Can I give him his food when he wakes up?”

I’m now fighting back the tears and grappling with embarrassment. Danny objected to my sister’s attempts to give him a bottle yesterday, so I’m back to nursing him. I love feeding him. It feels natural and keeps me connected to him. I’m trying to figure out how to tell all that to Charlie. I see Charlie’s doe-brown eyes turn heated as he processes what I’m not saying. See, that’s the thing with Charlie. He can read between the lines like a pro and it’s always been something I’ve marveled at.

“Ah, you don’t give him a bottle, do you?”
I shake my head. His cheeks turn slightly red, which adds to how adorable he looks nuzzling the top of our son’s head. I know what he’s trying to do. Inhale that sweet baby scent of him, because it’s something I do all the time.

“Okay, let me just add to the awkward moment and say that’s really hot,” says Charlie, a grin spreading across his face. He throws in a wink to disarm me.

I smile for real. This is the Charlie I came to love. Not only is he fast on his feet and academically a freaking brainiac, but his wit will blow you over like a cyclone. You either like it or hate it. I fell in love with it on day one when he and a bunch of other so-called high school delinquents showed up at my paddling club for an afterschool program. I’m not sure what the overall objective of the program was, but for Charlie and Eje, who’s still hooked up with my best friend Shannon, the program reinforced their desire to escape where they live.

Charlie’s not very good in a kayak, but he knows his way around a weight room like a heroin addict—all hype and ready to show everyone the joy of lifting weights. Trust me, there’s no joy in pumping iron, but I’ve never told Charlie that.

“Trust me, Danny—I call him Danny—likes his food.”

“Life father, like son,” says Charlie with ease.

Once again I have to remind myself not to fall for his charm. That’s not easy. Charlie was stud material before the military whipped him into shape. At six-foot one, with light, curly brown hair cropped even closer to his head, mocha skin tone and brown eyes, he’s brash and bold. Charlie was a lot of muscle before he joined the army but now all that muscle has been evenly displaced to the rest of his body. Plus, he looks more confident. Oh, he pulled off cocky with swagger and I’m not saying that’s gone, but he’s a guy with a purpose and he’s on the right path to achieve that. Me, what’s my purpose? It’s a question I don’t want to examine at the moment.

Charlie keeps looking at me and Danny. “He’s got your nose. Thank God.” He chuckles.

I laugh. Charlie’s always hated his wide nose and used to curse his no-good father for that genetic marker. “He’s got your eyes,” I add.

“He does? I really hope he wakes up soon. I’m dying to see. So he’s, like, five months?”

“Six. He was born on February twenty-seventh at four in the morning and he weighed a good seven pounds nine ounces.”

“You have got to be kidding me. February twenty-seventh?”

“Yeah,” I say, not feeling his excitement.

“That’s my mother’s birthday.” If he grins any wider, his face might split open.

“You’re kidding me. What are the odds of that?” I say, trying to process it all.

Charlie switches Danny from his left arm to his right so he can better watch his face. He’s not nervous and looks in his element holding our son. Our breakfast arrives and I dig in while I can. My breasts feel heavy and my gut tells me when Danny wakes up, I’ll have to feed him. I brought along his soother, but half that time that doesn’t work to keep him quiet.

Charlie uses his left hand to feed himself, not willing to put Danny down. I forgot Charlie was a leftie and it makes me wonder about Danny. I get his desire to keep Danny close.

“Don’t you get it, Jen? Our son was meant to be.”
I’m stuffing a large piece of my cheese omelet into my mouth and almost choke. That was a phrase I used on my father after, like, our fortieth conversation about my choices. His first words of wisdom urged me to get an abortion. His second was adoption, which sounded worse than his kill-my-baby talk. When I finally did find my voice, I spoke about fate and all that crap. I know I said this baby was meant to be and while my dad told me not to romanticize it, which I’ll admit I’d done in the beginning, from day one I had a feeling I was right. Danny was meant to be. Could I have an abortion? No. It was that plain and simple. Could I even think about giving up my baby to complete strangers? I tried to think about it. I tried to paint a picture in my head that he’d be better off and end up with some rich parents, but in the end that’s not a guarantee and I couldn’t do it. Two months before I gave birth to Danny I left home to move in with my sister. The fights with my father had escalated and weren’t worth it. Of course, I can’t find my voice to tell my father. Instead, I left him a note and told him not to call.

He called once after I left a message on the home answering machine, informing him he had a grandson. His call had been brief and awkward but before he hung up, he told me that no matter what he loved me. He didn’t add that he loved my son, and I get that step might take longer. Ella, my sister, said to give him time. It’s been almost half a year. I wonder how much time he needs. I don’t tell any of that to Charlie.

“I take it your father freaked on you. Jesus, Jen, I’m so sorry. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. I should have been there for you.”

I blink back tears and mouth, “It was difficult.” What I can’t believe is why Charlie isn’t screaming his head off at me. What I did to him was unfair. I almost feel the urge to text Shannon to tell her she was right. Instead, I lean across the table and for the first time in months, I touch Charlie. That one touch is all it takes. Holding our baby in his arms, he moves out of the booth and scoots in beside me. Using his left arm, he hauls me to him. I savor the feel of his body heat and let his warmth invade my scarred heart.

“Jen, don’t lie to me again. It was shitty. I get that. Your father never liked me because of the color of my skin. I bet he freaked on you big time about having my baby.”

I try to deny it but don’t. The hateful words my father spewed at me come flashing back. I dig my fingers into my palm. Pain is something I’ve learned to embrace.

“He just doesn’t know you.” Why do I feel the need to defend my father? My father is far from perfect, but he’s only human and we all have flaws. His years on the police force certainly changed him. Raising the three of us after my mother died of breast cancer ten years ago didn’t make for an easy life. Maybe I should call him again?

“Well, he might change, but I’ve dealt with enough people like your father to know that’s not going to happen overnight. And part of me respects that. I’m not sure I’d ever let a daughter of mine date a guy like me.”

He’s trying to lighten the mood. Danny start to squirm, and I hold out my arms so Charlie will hand him over. Charlie gives me another one of his bone-melting longing looks I try hard to ignore. With obvious reluctance, he hands Danny to me. I absorb my son’s warm body and gently push down the small hoodie covering his head. Charlie leans closer and I expect him to pull his arm away from me, but he doesn’t.

“Jen, don’t get me wrong. I’m really mad you didn’t tell me, but I don’t live in the past anymore. I’m also really proud of what you did. You did this because you wanted something better for me. I get that. But you’ve got to understand something. There wasn’t a day that went by without me thinking about you. I know I fast-talked you and I know
you might have thought our fling was just that, but that’s never been what I wanted.”

The tears slide down my cheek and I lean my head more into his muscular shoulder. He caresses my hair and I feel my heart start to beat a loud warning bell. I feel his touch throughout my sensitive body. So much for my armor.

“I’m sorry,” I mumble. “I didn’t know what to do and then I didn’t know how to tell you.”

“You should have told me from the beginning,” he says again.

I know I’ve hurt him, but this is going a lot smoother than I envisioned. A small whimper from Danny draws me to him. His eyes are wide open and Charlie’s leaning over me so he can see the expression on his son’s face. That pulls at my heartstrings so much I have to concentrate on the sounds of the diner to avoid breaking down. The couple in the booth to our right has been privy to our entire conversation, but when I make eye contact with the woman she smiles at me. It’s such a reassuring look that I find myself smiling back. She turns her attention back to her coffee and I’m forced back to my son and Charlie.

“His eyes are just like mine.”

“I told you,” I say.

Charlie is touching Danny’s cheeks. His hand is so big compared to our son’s small cheeks I find it mesmerizing.

“He’s got your skin coloring.”

“Maybe that will fade more with time,” Charlie says.

I look up at Charlie. He’s never been proud of his African-Canadian heritage but it’s a part of him. Too bad his father wasn’t in their life. Danny’s mouth starts to make puckering movements.

“Can you pass me that small blanket in the stroller? I’m going to have to feed him.”

Charlie hands me the blanket and then moves back to his side of the booth. I adjust the blanket around me and realize my hands are shaking.

“Listen, I’ve got to go to the bathroom. I’ll be right back,” says Charlie, getting up from the booth before I can even nod a thanks.

I know exactly what he’s doing. He’s giving me time to compose myself so I can feed Danny. I sniffle back the tears and lean back in the booth, letting my son take hold of me. Now what? I’m wondering. Will we eat our breakfasts and go our separate ways? What’s best for Danny? But what about what I want?

I thought I knew what I wanted long before Danny came into my life. Getting my teacher’s degree had been my goal. Now, my priority is Danny. I haven’t given up, but sometimes taking care of him twenty-four-seven makes it feel like a pipe dream.

Holy fucking shit. I think I’ve said that a dozen times in my head but I can’t stop. Jen is in there nursing my son. Our son. It’s such a major-turn on I feel like a freak. I should be pissed at her, but there’s this part of me that just wants to protect her. Is this how love feels? Shit, this is so not what I expected coming home on leave. I thought I’d spend my entire time partying. Now, all I want to do is spend my time with Jen and Danny. My son.

I wonder what she’s thinking. If she thinks I’m walking out on her life, she can think again. No shit. My father might have done that to my mom, but that’s not going to be me. I know how hard it’s been on my mom to raise me, her hellion, on her own. Plus, I want
to be there for my son. I guess the bigger question is, does Jen want me? Christ, I’ve got a freaking hard-on thinking about her breastfeeding our son. I’m too afraid to go back out into the diner. I wonder how long it takes to feed a baby. I start counting the dirty diamond squares on the floor and force my body to cool down. I judge a good ten minutes have passed. I leave the stall, knowing I was being a freaking coward, and head back out.

Danny’s back in his stroller and Jen’s tucking in her shirt. The bill is on the table. I walk over and grab the two receipts, heading to the cashier. I pay and then I’m helping Jen move the stroller down the stairs and out onto the street.

“So, are you still at home?” I ask, realizing I have no idea where’s she’s living.
“No. I moved in with my sister. I live with her on Tower Road.”
I wonder if her move was by choice but suspect it wasn’t. “Listen, Jen, we really need to talk more about all of this.”

“Yeah, we do,” she says, moving the stroller back and forth.
“Can I come over?”
“As in, now?” Her green eyes look freaked.

My heart’s running a marathon and I feel like I’m rushing the words. “I can come over now or wait until a better time. It’s up to you, but I’m not leaving you. You’re not getting me out of your life so fast.”
She smiles. Guess I’m saying the right things. “My sister’s at work and the place is a mess, but yeah, you can come over.”
My heart flip-flops. I nod and together we start the walk from the waterfront up to Tower Road. We talk about silly things. She tells me what Shannon’s been up to and then I realize what she hasn’t said.

“You quit school, didn’t you?” I need to know.
“Sort of had to. Things got really hard for me,” says Jen, telling more with those small words than if she’d launched into a lecture. “But I’m currently working on getting my GED. My sister is determined to help. Honestly, Charlie, I’m not sure what I would have done without her support.”

Because I gave you none. I feel like a flat tire. Useless. What could I have done to help if she’d told me? Not much. Jen’s right. The only way out of my neighborhood was a scholarship like Eje got or the Armed Forces. I could have gotten a scholarship, but the reality is I wanted a military life. A chance to see more of the world. A chance for a steady job. An opportunity to learn a skill and be useful.

“So, how is army life?” she asks, turning the conversation.

For once I’m happy to switch subjects. It certainly hasn’t been a picnic, but I bet it’s been easier than Jen’s life. And that’s partly my fault.

We get to her sister’s apartment and I help her haul up the stroller. It’s two freaking flights of stairs. How the hell does she do this every day? She unzips Danny but doesn’t move him from the stroller.

“He likes to sleep in his stroller during the day.”

I strip off my coat. Once Jen hangs up our jackets I turn to her. I walk right up to her and do what I’ve dreamed about a dozen times a day. I kiss her like she’s my lifeline. The scary thing is, since I met her she’s meant everything to me. And now it’s up to me to play at being her savior when in reality, she’s mine.
Why isn’t he screaming at me? Why, when he looks at me, do I feel special when I know I’m not?

I’m almost wishing Danny would wake up and demand my attention. He’s still asleep in the stroller, which is parked in the hallway. I find myself checking on him to see if he’s started to squirm, but he’s deep in baby sleep land. Hopefully his dreams are better than mine. Lately, nightmares make up my nights and I know it has to do with my fear of coping. Being a single mom is hard, but more than that it’s lonely. I know that now. I tuck my feet under me on the sofa. Charlie’s hair is a lot shorter than it used to be, but with his face he can pull it off.

He gives me another heated look, which I’m trying to ignore. “So what do you do all day?” he asks.

It’s such an innocent question, I know I shouldn’t feel angry because he doesn’t get how demanding being a parent is, but I find myself turning red.

Like he knows he’s said the wrong thing, Charlie rushes in with, “Shit, I bet it’s hard, but I’m just wondering about your life and Danny.”

“At the moment, when Danny’s sleeping, I’m studying and doing my GED work. I’m finishing my last year and in June, I’ll write my GED and graduate. And then I’m applying to university.”

“You still want to be a teacher?”

It’s always the small things Charlie remembers, and I love him more for it. “Yeah, that’s still my dream.” I stare deep into his brown eyes and wish he could read me like a book. I’m too afraid to find my voice, to speak the fears I’m trying hard to keep blanketed. Like Danny sleeping, being oblivious to the world would be easy. In my case, I’m hyperaware of time ticking away.

Charlie’s hand grasps mine. He moves closer. I feel his body heat and smell the clean scent of his soap. He still smells like Irish Spring and I find myself smiling.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. I would have thought the army wouldn’t allow Irish Spring soap.” I chuckle.

He laughs. “Oh, army soap is mean. It’s not for black people. I’ve never used so much lotion in my entire life. I’m not sure what was worse—surviving boot camp, or being nicknamed ‘scaly’ because the soap dried out my skin so much. First thing I did when I got home was take a long bath.”

“Yeah, knowing you, I bet there was a magazine in your hand.”

Charlie grins and his eyes light up. “And what magazine did you envision in my hand?”

I find myself blushing. We’re flirting. It almost feels like old times.

Charlie leans back on the sofa and, quick like a kayak, slides his arm around my shoulder. He hauls me closer. “Jen, I get that this has been hard. If I’d known—”

“You’d what?” I cut in, trying hard to maintain that concrete barrier I’d built up around my heart.

“I would have stayed,” he says softly, like he knows he’d regret it.

“Of course you would have. It wouldn’t have been right for you, though.”

He jumps up from the sofa. “What’s fair for you and Danny? I should have been here.”

I get up and force myself to close the space between us. “We’re okay.”
“Jesus, how can you say that, Jen? Don’t even try to pretend this is how you envisioned your life. You quit school.”

“Yes temporarily,” I remind him, jumping up with nervous energy.

“You moved out of your home to live with your sister.”

“This is a lot better than living with Dad.” Why am I defending myself? I plunk back down on the sofa and steal another glance at the stroller. No little movements. Damn. Charlie sits beside me but his arms are resting on his legs and he looks like he’s thinking of something to say. It’s making me nervous.

“I’m…we’re going to be okay, Charlie.”

It’s then I realize he’s silently crying. My arms automatically wrap around his wide back. He doesn’t shake me off. I hear him mumble, “I’m such a fuck-up. This is all my fault.”

I move and kneel before him, forcing him to look at me. I capture his face in my hand. I need him to realize I’m not the same person I had been. Having Danny changed me. Maybe this isn’t how I thought my life would play out, and maybe coping is okay for now, but I certainly don’t need a knight in shining armor—or in my case, Charlie in his army fatsue saving me. No way. Maybe at one time I wished for that, but this Jennifer grew up. Someone else counts on me now, and I won’t let him down.

