THE ATHENA EFFECT

Derrolyn Anderson
PROLOGUE

It was a moonless night, cold and dark. The fine mist that hung in the air started thickening to form a light drizzle. A boy and a girl walked alongside a roadway, looking over their shoulders frequently and ducking off the pavement to hide from the occasional headlights. He held her up when she began to falter, helping her stumble along until they were finally forced to stop and rest under the cover of some brush.

“It’s okay, babe. It’s gonna be all right,” he told her.

He took off his denim jacket and draped it around her frail shoulders. She started convulsing, her small body racked with violent tremors, her breath coming in ragged gasps. He held her tightly to his chest, murmuring soothing words that he didn’t really believe.

When the seizure finally subsided she moaned, “Oh no … What will it do to the baby?”

“Wait here,” he said firmly, brushing the fine brown hair back from her forehead. “I’m going to get us a ride.”

The trucker flipped his wipers on and rounded a bend to see a lone figure standing with his thumb out. His first impulse was to keep going, but years on the road had given him a sixth sense about people, and this kid looked too young and skinny to be a threat to anyone. Besides, it was raining. He sighed, pulled over, and sat idling.

The kid climbed up and opened the door, looking in warily.

“Where you headed?” the trucker asked.

The boy was young, probably not too far out of his teens, the driver thought. He had an extravagantly curly head of blond hair and thin arms that poked out of a plain white T-shirt.

“N-north,” he answered, poised cautiously in the threshold.

“Hop in. I can take you as far as Eureka.”
The boy paused, and after taking a good look around the cab, he finally nodded. “My girl’s with me. … I’ll go get her.”

The driver watched suspiciously, adjusting his side mirror to see the boy retreat into the bushes. He was just about to pull away when he saw him come back out leading a girl, a girl so pale and cold-looking that the trucker automatically reached over to turn up the heater. The boy helped her climb into the cab, and she turned to face the driver with a tremulous smile and the biggest brown eyes he’d ever seen.

“Thank you for the ride,” she said timidly.

Good Lord, he thought. These hippy kids didn’t have the sense God gave a chicken, dressed like that out here in the cold and the wet.

He nodded curtly, turning to glance over his shoulder as he pulled back out onto the road.

“No problem.”

“I’m Jenny,” she announced after they got back underway, “and this is David.”

At least she has some manners, the driver thought, looking sideways at his two damp and disheveled passengers.

“Name’s Bob. You kids thirsty?” He gestured to a small cooler that sat on the floor of the cab. “I got some pops in there. You can help yourself.”

The boy took out a can of cola and opened it, urging her to drink. She passed it back to him and dropped her head to his shoulder with a sigh. He took her hand and wove his fingers through hers.

The trucker cleared his throat. “What are you two doing out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“We’re going camping,” David said defiantly.

The driver shrugged at the obvious lie, but something made him hold his tongue. He’d picked up hitchhikers before, and everyone had a sob story. It was none of his business who they were or what they were running from. They drove along in silence for a while.

The girl saw the stuffed bear he kept on his dashboard and asked him about it. Before he knew it, she had him going on and on, telling her all about Margaret and the kids, describing his life back home in Oklahoma. She peppered him with questions, listening avidly and hanging on every little detail about his family. He noticed how her hand kept involuntarily straying to her midriff. Poor kid, he thought.
When they reached their destination, he pulled up to a diner and insisted on feeding them despite their protests, again noticing how pale and weak Jenny looked. He ended up giving them some money, admonishing them to dress warmly and be careful. Margaret always complained that he was a soft touch, but he knew she’d do the same thing if she took one look into that poor child’s tortured eyes.

He watched them walk away hand in hand, shaking his head.

They had nothing but the clothes on their backs and each other. They were obviously running from a troubled past and heading towards an uncertain future; he wished them well. They rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

They were heading north.
Chapter One
CAL

She moved silently through the dense forest, springing over a small stream effortlessly despite her chunky hiking boots and the bulky satchel she had slung over her shoulder. She stopped to tighten a sisal rope cinched around her waist that served as a makeshift belt; it was the only thing that held up the ill-fitting pants that threatened to slip right off her slender hips.

Her quarry preferred the disturbed earth at the edge of the woods, and she scanned the ground with a practiced eye, swooping down with swift grace to scoop up one cluster after another. She hunted along abandoned logging roads that were little more than dirt trails, pathways only rarely frequented by marijuana growers, game wardens, or the occasional dirt-bike rider.

Careful never to be seen, she was skilled at blending into the background when she needed to disappear. The machines were easy to hear coming, unlike the stealthy cats that could be all around her without making a sound. She shivered a little, fingering the parallel lines of scar tissue that ran down the length of her forearm.

She followed the trail a little ways, finally veering off onto a narrow path that led deeper into the woods. She stooped to gather the first tender leaves of spring, picking fleshy pads of miner’s lettuce, tart purslane and bright tangy sorrel. It would be nice to have some fresh greens for a change, she thought, looking up at the clear blue sky with a smile.

Her father used to always joke about “Living off the fatta’ the land,” but she never knew what he was referencing until she got hold of a collection of Steinbeck books that were packed away in a dusty box from the local swap meet. She’d read ten of them back to back before she reached “Of Mice and Men.” From that point on, she teasingly referred to her father as Lennie, whereupon he’d call her George, reciting lines from the novel until Mama had enough of listening to the two of them and begged them to stop.
She smiled when she thought about how pleased Papa would be with her latest haul, guessing that she must have gathered nearly an entire pound of the valuable mushrooms. She shifted her burden, careful not to crush the spongy little treasures.

She finally reached her favorite spot, a small clearing in the dense woods that concealed a glorious hidden meadow. It was a magical place in the spring, filled with blue lupine and orange poppies that were almost too bright to look at. The edge of the grove was ringed by coiled ferns stretching up from the shadows, poised to spring open at the first touch of warm sunlight.

Sunlight was precious to her too, and she carefully set down her burden, reaching into a side pocket to pull out a small yellowed paperback. She took a seat on the smooth side of a fallen tree, tucking a loose curl back into the careless braid that reached most of the way down her back. She cracked open the book and lost herself in the story.

A movement caught her eye, and she drew her knife in a flash, glancing up to see spring’s first rattlesnake sunning itself on a nearby rock. It glowed pale peach with contentment, and she knew that it meant her no harm. Rattlesnake wasn’t pretty tasty, but she decided to return the favor and leave it in peace.

The knife hung from her makeshift belt, its sharp edge facing outwards on her dominant side. She could pull it from its sheath in an instant, clenching it tightly with a lethal ready-to-slash underhand grip. She kept it honed sharp, unable to forget the day that she’d received the twin scars on her arm.

She’d been slow then, caught unprepared, and it was something she vowed to never let happen again.

When the afternoon shadows lengthened and darkened her spot on the log, she closed her book and gathered her things to head home. Her parents would be back soon, and she should get the fire stoked and the kettle on. She was feeling a little uneasy, because when Mama got up this morning her color was bad, and she suspected that a flashback might be coming on.

“Cal, stop that right now!” Mama had scolded her when she caught her daughter staring intently. Cal had perfected changing any animal’s color with ease, but making her mother feel better hovered frustratingly just beyond her reach. Now that her parents were aware of her talents, they’d become self-conscious, uneasy about the prospect of being manipulated by their daughter.
Shocking attacks had plagued her parents as far back as she could remember, and Cal had endured years of watching them helplessly as they suffered through their terrifying hallucinations. Her parents shared a dark secret that they rarely spoke of, something terrible that had happened before Cal was born. Something that kept them all hidden away, scratching out a living on land tucked in the foothills where the redwood and oak forests met.

They only visited the nearest small town in order to pick up things they couldn’t grow or gather. People around these parts valued their freedom and minded their own business. Ranchers, loggers and orchardists had populated the area for well over a hundred years, and they were a self-sufficient lot; the only strangers they saw were the tourists that passed through town infrequently, taking the scenic route on their way west to the sea.

Over the years hippies fleeing the city had come to build their geodesic domes and yurts in these woods, earnestly eager to get back to nature. The locals tolerated them, as they were generally harmless, and they usually didn’t stick around for very long. Their romantic notions of going back to nature always collided with the harsh reality of living completely off the grid.

Cal’s parents were different. They clung tenaciously to a plot of land with a seasonal creek running through it. They impressed the natives with their stubborn refusal to give up their homestead, and eventually they became a thread in the fabric of the place. They were friendly, but they kept to themselves; no one from town had ever been invited into the snug little cabin they’d erected on their remote acreage.

Nobody even knew they had a child until Cal was nearly ten years old, and after a few half-hearted attempts to enroll her in a distant school, the locals forgot all about it. The parents insisted they were within their rights to educate her themselves, and from what the sheriff could see, the child was as smart and happy as could be. Cal’s parents were better educated than the entire town combined, so who were they to argue?

So Cal grew up wild and free, tall and strong. Her little family lived a peaceful life in nearly complete isolation, in tune with the untamed land and the changing seasons.

A voracious reader, Cal mowed through books as fast as her father could bring them home from the junk bins and thrift shops he’d scavenge for supplies. When he pulled up on his precariously overloaded motorcycle she’d come running, delighted to see the heavy boxes tied down with bungee cords.
By the time she was twelve she’d read most of the classics, as well as stacks of nonfiction on everything from botany to motorcycle repair. At the bottom of one box she came across a cache of books about astral projection, crystal healing and reincarnation. She was entranced by the tales of mysterious crop circles, alien abductions and spirit channeling.

Cal’s parents were scientifically minded and only believed in things that could be measured subjectively, recorded and proven. They made fun of the books, scoffing at what they called “New Age mumbo jumbo.” They tore out the pages, using them as kindling to start the morning fire.

They didn’t realize that their daughter had found something in one of the books—something that changed her entire world view. In one earth-shaking moment she was confronted by the painful truth that her parents were wrong … unquestionably wrong.

She knew it because one of the books finally put a name to a phenomenon she’d experienced her entire life, and she got the impression it was something to be ashamed of. The book told about people who were able to perceive the visible spirit of living things. It described people who could see colorful auras.

She realized that she was one of them.

Cal had always seen and tasted the colors, glowing clouds of feelings and emotions that surrounded everyone. When she was little, she’d assumed that everyone else could too, but she gradually came to realize that her parents didn’t know how she was feeling simply by looking at her. She’d tried to explain it to them, but at first they’d laughed it off, believing her stories to be the fantasies of an overly imaginative child.

The colors came in all hues, some saturated and some merely the faintest whisper of pastel. A joyful, excited red was sweet, while an angry red tasted bitter, with a bloody metallic edge. Every person’s range of tones was different, but somehow she could tell exactly what they meant. It was like hearing a sad or happy song—she simply knew what people were feeling without being able to explain exactly how she knew.

Every color had a variety of flavors, and Cal was acutely sensitive to the meaning of them all. Each hue had a negative and a positive side, and she guessed that they were like magnets, or maybe electric currents.

She started to play with it, learning how to change her colors at will and push them outside of herself. So far she’d only mastered projecting them onto animals, making the rooster stop
crowning with a sudden burst of bright yellow confusion, or sending a hungry rabbit running away from the vegetable garden in a blind silvery panic.

Cal found that she much preferred the company of animals, because they were true to every color they displayed. There was no confusion with them, because their body language was always perfectly in sync with their emotional states. Only people were false; nearly everyone she saw acted in ways that were contrary to their true feelings.

As Cal grew older, her parents realized that there was something unusual about their only child. She knew their every mood no matter how hard they tried to mask it, and they were afraid when they realized how truly different she was. They warned her to never mention it to anyone, telling her that there were bad people in the world who would come after her if the word ever got out.

She tried to use her ability to soothe her parents when their horrific visions threatened to consume them, but the force of their flashbacks was too powerful, overcoming her fledgling attempts to help. Still, she found that if she made eye contact and concentrated, she could turn them a bit with a soft color, taking the edge off an angry red outburst or transforming her mother’s pale green irritation into wry turquoise amusement.

On the rare occasions that she accompanied Papa to town on the back of his motorbike, she was surprised at the lengths strangers went to hide what they were truly feeling. The face that most people displayed in public had very little to do with their actual state of mind. Cal tentatively experimented with trying to change their colors, but found adults to be resistant. For some reason the townspeople were unwilling to look her in the eyes, closing off her attempts to alter their moods.

Nobody seemed to notice that babies never cried around her.

Cal was always happy to return to her country cabin; she saw nothing unusual about the way they lived. Hidden away as surely as Rapunzel in her tower, she read about the things she’d never do or see because of her parents’ all-consuming fears. As curious as she was about the outside world, Cal was content to live inside the pages of a book, roaming the woods like one of the wild creatures she was increasingly able to manipulate.

They grew most of their own food, and Cal’s father did odd jobs in town that earned them just enough money for fuel and incidentals. Cal hunted and foraged in the woods that surrounded them, and her mother kept a small flock of chickens. In the fall, Papa would take her by
motorbike to glean the surrounding orchards, and Mama would spend days putting up enough jars of pears and applesauce to last them the entire year.

Cal knew every inch of the forest and was an expert in edible and medicinal plants. She liked to trek up to the most remote location on the property, a hilltop graced with the ruins of what was once a sizeable house. She harvested rose hips from ancient overgrown bushes that surrounded crumbling foundation stones, fantasizing about the people that had once lived there.

It was a romantic spot, and she would read sitting by the remnants of a brick chimney, watching the lizards scurry on charred timbers that stood as mute evidence of a massive fire that had raged long ago.

Cal had one secret friend, a bearded recluse named Jesse, whose sparse camp she’d stumbled upon while foraging beyond the boundaries her parents had set for her. He lived an even more solitary life than she did, and she would stop by for a visit occasionally, sometimes trading mushrooms and game for the peppermint candies that he always had on hand. She kept their friendship to herself, realizing that her parents would not approve.

Jesse tended a marijuana plot for someone she never saw, an arrangement that suited his laid-back nature perfectly. “It’s medicinal,” he explained, filling his pipe and waxing poetic about Henry David Thoreau, eastern philosophy and mysticism. He claimed to have traveled to India, Morocco and New York City, but his stories grew increasingly circular and convoluted the more he smoked.

Still, he was friendly, and always happy to see her. She never had to worry about troubling flashbacks with Jesse, because his mind was as calm and tranquil as still water. He called her “Artemis” or “Diana,” proclaiming her protector of all the plants and animals. Usually, he just made her laugh, trying to sort out the differences between Greek and Roman mythology in his fanciful stories.

Sometimes Cal wondered about the people living in town, their mysterious lives illuminated by electric lights blazing through curtained windows. They kept tidy houses with neatly mowed lawns, but they all seemed to be masking inner turbulence, and it was always a relief to turn up the unmarked road that led to her quiet little cabin.

The random seizures and night terrors her parents experienced only served as a testament to the dangers of straying too far from home. She realized that there was evil out there that she couldn’t even begin to fathom, and she adopted her parents’ fears as her own.
But today Cal glowed pink with happiness as she trotted home with a great haul of fresh morels—more than enough to feast on and still take the extra into town to sell. There might even be enough money left over for some chocolate, she realized, picking up the pace with a little thrill of excitement.

She rounded the corner and her heart leapt with joy to see Sheriff Brown’s truck parked on the rutted dirt road leading to her door. The sheriff was a kind man who worried about her parents, checking in on them a few times a year. His initial suspicion about their isolated lifestyle had turned to grudging respect, and on his visits he always brought along a tool or some spare item he claimed to have no more use for.

He knew how much Cal loved her books, and was always sure to include something new for her to read as well. One Christmas he’d even hauled over an almost complete set of the Encyclopedia Britannica—over twenty-nine thick and heavy tomes. Cal read them cover to cover that cold winter, huddled by the warmth and dim light of their wood-burning stove.

She hustled up the driveway to find the sheriff leaning against the hood of his truck, reeling to a stop when she saw his color. He was vibrating with a deep purple sorrow, surrounded by an intensely worried yellow-green anxiety. He shuffled uncomfortably from foot to foot.

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Sheriff Brown had seen a lot of things in his many years in law enforcement, but he could say for certain that this was the worst day of his entire career. He thrust his hands in his pockets and stared down at his feet. He’d been a newly hired deputy almost eighteen years ago when Jenny and David had arrived on the scene—two scruffy kids that looked like something the cat dragged in.

The land they settled on had once belonged to David’s grandmother, but there hadn’t been a Mackenzie living in these parts for many years. Stories about the area still swirled throughout the town: tales of a forest haunted by the ghost of Old Lady Mackenzie, along with rumors of witchcraft and demonic goings on. Lingering suspicions kept the locals away, and that suited David and Jenny just fine.

No one ever came looking for them; they paid the property taxes regularly and kept out of trouble. They were grimly determined to hang on and stay out here in the middle of nowhere, despite the overwhelming odds against them. Heck, the sheriff remembered, they’d even spent the first few rainy months living in an old army surplus tent.
Some folks speculated that they were involved with the drug trade, growing pot on a remote plot hidden away in the deep dark woods. But when year after year went by without any ill-gotten gains appearing, folks pegged them as reclusive back-to-nature types that simply wanted to be left alone.

Odd … but then again, odd was not illegal.

The Mackenzies were always nice and polite to Sheriff Brown, and he admired their tenacity. He looked around at the tidy little cabin with its neatly stacked woodpile and wire enclosed chicken coop. It was a damn shame.

He’d just seen David and Jenny for the last time, and he squirmed, because now he had to break the news to the kid. He heaved a deep sigh, wishing he had a cigarette. A movement caught his eye, and he looked up to see the girl rushing up the long gravel path, her golden hair reflecting the last long rays of the sun despite the advancing gloom. Even hidden under baggy clothes that looked like they’d be more suited to her father, he could still see the beautiful young woman she’d grown into.