“Charlie, it’s both our faults. We were young. We let our passion for each other rule our heads, and voilà. Do I regret Danny coming into my life? Not for one second.”

“How can you say that when he must remind you of me so much?”

I smile, hoping he’ll understand that’s exactly what makes Danny so special to me. Looking at Charlie, I know he needs to hear those words. “Charlie, you don’t get it. When I look at Danny it’s you I see. I search you out in his eyes. I love running my fingers over his pudgy nose, hoping it’ll look like yours.”

Charlie groans.

“I could never hate how Danny looks because to me, he looks like you. Gorgeous.”

The next thing I know, Charlie’s hands grasp my face and his lips are on mine. I expect for a second for it to be a punishing, almost brutal kiss, but that’s the thing with Charlie. He defies expectations. Like before, his lips are soft, gentle and so coaxing that it’s me who ends up demanding more. I’m not sure how long we declare our love with our lips, but it’s only when the door opens that I realize in the span of an afternoon my barrier has crumbled.

I didn’t want to leave, but Jen’s sister, as nice as she is for taking Jen and Danny in to live with her, made it clear by eight o’clock it was time for me to head home. She’s right, of course. I was putting it off because there’s this part of me that feels if I leave, Jen might run. That’s ridiculous, I know. Where the heck would she go? She’s put on a brave face, but if she thinks I’m leaving her for good she’s about to discover I’m harder than a bed bug to get rid of.

“It’s movie night, Charlie, and I’ve got all your favorite snacks,” says Mom the minute I open the door to our apartment. It hits me then. I’ve got to tell her.

“Mom, can I speak with you?”

Her face turns gray and she clutches her heart. “What’s up?”

When you grow up in the North End of Halifax you get used to living with tragedy
and shock, so she has every right to get worried, but I don’t want her getting too worked
up. We move to the sofa in the living room and I can tell by the look on her face she’s
thinking the worst.

“You remember Jennifer from the paddling club?”
Mom shakes her head. Shit, that’s right. Jen never came over. Mom only met
Shannon when Eje got the crap beaten out of him. “Was she the girl you were always
mooning over?” she asks, trying hard not to smile.
I nod. “Yeah, guess I was mooning over her. We were sort of going out…”
“And?”
I gulp, knowing I’m stalling. I’m worried Mom’s going to freak on me, and that’s
never good. “Promise me you won’t freak?”
“Charlie Daniel Johnston, you had best not be in trouble. Not after all I’ve done to-
“It’s not like that. I’m a dad.”
My mom doesn’t say anything for a full minute. I rush in with everything I’ve
learned in the last hours being with Jennifer.
“You are telling me this here girl didn’t tell you because she didn’t want you to say
no to the army?”
“Yeah, that’s basically what I can gather.”
My mom gets up from the sofa. “Charlie, this girl loves you and let me say it right
now, I love her. She was trying to protect you. And now you, my son, are going to do the
right thing.”
“And what’s that?” I know, but I want her to say it. I’m fighting not to grin when
Mom gets in my face.
“Boy, you’d best not be messing with me. No son of mine is going to walk away
from his child.”
I grin. “Absolutely not. I think that’s what Jen expects. Hell no. I want to see my son
grow up.”
“Oh my God, I’m a grandmother and I don’t even know his name.”
“Daniel. And more than that, he was born on your birthday.”
I swear to God, my mom got down on her knees and started thanking God for
Danny. That, more than anything, brought more damn tears to my eyes.
My mother’s eyes turn misty. “She knew that was your dad’s name, right?”
I nod.
Mom gets up off her knees and takes my face in her hands to stare at me. “Well,
Charlie, you might have your father’s name as your middle name but you are not like
him. I raised you better.”
“Yes you did. Would you like to come with me tomorrow to see your grandson?”
Mom nods, but big fat tears are running down her cheeks. “I can’t believe she took it
upon herself not to tell you.”
“It hasn’t been easy for her.”
Mom laughs but not in a funny way. “Charlie, you don’t have to tell me that.”

I ring the door to Jennifer’s apartment. I’ve got a dozen red roses and a ring in my pocket.
The ring belongs to my grandmother who passed away a decade ago. Mom gave it to me
last night in case I thought of some important words to ask Jennifer. Those were her
words, not mine. I tried to play like I had no idea what she was talking about, but she grinned and walked away, not falling for my game.

“Oh, come in,” says Jen when she opens the door. I notice panic flare to life when she realizes I’ve brought my mother along.

“Jen, this is my mom, Sherry.”

“Nice to meet you, Sherry,” says Jen, taking the roses. “Thanks, Charlie. You shouldn’t have.”

“Oh, yes he should have,” adds my mom.

They shake hands but then my mom pulls Jen in close for a bear hug. I expect Jen to stiffen but she surprises me by returning the hug. They’re both grinning when they release each other, and both have tears in their eyes. *This I so don’t need. I’m sick of crying.*

Quickly, like she knows how I feel about more tears, Mom comes right out and asks if she can see the baby. The smile lighting up Jen’s face is better than any firework display.

“He’s such a good baby. He only wakes up usually once in the night for a feeding and then goes right back to sleep. And he likes to take a two-hour nap in the afternoon, which gives me time to work on my studies.”

Mom doesn’t say anything. Her mind, like mine, is waiting to see Danny. Jen moves us to the living room, and there he is. Today he’s in something Jen calls a bouncy chair, watching the moving planets with a huge grin on his chubby face.

Mom immediately gushes on about how handsome he is. This we all agree on. Without asking, Jen unstraps Danny and hands him to my mom. My mom’s face has this raptured look on it, and I know how she feels. Overwhelmed, excited and nervous.

Then, like a pro, Mom sits down with Danny in the rocking chair I didn’t even notice yesterday and settles in to rock him. I’ll be lucky if I get to hold him today.

Jen offers to make us coffee. I follow her into the kitchen.

“Your mom’s handling this okay?”

“Yeah, she is. Sort of surprised me. Thought for sure she’d beat the shit out of me.”

Jen turns her head to see if I’m lying. I am. For all Mom’s hollering, she’s never once laid a hand on me. I don’t tell Jen that’s because my father thought laying a hand on my mom was cool. All Jen knows is that he left us a long time ago. For that I’m glad. I don’t need his influence in my life.

Jen smiles and turns the coffee machine on.

“Where’s your sister?”

“She wanted to give us privacy. Don’t worry, she’ll be back. She was sort of nervous about leaving me here to face the cavalry on my own.”

“Did she expect us to storm in and take him or something?” The minute I say it, I know the truth. Jen thought that. I take Jen in my arms. For a second her body stiffens, but then as I simply hug her, letting her adjust to my hands on her, she slowly loosens up.

“Jen, I’d never do that to you. You understand, don’t you?”

“Not really,” she says. “This is all good…you knowing and your mom being okay with it, but what does it mean?”

“It means a lot. I want you in my life, Jen. I want to be in Danny’s life.”

Her eyes widen, like that’s the last thing she expected. She attempts to back out of my hold. I tighten my grip. No way am I about to let her leave me.
“Charlie, you don’t know what you’re saying. I know this is a huge shock to your system, but you don’t mean it.”

The ring in my pocket feels like it’s digging in my leg. If I reach in to retrieve it, Jen will back out of my hold. Looking her in the eyes, I say what I rehearsed last night. “Look, I know I’m far from your idea of a perfect guy, but I’ve got potential. I have one more month to finish up this course. Then I’m going to be stationed here...in Halifax. That placement should last five years. After that, I’ll probably be stationed somewhere else. That will give you time to finish up your studies. I have to do one overseas eight-month stint within those years, but Jen, I guess what I’m saying is, I want to be with you.”

She’s about to open her mouth to say something. I rush in with a kiss to silence her. I’m hoping the fact that she kissed me back is a good sign. Once we’re done, she’s leaning more of her body into mine. I rush in with the rest of what I need to say. Reaching into my pocket, I dig out the ring.

I hold it up for her to see. Tears immediately gather in her eyes. Shit, that wasn’t the reaction I’d been hoping for.

“Charlie, you can’t be serious.”

I get down on one knee. I’m hoping she won’t think it’s a stupid, lame move. I’ve never been more serious in my life. “Jen, you are my life. There wasn’t one day while I was away that I wasn’t thinking of you. I think I fell in love with you the first time I saw you and yes, that might be lame, but you get me. You’re the only one who totally gets me.”

“Charlie, what you’re asking is a lifelong commitment.”

“Damn straight it is. Will you have me? I promise to never leave you or cheat on you.”

Jen starts to laugh. “I’m fairly certain that’s not a standard proposal.”

“It is where I come from. I’m dead serious. I want to be in your life. I want to be in Danny’s life. Please, will you consider what I’m asking?”

Her eyes dart to the coffee machine. Our drink is ready. My heart feels like it’s running a 5-a.m. marathon, the type I hated in boot camp.

“Charlie, I think you should get up off your knee and get real. You’re just feeling guilty. I understand.”

Okay, drastic measures are called for. I get up from the floor and slip the ring on her finger. She’s speechless but holds out her hand to admire the diamond. “It was my grandmother’s.”

“Oh my God, Charlie. You can’t be serious. It’s beautiful. I should take it off.”

“No. I want you to keep it on your finger so you can think about what I’m asking. I’m not going to rush you, Jen. This has to be your choice. But you know how stubborn I can be.” I smile then swoop in for another kiss. This time I take my time and wait until she once again leans into my body before I lower my hands to her bottom. I haul her in tight, needing her to understand I’d do anything to keep her with me.

We release each other only when Mom asks if the coffee’s ready. Jen blushes. I whisper not to worry about it.

She’s about to take off the ring, not wanting Mom to see it, but I urge her to keep it on. I tell her I told Mom I was going to propose and her face turns even more flushed. She looks sexy and adorable.
“Charlie, I’m not sure about this.”
“I know, Jen. I know. Like I just said. I’m not rushing you. I want you to promise me you’ll think about it. And I’m not planning to leave you and Danny, so you’re going to have to get used to us being around a lot.”
“You say that now, but you’re young and you could change your mind.”
“And you’re young. Christ, we’re both young. But sometimes things are meant to be. You were meant to be with me. I don’t think of Danny as a mistake. I think of him as our miracle.”
Her eyes once again get misty. I know mine are and I’m hoping she won’t hold that against me. This time Jen is the one to initiate the hug. “Thank you, Charlie.”
“For what?”
“For being you.”
“Does that mean you’ll think about it?”
“Yeah, it does.”
Jen claims my eager lips, anchors my heart and gives me eternal hope. Three simple words I’m praying to God will change all our lives for good.

***

Renee Pace writes nitty gritty young adult stories. She is the author of Off Leash and Off Limits. Renee lives in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she juggles motherhood and working as a volunteer in the community. She is a member of Romance Writers of America and her local Romance Writers of Atlantic Canada, as well as the Writer’s Federation of Nova Scotia, and the Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators. For more information, please visit [www.reneepace.com](http://www.reneepace.com).

[Back to Table of Contents]
On A Field, Sable
By
Diana Peterfreund

Ashes fall from my fingertips and my mouth tastes of smoke. I’m almost halfway through the pack of cigarettes, and nothing’s happened yet. The fumes are evaporating, too. It’s a pity. Bet it would smell great here normally. Ursula would love it. She’d be running around, picking all kinds of flowers. The little purple spiky ones with the leaves like grass. The white daisies with the cup like centers. The tiny, shapeless masses that sprout from cracks in the rocks, dripping with petals so yellow they make my eyes water.

There are red ones there, near the boulder where Rosamund bled to death. Ursula would probably know what they’re called. All I know is they aren’t roses, which strikes me as much funnier than it should. Maybe I’m high from the nicotine. Or the gas fumes. Or the altitude.

It’s quiet on the mountainside. I’m sitting on a rock, dangling my feet over the side, thunking my heels against the stone as I smoke. It might be the rock — it probably is, though the stains of Astrid’s blood have long since washed away. It’s been months since her brains were dashed out against the stone, months since I carried lifeless bodies down the trail. So much blood spilled on this mountainside, and now all I see are flowers.

Two cigarettes later, and the scent of tobacco smoke wanes in my nostrils in favor of true fire. For a moment I’m elated, and then I realize the origin, as rot joins the mix.

In storybooks and movies, magic lets you see the secret path, the hidden sprite. It lets you hear the sound of fairy music, or the voices of the dead.

My magic stinks. Unicorns stink. They smell of soot and stagnant water. Of death that comes by suffocation or incineration. I wonder if those are preferable to the one I always figured awaited me, somewhere on the end of a unicorn’s horn.

The magic makes it impossible for a unicorn to sneak up on you. Your mind smells them from miles away. Today, however, I’m grateful. If it weren’t for the stench heralding his arrival, I’d have jumped from my skin when he spoke.

Daughter of Alexander.

I flick some ash and keep smoking, steeling myself for the sight of him. I have my crossbow, but it didn’t even pierce his skin last time. Some part of me, some tiny traitorous part, must have been waiting for him.

Seconds later, there he is, bigger—always bigger than I expect. Bigger than the pictures in the books, or the statue in the rotunda, or the nightmares Ursula’s been having for the better part of a year. Big, bigger biggest.

“The name’s Melissende, Bucephalus.” I nod at the unicorn. His voice in my head reminds me of my father’s. I’m sure that’s what he intends.

In storybooks, unicorns are lithe, graceful things, with slender, deer bodies and mischievous goat faces and gorgeous, spiraling white horns. Bucephalus looks more like a wooly mammoth, with hooves the size of hubcaps and eyes like temple fires. His horn is a massive spike from his head, a tusk of stone stained with the murders of millennia. I climbed up this boulder, but he still stands at eye-level.

“What are you doing here?”
What are you doing here? He reflects back at me. And why does the soil smell of peat?

I gather the images in my mind for him. Automobiles and oil fields, petrol stations and red warning labels.

His front hooves paw the ground. The boulder beneath me vibrates at his every move. If he kills me where I sit, will I have succeeded or failed in my goal?

_Do not wish for death, young hunter._

“Why? Don’t you, after all these years? You have nothing. Nobody. Everything you ever knew or loved is gone.” I flick away my cigarette. Nothing. No sparks, no flames, no tiny plumes of smoke. I know my aim is better than that.

_But it is not that way for you. You have your sister. The little bear._

“Don’t speak of her.” My fingers itch for my crossbow. Instead I light a match. Such a frail little stick, compared to my horn-tipped bolts. But it’ll do more damage, magic or not.

Bucephalus says nothing. He snorts and shifts on his massive legs. Nothing was meant to live as long as he does. I have heard that there are trees that do, though, in Norway or New Zealand or America or something. That makes even less sense. How much worse would thousands of years be if you were rooted to the same place that whole time? If your children fell from your branches and lived in your shadow and died so close you could touch them, if only the breeze was strong enough that day.

If I’d been a few meters closer, I might have killed that re’em before it got to Astrid and Rosamund. If I hadn’t tripped, if my first two shots had been deeper or in a more vital artery. If Dorcas hadn’t decided to stay back and let her arm heal. If there had been more hunters on the mountain that day. If Clothilde Llewelyn had killed every last one of these monsters when she’d had the chance a hundred and fifty years ago. If she’d never made a deal with the monster who stands before me.

When Bucephalus growls, you feel it more than hear it. Your bones shake beneath your skin.

The match extinguishes in the mountain breeze. Oh well. Plenty more where that came from.

“I’ve killed a hundred unicorns,” I say.

_I’ve killed ten thousand men._

“Please, tell me more about all the people you’ve murdered.” Of course, your bones can shudder from other causes, too.

_We are both killers, Daughter of Alexander. There is no need to apologize for it._

“Do you see me apologizing?”

_What is your wish?_

To avenge the death of Rosamund is the only one I’ll allow in my mind for Bucephalus to see.

_Her killer is dead._

The image floats before me—I slew the re’em while Rosamund and Astrid lay in pools of blood on the mountainside. It didn’t take the half-dozen bolts I fired into the unicorn’s body, nor the dagger I used when it dropped to the ground. Even as it gurgled its last breaths, it cried out for its offspring. I heard their answering pleas in my mind for the first time as their mother’s lifeblood soaked my hands and stained my clothes.

I would have killed them, too, but I had to get Astrid off the mountain.
Do you know what happened to them?
I shrug and light another match. I feel faintly sick, but I don’t know if it’s from too many cigarettes or a unicorn far too close.

Search for them now.
I flick the match from my fingers. “Not necessary.” The match bounces on the ground and the flame dwindles. Nothing. Again.
Who knew it could be so hard to start a fire?
Search for them. Do you feel any unicorn other than me on this mountaintop?
Against my will, my instincts reach out, but I hear no chord, scent no fire, feel no unicorn thoughts. But what does that mean? I couldn’t feel them last time, either. Their existence was shielded by their mother.

Who is now dead. Do you think they survived here all winter without her?
I grimace and fumble for the box of matches, knocking the canister so it falls over, clattering against the stone, splattering oil in its wake. My fingers are shaking. Yes, too much nicotine. Too much magic. The scene blurs before my eyes — the massive, red-brown hide of Bucephalus, the tiny pinpricks of wildflower color against the carpet of mountain green.

“If the unicorns aren’t here, then tell me what I’m doing.”
You know what you are doing, Melissende Holtz. But do you know why you have not yet done it?

I have to strike the match three times before it lights. “Oh, I get a name now? I heard you were stingy with things like that.” The flame licks at my fingertips, but I can’t feel its heat. I need more. So much more. I toss the match away from me, and watch its arc down into the grass.

Bucephalus watches too. I can’t see that well anymore, but he helps. This match, too, fails to do its duty. It lands facedown in the heart of a wildflower, melting the petals and singeing the stamen before it extinguishes.

Come now. Your aim is not that bad. When you kill a unicorn, you shoot for the heart. Why such a coward when you wish to kill yourself?

My head flies up, my eyes meet his. There’s a pool of gas on the rock at my side. And I shove my sleeve into it. “I’m no coward.” Where are my matches?

Bucephalus charges forward, swiping his giant head at me. I’m swept from the rock by the flat of his horn, tossed in the air like a petal torn from a flower.
If I landed on a rock, I might be dead, or maimed, like Astrid. But Bucephalus’s aim is as good as mine. I hit the thick grass hard, but not hard enough to break. There’s gas in my nose and damp wildflowers in my hair. My body burns with pain. I cough, trying to catch my breath as his shadow blocks the sun.

My crossbow is gone, up on the boulder. My matches have been flung in every direction.

“So why don’t you kill me?” I scream at his ancient, terrible face. His nostrils flare wider than my open mouth. If he wanted, he could bite off my head. He could crush my skull to dust beneath his hooves.
He’s killed ten thousand people. How many were hunters, just like me?
I grab the nearest rock, and bash him on the snout. He winces — if monsters can wince, and I scramble out from beneath him.
I race back to the boulder, but his legs are as long as my whole body. Again, he
brushes me aside, and I go tumbling, over and over, my body jostled by half buried rocks in the pillowy grass. Bruises and blood bloom on my skin like so many spring flowers.

I push myself to my feet against, bracing my body against the rock and face him. The unicorn is eyeing me, horn lowered, mouth open so saliva drips over his fangs and off a tongue as large as my arm.

“Speak!”

But there are no words from the unicorn in my mind. It’s closed off to me, the way the re’em or the kirin can sometimes shield their thoughts, the way the little ones like Bonegrinder never can. “Is that what makes you special?” I spit at him. “That you have the choice whether or not to speak, but you can always, always read our minds, as we can always read the minds of the lesser unicorns?”

The unicorn is silent. The whole mountain is silent. The birds and insects have fled the stench of gasoline, and even the breeze has stopped. I hear the blood in my ears.

“You should kill me,” I say. “I’m not soft, like the Llewelyns.” Like all the Llewelyns. “I have no love for fluffy animals that only want to eat me.”

Nothing.

“Speak!” I shriek. I rush at him, unarmed. He doesn’t let me get a blow in this time, lifting his head and shoving me back against the boulder. His horn screeches against the granite above my head.

This is how it ended for Astrid. My skull smacks against the stone, but not hard enough to crack. Not nearly hard enough.

I slump to the ground as he backs away, and I cover my face with my hands. My skin is wet with blood or gas or tears. My flesh stings and burns, but not with fire. Not with fire.

I don’t want to die by fire.

“If I live,” I say at last, “I will kill you all. Unicorns are a threat to my family. To everyone I love. I won’t rest until every last one of you is dead.” I drop my hands to the grass at the base of the boulder and rake my fingers through the blades. Bucephalus watches me with eyes as old as the ages. In his endless life, he’s watched millions die. He’s seen empires fall and stars fade and species wink out of existence.

And still he fights. He could have walked off a cliff a century ago, and he didn’t.

“I would dedicate my life to eradicating unicorns. Is that not reason enough to kill me?”

It is.

I almost cry out with relief at the voice in my head. He’s going to do it. He’s going to do it.

He lowers his horn and his hooves slash the earth, smearing wet wildflower against a scar of green and black. In this moment, my last moment, I am transfixed by the colors.

It’s so pretty up here. Ursula would have loved it. Little, bratty, precious Ursula, who should never have seen the blood and the death and the violence she’s seen. Who shouldn’t even know how to hold a bow, let alone use one to kill something. Who has a massive scar in her tummy from the time she was impaled by a unicorn.

You know what? I don’t want to die by unicorn, either.

My hand closes around a tiny, round-tipped twig in the grass. Bucephalus has seen far worse than me, and he’s ready to murder rather than allow his kind to be cut down.

You can learn quite a lot from your elders.
The unicorn charges and I leap. I scrape the end of the match against the stone as I jump and it bursts into flame against my fingertips. Bucephalus collides with the rock as I land, shaking the foundation beneath my feet. The boulder cracks beneath me and I reach out for a handhold.

The match tumbles from my fingertips. In the slowness of time that comes courtesy of my unicorn magic, I can see it falling, end over end, the fire traveling down its length until it lands in the grass.

The explosion knocks me off my perch.

Somewhere, beyond the rock, beyond the roar of the flames, the unicorn bellows in agony. My eyes are seared with the afterimage of a ring, a mushroom cloud of fire. My coat’s aflame — I drag it off, rubbing my arm against the grass until all trace of fire is gone.

And then I run. I don’t know if he made it out, but if he did, he’s coming for me.

Halfway down the trail, I stop to look back at the charred rock field above. The fire’s still burning, but the rocks will contain it. It won’t spread to the rest of the mountain.

All those lovely wildflowers: gone. My crossbow: gone. And Bucephalus — the unicorn that lived for a thousand years, the unicorn that saved my life by promising to end it, the unicorn that made sure that his kind survived the last time we hunters threatened to extinguish their entire species…

He won’t be a problem this time around.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The world of the killer unicorniverse, as seen in this story, is based on real myths and legends of unicorns from around the world. For instance, contemporary biographies of the great military leader, Alexander the Great, claimed that his famous warhorse, Bucephalus, was not a horse at all, but rather a giant type of man-eating unicorn from Turkey called a karkadann. To read more about Bucephalus, other killer unicorns, Melissende, and her fellow unicorn hunters, check out the novels Rampant and Ascendant.

***

Diana Peterfreund is the author of eight novels for adults and teens, including the Secret Society Girl series, the killer unicorn novels, and For Darkness Shows the Stars, a post-apocalyptic retelling of Jane Austen’s Persuasion. Her critically acclaimed short stories have been on the Locus Recommended Reading List and anthologized in The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year, vol. 5. She lives in Washington, D.C. with her family. Read more about Diana at http://www.dianapeterfreund.com.

Back to Table of Contents
“I want something romantic. A bouquet that shows her how much I love her.” The lanky older man casts his glance around the shop, gaze skipping over our vibrant offerings. “Something…special.”

I slip from behind the counter and head toward our bold selection of wildflowers, him right on my heels. “How about a mixed bouquet? We can add romantic flowers in, along with sprigs of baby’s breath and other greenery.” A small wave of excitement washes over me. Finally, a chance to do something other than—

“What about roses? Not red, of course,” he adds quickly. “Everyone does red. Do you have any fun colors?”

I stop and slowly turn around, trying to keep my face from showing my disappointment. “We have a fantastic selection of roses. But if you really want unique, maybe you can try lilacs. They’re a symbol of falling in love.”

He purses his lips, thinking. Then he shakes his head. “Nah, I think I’ll get…two dozen roses. Let’s try yellow.”

“Yellow isn’t very…romantic,” I say as gently as possible.

His brow furrows. “But Mary looks great in yellow.”

Okay, my cue to back off. I head to our roses and get twenty-four bright yellow ones, swallowing my sighs of frustration. Aunt Becky tried to tell me when I started working at her shop a couple of months ago that most people go for tried-and-true bouquets, but I was convinced I could sway people into buying more exotic offerings. Everyone knows that roses mean love, especially red ones. But different colors actually have different meanings, which can also vary depending on context. Yellow is more of a declaration of friendship than romantic sentiments. So giving a girl two dozen yellow roses is like beating her over the head with a let’s-just-be-buddies bat.

Oh, well. Maybe Mary will love them. In the end, that’s what matters. I carefully prepare the flowers, wrapping them in tissue paper and tucking a packet of flower feed between the stems. The man smiles widely, almost patting himself on the back. He’s probably imagining the woman fawning over him in gratitude.

After ringing him up and handing him the change, I say, “And thank you for shopping at Eternal Spring Florist. Have a wonderful day.”

The door dings as he leaves, letting in a waft of fresh air. Most spring days in Cleveland are rainy, too hot or too cold, so it’s a pleasant surprise to have nice April weather.

My pocket buzzes. I snag my phone—a text from Anna. Hey, girl! Still coming over 2nite?

Yup! Bringing ice cream, I write back. Hanging out with Anna on Saturday nights is about the only highlight of my very, very lame social life. And while I love her to death, one of the secret thrills of our hangouts is spending time with Anna’s twin brother, Curtis. I’ve had a thing for him since second grade, when I moved to Cleveland and Anna and I became instant besties in class. The moment I saw his wavy blond hair and deep
brown eyes, combined with that crooked smile and deep dimple, I was head over heels. And my feelings have only grown as I’ve gotten to know him better. I’ve never breathed a word about it to anyone, though. Anna would either harass me for life about my crush or be irritated about it. I don’t want it to come between us. Not that Curtis notices me anyway. At least, not as anything beyond his sister’s dorky, flower-obsessed friend. So I spend my Saturday nights on her couch, one eye on the movie and the other looking for any signs of Curtis entering the room. You wouldn’t think that’s physically possible, but I’ve perfected the art of looking-but-not-looking. **Awesome. I want cookie dough!** Anna texts me. With a grin, I shove my phone back in my pocket and focus on finishing up at work. Aunt Becky will be by shortly to close out the register and help me shut down for the day. It’s been surprisingly slow for a weekend, so I’ve been bored and mentally creating bouquets with different themed messages:  — **I’m bitter and hate you**—hydrangea to show heartlessness, with a splash of yellow chrysanthemum for slighted feelings.  — **I just want to be friends**—featuring pear blossoms, striped carnations and, of course, a crapload of…yellow roses.  — **I want to touch your naughty bits**—balsam, sprigs of coriander, and coral roses, reflecting lustful passion. And the list goes on and on. Ever since my aunt told me about the meanings of flowers on my first day, I’ve been passionate about uncovering their hidden truths. I’m still wading my way through—who knew there were so many plants in the world? Well, other than florists and botanists. The door dings again as my aunt breezes through, carrying a bunch of flat flower boxes in her arms. I rush over to help. “Thanks, Chrissy,” Aunt Becky says, shooting me a grateful smile. Her short red hair is crazy, sticking up all over the place, but for some reason the messy look works on her. She rocks it. “I’m going to be here late tonight getting an order ready to ship, so you can head out. I’ll finish up.” “Are you sure?” I ask, though on the inside I’m jumping up and down in excitement. “I can stay if you need help.” She sees through my ruse and shakes her head, chuckling. “You’re bursting out of your skin. Go, run free. Enjoy the weather while it lasts.” I kiss her on the cheek and grab my purse. She doesn’t have to tell me twice. “It’s been slow in here today, so you should be able to get your work done. See you Monday after school!” With that, I step into the sunshine, breathing deeply, and dash to my crappy beater car parked on the side of the building. Then I stop dead in place, blinking rapidly. Underneath the driver’s side wiper is a single red tulip. I look around the small parking lot. No one’s around. Did someone leave the flower for me on accident, thinking my car belonged to a different person? There aren’t any cars in the lot though, much less one that looks like mine. Red tulip. Red tulip. I flip through my mental catalogue to find its meaning and draw in a shaky, startled breath. A declaration of love. Instantly I scoff at myself. No way is someone trying to declare anything to me.
Working at a flower shop has made me read messages into something that isn’t there. I carefully remove the wiper and pluck the tulip from its resting place, rubbing my thumb over a soft petal. But that still doesn’t answer my most pressing question—who gave me a flower?

And why?
A mystery! This may possibly be the most exciting thing to ever happen to me. I can’t wait to tell Anna about it.

With a sniffle, I dig my spoon into my half-eaten pint. “Every time I watch this movie, I cry,” I say with a slight whine. “Why do you like to make me cry?”

Anna elbows me, also sniffling. “Hush. Eat more ice cream. It’ll soothe the pain. Plus, I think he takes his shirt off soon.”

A deep chuckle comes from behind us. My face instantly flames, and I stare into my carton for a moment. Deep breath, Chrissy.

I force myself to look over the couch at Curtis, giving him a carefree smile. “Laugh it up. You’re just jealous because we didn’t destroy our ice cream in point-three seconds, so we still have some to enjoy.” I’d gotten Curtis his favorite, cookies and cream, while at the store. I don’t know that he even chewed, he inhaled it so fast.

He eyes me, and goose bumps break out across my flesh. He slowly grins, flashing bright white teeth. “Maybe I’ll just take yours.” His voice is like a slow spread of molasses across my already warmed body.

I swallow, telling myself he’s just joking around as usual. There’s nothing serious in that look. Of course, my sensible words don’t penetrate my thick skull. “You’ll have to fight me for it,” I say, my voice strangely breathless.

“Don’t make me use the force on you.” He takes a step closer. I can see the flecks of caramel in his eyes. The smile suddenly slides off his face as he tilts his head, studying me intently.

Star Wars cracks become forgotten as we stare into each other’s eyes. My mouth opens of its own volition, and his gaze darts down to look at my lips, his eyes hooded. I can’t read his expression. I fight the urge to rise toward him and press my mouth against his.

Anna snorts, reaching behind her to swat her brother in the stomach. “Knock it off, you two. Curtis, if you’re that hungry, go make a sandwich or something. I’m missing the movie hotness.”

That breaks the spell. He retreats into the kitchen. I give myself the luxury of staring for a moment at his finely crafted backside, clad in a pale blue T-shirt and low-slung jeans, then turn my attention back to the movie. But I can’t help the small sigh that slips out.