He watched her sadly, wondering. Where did all the time go?

When she looked up to meet his eyes she froze, and the bag that she carried slipped from her shoulder and fell to the ground with a dull thud.
“Are you sure it’s the right thing to do?” Mrs. Brown fretted.

“She doesn’t know anyone around here. She should be with a relative.”

“But she’s never even met the woman.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s her only family.”

“It’s not right, the way they raised that child,” she huffed. “You should have done something about it sooner.”

“Like what?” he asked. “Take her from her parents? They may have been a little different, but they loved that girl. …” His voice was drowned out by the low hum of a furnace turning on, yet another alien sound to Cal’s ears.

She lay suffocating in a midnight blue pool of grief, listening numbly from the guestroom bed as Sheriff Brown and his wife discussed her fate in the next room. The past few days had gone by in a blur, and the crushing pain in her chest still made her feel as though she could scarcely breathe.

Her parents had been on their way home from the farmer’s market when their motorbike suddenly swerved right into the path of a logging truck. They were killed instantly. The driver was beside himself, but there wasn’t anything he could have done to avoid it. Cal suspected that a flashback had caused them to lose control, and blamed herself for not doing something to forestall it. She remembered the eerie feeling she had gotten that fateful morning.

The good people of the town had pitched in for the burial, laying her parents to rest side by side in the local cemetery. Cal stood in shock, watching the last few shovelfuls of dirt cover the only two people in the world who loved her. A few strangers stood by silently, surrounding her with clouds of pale blue sympathy laced with lemon curiosity.

Sheriff Brown had done a little research at the county courthouse, hunting for any information about her next of kin. He finally came across a yellowing antiquity of a deed, and
discovered that after being orphaned himself, David Mackenzie had been adopted, and had a sister who was living to the south of them in Santa Rosa.

Cal wouldn’t be eighteen until the fall, so the aunt had grudgingly agreed to be her guardian up to her birthday, upon which David’s land would officially go to the girl.

Arrangements had been made for Cal to move into her aunt’s condo. The chickens were taken to a local rancher and the little cabin was boarded up. She watched it all happen in a daze, swept away before she even had a chance to say goodbye to Jesse. She wondered if he would notice when she stopped making her random visits.

Carrying a bag with some clothes and a few treasured books, Cal boarded a smelly bus to the big city. She looked out the window, silently saying goodbye to the only home she’d ever known. I promise I’ll be back, she thought, wishing she could see her parents one last time.

Sheriff Brown and his wife watched the bus pull out of the station.

Mrs. Brown turned to her husband. “My goodness, those eyes of hers,” “I know,” he replied, waving goodbye to the sad, beautiful face in the window. “God bless her.”

The bus ride lasted for three shocking hours that exposed Cal to more different kinds of cars and scenery than she’d seen in her entire life. Colorful billboards with scantily clad women advertised casinos, and some sections of the road were peppered with discarded cans and bottles.

Everyone on the bus seemed to go to great lengths to be disconnected from one another. They all wore plugs in their ears and stared into the tiny screens of electronic devices that had them completely absorbed.

Cal was overwhelmed by the colors coming from the other passengers, people of more different shapes and sizes than she’d ever imagined existed. She was surprised by how many of them seemed to be in real distress; just as she had feared, the outside world was proving to be a frightening place. Cal was beginning to feel very small and insignificant when the bus finally pulled into the station.

There was no one there to meet her and she grew frightened, pacing around the bus terminal anxiously. She must have looked lost, because she instantly attracted the attention of a man who offered to help, asking if she needed something to eat or a place to stay. When she looked into
his eyes she recoiled in shock, because his kind voice and offer were completely incongruous with his predatory greenish yellow aura.

“No… No, thank you,” she told the deceitful man, backing away. She bent to check the hunting knife she wore strapped to her ankle, shouldered her bag, and left the station to wait outside. Her parents were right: the world was clearly very dangerous, full of predators of the human type. She was coiled with tension and ready to fight.

She found a bench out front and settled down, holding her bag protectively across her lap. Her baggy clothes and worn out sneakers helped her to fit right in with the homeless population of the bus station and, thankfully, no one tried to talk to her again. She pulled her baseball cap down low on her forehead and pulled out a book, pretending to read with her head down.

A motorcycle pulled up to the curb, and two dark-haired young men climbed off. She squeezed her eyes shut. The sound reminded her of her parents, and her eyes burned as she fought back tears.

She was afraid that if she allowed herself to start crying again, she might not ever be able to stop.

“Thanks for the ride, bro,” she heard one of them say. “I’ll call you when I get to town.”
“Just hurry back, all right?”
“When are you gonna come along with me? What should I tell him?”
“I have nothing to say to him.”
She heard a heavy sigh. “Hey, Cal … take good care of Rufus, okay?”
Her eyes snapped open at the sound of her name.

“Sure thing,” the other man answered, flashing a wide grin. The two shook hands, leaning in for a one armed hug with a few backslaps. One of them headed towards the bus station, turning back to call out, “Take care, little bro.”

She watched the one named Cal as he sauntered back to his bike. It was a bigger, more powerful-looking motorcycle than her father’s; she’d never seen one that looked like it before. She tried not to stare, but she’d never seen anyone who looked like him before either.

He was tall, taller than her father, clad in dirty blue jeans and a black leather jacket that fit snugly across his broad shoulders. His hair was dark, like his eyes, which were fringed with black lashes that made them stand out even from a distance. She’d never seen a really good-looking man before, and she watched him, fascinated.
He walked with a confident swagger that belied the anxious chartreuse color he was radiating. Like everyone else at the bus station, he was troubled. He reached into his pocket for a pair of mirrored sunglasses, slipping them on to hide his arresting eyes. She watched him straddle the bike gracefully, without putting on a helmet. He revved the engine and sped away, going much too fast.

Beautiful idiot, she thought.

A small economy car pulled up in front of the station and stopped with a screech. Cal looked up to see a woman with short brown hair checking her face in the rear-view mirror. She wore a black vest over a white shirt, and she climbed out and smoothed her skirt, looking flustered in a tangerine sort of way.

She scanned the crowd in front of the bus station, and when their eyes finally met she hurried over, asking, “Are you David’s kid?”

Cal nodded, thinking that the woman looked younger than she’d imagined. She stood up and held out her hand. “I’m Cal.”

“Sorry I’m late–I just got off work. You can call me Angie. You sure have his hair, don’t you?” She pumped Cal’s hand, smiling apologetically. “Nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Cal said politely, “Thank you for letting me stay with you.”

“Well, I’m double-parked, so let’s get going. Is that all of your stuff?” She looked at the battered green duffel bag suspiciously.

Cal nodded, slinging the bag over her shoulder and following along behind her. They drove off in an uncomfortable silence. She could tell that Angie was uncertain, yellow with curiosity, but far from happy about the situation she found herself in. People couldn’t help the colors they gave off, making Cal a walking lie detector.

“I was sure surprised to hear about David,” Angie finally said. “We were adopted at the same time, but I was only a baby and David was nearly six years old. I suppose he never really felt like part of the family, because he changed his name back when he was a teenager.”

Cal was surprised, because her father had never spoken of his childhood at all.

“When our parents divorced we just kinda drifted away from each other. He got himself a scholarship and I stayed with mom until she passed. Last I heard David went missing from college. Some professor even came around looking for him way back when I was in high school.
To tell you the truth, when I didn’t hear from him, I just assumed he was already dead or something.”

Cal looked down, wincing. The car came to a stop at the light and Angie frowned, turning to face her passenger.

“Didn’t he ever mention that he had a sister?”

Cal shook her head no, blinking back tears. “Sorry.”

Angie’s voice softened. “I’m sorry too.” She patted Cal’s knee. “I know how it is to lose your parents when you’re still young.”

They drove through a bigger city than Cal had ever seen, passing through vast suburban neighborhoods with row upon row of matching houses. Angie pointed out the low buildings and sports fields of the area’s high school, and they looked mammoth to Cal’s inexperienced eyes.

“This is where you’ll be going to school. There’s a couple months left, and you might as well get into the routine. You might even need to go to summer school if you’re not up to speed. You’re a junior this year, right?”

“I guess so,” Cal replied nervously.

Her aunt started chattering about the restaurant where she waited tables, explaining that she’d been called in unexpectedly to cater a luncheon. “That’s why I was late,” she explained, “I’ve been picking up extra shifts and it seems like I’m working all the time these days.”

They pulled up in front of a modern-looking condominium complex.

“This is the place,” Angie said, climbing out and leading Cal down a cement walkway. They stopped at a door decorated with a wreath of plastic eggs, and Angie fumbled for a key to open it.

When they stepped inside Cal looked around, surprised by the house and its furnishings. The sheriff’s place had impressed her with the sheer number of things in it, but her aunt’s home was even more shocking to her. Everything looked so new and store-bought, and in such abundance. It stood in sharp contrast to the homespun furniture and random items that her parents had haphazardly accumulated in the past seventeen years.

Cal peered up the carpeted stairs that led to the second floor to see a man standing at the top, looking down at her. He was tall and wide, with a balding head and a neatly trimmed beard.

“Phil!” Angie called up to him, “Come down and meet my niece.”
The man didn’t even try to hide the celery-green annoyance he was radiating as he descended. He clearly was not happy to see her.

Angie took his arm proudly. “Cal, this is my partner Phil.”
Cal nodded politely. “It’s nice to meet you. What kind of business are you two in?”

They looked at each other and laughed, confusing her.

“He’s my boyfriend,” Angie said, “He just moved in with me, too.”

Cal’s cheeks flushed pink. “Oh … pardon me.”

“Come on,” Angie laughed again, climbing the stairs. “I’ll show you your room.”

She was taken to a room stuffed with boxes, with an inflatable mattress tucked in the corner. She’d never been in an upstairs room before, and she looked out the window to see the identical buildings of the complex repeated in a row, like an M.C. Escher drawing she’d seen in one of her art books.

“Sorry about the mess. Phil says he’ll get his stuff moved out of here as soon as he can.”

Cal set her duffel bag down, flipping the switch that turned the overhead light on and off with a smile. Now she could read any time she wanted to. “It’s fine.”

That night she stayed awake a long time, re-reading a childhood favorite until she could barely keep her eyes open. She got up silently to get a drink of water from the bathroom down the hall. It shared a wall with her aunt’s bedroom, and she could hear Phil and Angie’s voices echoing through the heater vent as clearly as if she was in the room with them.

Phil was complaining, “I still can’t believe I have to give up my office space. I should have kept my own place.”

“Don’t say that,” Angie replied. “It’ll only be until she turns eighteen. I’m sure we’ll figure out something to do with her by then.”

“When’s that?”

“In October.”

He groaned, “When I agreed to move in I thought it would just be the two of us.”

“I know, I know. But what was I supposed to say? I’m her only family.”

“Yeah, well … as long as she doesn’t try and drag a bunch of punk teenagers over here at all hours.”

She could hear Angie laugh at the thought. “I seriously doubt it. She seems pretty shy. Apparently my brother and his wife were some kind of weird hermits or something.”
“She does seem a little strange,” he said.
“Yeah,” Angie agreed, adding, “Did you get a load of her eyes?”
Cal looked at herself in the mirror and frowned.

~

The following week consisted of jumping through various bureaucratic hoops and
government red tape to get Cal enrolled in school. Since she’d been born at home and not in a
hospital, she officially didn’t exist in the eyes of the state of California. The problem was only
compounded by the fact that her aunt had a different last name than her.

“I’m Jenkins, she’s Mackenzie!” Angie screamed into the phone after being left on hold for
the umpteenth time. She finally hung up in frustration. “What a pain in the ass!”
“I’m sorry,” Cal said, feeling completely helpless.

Angie looked Cal over with a skeptical eye. “You really need to get some clothes for
school.”
“I have clothes,” Cal said.
“Trust me, honey,” Angie said, “It’s time for some new ones.”
Cal looked down. “But I don’t have any money.”
“I’m kinda broke right now too, but once Phil gets a job things will be easier. Maybe this
summer I can get you work at the restaurant. You could start out hostessing or something.”
“What’s hostessing?” asked Cal.
“It’s when you show people where to sit down in the restaurant.”
Cal was confused. “They pay people to do that?”

Angie laughed; she was getting used to her niece and all of her strange questions. She had to
patiently explain how to do the simplest of things, whether it was showing Cal how to work the
washing machine or teaching her not to put metal into the microwave. The girl needed to learn
everything from scratch, as if she were a little kid, making Angie feel almost motherly.

Always a free spirit, Angie had never married or settled down, and everyone seemed to think
she was flaky. Having Cal around made her feel like she was finally a grown-up. She started
thinking that maybe it wasn’t too late to start a family after all … Phil might even marry her if
they had a baby. She smiled to herself, imagining it.

As for Cal, it was as though she had walked through the wardrobe and ended up in Narnia.
Everything was new and strange to her, and she was always a bundle of nerves from the
unfamiliar noises. Cars whooshed by on the road, electronics buzzed and hummed, and the non-
stop sound of sports blared from Phil’s television set.

After a few days she started to relax a little, settling into the rhythm of her new home. 
Angie worked nights as a waitress at a downtown steakhouse, getting in late and sleeping in most 
mornings. Cal did her best to keep out of Phil’s way, staying in her room when her aunt wasn’t 
around.

After a couple of awkward visits with a counselor, Cal was finally enrolled in school, and 
she was nervous about going in on her first day. She’d never had any friends her own age, and 
couldn’t imagine what she would talk about with other students. She got up early, laying out a 
simple dress her mother had sewn, paired with some hand-me-down shoes the sheriff had 
brought by on one of his visits. She went to take a long, hot shower.

Her favorite part of living with her aunt was definitely the bathroom. She’d grown up taking 
quick baths with water boiled on a wood-burning stove, so having hot water at the turn of a knob 
was an almost unimaginable luxury. Standing under the warming rain was pure heavenly bliss, 
and it helped Cal miss her quiet life in the wilderness a little bit less.

She got out of the shower and dried off, brushing her long hair and wrapping a towel around 
herself. When she stepped out into the hall she nearly collided with Phil.

“Oh! Excuse me,” she said, looking down.

He didn’t move, and his massive bulk blocked the path to her room. She glanced up to see 
him studying her with intense interest. The wrong kind of interest. Uncomfortable, she looked 
back down immediately.

“Excuse me,” she said meekly, trying to go around him.

He stepped to the side, barring her path.

“Do I make you nervous?” he asked, his voice seductive and threatening at the same time. 
She stepped back, afraid to look up again, finally spinning on her heel and slipping back into the 
bathroom. She locked the door, her heart pounding in her throat.

For an instant, she felt like she was back in the woods, being stalked by a hungry predator. 
She listened carefully for the sound of his footsteps receding, goosebumps rising on her flesh.

She looked in the mirror at her frightened eyes, and for the first time since she’d come to her 
aunt’s house, she wished she was carrying her knife.
A black cloud of dread hung over Cal’s head as she walked to school that morning. Phil had always seemed irritated by her presence in the house, but now there was something else; something much worse than mere annoyance. She had absolutely no idea what she should do about it.

She walked past the condominium complex, coming to a place where the sidewalk ended and chain link fencing replaced the tidy wood pickets of suburbia. The houses started to look older, with peeling paint and weed-overgrown yards. Old washing machines rusted alongside broken-down cars up on blocks.

A sudden barrage of vicious barking startled her, and she looked over her shoulder to see a muscular brindle-colored dog come tearing up a driveway straight towards her. She stood her ground, turning to face it, reaching to her hip reflexively for the knife that was not there. The dog jerked to a halt with a strangled yelp when it reached the end of a nylon rope.

“Aww,” she crooned as she approached it, feeling sorry for the poor creature. She sent it a soothing blast of lavender, and the dog sat down, panting from its exertion. By the time she reached it, the beast had rolled onto its back with a whimper.

“There’s a good boy,” she crooned, giving it a belly rub.

“Hey!” someone called from the house. Cal looked up, surprised to see the motorcyclist from the bus station appear on the porch. When he started walking towards her she bolted up and raced away down the street as fast as her ill-fitting shoes could take her.

By the time she reached the high school she realized just how completely out of place she was. All of the other teens seemed to be wearing a uniform that consisted of brand new blue jeans worn with snug t-shirts or hooded sweatshirts; everything was printed with designer logos. The girls that did wear dresses wore them short, with chunky wedge heels that looked ridiculously hard to walk in.
Everyone carried phones and walked about the campus with their heads down, reading whatever was on the tiny screens. It’s a wonder they don’t run into each other constantly, Cal thought. She kept her head down too, avoiding eye contact as much as possible.

She didn’t want them to see.

Oh, and the colors they gave off! So many teenagers in close proximity created a witch’s brew of emotions; she tasted intense hatred, fear, envy and anxiety in the time it took her to find her first class. The riot of vivid colors blended together into a sensory overload that made it difficult for her to focus.

There was plenty of love in the air—sickeningly sweet blood-red infatuation so powerful that it was amazing its victims could function at all. An incredibly alienated boy made her catch her breath with his bitter hateful thoughts, and sad, lonely kids haunted the halls in blue mists, beaten down and defeated by life. Like her, they slipped quietly through the hallways, trying their best to disappear.

She navigated the labyrinth of high school in a haze of bluish purple misery, sitting in the back of her classes, nodding with her head down when her teachers introduced her as a new addition. She could see curious eyes size her up, take note of her unfashionable clothes, and dismiss her.