“You okay?” Anna asks, her brow furrowing in concern. “You’ve been quiet tonight. Do you need to talk about anything?”

“Oh, I’m just thinking about a lot of stuff,” I say, forcing a lighter tone. “Like who gave me that tulip. It’s a mystery, wrapped in an enigma.”

“Nestled in a cornucopia of surprise,” she adds, turning to face me and plopping her ice cream carton on the coffee table. “And you’re sure there’s no note? Has anyone flirted with you lately?”
“No.” God, I wish. Could Star Wars jokes be counted as flirting?
“Hm. Anyone at the shop come in and talk to you?”
Good question. “Well, I had that yellow-roses dude. And this morning a guy came in looking for a funeral wreath for a neighbor who died.”
“Doesn’t exactly set up a romantic interlude, does it,” she says with a laugh.
“No, not so much.” That perfect tulip, pressed against my windshield, was placed there by someone who wanted to leave me a message. Could this be the nudge I need to get over my ridiculous crush on Curtis?
“Oh, oh!” she exclaims, clapping her hands. “What if it’s Johnny-in-the-Way? You know how much he’s in love with you.”
I groan. Anna and I dubbed John Richter ‘Johnny-in-the-Way’ freshman year because of his preternatural knack for being in the wrong place at the wrong time—usually right in my path as I’m trying to make it to class. He also hovers by my locker way too often. It’s gotten to the point where I take extra books with me to avoid going over there. I feel bad because I don’t like him. He’s kind of nice, but just so…awkward.
And he’s not Curtis.
“That is so not funny,” I tell her with a mock scowl.
“So, who do you want it to be?” she asks, leaning back on the couch and eyeing me. “You know, if you had your choice. Who would be your dream guy?”
I know exactly who. It’s right on the tip of my tongue to tell her about my feelings for her brother. But he’s still in the house somewhere, and I’m petrified of what she’ll think. Plus, I still vividly remember what happened with Cara. A couple of years ago, one of our casual friends started asking to hang out more and more with Anna. Turns out she, too, had a (surprise!) huge crush on Curtis. Anna was hurt about being used like that and stopped hanging out with Cara shortly after.
It would kill me for her to think I’d do something like that.
“I hope it’s this dude,” I say, pointing to the TV right when the hero takes his shirt off, exposing a carved six-pack and killer arms. “He’s sooooo dreamy.”
“No kidding. So hot.” Luckily she drops the subject, sighing happily with me as the guy jumps into the pool.

“Chrissy,” my mom hollers up to me on Sunday morning. “Get your butt out of bed. It’s almost nine!”
I groan, smothering my head beneath my pillow. I got little sleep last night—and not just because my dad snores like a drunken sailor and I could hear it from down the hall. I couldn’t stop thinking about my tulip, which is now in a thin glass vase by my bedside. So silly to fixate on such a small thing. After an hour or so of lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, thinking of brown eyes and red petals, I decided my best course of action is to simply let it go. I’m likely reading too much into what was a sweet, but random, gesture.
“Ohay,” I yell back. With a heavy sigh, I flop out of bed and shuffle my way through a shower, then towel off and throw on some capris and my favorite Star Wars T-shirt, the one with Han Solo frozen in carbonite. Anna, Curtis and I went to an all-day showing of the six Star Wars movies at our favorite theater last summer, a junky little hole-in-the-wall that serves cheap popcorn and plays all kinds of old flicks on the big screen. We’d each picked out a shirt to wear—plus, Anna twisted her long blond hair into Princess Leia
buns, and Curtis kept calling me a youngling, threatening to drag me to the dark side.

I wish. I’d visit the dark side of the theater with him for a serious make-out session.

Yowza.

No. I focus on brushing my dark brown hair and tugging it up into a ponytail, then make my way downstairs.

“Thank you for joining us, princess,” my mom says sweetly, coming out of the kitchen into the hallway. She wipes her wet hands on a dishtowel, slinging it over her shoulder.

I feign a yawn. “I figured it was time to let the peasants get another glimpse of me.”

“Well, you’re full of it today.” She laughs, heading toward the living room.

“Breakfast is on the table. Hurry before your father comes downstairs and eats it all.”

After a pause she says with a sly smile, “And something came for you earlier today. It’s by your plate.”

My heart thuds erratically in my chest. I run into the kitchen and spot a small purple flower with a note folded underneath. Oh my God. Oh my God.

“Mom, who sent this?”

“She some neighborhood kid dropped it off about an hour ago,” she says loudly.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” Holy crap, another flower! There’s definitely something in this. It wasn’t a random event. It’s a real, intentional thing. With shaky hands I pick up the wildflower. It has thin purple petals, with a burst of yellow pollen in the middle. I’ve never seen it before.

I tug my phone out of my pocket and take a pic. It takes me about fifteen thousand tries to type out in a text to my aunt, What kind of flower is this? I send her the pic and text and put the flower down, then pick up the typed note. A slip of paper falls out. I read the message first:

Noon today. Rainforest, by the big tree. Please come.

My heart rate picks up even more, and I bite my lower lip. The paper is a ticket to the Cleveland zoo, including the rainforest. I haven’t been in a couple of years. Glancing out the kitchen window, I can tell it’s another beautiful sunny day.

Should I risk it? Is this stupid?

My phone vibrates. Now my pulse is racing to the speed of heart attack. I pull it out. The text is from my aunt: Aster. Beautiful flower! It’s a symbol of love and trust. Oooh--I want details, missy! ;-

Will talk later! I type back. Then I dial Anna’s number.

“What’s going on?” she says, sounding as groggy as I did half an hour ago.

“Uh, I assume that’s a good thing,” she says, deadpan.

“Someone is sending me deliberate messages. And the person wants to meet me at the zoo. And I...” I swallow. “I think I want to go. I need to go. But you have to come with me.”

“You want me to be your backup date in case Johnny-in-the-Way turns out to be a dud?”

“Hardy-har. I can’t go by myself. I don’t know who it is. And I’m so nervous I’m going to throw up.”

“No throwing up in my kitchen,” my mom says, coming in and planting her hands on her hips. “What’s going on?”
I gesture to her to wait one second. “Anna, will you come?”
“Hell, yeah. Wouldn’t miss it.”
“Great. I’ll get you in an hour.” I hang up. “Mom, I just got asked out on a kind-of date!”
One eyebrow raises. “Um, I don’t really know what to say to that.”
I explain the situation. As I’m talking, she crosses her arms over her chest.
“I don’t know if I like this,” she says. “It’s not safe to go meet someone you may not even know.”
“It’s romantic,” I exclaim. “No one’s ever done anything romantic for me, especially not like this. And I’m sure it’s not a stranger. It has to be someone at my school. Look, Anna’s gonna go with me. We’re meeting the person in a very public place. I couldn’t be any safer than if you were holding my hand. I promise to text you, okay?”
She purses her lips and studies my face for a long moment. “Well, okay.”
I squeal and hug her.
“But keep me posted,” she adds. “Because now I’m dying to know who it is.”
“Me too,” I throw out over my shoulder as I run upstairs to get ready.

Twelve-ten. Mystery man is late.
“Maybe he got caught up in traffic,” Anna offers. “You know how crappy driving in Parma can be.”
“Or maybe he changed his mind.” I lick my lips and glance around the crowded dome. Families pushing kids in strollers, Amish couples, all kinds of people wade their way through the damp, warm air of the rainforest. “Maybe I misunderstood.”
But I didn’t misunderstand. I read that stupid note, like, five hundred times in the last hour. My heart sinks clear down into my stomach. I took a chance and it blew up in my face.
“Hey, don’t worry. Please.” She hugs me. “I’m gonna walk around and see if I recognize anyone from school, okay? I bet the person is just feeling shy for some reason. Stay right here.” She runs off.
I wrap my arms around my torso and stare at the gigantic tree, hollowed out so people can wander inside. I feel so very stupid right now.
“I’m gonna walk around and see if I recognize anyone from school, okay?” She runs off.
I spin around, unable to hide the surprise from my face. “Curtis? What are you doing here? Are you looking for Anna? Because she—”
He steps close to me, so close I can smell the richness of his body spray. He looks delicious in dark jeans and a faded black T-shirt. “I’m not here for my sister.”
That shuts me up. Does that mean…? Did Curtis…? This can’t be real.
His gaze skitters away. I can see a pulse throbbing erratically at the base of his neck. Is he nervous? “I’ve been trying for so long to talk to you,” he says in a husky tone, looking down at his feet. “I just never knew how. And then you go and bring my sister with you.” He chuckles, shaking his head.
“What do you want to say?” I blurt out.
He reaches out and takes my hand, his thumb gently caressing the top. It sends shivers across my skin. “Do you like me, Chrissy?”
“You’re joking, right?” I can barely speak past the lump in my throat. How can I tell
him how I feel about him?

He glances at me. His eyes are so warm, so dark. Then he smiles, that dimple creasing his cheek. With his free hand he strokes a strand of loose hair behind my ear. “I’ve had a crush on you for the longest time. But I figured you only saw me as your friend’s doofy brother.”

Oh, God. Anna. How could I forget about her? I stiffen, swallow. “I fell for you a long time ago, Curtis. But I have to tell you, I value my friendship with your sister. I saw how…well, how others made her feel when they were trying to date you. I won’t treat her like that, even if it means ignoring what I really want.”

He leans down. “And what is it you really want?”

The breath whooshes out of my lungs. “I really want to kiss you,” I find myself saying.

A kid runs by us and I lean out of the way, pushing me nearer to the heat of Curtis’ body.

“Anna set this up, you know,” he says, moving closer, closer. His lips are no more than a couple of inches from mine. His eyes are piercing me, seeing everything I’m feeling. Mirroring that longing back.

He wants me. Wow.

Wait—my mind rewinds back to what he said. “Your sister knows?”

“You two are the most ridiculous people I’ve ever met,” Anna says, coming out of nowhere, a huge smile on her face.

I turn my eyes away from Curtis and pull back, heat blazing across my cheeks. “Um, hi, Anna.”

“Do you know how long I’ve watched you guys moon over each other?” She laughs and gives me a quick hug. “Chrissy, honey—I know how you feel. And guess what—doofus here feels the same way.”

Curtis shoots her a glare and elbows her in the side. “Knock it off,” he says hotly.

I laugh. “Okay, so am I the last one to know what’s going on?”

Anna rolls her eyes dramatically. “Curtis wanted to know the best way to get your attention. I told him to try flowers. Obviously, I am a genius.”

Never would I have believed I’d been so transparent…and missed so many clues. I take his hand, stroking his fingers. “I can’t believe you like me.”

“I can’t believe you like me,” he replies.

“And I can’t believe I’m watching this. I’m going to get ice cream. You two don’t make a baby in front of the children, okay?” With that, Anna leaves.

Curtis moves closer to me. “Now, where were we?”

I smile. “I think we were talking about what we really wanted.”

His eyes get that sexy half-lidded look again, and he brushes his mouth across my lips. “That’s right,” he whispers against my mouth. “Now I remember. I want you to be my girlfriend. By the way, you look very sexy in that shirt.” He skims my hips, sliding his hands across to my back, his thumb kneading my lower spine.

I sigh and wrap my arms around his neck. “Thanks. The flowers were beautiful, by the way. Oh, and as your girlfriend, I have our first order of business.”

He pulls back slightly to look at me. “What’s that?”

“I’m starving. Let’s make Anna buy the ice cream this time.” I can’t stop smiling.

“Deal.”
We weave our way through the crowd, hands clasped tightly together.

***

Rhonda Stapleton is the author of the *Stupid Cupid* books. Her newest release Struck, the 3-in-1 volume of the romantic comedy trilogy. Rhonda lives in Ohio with her husband, two kids, three dogs and a cat. When she's not writing, she's busy buying foxy shoes, drinking way too much caffeine and singing in the shower--but not at the same time. Visit her website at [http://www.rhondastapleton.com](http://www.rhondastapleton.com) for more information about her and her releases.

[Back to Table of Contents]
As I turned up the Sum 41 tune blaring from the CD, the speakers rattled in the car door. The stereo system in the new Toyota Matrix kicked ass. I had to thank Dan for loaning me the car. I didn't ask him when he got it, mind you, or why he needed it. There are just some things a person just shouldn't ask a Great Duke of Hell. But I had to have some kind of vehicle to pick up Aspen. It was our first official date, and I didn't want to come off as a complete douche with a pocket full of bus fare and a transit map.

I checked Google maps on my iPhone while slowing to a stop at a four-way intersection. When I accelerated again, there was a definitive pop in the air and the smell of cigarette smoke filled the car. I glanced in the rear-view mirror to see Dan lounging in the backseat with a cigarette dangling between his pale lips. As always.

"You’re going to be late, brother." He blew a perfect smoke ring, and it floated toward me with a happy face inside. The face winked.

For a demon, Dan had an incredibly upbeat personality.
"Go away.” I said. “You’re stinking up the car. Now she’ll think I smoke.”

He sat up and hung his arms between the two front seats. "Just tell her about me. Problem solved."
"So not going to happen."
"She’ll believe you, she is a necromancer."
"Necromancer in training."
"Whatever.” He waved his hand, scattering cigarette ashes on the seat.
“Watch it.” I brushed at my jacket. “I actually washed this with my own two hands, you know.”

“Mate, she’s totally not going to care. All she’ll be paying attention to are those big beautiful eyes of yours.” He ruffled my hair. Hair I’d spent exactly twenty minutes on to get that perfectly messy look.

I slapped at his hand. “Don’t you have some demon-like thing to do tonight?”
“I suppose I could go possess someone, but it’s only fun when you’re there to exorcize me out of them.”

Not only were Dan and I best friends -- well as much as an exorcist and a spawnling from hell could be friends -- we also worked together. He possessed them, and I saved them for a disgustingly large fee. Most of our clientele resided in the City of Angels, Hollywood. We didn’t con just anyone. We picked out marks carefully. Only those truly deserving of a little trickery and thievery. I’d seen true possession and the damage it did to people, so Dan and I limited our jobs to the real dickwads of the world.

“I’m sure there are plenty of other things you could be doing right about now.” I pulled to a stop in front of a small yellow bungalow and parked. “And I mean now.”
“Fine.” He sighed. “But if you need any help with…”
“Dan,” I warned.

There was another pop and he vanished. Cigarette smoke lingered in the air from where he’d just been sitting. Even after all these months, his sudden comings and goings
still freaked me out.

I turned the car off, opened the door then slid out. While I made my way up the front walk to the door, my gut tightened. I was so nervous my knees shook. I’d performed dozens of exorcisms, stared down a multitude of nasty demons, heck I’d even spent a year in Hell, but girls were a whole different matter. I had no clue what I was doing.

When I reached the door, I did a quick breath-check then knocked. By the time the door opened, my heart was thumping hard. And when I saw Aspen outlined in the doorway, her blond curls framing an incredibly sharp face, it beat twice as fast. She was just as pretty as she’d been when I first saw her in the cemetery. More so because she didn’t have flecks of dirt on her face or spots of blood on her slim hands.

“You,” she said.

“Hey.”

“Do you want to come in? My mom wants to say hey.”

“Um, okay.” Knowing I didn’t really have a choice.

I followed her into the kitchen, admiring the way her butt looked in her tight jeans. Her mom, Dina, was sitting on a bar stool at the kitchen island. Although she was smiling, her intense blue eyes still scrutinized me. Like being raked over hot coals. I couldn’t really blame her though. I did have a bit of a reputation. Well, my whole family did really. The Butchers were known to deal in the three D’s: danger, demons and death. In her opinion, I probably wasn’t the ideal candidate to be dating her daughter.

“Hi, Caden.” She tucked an ash blond curl behind her ear. A gesture that Aspen had obviously picked up.

“Hey, Ms. Spencer.”

“How’s your dad fairing?”

I shrugged, uncomfortable talking about my dad. I never knew exactly what to tell people. He was sad and angry all the time and drank way too much.

Instead of sharing that happy information, I said, “He’s all right.”

“Good to hear.”

I dropped my gaze, unsure of what to say next. I’d stared down a level two wrath demon and banished him back to Hell, but Dina Spencer, the most skilled necromancer in the Western hemisphere, was ten times more formidable and one hundred times scarier.

Aspen was next to me in a flash, tugging on my arm. “Okay, Mom, we’re going now.” She led me back to the front door. Dina followed us there.

As Aspen slipped on her runners, I looked at everything but her mom. Making eye contact with a hostile entity was always a bad decision.

“Be home by midnight.”

“Yes, Mom.” Aspen sighed, rolling her eyes.

“Don’t give me that look, Aspen. You know as well as I do what comes lurking after dark.”

“I know. You don’t have to worry.” She wrapped her hand around my arm. “I’m with Caden, exorcist extraordinary. What could possibly happen?”

Dina didn’t answer; she just looked at me. Her gaze was withering. It was obvious I’d just been measured and found extremely lacking.

“I’ll take care of her, Ms. Spencer. Trust me.” I gave her my winningest smile, but I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Dina Spencer didn’t trust me one iota.
Once we were in the car and had pulled away from the house, I relaxed a little.

“Sorry about my mom. I know she can be a bit scary.”
“No worries. I wasn’t afraid.”
She gave me a knowing look. “Liar.” She laughed.
I laughed with her. “Okay, maybe a little.”
Smiling, she looked around the car, taking in everything including me. Her blue eyes were intense, and looking into them made my gut clench. “So, where are we going?”
“I thought the Young Street spring fair?” Nervous she was going to hate my suggestion and think I was a complete loser for suggesting it, I watched her face, waiting for a positive reaction.
Meeting my gaze, she nodded. “Cool.”

After I parked the car, we made our way to the street carnival. There were game stalls, food carts, a few rides, jugglers, mimes and clowns. It was a smorgasbord of harmless fun and frivolity. My plan was to eat some corn dogs, win a big stuffed animal for Aspen at the ball toss, then make out on the Ferris wheel.
But before we could make our way to the corn dog stand, a tall, rail-thin clown with bright blue hair stepped in our path. Smiling, he twisted some balloons into a wiener dog and presented it to Aspen.
She laughed. “Thank you.”
He took a deep sweeping bow, but his gaze never left mine. He creeped me out. I grabbed Aspen’s hand and pulled her away.
Twenty minutes later I was making good on the second part of my three-part plan. I had one ball left and only two more bottles to knock down to win the big panda bear Aspen was eyeing. Just as I wound up to throw, Dan sidled up next to me, and I missed the tower of bottles.
“Oh bad shot, dude.”
“What are you doing here?” I turned to glare at him.
Thankfully he was looking like his innocuous teenage persona, with unkempt brown hair, brown eyes, two-day scruff, and not like Sid Vicious, which was his preferred character skin. They’d been close friends way back when.
He grinned that devil grin of his and turned his attention on Aspen. “Just wanted to meet this girl of yours.” He pushed past me and offered his hand to her. “Hi, I’m Dan. Caden’s better looking and more charming friend.”
Looking at me for help, she shook his hand. “Aspen.”
“Fantastic to meet you Aspen.” Then he glanced at me. “You’re right, brother, she is hot.”
I shook my head in exasperation. “Don’t worry. He’s harmless.”
“Speak for yourself.” He slung an arm around her shoulders, then mine. “So, what’s on the agenda?”
“Well, Aspen and I are going to go on the Ferris wheel.”
“Can three people fit in that seat?”
I stopped walking and shrugged Dan’s arm off. To Aspen I said, “Will you excuse us for a sec?”
“Sure.” She shrugged.
I pulled Dan away from her. “What the hell dude? Are you trying to ruin things for
“Nah. I’m just bored. You’re my only source of entertainment on this plane.”
“That’s just sad, you know?”
He shrugged. “It is what it is, man.”
“What about that girl in Calgary? The one we met on our road trip to the Stampede. Why don’t you zip over there and see her?”
He pulled out a smoke from his pack, put it in his mouth and lit it. “Nah. She’s getting too clingy.”
“Whatever dude, you gotta go and do something, because you are not hanging with us. I like this girl and I’m not letting you screw it up for me.”
“When have I ever screwed it up?”
“Every time.”
Dan nodded then one brow went up. “Speaking of girls. Where did yours go?”
“What?!” I spun around and my heart froze. Aspen wasn’t in the spot we’d left her. And she wasn’t at the nearby hotdog vendor or the shooting game booth either.
“Maybe she went to use the bathroom.” He gestured toward one of the porta-potties. Despite the growing sense of dread in my gut, I knocked on the facility door.
“Aspen?”
“Get lost jerk,” came a very masculine voice from inside.
I looked at Dan. He must’ve seen the worry on my face because he clapped me on the back. “Maybe she just hooked up with another guy, a better looking one.”
The unease was intensifying. I had a lot of enemies. Most of them made during my year-long hiatus in Hell. If one of those demons wanted to jack me up while topside, kidnapping Aspen would be high on the list of the worst things to do to me. That and messing with my dad.
That’s when I saw the clown, the one who’d accosted us earlier. In front of him I caught a glimpse of blond curls. He had Aspen and was taking her to the fun house.
“Come on,” I said to Dan pointing. “Follow that clown.”
“Why would a clown kidnap your girlfriend?”
“I don’t know. Clowns are always doing something evil.”
Dan nodded. “True dat.”
We ran after the clown, weaving around the steady stream of carnival goers, reaching the funhouse just as he, with Aspen in tow, ducked inside.
“So, what’s the plan?” Dan asked, blocking me from rushing in.
“To get Aspen back, duh.”
“Yeah I know that genius, but you realize if one of my kin is wearing that clown like a meat suit I can’t interfere.”
“What do you mean you can’t interfere?”
“I mean I can’t like pulverize the dude or anything.”
“I thought you had my back?”
“I do, man, in usual circumstances, like if that clown was just some regular old creepy molester clown. But if he’s possessed I can only do so much.”
I shook my head. Now he tells me. “Well, what can you do for me?”
As an answer, he grabbed me and we zipped through the ether and popped up inside the fun house right in the middle of the hall of mirrors. The clown’s maniacal reflection stared me right in the face. I swung around to see him standing there, grinning at me, his
arm crushing Aspen in a headlock.

“Caden Butcher.” The clown glanced at Dan. “And his faithful dog Dantalion.”

Dan put his hands up. “Hey, I just brought him here. I know the damn rules.” Then he pulled out his cigarette pack and lit up. I was beginning to wonder if that was a nervous habit of his or if he really was that carefree about the whole situation.

“Let her go.” I didn’t have my bag of tricks with me, my regular arsenal of amped up holy water, blessed chalk and anise, but I didn’t go anywhere without an iron cross blessed by the pope and a small vial of holy water. I fiddled with the vial in the pocket of my jacket.

If I could somehow get it out, splash it on him for a distraction, then press the cross to his forehead and recite the *Rituale Romanum*, I might be able to exorcize him back to Hell.

The clown glanced down at Aspen struggling in his hold. He patted her on top of the head. “Her? Really? Why? She’s not all that pretty.”

“She’s got nothing to do with this. This is between you and me.”

“Actually my beef is with your dear old dad. He ended my playtime in that old Russian man with the knife collection. I was just having some fun. Then he comes along and poof. Sends me back to Hell. But your dad’s usually so protected, I can’t get to him. So I thought hey, what the heck, I’ll see if I can play with Baby Butcher. And voila! Here you are.” He waved his red-gloved hand around and indicated the fun house. His reflection danced around like a marionette in the other mirrors. It unsettled me, and I had a difficult time concentrating on the real clown. I had to tamp down the urge to turn and look at the moving images in the other mirrors. Which was exactly what he wanted me to do.

“Well, why don’t you tell me your name so I can tell my dad you said hi when I see him next.” Names had power. If I could get his, it would make his exodus down under a lot easier for me.

The clown frowned. “The only person you’ll be seeing next is the coroner.”

He tossed Aspen to the side like trash. She flew into one of the mirrors, hitting it hard, knocking her head and cracking the glass. Like a rag doll, she slumped to the ground. I didn’t have a chance to go to her before the clown was charging at me.

“Dan! Get her out of here!”

I thought he was going to object, but he sighed then said, “Fine.” He was next to her in a flash and vanishing them both into thin air in seconds.

Just as the clown’s hands reached for my neck, I got the vial uncorked and tossed the contents in his face. The moment the water touched his skin, wisps of thick black smoke curled into the air, burning his demon flesh like acid. Shrieking, the clown released me and brought his hands up to his face, but I was faster. I had the iron cross pressed to his forehead before he could even contemplate what I was doing.

*“Dues, et Pater Domini nostril Jesu Christi...”*

He continued to shriek—the sound was like nails on a chalkboard—and writhe as I spoke the words. There was nothing he could do now but try and hold on to the soul he’d possessed as he was yanked back down into the fiery depths of his hellish prison. And trust me, hell was as fiery as the rumors made it out to be.
“….amen.”

The clown collapsed to the ground, me on top of him. I really hoped no one walked in on us. The cross stuck to his skin, burned into his flesh. Carefully, I peeled the iron off then stood, looking down at the now recovering clown.

His eyes fluttered open and he blinked up at me, confusion evident in the way his pupils dilated in and out. “What’s…what’s going on?”

I helped him sit up against one of the mirrors. “You should really lay off the drinking buddy. You could’ve really hurt someone.”

He glanced around, taking in the hall of mirrors and the broken glass on the ground beside him. “What are you talking about?”

“I saw you stumbling around in here, mumbling to yourself. When I tried to help, you fell into one of the mirrors.”

He looked at me, and I knew he was trying to reconcile what I just told him to what he remembered. His mind was likely trying to hide those lingering images to protect his own sanity. I was just helping him out, giving him a more plausible reason he could cling to.

Finally he nodded to me. “Yeah. Yeah. You’re right, kid. Thanks for helping me.”

He got to his feet, a little shaky, but he was able to stand.

“No worries.” I left him there to sort it all out.

Outside the fun house, I found Aspen sitting on the street curb and Dan handing her a bottle of water.

“Are you all right?” I sat beside her, wanting to put my arm around her, but not sure if she’d welcome it.

She rubbed the side of her head. “Yeah. I’m a little fuzzy about what happened though.”

I glanced at Dan, wondering if he’d messed with her head at all. He just shrugged.

“Caden saved your life is what happened.”

She took a sip of water then looked at me. “Was that clown really possessed?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Unfortunately.”

“Does this happen often when you take a girl out?”

“No. This is a new one for me.” I gave her a reassuring smile.

“Huh. Well, that’s messed up.”

“Yeah it is.” I stood then helped her to her feet. “Let me take you home.”

“Yeah, that’s probably best.”

During the drive back to Aspen’s, the silence was deafening. In the backseat, even Dan was unnaturally quiet. I snuck a few peeks at Aspen as I drove, but she just stared out the side window the entire time. I imagined this was going to be our first and last date.

When I parked in front of her house, she looked at me then back at Dan. “The clown said some weird things in there. You’re not really a demon are you?”

For a second I was sure Dan was going to admit it but instead he shook his head.

“Nah, I’m not a demon. That would be messed up, especially since Caden’s my best bud. Could you imagine what the International Order of Exorcists would do if that were true? It would be total and complete chaos for sure.”

I gave him the ‘Shut up while you’re ahead’ look. But as usual he ignored me.
She looked at him a moment longer, then as if appeased turned to open the door. “Walk me up.”

Quickly, I got out of the car and came around to shut the door for her. We slowly walked up the steps to the front door. Nerves made my gut churn and my throat constrict. “I’m sorry about tonight. It’s not really the plan I had for us.” I looked down at my feet, too much of a coward to look her in the face. I didn’t want her to see how much it mattered to me that I had blown it. Dating me was definitely an extreme sport. The risks far outweighed the benefits. Even I could admit that.

She nudged her runner against mine. “Nah, it wasn’t all that bad.”

My head came up, shock probably making my eyes bug out. “But.”

Aspen smiled then bridged the distance between us. She put a hand on my chest, gripping the edge of my jacket between her fingers. “I’ve always been a sucker for a bad boy.”

I could barely take a breath with my heart hammering so hard in my chest, but I did and leaned down toward her. “Well, I’m as bad as they come then,” I murmured just inches away from her lips.

I cupped a hand behind her neck, rubbing my thumb along her jaw line. The soft curls of her hair caressed my skin. Her lips parted slightly, and I could hear her tiny gasp as I covered her mouth with mine. It was a slow, wet, aching kiss that left me wanting so much more.

I’d kissed girls before. But this was different. Aspen was different. She was the perfect girl for me.

After we parted, she gave me one of her secret sexy grins then opened the front door. Before she went inside, she said, “I’ll see you soon, Caden.”

“When?” I responded eagerly.

She shrugged then stepped inside and shut the door. I wanted to follow her, beg her to see me tomorrow, but instead I turned and headed back to the car. The saying ‘quit while you’re ahead’ played over and over in my mind.

Once inside the vehicle, I started it and stared at her house for a minute longer, hoping to see her framed in the window looking out at me. I just wanted one more look at her. The sudden feeling that she was going to disappear from my life churned in my gut.


“I know.” Sighing, I pulled away from the curb.

Dina was worried about Aspen dating after dark, about the dangers out there, when she should’ve been concerned about the really dangerous thing that had just happened on the front porch of her house. Sure exorcisms were risky, life-threatening even, so for us falling in love was a natural disaster just waiting to happen.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This is a prequel to the full Caden Butcher novel Demon Whisperer, now available in ebook and print at Amazon, B&N and other retailers. Stay tuned for another exciting Caden Butcher adventure in America’s Next Top Zombie, to be released July 2012.