She’d expected school to be something out of “Little House on the Prairie,” but she couldn’t have been more wrong. The classes were undisciplined, the teachers harried with overwork or disinterested. The ones who put in an effort mostly played to the front row, and a late entrant who didn’t look up or speak up did little to attract their attention.

No one spoke to her at the lunch hour, and she couldn’t bring herself to go into the cafeteria. Her head ached from all of the falseness, and she wandered around the school grounds aimlessly, ending up in the back of the complex by the dumpsters.

She rounded a corner and stumbled across a boy kissing a girl passionately up against the wall. She had her hands buried in his shaggy black hair, pulling his face down to hers. He was grinding into her body, his hands up under her skirt. Cal stopped in her tracks, shocked.

The boy had a sleeveless shirt on, and she could see that a swirling black pattern had been tattooed on his shoulder, winding down past his bicep to cover half his arm. She couldn’t stop staring, thinking of Queequeg from Moby Dick. The way he was working over the girl’s face he might as well have been a cannibal.
The girl glanced up and saw her. “What are you lookin’ at?” she snarled. The boy turned around and, once again, she found she’d run into the bus station biker. She bolted away, listening to the girl’s cackling laughter trail after her.

The rest of her day was filled with worry and wonder, and by the time the final bell rang she was exhausted. She walked home slowly, giving motorcycle boy’s house a wide berth. She was relieved to see her aunt was home when she walked in the door. Phil didn’t look up from the basketball game he was watching.

“How was your first day at school?” Angie asked, calling to her from the stove where she was cooking.

Cal came closer. “Fine, thanks.” The food smelled good, and she realized she hadn’t eaten all day.

“When’s it gonna be ready?” Phil grunted from the other room.

Angie got back to work, responding, “About a half an hour or so.”

“Can I help?” Cal asked her aunt.

“No thanks,” Angie smiled. “I’m the only one who knows how to make it the way Phil likes it.”

Cal nodded, retreating to her room and busying herself with a reading assignment, trying to ignore her growling stomach. After a while there was a knock on the door and Angie poked her head in.

“I’m leaving for work now. The mac and cheese is in the oven. Why don’t you come down and have dinner with Phil?”

“Um, sure … thanks.”

Her aunt paused for a moment. “So school went all right? You got there okay and everything?”

“Yes, just fine. … Um, Angie?” She asked her casually, “Do you know who lives in that house up the street with all the motorcycles?”

“The one with the pit bull out front?”

“Yes.”

“What a dump! Stay away from that place—they’re a bunch of biker losers. Cops get called out there every weekend.”

“What for?”
“Loud music, dope … who knows? Those people are trash–they outta lock ’em all up and throw away the key.”

“Oh.” Cal was confused, wondering how people could be garbage.

“Gotta run … I’m closing up tonight, so I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Cal stayed in her room, waiting and listening, as the sky outside her window darkened. She heard Phil come up the stairs and tensed up, relaxing when his bedroom door clicked shut. After an hour or so had passed she slipped down into the kitchen and made herself a plate of food, standing in front of the microwave and watching it spin around in circles. She still couldn’t get over the miraculous device.

“Need some help with that?” Phil said, startling her. He came in to stand right behind her in the small kitchen.

“N-no thanks,” she stammered.

He reached in the refrigerator and pulled out a beer, patting Cal’s rear end with his other hand just as the timer went off. She jumped.

“Want one?” he asked, holding it out to her.

“No. thanks,” she repeated, beating a hasty retreat.

She started eating in her room, going out of her way to avoid crossing paths with Phil. When Angie was around she could relax, but her aunt worked nights, and that was when Phil started drinking. He was overly friendly when he was drinking, always trying to get her to talk or join him for a beer.

One night, after hunger drove her from her room, Phil insisted that she sit and watch television with him. She perched on the edge of the couch nervously while he put a movie on. Within a few minutes everyone on the screen was naked and on top of each other.

Cal jumped up in shock, and Phil reached out and grabbed her wrist.

“Stay and watch it with me,” he pulled her towards him, radiating a deep maroon lust.

She wrenched her arm away and bolted for the stairs. He followed her halfway up. “Hey! Lighten up–I was only kidding around!”

From then on, whenever Angie wasn’t around Cal went to great lengths to avoid Phil, keeping her knife at the ready. The more she shied away from him, the more he seemed to like it, and she could feel his eyes following her constantly. She told her aunt what had happened, but Angie brushed it off, saying that Phil was just a big jokester and meant nothing by it.
Cal started wandering the neighborhood at night, loath to be alone in the house with her aunt’s creepy boyfriend. She considered running away, but she was afraid. She had no money, and no place to run to. She felt trapped, tied to her aunt’s house almost like the poor pit bull that stood guard at the decrepit place down the street.

She passed by the dog’s house nightly, stopping to visit with him on the occasional times she found the poor animal left outside. Sometimes they huddled together for comfort, two creatures at the mercy of forces they had no control over.

Her favorite place to go was an old cemetery a few blocks away, a secluded spot on a hill alongside a wooded area. The old gravesites did not frighten her, and it was nice and quiet there, away from the road. She was drawn to the small wild space, haunting the dark woods as silently as an owl. She rarely came across anyone else, and it was the closest thing to home she could find.

One moonlit night she heard footsteps approaching and slipped into the bushes, pulling the hood of her sweatshirt over her light hair and holding perfectly still. A lone figure entered the cemetery, pacing nervously in an anxious cloud of greenish fear. It was the boy from school—the motorcycle rider that shared her name—and she watched him from the shadows with interest, wondering what on earth he was doing in the cemetery at night.

Three men approached from the opposite direction and he straightened up in anticipation. His color went silvery white with tension, and a little shiver of bitter fear ran down her spine. She could hear them speak when they met, and she strained to listen to what they were saying to each other.

A harsh voice asked, “Where’s Jarod?”

“He’s out of town. He asked me to do the drop.”

“Who the hell are you?” the man asked him, looking around suspiciously.

“I’m his brother.” Cal reached in his jacket to hand over a thick manila envelope. “He says it’s all there,” he said.

The man took the package, shoving it into his coat. “It better be.”
The first one said, “I want you to give Jarod a message for me.”

“Yeah?” Cal asked.
The other men went bright crimson red with excitement, ready to spring. In the blink of an eye they set upon him, pinning his arms behind his back despite the furious fight he put up. Cal gasped in the shadows, covering her mouth.

When they had him immobilized, the first man came close, drawing back to punch him hard on the jaw. She saw his head snap back, and he slumped in their arms as the man began to pummel his torso with blows. The dull, soggy thuds were sickening; Cal had never seen anything so brutal.

She stepped out from the shadows, shrieking, “Stop it! You’re going to kill him!”

The three thugs looked up with shocked faces. “What the …”

The punching man stopped in mid-swing and charged at her. She tried to run back into the tree line, but was thrown to the ground with a flying tackle, and dragged by her ankles into the clearing. She kicked and fought, twisting and clawing at the turf, unable to break free. Her hood slipped down and a mass of curly blonde hair spilled out.

“Let go of me!” she screamed, remembering the last time a killer tried to drag her away.

The man lunged on top of her, straddling her and pinning her arms to the ground over her head.

“Shut up bitch, or I’ll shut you up,” he grunted from the exertion. The other two men stood looking down at her as she struggled futilely to get away.

“Here to save your boyfriend?” one of them asked, making the other one laugh.

“Help!” she screamed at the top of her lungs. The man on top of her released one of her arms to slap her hard across the cheek, and it was all the opening she needed.

With a well-practiced grab, she drew her hunting knife from its sheath on her belt and pressed it to his side, ready to plunge it in. He looked down in horror and reeled back from the long blade, allowing her to push him over onto his back and spring to her feet in one swift move. She crouched above him, poised to plunge it into his belly.

“I swear I’ll gut him!” she yelled, her eyes flashing at the men who stood frozen. “Get back,” she growled through gritted teeth, trying her hardest to send them all an icy blue blast of fear.

It seemed to work, because the man lying on the ground called out, “Do what she says.” His eyes were wide in the moonlight, locked onto the gleaming silver blade.
“Back off,” she yelled again, watching the others as they slowly moved away. She kept the knife raised with both hands, shaking from the rush of adrenalin. A police siren wailed in the distance and the two men looked over their shoulders nervously.

“Take it easy, Blondie,” the one on the ground said. “We were just leaving.”

Cal slowly backed away, keeping her knife at the ready. She glowed a fiery orange red, fully prepared to dive on him and stick it deep into his belly without hesitation. The man scrambled backwards, finally rising to join the others. He brushed himself off, trying to regain his dignity, and signaled for them to leave. She watched the three of them disappear back into the shadows they’d come from.

Satisfied that they were really going, she turned her attention to the beaten boy.

Cal had crawled to his knees and witnessed the whole scene, and he looked up with bleary eyes to see the girl standing over him, her golden hair reflecting the moonlight like the halo of a guardian angel. The police siren grew louder on the road beneath the hill, passing them by and fading away into the distance.