***
Tawny Stokes has always been a writer. From an early age, she’d spin tales of serial killers in love, vampires taking over the world, and sometimes about fluffy bunnies turned bunnicidal maniacs. An honour student in high school, with a penchant for math and English, you’d never know it by the foot high blue Mohawk and Doc Martens, which often got her into trouble. No longer a Mohawk wearer, Tawny still enjoys old school punk rock, trance, zombie movies, teen horror films, and fluffy bunnies. She lives in Canada with her fantastical daughter, two cats, and spends most of her time creating new stories for teens. Tawny also writes adult paranormal/urban fantasy fiction under the name Vivi Anna, and is an aspiring screenwriter. For more info, please visit www.tawnystokes.com
“You mean you haven’t told your parents about your job at the museum?”
“Yeah, only my mom and me. And, no, I haven’t told her. For some stupid reason she
doesn’t want me working there.”
“Really? But it’ll look so good on your college applications.”
I shrug. “She just has these weird ideas about what I should or shouldn’t do. But it’s
cool because I’ll be able to get home each day before she finishes work.”
Sarah bites her lip. Like she’s never done anything without telling her parents?
Now I’m sorry I opened up to this girl I only met once in study hall. I let the
conversation die and stare out the bus window at the Philadelphia streets.
The May afternoon is a bright, sunny one. Or maybe it just looks brighter because
something I want so badly is actually happening.
The bus stops at Thirty-fourth Street and I leap off, my stomach churning.
Straightening the cuff of my jeans and smoothing out the wrinkles in my layered tees, I
walk through a wrought iron gate into a landscaped garden complete with manicured
hedges, stone satyr, and oblong lily pond, and into a building that’s housed
University of Pennsylvania’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology since the
late 1800s.
The lady at the reception desk calls Ms. Cresley, who hired me. “Go ahead to the gift
shop. The young man who’ll be your supervisor is waiting for you.”
I climb the broad marble stairs to the second floor. Yeah, it’s only a job in the gift
shop, but it means I’ll be a few steps away from all those mosaics and bas reliefs and
terra cotta figurines and silk tapestries and . . .
I stop short when I see who’s standing behind the shop counter. OMG. Is he
my supervisor?
It’s Jerrod Pierce. I watch him keying something into the cash register. My knees go
wobbly. He’s new in town, and every girl in school is talking about him because he is
way gorgeous. His dark, long hair is tied at the nape of his neck today, showing off the
painfully perfect angles of his face.
He must sense me staring because he looks up, directly at me. His onyx eyes send an
electric jolt through me. I shiver. Then try to hide it by forcing out, “Hello, Jerrod.”
That was dumb. Sounds like I’m pretending I know him. For one thing, he’s a senior
and I’m only a sophomore. Plus, in the short time he’s been at Central High the buzz
about his outrageous athletic talent has earned him a big rep.
“You’re Terry Conn.”
At first I’m shocked that he knows the name of an unpopular loser like me. But then
I remember Ms. Cresley probably told him. “Um, yes. That’s me.”
Jerrod smiles and it nearly takes my breath away. How am I going to do this? It
won’t work. I consider making up some bogus reason for quitting. Except, I’ve been
trying to get a job here for so long.
“Jerrod Pierce,” he says, as if I wouldn’t know. He leads me around the shop and
The storeroom, pointing out the different sections. He shows me how to log in items that need to be unpacked, how to shelve them, and how to work the cash register. I listen really hard, but the only “how” that seems to be sinking in is how it feels to have a guy this droolworthy standing so close.

I keep making mistakes and get more and more frustrated. What is wrong with me? I like cute guys as much as anybody, but I’ve never met one who made me act so stupid. But as I wallow in my mortification, imagining Jerrod telling everyone at school what a dork I am, he reaches out and — holds my hand!

I don’t move a hair for fear of obliterating this incredibly magnificent moment. Jerrod Pierce is actually holding my hand and looking at me with those amazing eyes.

“Chill, Terry,” he says. “You don’t have to learn it all today.”

Chill? I’m ready to melt into his arms. So it’s a good thing he leaves me in the storeroom to unpack boxes. Alone.

My IQ, which happens to be pretty high, begins functioning again. Until five thirty when Jerrod walks into the storeroom. I avoid looking at him so I won’t trip over my feet.

The shop always closes a half hour before the rest of the museum, and the main reason I wanted this job was so I could buzz around afterward. So when Jerrod tells me I am finished, I head for the gallery displaying stuff from ancient Sumer. Stuff that my dad studied when he was alive.

I wander past Lady Puabi’s headdress. Steles of the first law codes. A mosaic of abalone and lapis lazuli. Glass cases of beaded jewelry, stone vessels and tools.

“So you like ancient history.”
I jump, turning to see Jerrod walking toward me. “Um, yeah.”
“I’ll be studying all that here next year.”
“You got into Penn?”
He nods.

“Cool.” I’m proud that my dad used to teach here, and I almost tell Jerrod. But then I’d have to explain that he died when I was two years old and I hardly even remember him. Except I sometimes wonder if that’s the reason I’m drawn to this place. But that wouldn’t explain the dreams I have.

Jerrod’s dark eyes study me. My cheeks go red. I run a nervous hand through my hair. My thick, mahogany curls are the only part of me I really like. He seems to be waiting for more. I force myself to say something. “My fave thing is reading about mythologies from ancient cultures.”

Of course, Mom tells me I should be dating instead. Or going to parties with friends. But since I never get invited anywhere I figure I can at least go to exciting places in my head.

“Mine, too,” Jerrod says. And he starts talking about the Sumerians, the Egyptians the Minoans. I’m impressed with how much he knows, but on these subjects I’ve got plenty to add. All of a sudden we’re deep into a discussion about gods and kings and mythical creatures. And I’m not even stumbling over my words like I usually do.

We stroll the gallery looking into the glass cases filled with clay tablets written in cuneiform. The room is filled with figurines and plaques. Like one that catches my eye. A reproduction of an ancient mosaic. A wingless dragon that looks kind of like a dinosaur dog. “Isn’t that one called a mushrushu?” I say to Jerrod.

But my gaze stays glued to the creature. In fact, I find I can’t look away. And while I
think I hear Jerrod saying there are several names for this creature, my ears fill up with sounds of rain and thunder. Everything around me seems to get fuzzy, colors blurring. I wonder if my blood sugar is plummeting because I haven’t eaten since lunch.

Suddenly images flash through her mind. A woman with sea-green hair. And memories of soaring through a piercing blue sky while looking down on a city with winding streets and tightly packed, dun colored buildings.

Did I say memories? No, this is . . .

I sway and grip the glass case.

“Are you all right, Terry?”

“Just dizzy.”

I glance at him and it’s like going from the frying pan into the fire. But what a fire it is. His eyes lock onto mine and I sense this megawatt surge of some of, of . . . I’m not sure what. The word power comes to me. Or euphoria? All I know is I’ve never experienced anything like it in my life.

And I can swear Jerrod is feeling the same thing.

“Oh, there you are, Jerrod. And Terry.” Ms. Cresley walks into the room. “How did it go?”

Jerrod falls into such an easy and lucid conversation with Ms. Cresley that I’m wondering if what just happened between us was wishful thinking on my part.

Whatever. Muddled and confused, I still know one thing. I’ve got to get home before my mom does. I mumble my thanks and move toward the exit.

“See you tomorrow,” Jerrod says as I pass, and he touches my arm. I’m not sure if the warm and tingly buzz it sends through me is because I think he’s hot, or because there’s something strange about him.

I stand at the bus stop and can’t help squeeing the tiniest bit, wishing I had a best friend to tell about my encounter with Jerrod Pierce. His fingers brushing my arm. The way he held my hand. And his eyes. Could he actually like me? Or was it just pity for a dorky sixteen-year-old?

I think about those strange images that flashed through my mind when I looked at the dragon figurine. Was it just my blood sugar?

Which reminded me of a text Mom left me earlier, telling me to take a pack of chicken out of the freezer as soon as I get home from school so it’ll be ready to cook by the time she . . . oh no. I give up waiting for the bus and cross Thirty-fourth Street at a jog.

My mother would have a bird, especially with all the robbery-turned-murder stories around some of the not-so-great neighborhoods I have to pass through. Which is why I don’t use my iPod earbuds. But aside from inhaling auto fumes and garbage smells, it refreshes my head, gets me out of the muddled state that overwhelmed me at the museum. Running is another love of mine, a thing I can do all alone, letting my mind go off into the stratosphere.

The trip home is an easy two-mile sprint across the bridge to Center City and straight down South Street to Eighth and Kater. Aside from the newer high-rises near city hall, Philadelphia isn’t a tall city. And certainly not where I live in Bella Vista, an Italian neighborhood that’s more mixed than it used to be. When I see a white lightbox sign
reading: Marini’s Pizza, I slow to a walk. Home turf.

The scent of melted cheese makes my stomach growl. It also gives me a solution to
the chicken I never took out of the freezer for dinner.

I pull open the glass door. Cheryl Quigley, Central High’s answer to Rachel
McAdams sits at one of the orange plastic tables just inside the entrance with her two-girl
posse. And here I am with my hair a frizzed out mess and my tee all sweaty from my run.

Can I make it to the counter without being publicly insulted? Halfway there I get my
answer.

“Yo, Terry. Soup kitchen’s at the church up on Seventeenth. You know, same place
you get your clothes.”

Her posse laughs like it’s the funniest thing they’ve heard all week. Or maybe it is.
Maybe I am that big a joke to them.

I look right at Cheryl, determined to surprise her with a comeback. I think of all the
snarky lines I’ve rehearsed over and over in my bedroom, promising myself I’d someday
get one out of my idiot mouth. But as usual my voice freezes.

Cheryl looks back at me as if she’s a hair from getting out of her chair should I dare
to answer her back. I’m reduced by my fear. I set my palm on the counter and feel a
warm hand pat the top of mine. I meet eyes with Leon the owner. His salt and pepper
colored beard is neatly trimmed. The lines on his face scrunch together as he smiles.

“Don’t pay attention to them,” he says. “Want the usual?”

“Please.”
“Here or to go?”
“Delivered, please?”
“You got it. Twenty-five minutes.”

I pay him and turn to leave. As I pass by Cheryl’s table something gets between my
feet. Then comes that awful feeling of sailing face down onto the floor. Hands
outstretched, I catch myself an instant before my nose hits the tile. Next, a cold, wet
deluge of soda drenches my head. I can taste it in my mouth as it runs down my cheeks.
Hoots and hollers cheer on the deed.

Cheryl sneers down at me and walks away.

A pair of hands lifts me up. Leon. “You all right?” he asks. I nod. He points his
finger at Cheryl and her two partners in crime. “Get out. And don’t you come back.”

The three of them swagger their way to the door. Cheryl turns and says, “My Dad
could buy and sell this dump and not even feel it. And as for you, Terry, you’re marked,
girl. You’re on my list. Got that? Till next time, loser.”

“Parents today. Raising brats like that,” Leon says.

He walks me to the door, where I wait until the coast is clear. I thank him and go
home to await our pizza, even though I’ve just about lost my appetite.

I unlock the door of a two-story, brick row house on Kater Street. Walter, our aging
tabby, assaults me with demanding meows, following me through the dark, cluttered
living room to the small kitchen in back.

After feeding Walter and grabbing a swig of milk, I sprint upstairs, tug off my
grubby clothes, and under the pounding spray of the shower I belt out my cover of
“Defying Gravity.” I go into one of my corny Broadway fantasies, picturing myself

My voice doesn’t fail me when I sing. I never go mute or stumble over words or stutter. I fly.

Toweling off, I smirk at my mirror image. *Too skinny. No boobs. No wonder guys never look at me. Unless they’re staring at the hideous, blue birthmark on my ankle.*

But Jerrod looked at me.

Yeah, and if he mentions my name at school tomorrow to any of the other sophomores he’ll find out what a freak loner I am, and that’ll be the end of it.

In my room I march past posters of Dawn Harper, Robert Pattinson and the Treasures of Ur Exhibit and slip into comfy sweat pants and a clean tee. With about fifteen minutes until both pizza and Mom arrive, I decide to make a quick check through Dad’s books for the mushrushu.

I dart into the small room that used to be my father’s study. My mother keeps business papers there, but seldom uses it. After working all day as a paralegal, she just likes to veg-out in front of the TV.

The study is a sad, but cozy place with my father’s beaten up maple desk and his reading recliner with worn upholstery. He died fourteen years ago, and even though we’ve changed the house around a few times, Mom would never alter anything here. She gets kind of upset when I delve into in my dad’s stuff, so I try to do it before she gets home.

In my rush, I climb a stool and reach for the book I want on a high shelf, creating a tumbling avalanche of books and papers. Even an old rosewood tea box falls to the floor. I hop down and start gathering things. That’s when I see the bundle of papers held together with one of those old skool metal clips.

It’s labeled “Terry.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I peruse photocopies of newspaper articles about “The Cuneiform Baby.” And about Richard Conn, the University Of Pennsylvania professor who’d found the infant abandoned in the school’s Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. How he’d waited weeks and weeks while the state had searched for any sign of a relative. And when none came, he and his wife, Maribeth, had adopted the baby girl.

Just then I hear the front doorbell. Fuming, I spring to my feet and stomp down the stairs. I mean, how much weird crap can a girl take in one day?

Mom arrives on the tails of the pizza delivery guy. I can tell she’s tired, but right now I don’t care. As soon as she steps into the living room, I hand her the stack of papers.

“This is me, isn’t it?”

Mom frowns and shakes her head. “I never hid the fact that you were adopted.”

“No, but you also never told me I was a foundling. A homeless baby dumped in the museum.”

“I didn’t want you to think of yourself—”

“As the daughter of some drug addict who threw me in the trash?”

“Terry . . .”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?”

Mom sighs and drops onto our ugly green-and-gray sofa.

I continue. “This is why you don’t want me working at the Penn Museum. Because people there know about me.”
“Only some. The older ones who were around when Richard found you.”
“Well, guess what? I’ve got a job there. In the gift shop. And I’m not giving it up. I don’t care if it embarrasses you or if—”
“That’s not the reason, Terry. I . . . it’s . . . your father had some superstitious ideas about this piece of jewelry they found on you. And, well, it scared me. I didn’t want it in our lives. Especially with Richard gone.”
I could see she meant it. That something about it troubled her. She’d told me how devastated she’d been when cancer took my father’s life, leaving her alone with a toddler to care for. Having been two years old when he died, I’ve got only one clear memory of him. Of being carried in his arms, while he smiled at me and pointed up at a star in a beautiful night sky.
I perched on the coffee table facing her. “Forgive me, Mom. I don’t mean to upset you, but this is stuff I have a right to know.”
She patted my cheek and nodded. “Did you get these papers out of the rosewood tea box?”
“Yup. It fell when I was reaching for a book.”
“Well, that box is all about you. And the little necklace you were wearing is in there.”
I bolt for the stairs.

I sit on the floor next to the partially spilled contents of the tea box. At first I think maybe there will be info about who my real mother was, but so far it’s just articles about Sumerian and Akkadian words. Big surprise. Richard Conn researched and taught about ancient languages.
But then, near the bottom of the box I find a sealed manila envelope with my name scribbled on it in black ink. And it isn’t flat. Definitely something solid inside.
I tear open the envelope and tip it. I tarnished silver chain falls out. Along with what looks like a tube bead, which rolls toward me.
“Oooh, neat. Lapis lazuli.” Deep blue with golden sparkles. About the size of my finger digit. I’ve read about these and seen plenty in photos and at the museum. I know this carved spool is a cylinder seal. They signed things with these back in Mesopotamia. Rolled its carved out shapes over soft clay leaving three-D imprints.
Too bad I don’t have any clay around. No way to tell what this looks like without an impression of it.
I dig into the box again and find another envelope. This one has a little hardened rectangle the size of a small candy bar. Yep, this is it. Mostly cuneiform writing and some crude drawings. And a little four-legged creature that looks like the mushrushu.
Too weird.
My mother calls up the stairs. “Terry? Aren’t you hungry? Get down here and eat some pizza.”
“Coming, Mom.” I stuff the impression back into its envelope and take it to my room, along with my cylinder seal and silver chain. If I hurry after school I’ll can get to the museum early enough to catch one of the professors in the tablet room near the library archives. I gotta know what this thing says.
After not once getting even remotely close to having a boyfriend, there I am, standing at my locker after last period, when Jerrod walks up and leans his shoulder against the locker next to mine.

“You ready for your second day among the ancients?”

I can almost see jaws dropping around me. Jerrod has only been here a week, and already every girl in the school is so obsessed over who he’ll date you’d think you were at the betting tables in Atlantic City.

“Sure am,” I say. I try not to giggle. I’ve heard guys hate that. But a giddy bubble wells up inside. I purposely wore a jersey dress today, hoping Jerrod might look at me again. But I never imagined he’d really pick me of all the girls in the school.

_Cool your jets, sweetie. He’s just stopping by to say hello._

“Want a ride to the museum?”

Stunned, I take a steadying breath and manage to say, “Sure. Thanks.”

He reaches for the books out of my hands and carries them along with his own.

Whoa. Am I in a teen movie or something? As we walk down the hall together, I note the envious and baffled looks. Truth is I’m baffled myself. Why would someone as yummy as Jerrod want to hang with me? I know I’m not too bad looking, but he could have any of the popular girls. I wonder if it’s because we had such a good time talking yesterday about the mythical creatures. Which reminds me . . . “I need to make a stop in the tablet room before I start today.”

“Why?”

I’m itching to tell him I’ve got a seal impression he will die for, but I’m not sure if it’s wise to show him, considering I’d have to lie about where it came from.

Last night I cleaned the silver chain and threaded it through the hole in the cylinder seal. This morning I tucked it into a compartment in my shoulder bag along with the terracotta rectangle that has the impression.

Jerrod’s car is a black BMW. I think of Mom’s beaten up, aging Civic and figure his family must be well off. He opens the door for me and sticks our books in the back seat. I inhale fragrant cedar incense. I don’t know what I’d expect a guy’s car to smell like, but not that.

He’s so mysterious. I’d once heard some girls in gym class saying he lived alone in some big house near the river. “Um, how come your parents moved to Philadelphia? What do they do?”

Instead of answering, Jerrod says, “Ms. Cresley told me your father had been an ancient languages professor at Penn.”

I nod, but now I worry that he might know I’m a foundling. Except that he seems so nice I’m guessing he wouldn’t look down on me for it.

I peek at his profile and can hardly believe how handsome he is. Or that I’m sitting this close to him. I watch his hands on the steering wheel and mine curls in my lap as I remember the feel of his touch.

Out of the blue he says, “So you like that little mushrushu dragon. The one you were looking at yesterday.”

“When I got so dizzy I thought I’d fall over.”

“I would’ve caught you.” He glances at me and I practically melt.

“Actually, Jerrod, I wanted to ask you about them. I haven’t been able to find out
much.”

“They’re protectors, guardians. Not just of treasure or kings, but the earth.”
“Seems like most dragons are. At least that’s what I’ve read. Then of course there’s Hollywood.”
“Hollywood?”
“Dragons in movies.”
“Oh, yeah. Right.” He focuses on the street ahead. “Except I’m talking about real dragons.”
“Get out.” I laugh. “You aren’t serious.”
“Sure. And they’re all related, you know. In every culture.” He grins. “One big dragon family.”

I shook my head. “Love those dragon families. Papa Dragon and Mama Dragon. And all the baby dragons playing around on the floor. And then there’s Auntie Millie and Uncle Harry Dragon. And—”

“You don’t believe me.” His sober tone surprises me. Suddenly I feel I’ve somehow disappointed him, and I hate the feeling.

He parks in a lot across from the museum and I say, “Wait’ll you see this.” I pull out the lapis lazuli seal and show him.

That radiant smile returns and it’s like the sun just came out again. “This is super. Where’d you get it?”

The inevitable question. “Oh it’s something my father had.”
“You should wear it.”
“I don’t want to lose it.”
“You won’t.” He leans toward me with the chain and slides his hands beneath my hair to the back of my neck.

I’m in such heaven there’s no way I’m going to object. His touch is so sensitive, his hands warm. I can feel his minty breath on my cheek and wonder what it would be like to kiss him.

“Looks beautiful, Terry.” My cheeks go red. We head out to the museum, the cool lapis resting at the hollow of my throat. I run a finger across its carved ridges, thinking, This little hunk of lapis lazuli is the only thing I’ve got from the parent who abandoned me.

As we climb the marble stairs to the second floor I start getting that woozy feeling again. When I reach the landing I notice an odd kind of buzz in my head. I chalk it up to some kind of barometric thing. Until I hear deep, cello-like minor chords. But the only musical instrument around is the reconstructed bull lyre standing in the gallery on my right.

Tell me the chords I’m hearing aren’t coming from this instrument that’s seven hundred years older than the Great Pyramids. Especially since nobody’s playing it.

I walk toward the lyre. The gold bull’s head on the front turns luminous. The lapis, silver and abalone set into its wooden body go all sci-fi shimmery. And, whoa, I’m suddenly listening to it play a melody I’ve never heard before. The sound multiplies. Gets louder and louder. And crazier. Discordant. Wild.

I hear Jerrod say something, but his words are like a distant echo. Lightheaded and panicky, I concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other, telling myself I’m not the kind of person who freaks out over these things. But the screaming vibration envelopes
me, cutting through me, penetrating my chest as if it’s going to shatter me.
  My legs give way. I feel myself falling. And falling. The museum lights go dim.
  Then everything goes black.

The museum is gone. Vanished. I’m surrounded by thorny shrubs and tall grasses that
make my skin itch. I don’t hear the moans of the ancient bull lyre. I’d say I’m relieved
it’s gone except now I hear shouts and weeping and frenzied screams. And the crackle of
fire. Do I smell smoke?
  Brushing powdery dirt from my palms, I stand on unsteady legs. I peer through the
bushes at what looks like a campsite. Huge tents. Not the kind you get from L.L. Bean.
These are dark and hairy, like they’re made of animal skins. And some of them are
burning. And . . . ohmigosh. I glimpse bodies on the ground. Twisted and bloody.
  This can’t be real. Must be some horrible nightmare. I slap my face and try to think
myself awake. Nothing changes. And if this is a dream, how come I’m still wearing the
same jersey dress I put on this morning? And carrying my leather shoulder bag. I open
the flap on my bag, pull out my phone. Totally dead.
  Panic rising, I turn around myself. Where the heck am I? And how did I get here?
  I hear male voices nearby and see two men jogging toward the thicket I’m in.
They’re wearing capes and short kilts. Like Roman soldiers. No, the leather helmets that
strap under their chins look more like the ones used in ancient Sumer. Not taking any
chances, I sink into a crouch, knees at my shoulders, tucking myself behind the scrubby
foliage. The two men pause so close to me I could reach out my arm and touch their legs.
  I listen to them talk. Their language sounds like the Sumerian-Akkadian words my
father worked with. And what’s really weird is I understand what they’re saying.
  They’re definitely soldiers. Talking about the battle going on here with the Guti
tribe. I recognize the name. I read about the Guti. Rugged nomads living in the mountains
near ancient Sumer.
  A few thousand years ago.
  Am I in some kind of time warp? Is this all because of that cylinder seal? Will I
wake up in the museum if I just tear it off?
  I’m about to reach my hand up to break the chain and toss the thing away from me,
but I freeze when I hear orders barked out to the soldiers: round up prisoners worth
taking, kill the rest — and search the border areas for stragglers hiding in the brush.
  My mouth goes dry. No way could I pass for one of the soldiers. And I doubt they’d
believe I came here from the future, since I hardly believe it myself. I wonder if I might
be invisible, like Scrooge when he travels with the ghost in Christmas Carol. But I don’t
dare move. Being wrong could be fatal.
  So I wait here, shaking inside, but not moving a hair. By the time my arms are totally
bug bitten and my legs go numb, some unexpected company arrives. The four-legged
kind.
  The dog’s keen nose brings a group of soldiers right to my hiding place. I’m a really
fast runner, but the needles and pins in my feet turn my attempt to bolt into a hopeless
lurch.
  The men surround me in seconds. I’m no fighter. If I can’t even face down Cheryl
Quigley, how am I supposed to handle five big soldiers? But I scream and punch and
kick. When a footswipe sends me to the ground on my back, the horror of what’s coming
sinks in. No, this can’t be happening!

I hear a strange growl and see one of the soldiers go flying. The others turn toward a
guy who can’t be more than my age from the looks of him. But he’s moving with the
speed and ferocity of a wildcat. He’s obviously one of the Guti. Dressed in only a Tarzan-
style kilt. Red and black tattoos all over his incredibly powerful torso and arms. Beads
and what look like animal teeth braided into his wild, chestnut-colored hair.

I roll to my feet, brain-straining to figure out how I can help this guy. He’s already
managed to dispatch the five soldiers. But we both hear the sound of more coming. A lot
more.

He grabs my arm and says, “Hurry. This way.”

I snatch up my shoulder bag, kick off my cork sandals, and take off barefoot. The
mountain terrain is rough. Rocks and roots bruise my feet, branches slap my face, but I
move faster than I’d ever run before. I refuse to die here in this strange place.

My Guti friend seems to have a plan. After several dodges and sprints, we finally
duck into a shallow cave and drop onto our butts, both of us panting and breathless.

“Rest now,” he says. “This is a sacred place. They won’t find us here.”

His voice is deep, entrancing. And the crazy thing is that I realize his language is
different from what the soldiers spoke. But apparently I’m a walking Berlitz program
lately, because I have no trouble understanding him—or speaking it myself.

I cut my eyes sideways for a peek at this guy who probably just saved my life, and I
can’t help noticing he is truly hot. “I can’t thank you enough, um . . . what is your name?”

His full, sensual lips widen into a truly sexy grin. “I am Rigmai, son of Yarlagan,
panther warrior of the Guti.”

I’m about to tell him my name when his expression changes. His brows knit. He
leans forward studying my face. “It’s you, Tiriqan. The gods have finally brought us
together.”

What? “Did you just say Terry Conn? You know my name?”

“I am Yarlagan’s fourth son,” he says, as if that explains everything. “When did you
come out of hiding? I’ve been waiting for you.”

Whoa. Not every day a girl has a looker like this say he’s been waiting for her. But . . .
“But how can you possibly know me. I’m not—”

“Your face is exactly like hers.”

“My face? But—”

Rigmai gently wraps his hand around my ankle, lifting my foot. And, yeah, it sends a
wave of heat through me. But then I see he’s looking at the ugly blue birthmark on my
left ankle.

“The Divine Lady’s mark. I’m right. It is you, Tiriqan.”

“Are you saying Tee-ree-con?”

“The name your father gave you.”

My breath catches. Of course my last name is his, but how would this guy know my
father was the one who chose to name me Terry. Not Teresa or anything. Just Terry.

I ease my foot away. “Look, if you’re some kind of shaman, will you please help me
go back.”

“I don’t know where you were hiding, Tiriqan. And why would I send you back?
Your parents made me swear to watch over you.”
“Say what?” My parents? Will he believe it if I tell him I was born in Philadelphia a few thousand years from now?

“I’m sworn to protect you. And I’ll be a good mate to you.”

“Mate?” My voice rose an octave. “As in . . . marriage?” What is going on?

“I know you’re different, Tiriqan. I know that women of your family line often choose not to marry. I would never attempt to force you to be my wife.”

Well, at least we got past that one. Not that I’m afraid of Rigmai. I feel totally safe with this dude. I can tell he’s one of those principled warrior code types.

“Even though you were promised to me.” That winsome smile again.

Definitely time to leave. Loser life or not, it’s my life, and I want it back. I unhook the chain, tuck the seal into a zipper pocket of my shoulder bag, and wait to see if that will do the trick.

Nothing happens.

The reality—if that word can even apply here—of the situation hits me hard. I’m stuck. Trapped. And have no clue how this happened or how to change it. I drop my face into my hands, and burst into tears.

Rigmai scoots close to me and wraps me on his arms. I’m grateful he doesn’t ask me to explain. Or offer stupid feel good phrases. When my crying jag subsides, he lifts my chin, wipes my tears, and places the softest brush of a kiss on my lips.

He looks even better up close. And the earthy scent of his warm skin makes me think of the community garden along the river in Philadelphia.

I wonder if I’ll ever see it again.

I follow Rigmai out of the cave. The sun is going down and casts a purplish hue over the mountains. He stands a moment, obviously listening to things I can’t hear. With a decisive nod, he leads me down a trail through the forested mountains. Some parts go through barren cliffs where raptors circle above canyons.

At one point Rigmai snaps his gaze to the sky. “No.” He takes my hand and breaks into a jog. But we barely make two yards before an enormous winged creature appears in the sky above us. It looks like an asag dragon. With huge brown wings, a snake’s tale, eagle’s feet and a lion-like head. I think about the conversation I had with Jerrod. Is this proving him right?

Rigmai curses himself for having no weapon on hand. He throws rocks, which bounce off the mammoth creature like pebbles. The asag swoops in and catches the back of my dress in its claws, lifting me into the sky. I scream and try desperately to wiggle out of its clutch. But I only go higher and higher, traveling across the mountains, campsites and villages like dots on a map.

The distress of running from the soldiers is nothing compared to this. Asags are not nice dragons. They have demon blood. A part of me wonders if it would be better to fall to my death rather than be mutilated or eaten by an asag.

We cross a river and the image below strikes me like a blow. Just like my vision yesterday during my dizzy spell, here I am soaring above a city of dun colored buildings tightly packed along meandering streets. Especially since I feel the flight slowing. We’re descending. For what? For the asag to make a dinner of me?

My heart speeds up. My mind races. Will running like mad give me a chance to get
away? Or will it just make him kill me sooner? I think of my mother and how cruel it will be for her to lose me after losing her husband. I’m all she has now.

We touch down on a flat roof in the city. Even if I had decided to try running away, I can’t do it. Because terror has frozen my limbs. When the asag releases me I crouch in the corner, my head buried between my knees. Call me a wimp; I don’t care. There’s no way I’m going to watch as this demon creature tears me to pieces.

I wait for the first attack.
And I wait.
I hear people chattering and shouting in the distance. A baying donkey. Wagon wheels crunching against a shard-covered street. The air smells like a river, like fish, like foul city odors and warm cooking spices. I lift my head and look around.

“How are you doing, Terry?”

“Jerrod! You’re here, too?”

“I followed, but lost you. But I see you easily found another hero. I’m not surprised.”

I am. I shift to sit cross-legged. “Did you see that asag? Don’t ask me why it left me here. All I know is I don’t want to be here when it comes back. We’ve got to figure out how to get out of this horrible place.”

Jerrod squats next to me, his arms dangling over his knees. “I like this place, Terry. I’ll be staying here.”

“You can’t be serious.” I look around. A zillion sparkling lights scatter like wildflowers across the clear, blue-black sky. The city below answers with a sea of flickering lamps on rooftops and glowing torches carried by people in the streets.

That’s when I see the ziggurat, a humongo stepped pyramid with a seemingly endless stairway, and a glittering, purplish shrine at the top. It looks spanking new, way different from the excavation photos of dusty ruins I’d seen at Penn’s museum.

“Are we in Ur? As in the ancient city-state that existed a couple thousand years before Rome even got started? The Sumerian city my Dad had studied like forever?”

“Yes. And no. This is the Sometime version.”

“The what?”
He stands, looks uncomfortable. “There are times and places that don’t exist anywhere anymore except in the Sometime. Times and places that are there but not there. It’s special, Terry. And more necessary to the protection of your world than you know.”

Distracted by the glow in Jerrod’s face that makes him look even more handsome than usual, I almost miss it. But then it hits me. “You’ve been here before.”

He nods. “This is my home.”

I take on an accusing tone. “You tricked me into coming here. You insisted I wear that seal. So it must have something to do with transporting us.”

“It does.” That’s all he says. Not an ounce of guilt or apology.

“Take me home right now.”

“I don’t have the power to do that.”

“Your power brought us here.”

“No, Terry, it was power surge from a source connected to the bull lyre, but you directed it. You’re the one who can work that seal.”

“I have no idea—”

“Yes, you do. You just have to remember how.”