She bent down to offer him a hand, and he took it, focusing on the two raised scars that ran down the length of her forearm. She pulled him to his feet and he stood wavering, rubbing his sore jaw. It hurt to breathe, and he wondered if they had broken a rib.

He watched in a daze as she slipped her knife back into its sheath, pulling her oversized sweatshirt down to conceal it. She pushed her sleeves down over her arms and flipped the hood back up to cover her glowing mane of hair. It occurred to him that she might be a ghost.

“You need to get out of here before they come back,” she said.

“Where did you come from?” he choked out, looking back the way the men left. “Who are you?”

When he turned around she was gone.
Chapter Four
NOTICED

She sat up the next morning with a groan, rubbing her sore cheek gingerly. Her mother used to say that no good deed goes unpunished, and Cal finally understood what she meant by it. She missed her parents ferociously, suffering a stab of deep blue pain so powerful she had to lie back down to catch her breath.

After she finished crying, she got up to go to school.

Idiot motorcycle boy didn’t show up for the next few days, and she wasn’t surprised. As sore as she was, she figured he must really be hurting. By the end of the week he was back, and a crowd of girls clustered all around sympathetically, exclaiming loudly over his bruised face and fawning all over him. Cal did her best to avoid them and, thankfully, he didn’t seem to recognize her when she passed him in the halls.

He must have gotten what little sense he possessed knocked clean out of him, she thought.

She kept up her nightly walks, avoiding the cemetery for a few days. Tired at school and uncomfortable at home, Cal wandered around in a daze of grief and confusion. She made herself as small and unobtrusive as she could, trying to attract as little attention as possible. She trusted no one, and fully expected something bad to appear around every corner.

Still, some girls took note of her. The kind of girls that amused each other at the expense of those they believed would not fight back. Cal endured taunts about her clothes and the fact that she had no friends.

Her isolated upbringing left her ill-equipped to deal with being teased, and the cruelty they showed her only served to reinforce her unfavorable view of the city. She wished she was back in the forest with only animals for company.

The school library was her savior, and she found herself reading more and more, using books to escape her everyday life. In order to steer clear of Phil, she started to eat only at school,
taking her lunch to hide away in a back alley between some storage sheds. She would sit and read, sharing what she had with a pair of mangy stray cats.

Now she also had to dodge the idiot boy and his parade of girls, because they were always looking for secluded spots on campus to grope each other in. She saw him with a different one every time, and the girls he discarded sometimes came looking for him, radiating an ugly jealous green or a pitiful depressed blue.

One day a red-haired girl passed right by her hiding place, looking around anxiously before storming off in greenish brown frustration. A few minutes later the boy swaggered up, glancing down the alley and spotting Cal where she sat reading. She looked down at her book, willing him to leave.

“Hey,” he called out, scaring the cats away.

Please don’t talk to me, please just keep walking, she thought. He was clearly trouble, and she really didn’t want anything more to do with him.

“Hey, I know you …” he said, coming closer.

She cringed, closing her book and packing her things up. “I don’t think so,” she said quietly.

“You’re the girl that was petting my dog.”

“Um … yeah,” she said, relieved. She got up to go, hoisting her heavy book bag over her shoulder with a grimace.

“How did you do it?” he asked.

“Do what?” She avoided looking up at him, arranging things in her overloaded bag.

“Get near him. He doesn’t like strangers. Most people are scared of him.”

She was suddenly angry, thinking about the poor whimpering dog. She snapped, “He gets scared too, you know. You shouldn’t leave him tied out there all night!” She stormed past him out of the alley, colliding with the girl that had come back looking for him.

“Hey! Watch where you’re going, you stupid hick!”

Cal’s binder toppled out of her bag and exploded on the ground, sending loose papers blowing in the breeze. She crouched down to gather her things, her eyes burning with frustration. She could hear the girl laughing at her as she scrambled to stack up the loose pages, lunging for the ones that blew out of her reach. Motorcycle boy was decent enough to chase down the other papers, retrieving them and coming back to hand them to her.
She was mortified, and when she reached up to take them her loose sleeve slid down her increasingly thin arm. His eyes flew open wide when he saw the twin scars on her forearm. She snatched the papers from him, stuffing them into her bag and pulling her sleeve back down hastily.

“It’s you … It was you.” he blurted out in disbelief.

He could scarcely fathom that this was the fierce girl who had helped him out. He’d been able to think of nothing else for days, questioning if she was real, wondering how he could track her down. And now here she was–the weird new girl at school who dressed like a hobo and walked around with her head down, like she was afraid of her own shadow.

She reluctantly looked up at him, fighting back the tears that only made her eyes look even bigger than they already were. He stood there staring at them, struck dumb. One of her eyes was blue as the clearest sky, and the other one was the bright green of a new spring leaf. The colors were surprising, but there was something else. Instead of the fear he expected to see, there was sorrow.

She had the saddest eyes he’d ever seen.

Before he could say anything, the girl with the two different colored eyes sprang up gracefully as a doe and bounded away.

The redhead came up and took him by the arm. “Come on Cal. Let’s go.”

He looked for her in the halls the rest of the day, finally waiting out front when school got out. He sat perched on his bike, talking to some girls but scanning the crowds for her. She was elusive, and she almost slipped away, but he spotted her walking home. She was a good distance from the school when he pulled up, his bike idling.

“What’s your name?” he called out.

She shook her head no and kept moving. He followed alongside her slowly.

“What’s your name?”

She looked over at him, wishing he’d leave her alone. “Cal.”

He nodded. “Yeah, what’s your name?”

She flashed him an annoyed look. “Cal,” she repeated, picking up the pace. He pulled up a little ways and cut the engine, forcing her to walk past him.

“Seriously, what’s your name?”
She looked at him, his curiosity blazing a confident warm gold. The glow surrounded him, making him look like Apollo. If he were a mythological figure, he’d be a foolish, vain one, like Narcissus, she reminded herself.

“My name is Cal, too,” she informed him flatly.

He laughed, and his amusement came right through his dark eyes. “Is that short for Callie?”

“No.” She kept walking, forcing him to push his bike alongside.

“California?”

“No.”

“Hold on a sec …” he asked, smiling a charming, lopsided smile. “Please?”

She stopped, looking over at him with irritation. He almost felt like he was inconveniencing her, and he’d never had a girl look at him that way before. Her extraordinary eyes darted around like she was trapped, searching for a way out.

“That was you a few nights ago, wasn’t it?”

She nodded once, looking at him with resignation.

“Wow.” He flashed his most beguiling smile. “Thanks for the help.”

She frowned with disapproval. “You should be more careful who you meet up with in the middle of the night.”

“I was doing a favor for my brother,” he said defensively. “Anyway, what were you doing there? You shouldn’t be out wandering around alone in the middle of the night.”

She held her head high. “I can take care of myself.”

He chuckled. I bet you can, he thought, remembering the way she wielded a knife.

She looked angry at being laughed at. “I wasn’t the one meeting with the ruffians.”

“Ruffians?” he said mockingly.

She set her jaw and started walking away fast.

“Hey Cal,” he called after her.

She turned. “What?”

“The dog … Rufus. He’s my brother’s dog. I’m taking care of him while he’s away. I only leave him out at night when I’m gone. He goes nuts and tears up the house if you leave him alone.”

She shrugged and kept walking.

“You still didn’t tell me what Cal was short for,” he called after her.
She didn’t turn around this time. “That’s right Calvin, I didn’t.”
She heard the bike roar to life and watched as he sped away past her, popping a wheelie for her benefit.
Reckless fool, she thought.

~

The next day at school he watched her, intrigued. There was something so completely different about her; it was like seeing a unicorn wandering the halls. At first glance she seemed shy and timid, but he realized that she was really just doing her best to disappear. She moved through the crowds fluidly, like a cat stalking through the jungle, in stark contrast to the other girls who bounced and strutted, trying to get his attention.

Her choice of clothes was odd. He was used to provocative displays of bare skin and cleavage, but she wore oversized shabby-looking things, dwarfing her slender frame in earth tones. He could see how hard she worked to blend into the background, keeping her head down and her nose buried in a book. He could also see how pretty she was underneath her camouflage.

Fascinated, he became acutely aware of her presence, and when she passed by him he grabbed the girl next to him, just to show her he could. The girl he embraced noticed his gaze following the new girl, and took him by the chin, turning it to kiss him.

She could turn his face but not his eyes.

As for Cal, all she saw was a strutting, arrogant peacock of a boy. She went out of her way to avoid him, alarmed by the way his eyes sought her out in the crowds. He was the high school Casanova, and she wasn’t interested in becoming one of his conquests. She didn’t need any more trouble in her life—even if it came in an undeniably attractive package.

She struggled to find her way, clinging to her new routine to keep from drowning in her sorrow. She wandered the streets at night, wraithlike, and kept to herself at school. She faded into the background, her head down and her golden mane of hair tucked away in a braid.