“Remember?”
“You have ancient records in your memory. You just have to claim them.”
I crossed my arms over my chest and paced the roof, truly pissed off at Jerrod now.
“All your philosophy is very fine, but you had no right to do this to me. Was it a joke?”
“Not at all. We need you here.”
“Me? Gimme a break.”
“I’ll let my aunt explain it to you. You’ll be living with her.”
I stopped, my hands balled in fists. “No way. My mother is all alone in Philadelphia,
and right now she’s probably worried sick. I’ve got to get home.”
A girl’s soft voice cuts in. “Oh. Excuse me, Lord Ja-red.”
Lord what?
“It’s quite all right, Eanisa.” Jerrod says to a girl who is climbing off the ladder that
apparently leads from inside the house to the roof. He gestures to me. “In fact, you two
are the same age and might want to be friends. This is Tiriqan.”
Why is Jerrod suddenly pronouncing my name the same way Rigmai did?
He introduces Eanisa, who steps toward me. Her big-eyed face belongs in a manga
comic. Her whole demeanor is so sweet I can’t help but like her.
“He adds, “Tiriqan’s going to be Lady Ningal’s new chambermaid.”
In your dreams, buddy.
“It’s so warm inside tonight,” Eanisa says, “I thought I’d sleep here on the roof.
Want to join me, Tiriqan?”
“Okay,” I say, realizing how exhausted I am.
As Eanisa sets up two sleeping mats, I pull Jerrod aside and speak in a hushed voice.
“How could you do this to me? I thought you were my friend, Jerrod. I even foolishly
thought you might want to be more than friends.”
His dark eyes remorseful, his hand reaches out and cups my cheek. I tell myself not
to react, that my jelly knee is just fatigue.
“I’d like to be everything to you, Tiri. But I’m tainted. That’s why they could risk
sending me to fetch you. And if I hadn’t brought you, the bull lyre would’ve carried you
to her.”
“Her?”
“I don’t mean to frighten you, but you’ll be safer if you stay here.”
I snort. “Safer here? Running from soldiers and flying demons? No, thanks. I’d
rather take my chances with Philly lowlife.”
Jerrod grips my shoulders. “Someone very evil is after you. It’ll become clear in a
few days and you’ll—”
“I won’t be here in a few days. I’ll find a way home.”
Disappointment clouds his face. His hands smooth over my shoulders and down my
arms, giving me chills. His fingers entwine in mine. “Please don’t go yet. Now that
you’re here your powers will begin to manifest, but calling them up will attract demons.”
I shake my head. “I didn’t have any power when I got us here. So I can get back the
same way.”
“Tiri, it’s not like—”
“Why are you calling me Tee-ree?”
“Because your real name is Tiriqan. You are a descendant of the royal Kiengir
dragon line. And you’re the only one who can save it from oblivion.”
I release his hands and step back. “I’ve had enough, Jerrod. No more of this weird
stuff, okay? I just want to go home.”

He watches me a moment, then says only, “Goodnight, Tiri.”

In the middle of the night I’m jarred awake by the mournful bays of a dog or hyena or something. I sit up, soaked with sweat and breathing hard. At first I think I’m having a nightmare, but then I remember the real nightmare: I’m stuck in ancient Sumer. Or, according to Jerrod . . . Sometime.

Between moonlight and torchlight I notice people on neighboring roofs rushing about frantically. The howls grow louder. Eanisa jolts awake, her big eyes wide.

“What is that?” I ask.

“A namtar dog. A demon of the underworld gods. We have to get inside the house.”

After my experience with the asag, I don’t hesitate. I bolt for the ladder.

It happens so fast I almost miss it. Eanisa trips on her mat and a flurry of dark wings and clacking teeth erupts behind me. I pivot. And freeze.

Eanisa lies there pinned to the ground with the namtar dog standing over her on all fours, ready for the kill. The oily black fur covering its body emits a hideous stench. I hear Eanisa’s soft whimper and take a step toward her. The creature turns its fanged, anteater snout to me.

Eanisa murmurs, “Move very slowly to the ladder, Tiri, and it won’t chase you. Leave me. It will be satisfied with one life.”

“No!” I spring forward. With an eerie whine the creature changes course and heads for me.

I sense a hum down my spine and the deep, thunderous chords of the bull lyre ring in my ears. As the namtar charges me I rush toward it. Lightning shoots from my palms. My mouth breathes fire. The demon dog bursts into flames.

Foul smelling smoke fills the air. Eanisa stares at me open mouthed. I drop into a crouch, strange sensations in my body. Odd prickling and stretching and painful cramps. I’m thinking these may be power signs. Meaning I might be able to work the seal before it dissipates.

I scurry to my shoulder bag, dig out the cylinder seal, and fasten its silver chain around my neck. I loop my bag over my shoulder, close my eyes and let the rumbling hum fill me.

Dizziness.

Heaviness.

Blackness.

I open my eyes to find myself on a narrow cot in an office crowded with files and boxes. Ms. Cresley’s concerned face looks down at me.

“You had us all worried, Terry. Here. Drink this.” She hands me a glass of apple juice.

“Am I in the museum?”

“Yes, dear. In my office.”

Hmm. So it’s still the same day here, even though a day passed in Sometime. “Guess you found me near the bull lyre?”
“Yes, but we weren’t about to leave you lying in the middle of the Mesopotamian collection. Someone might think you crawled out of the Tombs of Ur.”

I laugh with Ms. Cresley, thinking this is closer to the truth than she knows. I’m wondering how Jerrod handled this. Did he come back with me?

I sit up. “I’m feeling pretty well now, Ms. Cresley. I think I’ll head down to the gift shop.”

“No working today. You just say hello and go home to rest. Ms. Rentiff will be closing up by now, anyway.”

Wait a sec. “Where’s Jerrod?”

“Who is Jerrod, dear?”

“The guy who runs the museum gift shop.”

“Ms. Rentiff manages the shop. There isn’t anyone named Jerrod working here.”

“Yeah, Mom, I decided you were right. I’m gonna stay away from all the stuff about me in that tea box of Dad’s.”

My mother smiled and gave me a quick hug. “Good decision, sweetie.”

After dinner I go to my father’s study and sit in his old recliner. I’m totally bummed over Jerrod. I’d started crushing on him something fierce, even let myself hope he might become my boyfriend. Now I don’t even know if he’s a real person.

Ms. Cresley doesn’t remember him. I asked a girl at school about him and she didn’t know who I was talking about. Am I such a mental case that I totally made him up?

And if he is real, that means I actually traveled to a time and place that doesn’t exist anymore — except in Sometime.

Did I actually kill a demon? And kiss a Guti warrior? And what about those stupid things Jerrod said? Like me being a descendant of a royal dragon family.

But he also said: *I’d like to be everything to you, Tiri.*

I slam my fist against the arm of the chair. I feel like crying, but instead just resolve to quit the museum job. I don’t ever want to see that creepy bull lyre again or any of the things Jerrod and I looked at together.

Yeah, right. Jerrod the phantom, who was probably some desperate-for-a-boyfriend illusion I carried around that day. Boy, am I a mess.

Pushing out of the recliner, I go to my room and bring back the silver chain, the cylinder seal, and the terracotta rectangle that holds its impression. The tea box is still on the floor where I’d left it, next to papers that scattered when it fell from the shelf three days ago.

I sit on my heels and begin piling papers into the box, which is going back on the shelf to collect dust. I find the two manila envelopes with my name on them and slide the seal and chain into one. As I put the clay impression into the other I notice a white paper inside with what looks like my dad’s handwriting on it.

I pull it out and read it.

*Terry, my beloved daughter,*

*I am ill and will not be around when you are old enough to receive this. The day I discovered you in the museum there was an engraved cylinder seal hanging from your*
neck on a silver chain with an archaically designed clasp. I took the seal before anyone else saw it, knowing if I gave it to the authorities I might never see it again or have a chance to study it. I believed then, and still do, that keeping it for you would somehow protect you.

I made sure the seal was not stolen property from any museum collection. And based on the authenticity of its construction and language style, I would rule out the possibility of it being a fake. Still, questions remain.

The blue star birthmark on your left ankle was my reason for naming you Terry – not Teresa or anything else. You’ll see why in my translation below. I’ve made the syntax conform to our speech, but the content is the same.

I do not mean to upset you, but if this seal has bearing on your life and origins, you should be aware of it. I will likely die before fully deciphering its meaning, but I will continue to search for it until my last day. I wish you were old enough for me to explain how important I believe this to be. All I can do is pray to whatever gods there are that you will be safe from harm. And hope that you will continue my search.

Richard Conn - Your loving father.

Seal translation:

This child is named Tiriqan. Her powers are many.
The gods have marked her left ankle with the star of Inanna
Blessed and cursed, she is the hunted one
Giant wings of darkness forever seek to find her and end her life

Floored, speechless, and rocked to the bottom of my soul, I read the letter over and over, thinking about the things I saw, the things that were said, and the things I learned when I was there in Sometime.

I slide the letter back into the envelope, tuck everything into the tea box, and carry it to my room — where it will stay.

In some ways it feels good to be back. Even school seems like a relief after all I’d been through. But the unexplainable events continue to haunt me. I can’t talk to anybody about them. No one would believe my story. And I’m in no mood to be sent in for psychiatric evaluation.

What would some shrink say about the mysterious bull harp sounds I hear on certain days? Like the vibrations that are cascading through the air right now. Deep and rich, building in intensity.

I wish Jerrod were here. And not just to talk to.

I march down Twenty-first Street determined to come to grips with this bizarre thing that’s hijacked my life. Reading my Dad’s letter every night gives me the courage to keep searching and to try and believe it all.
Only I can’t help asking: *Why me?*

I pass a little white terrier that licks my fingers as its owner scoops its poop from the curb and drops it in a nearby Dumpster. I try to focus on the sweet dog instead of the familiar looking trio rounding the corner at the end of the street. But some things take time to change.

My neck and shoulders tighten as Cheryl and her posse swagger toward me. The pleased look in Cheryl’s eyes tells me El Bitcho clearly has me in her sights.

Chin jutting forward with that cocks sure bossy attitude of hers seeping from every pore, she stands there blocking my way. Her buds converge from the sides to cut off any route for my escape.

She moves in so close her nose is practically touching mine, and I can feel her breath on my face. “Where do you think you’re going, loser?”

“Anywhere I please.” The words just pop out of my mouth.

Cheryl’s face contorts in shock. “What did you say?”

“Move your fat butt. Or I will.” At first I have to struggle to hide my own shock that I’ve said this.

But then everything shifts. Humming vibrations surround me, and the world moves in slow motion.

I watch her shoulder drop down just a hair as Cheryl prepares to launch a punch to my face. But it never makes it off the pad. I slap it away so hard it spins her halfway around. That’s when the bull lyre’s chords start to pick up. Its energy flows through every part of my body. I point my hand at Cheryl’s chest and raise my arm. She lifts at least ten feet up into the air as if responding to an invisible tractor beam emanating from my fingertips.

“Oh. My. God.” says one of her not-so-tough-after-all peeps.

I smile. “Now, where to deliver her?” I remember the sweet little terrier I’d seen moments ago. With a single, arching motion of my arm, I send a freaked out Cheryl sailing over the dumpster’s edge and crashing down into a pile of garbage garnished with savory dog poop.

Statement made.

Cheryl’s two buddies, or most likely ex—buddies, hightail it in the opposite direction. They really looked very shook-up. Don’t think I’ll be hearing from them again.

I ignored a couple witnesses standing across the street with their mouths hanging. As if they’ve never seen tele-transportation before.

*Well, get used to it. Cause the new kid on the block has some new tricks.*

I continue my walk home, an odd lightness in my stride. The guttural, crackling sounds of a motorcycle approach from behind.

It pulls up alongside me. “Want a ride?”

“Jerrod!”

He gives me a breathtaking grin and tosses me a helmet. I hand him my schoolbooks, strap on the helmet and climb on.

Jerrod glances over his shoulder at me and says, “Hold tight.”

I blush and wrap my arms around his solid torso.

Then we’re off and running.

Together.

Maybe I don’t understand who he is yet.
Or who I am either.
But I’ll figure it all out.
Sometime.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This short story is a prequel to *Inanna’s Mark*, Book 1 of the Sometime series that will be coming out this summer. I’ll be creating a special Sometime website, but meanwhile, if you would like to be notified when the first book is released, you can leave your name on my mailing list at [http://www.aliciastreet-roystreet.com](http://www.aliciastreet-roystreet.com).

***

Alicia Street writes in several genres, both solo and in collaboration with her husband Roy Street. In 2009 they won a Daphne du Maurier Award for Excellence in Mystery/Suspense. Alicia spent many years as a professional dancer and choreographer, but now she channels those creative impulses into the DANCE ‘N’LUV romantic comedy series. She is a compulsive, omnivorous reader and enjoys chatting about books with cyber-friends. Follow her on Twitter: @AliciaStreet1.

Back to Table of Contents

About the Stories in Eternal Spring

**Camp Cauldron** by Juli Alexander Forced to spend Spring Break as a counselor at a camp for troublesome young witches instead of drooling over hotties at the beach, Emma relinquishes her hopes for romance. Could the perfect guy be waiting in the midst of poison ivy, s'mores, elephant trunks and kangaroo feet.

**Barre Hopping at Midnight** by Amanda Brice How can aspiring ballerina Dani Spevak concentrate on performing at a spring arts festival when her not-quite-boyfriend is in town filming the lead in a hot new vampire movie and he was seen kissing his costar.

**The Vanishing Spring** by Carey Corp More than a century earlier, Eleanor Quimby tumbled into the water to escape an arranged marriage and disappeared. But was that the tragic end or a brave new beginning?

**The Princess of Egypt Must Die** by Stephanie Dray A lonely Princess is tempted by a forbidden love and forced to make a heartbreaking choice that will upend a kingdom and change her forever.

**Spring Perfection** by Leslie Dubois Star athlete Scott Kincaid is about to make history and pitch a perfect game. But when he realizes that true perfection lies in the relationship he has with his best friend, Reyna, will he risk everything in order to keep a promise to her?
**Picture Not Perfect** by Lois Lavrisa  Seventeen-year-old Tim wants to go to senior prom. Why doesn't his girlfriend, Gabrielle, want to go with him? Is she not who she says she is?

**Potionate Love** by P.R. Mason  Math geek, Tina, has found a way to get the popular jock, Ronny, to fall for her: a love potion. It'll work unless her best friend Nathan gets in the way.

**1:30, Tour Eiffel** by Jennifer McAndrews  A kiss in the dark will ruin Spring Break and a lifelong friendship unless Rachel Healey can prove she is a pawn in someone else's game.

**Off Balance** by Renee Pace  Jennifer's secret is big, but she loves Charlie enough to know ending their teenage relationship will set him free and enable him to join the Army. When Charlie discovers the truth, it's up to him to convince Jen their young love was meant to be.

**On A Field, Sable** by Diana Peterfreund  After the shocking events of Ascendant, what awaits the unicorn hunter Melissende Holtz on the mountaintop where she watched her comrades fall?

**The Language of Flowers** by Rhonda Stapleton  Chrissy, a clerk at her aunt's flower shop, starts getting her own romantic surprises—flowers with a special secret meeting. Can she bury her longstanding unrequited crush on her best friend's brother to take a chance on mysterious love?

**Dating After Dark (With Clowns)** by Tawny Stokes  All teenage exorcist Caden Butcher wants is a demon-free night to take his new girl to the spring fair. Is that to much to ask for?

**Sometime** by Alicia Street  Sixteen-year-old mythology buff Terry Conn finally gets the after-school museum job she wanted so badly, but who knew those ancient dragon figures would dredge up images of a past she only half-remembered? Or that drool-worthy Jerrod Pierce would be part of it?

### About the Authors

Collectively, the thirteen authors in Eternal Spring have published over 90 books, and have received or have been nominated for several prestigious awards, including the RITA,® the Golden Heart,® the Daphne du Maurier Award of Excellence in Mystery and Suspense, the Jasmine, the Maggie, the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Award, the Cybil Award for Best Young Adult Fiction, the EPIC e-book Award, the Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award, and the New York Public Library’s Books for the Teen Age list.