She soon discovered that the trick to being left alone in public was to look like you were completely engrossed in something. She avoided eye contact and kept her body language closed off. She also broadcasted the very best back-off blue color she could muster, and it seemed to work.

On everyone but Cal.

He sought her out, leaning over to murmur into her ear, “Calista, right?”
“No,” she said, darting into the nearest girl’s restroom to wait him out. He pulled up alongside her on her way home from school. “Calpurnia?” “No.” She trudged along, shifting her heavy bag from shoulder to shoulder. “I like Cali better than Cal … you know, for a girl. How about I call you Cali?” he said, trying to strike up a conversation. “Suit yourself,” she replied, continuing to walk away. “Do you want a ride home?” “No.” She wondered why he wouldn’t just go away. He wondered why she wasn’t interested in him. “Are you afraid?” he taunted her. “I happen to value my life,” she retorted. He laughed, “You are afraid.” “And you’re too stupid to wear a helmet.” He was taken aback. “It wouldn’t matter anyway.” She cast him a withering glance. “That’s not what the statistics say.” “Well, I like to be free,” he said defiantly. “To do what? Donate your organs?” she snapped. She rushed away, eager to get home and take a nap before her aunt had to leave for work. Phil still couldn’t find a job, and he’d started drinking heavily. Too much beer made him dangerous.

She left the house after dark that night, striking out for the night woods. She could hear a raucous party going on in front of Cal’s house; music was playing loud, and the smell of wood smoke and something cooking on a grill made her stomach growl. There were at least seven or eight big, heavy motorcycles parked diagonally in front, and she crossed the street, going out of her way to skirt the house.

She heard a bark, and looked up to see a dark shadow come flying across the street at her. She gasped in horror to see Rufus illuminated by the headlights of an oncoming car; the dog narrowly missed getting flattened.

“Oh, Rufus! What are you doing running loose?” she cried, crouching down to greet the happy dog. He wagged his whole body, whimpering like she was a long-lost friend he hadn’t seen in years. He lunged for her face, slathering her with sloppy dog kisses and knocking her over into a weedy patch.
“Hey! Get back here!” A man’s figure came racing up the dark driveway to retrieve the dog. When he saw Cal and Rufus on the ground he ran across the street to them, exclaiming, “Oh my God!”

He grabbed Rufus by the collar, roughly jerking him away from Cal. He looked like he was about to hit him, yelling, “Bad dog! No! Bad boy!”

“It’s okay! It’s okay!” she cried, scrambling to her feet. “He was only being friendly!”

He looked surprised, watching as she brushed herself off. She recognized Cal’s brother from the bus station. Another good looking ne’er-do-well, she thought.

“Are you all right?” he asked incredulously.

“I’m fine,” she said, picking burrs from her sweatshirt. “But Rufus nearly got run over!”

“How do you know my dog?” he asked suspiciously.

Rufus slipped out of his grasp and rushed back over to Cal, nuzzling her hand and whimpering.

“Calm down,” she told him, pointing to the ground. “Sit.” He plopped down at her feet, and when she bent to scratch him behind the ears he rolled over on his back submissively.

“He’s a good dog,” she said, “You should take better care of him.” She turned to go, walking off into the darkness.

Jarod returned to the ring of people sitting around a fire pit, dragging a dog struggling to go back the way they came from. He found the end of a nylon rope and tied it to Rufus’ collar.

“Man, that was weird.”

“Did Rufus put the hurt on someone?” one of his friends asked.

“No, there was this girl … She, like, totally had him … like … hypnotized or something.”

Everyone around the fire broke into laughter, thinking he was making a joke.

Cal’s head snapped up. “Was she blonde?”

“Yeah, like with a long braid,” Jarod replied, watching with surprise as his little brother bolted up, nearly knocking over a girl that was perched on his lap.

“Hey!” the girl cried indignantly, smoothing her hair as he raced off into the street.

Cal heard footsteps coming up behind her fast and she wheeled around, hand on her knife. Her eyes were wide with fear; she was relieved to see it was only Calvin trotting towards her.

“Where you headed?” he asked, breathing hard.

“Nowhere,” she replied.
“You shouldn’t be out here all alone. This isn’t the best neighborhood.”

“I’m fine,” she said.

She didn’t look fine to him. She looked vulnerable, fragile, and more alone than anyone he’d ever seen before. He had an irrational urge to take her into his arms and hold her close. He’d probably get stabbed if he tried, he thought.

“Listen. My brother got back today, and we’re having a party to celebrate.” He ran his hand through his shaggy hair. “Wanna come over and have a beer or something?”

“No thanks.” She shook her head, wondering why everyone kept offering her beer. She would have had a harder time turning down something to eat. “Goodbye.”

She turned away to walk briskly off into the dark, without looking back. Cal stood watching her go, her long braid swinging gently as she made her way down the deserted street. He had a sudden impulse to follow her, to stay by her side; to take her hand and make sure she got home okay.

Don’t be an idiot, he told himself. She doesn’t even like you.

He walked back to the party slowly, and spent the rest of the night worrying about her.
Chapter Five
RUFUS

It was frustrating. Cal kept finding himself scanning the crowds at school, looking for her, but he was unable to catch more than a glimpse as she rounded a corner. She was hard to spot, and there was no denying that she was going out of her way to elude him. He had so many unanswered questions, but she obviously didn’t want to talk to him. She was driving him crazy, and he didn’t know why.

Girls had always liked him, and he was used to getting his way with them. This one obviously didn’t want anything to do with him, and it was aggravating. He couldn’t understand why his charm didn’t work on her. He’d never been ignored like this before.

Everyone at school thought she was weird, and he knew that she was, but he also knew that she was weird in an entirely different way than his classmates suspected.

He couldn’t shake the image of her at the cemetery from his mind. Sometimes he went an entire day without sighting her, and he felt like a fool for being depressed about it. He figured out where her classes were, and found himself lurking around like some stupid girl, trying to come up with a reason to talk to her.

It must be the challenge, he thought.

Now that his brother was home, the party was back on, and there were always plenty of willing girls around to distract him. His older brother’s dealings with shady characters brought them lots of money all of a sudden, and crowds of friends to go along with it.

Jarod rode with a gang of bikers, and after what had happened at the cemetery, Cal did his best to stay out of their business. They all treated him like he was their kid brother, warning him about the dangers of drug use while constantly smoking pot around him. “Stay in school, man,” they’d say, “You don’t wanna end up like us.”

Somehow, he didn’t really think they meant it.
It didn’t matter anyway, he thought. He had it made: Jarod didn’t give a damn what he did, supplied him with all the money he needed, and never tried to boss him around like his dad used to. Sometimes he thought he should drop out to get a job and a place of his own, but he’d promised Jarod that he’d graduate, and the truth was, the craziness was starting to seem normal. He didn’t really have any plans that went further out than the next weekend.

One particularly rowdy Saturday night the police showed up, responding to a noise complaint. Jarod was drunk and belligerent, and he argued with the cops, ignoring his girlfriend when she tried to calm him down. He pushed her aside blindly, knocking her to the ground, and the cops decided to take him into custody for being drunk and disorderly. She stood wailing as he was handcuffed.

Cal came out of his room to see his brother bent over a police cruiser again, wondering how on earth he was going to post bail this time. Just when he thought it couldn’t get any worse, Rufus broke free and bit one of the cops on the leg. Cal managed to pull the dog back before they could shoot him, but it was too late. Animal control arrived on the scene, and before he knew it Rufus was strangling on the end of a catch pole, loaded into a kennel and whisked away to a certain death.

Everyone scattered, and the harsh light of morning found Cal alone, feeling completely helpless, out of control as usual. He made himself breakfast, put in a call to the bail bondsman, and collapsed on the couch, deflated.

There was nothing more depressing than a party house after the party was over.

~

On Monday, Cal went to school, but he didn’t go to his classes. He followed her, keeping his distance. He watched her pick up her lunch in the cafeteria, slipping some extra fruit into her bag when she thought no one was looking. She slunk around the corners like a spy, looking over her shoulder and making her way to the most remote spot in the school.

He peeked around the corner of a storage shed, watching in amazement as she took out her lunch and was immediately joined by a chattering pair of blue jays. They perched on her book bag, waiting patiently as she lined up some crumbs for them. The birds settled down to preen their feathers, completely relaxed around her.
She settled down too, getting a book out of her beat-up bag and leaning back against the wall. He watched her reading, noticing how she kept tucking stray curls back into her loose braid, trying unsuccessfully to keep her hair under control.

He knew it was crazy, but he wanted her to see him, to talk to him. He wanted to look into her eyes again, and see them looking back into his. He didn’t know what he wanted. She looked up with a start, and his heart sank.

When he stepped out from around the corner he fully expected her to take off like the two birds had just done. Instead, she looked him over, her brows knitting together with concern.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him. “What happened?”

When he looked into her eyes he saw complete understanding; there was no need to keep up the pretense of control. He wanted to cry, and it was shocking, because he hadn’t allowed himself to feel sad for a very, very, long time. He swallowed the lump in his throat.

“My brother’s in jail, and they’re gonna kill Rufus.”

She frowned. “Why would they punish Rufus?”

He came closer to her, leaning against the same wall she did. “He bit a cop.”

“But he’s a dog,” she said, indignant. “He doesn’t know the difference between right and wrong.”

He nodded, unable to take his eyes away from her face. “They have him at the pound. They’re holding him so they can test him for rabies before they do it.”

“How long does he have?” she asked.

“They’re gonna do it tomorrow.” He slid down the wall, still staring at her.

“You have to get him out of there tonight,” she said quietly.

He sighed with resignation. “I tried to break in last night, but when you get near the place the dogs all go nuts barking, and the security guard comes running.”

She looked down, biting her lip. He watched her profile, and he got the impression she was struggling with something. She finally looked back up, her eyes serious.

“I can help with that.”

Cal waited out front that night, full of nervous anticipation. He didn’t know whether he was more excited at the prospect of seeing her or about what they planned to do. He looked down the
street anxiously, afraid she might not show up. When he saw her slim figure approaching he actually felt his heart pounding.

He called out when she drew near, “Hey Cali.”

“Hello Calvin,” she replied.

“That’s not fair,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because I haven’t guessed your name yet.”

He could see the corner of her lips twitch up, and he realized that he’d never seen her smile.

“It’s not Rumplestiltskin,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Nothing.” She looked down, serious again. “Where is this place?”

“It’s on the other side of town,” he said. “We can take my bike.”

She stood her ground. “I’d rather walk.”

“It’s too far to walk,” he countered.

“You’d be surprised at how far I can walk,” she said, folding her arms across her chest.

He threw up his hands. “It’s gotta be ten miles!”

She didn’t move, and he started to question the wisdom of involving the strange girl.

“C’mon,” he said, walking over to where his bike was parked. “Look—I got a helmet and jacket for you to wear, and I promise I’ll be careful.” He held the gear out to her.

She tentatively edged closer, swallowing hard. The last time she’d been on a bike, it was with her dad. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she was glad it was too dark for him to see.

“For Rufus?” he added, cocking his head as charmingly as possible.

“What about you?” she asked, “Where’s your helmet?”

“Don’t worry about me; the skull is nature’s helmet.”

She almost smiled at his joke, pressing her lips together and taking the jacket. She slipped it on, noticing how it smelled like him. She reached for the helmet as he stood grinning at her.

“What?” she asked.

“It looks good on you,” he said, climbing on the bike and starting it up.

She took a deep breath in, exhaling slowly. “For Rufus,” she said, slipping on the helmet and climbing up behind him.

“Hold onto me,” he told her.
She took him by the waist gingerly, keeping some space between their bodies. She could feel his lean torso tense up under her hands, and for some reason it unnerved her. She closed her eyes and tried not to think about her parents’ accident.

True to his word, he was careful to go slowly, and within a few minutes they pulled up into a dark alley, parked the bike and walked out onto the sidewalk. The pound was across the street, and he showed her the fence they needed to scale. They waited in the shadows until the security guard was clearly visible in the office window.

“Wait a sec. You do know that this is illegal … right?” he asked.

Her mother had always said that legal and right were two different things. Besides, Cal had read Machiavelli. She rolled her colorful eyes at him. “Lead the way.”

He reached the fence first, turning around like he expected her to need help. She scrambled up faster than he could, climbing with effortless grace and jumping down to land as light as a feather. He went after her and hit the ground with a thud, sending a lone dog barking with alarm. They both froze, waiting a few minutes until the noise trailed off and stopped.

He took her hand in his, and with a redundant finger to his lips he led her around a corner to a door standing ajar. There was no need to lock this room, because it was lined with securely padlocked kennels housing the dogs deemed vicious. This was where the death-row inmates were caged, and the room was filled with battle-scarred pit bulls and mangy-looking mixes, with a few wild-eyed Rottweilers thrown in.

They were trapped, frightened, and ready to start barking on a hair trigger.

The room smelled awful, but far worse than the odor was the terrible despair that permeated the atmosphere. It was a place of great sorrow, and goose bumps rose on Cal’s arms. Her heart went out to the poor animals, and she walked in ahead of Calvin, sending a soothing blast of lavender pink out ahead of her. She moved down the row of kennels, and he watched in amazement as the dogs all lay down in her wake.

They rested their heads on their paws with audible sighs, a peaceful feeling washing over them that many hadn’t experienced since they were puppies. She reached the end of the walkway and turned back, her face wet with tears. Cal stood at the other end of the room with his mouth hanging open.
She dropped her face into her hands, drained. He rushed up to her, worried, and she raised her head, wiping her eyes with determination. “Find him,” she whispered. “I can’t look anymore.”

He nodded, speechless, peering into the rows of kennels and finally stopping at one. She joined him, waiting as he climbed over the wire to get inside the enclosure. Rufus sat up, wagging his tail, and Cal heaved him up and over the fencing to her. She caught him, staggering and falling to the cold cement floor with Rufus licking her face happily.

Cal jumped back over and helped her up. “Are you okay?” he whispered, brushing off her back awkwardly. Again, he wanted to give her a hug, but she was already turning away, sending the pathetic dogs one last blast of peace and drowsiness that she hoped would last them all night.

She hurried out of the building, climbing the fence numbly and waiting on the other side to catch Rufus. This time she managed to keep on her feet, waiting for Cal to jump down and take the squirming dog from her. He took Rufus under one arm, and grabbed her hand with the other, hustling the three of them into the alley and onto the waiting bike.

It was awkward, but they managed to climb on with a peacefully sedated Rufus sandwiched between them. She held the calm dog securely, holding firmly onto Cal this time. He liked the way her hands felt on him, and the hair on his scalp started tingling.

He pulled up to his dark house and parked. They got off the bike and stood while Rufus wandered the yard happily, sniffing the ground and lifting his leg to re-mark his favorite spots.

“That was a trip,” Calvin said.

She handed him back his helmet and jacket in silence, remembering the shocked look on his handsome face. “Please … Please don’t say anything. Please don’t tell anyone …”

“I won’t,” he said, and he meant it. He knew he had just witnessed something profound, and he wasn’t about to ruin it by telling Jarod or one of the silly girls at school. They watched Rufus silently for a while.

“I should put him in the house before someone sees him,” Cal said, looking at her hopefully. “Do you want to come in?”

She shook her head no, glancing back over her shoulder. “I should go.”

The motorcycle ride, combined with the chamber of horrors she’d just seen at the pound, had shaken her to her core. She wanted to curl up in bed and cry. It was late, and Phil was bound to be passed out by now, making it safe to go home.
The truth was, it was all too much, and she needed to be alone with her fresh grief. Calvin was disappointed; he hated going into the house when it was empty. “I’ll walk you,” he said, putting Rufus indoors and rushing to return to her side. They walked along the road, and he asked her where she had moved from. “I came to stay with my aunt,” was the most he could get out of her. “I have to find a place for Rufus before they come looking for him,” he said. “Will you help me move him?” 

“I’ll walk you,” he said, putting Rufus indoors and rushing to return to her side.

“Okay,” she nodded.

He took out his phone, noticing that he had tons of texts piled up from various girls. “Give me your number and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I don’t have a number,” she said.

“How do you call people?” he laughed.

“I don’t,” she replied.

“Why?” he asked, honestly curious about her.

“There’s no one to call,” she said.

He didn’t know what to say, realizing that she wasn’t joking. They got to the condo complex and she stopped, indicating he’d come far enough.

“I can check by your house on the way to school tomorrow,” she volunteered.

“Okay,” he nodded eagerly. He wanted to reach out and grab her, wrap his arms around her and kiss the sad look right off her face, but he was afraid of scaring her off for good. “Thanks,” he said awkwardly, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

He started to walk away, and she called after him, “Do you give up?”

“Give up what?” he asked.

“Trying to guess my name.”

“You got me,” he said.

“It’s Caledonia,” she told him, turning to walk away.

“Caledonia,” he said out loud, letting the word roll around on his tongue. He couldn’t stop smiling the whole way home.
The next morning he was waiting out front again, pacing back and forth. He couldn’t stop thinking about what she’d done–it had to be some kind of trick. She was just a dumb girl like any other, he kept telling himself, and not worth getting so worked up about.

He froze when he saw her willowy figure coming towards him, walking tall and holding herself lightly. When she wasn’t on guard she almost seemed to float, moving through space with natural ease and grace. His cocky attitude vaporized, replaced by nerves.

Rufus caught wind of her approach, and sat up with a whimper.

“Good morning,” she nodded.

Up close, her pretty face looked pale, her shoulders weighted down by her heavy book bag.

“Did you find a place to take him?”

“My Grandma said she could keep him for a while.”

“Oh!” She looked surprised. “You have a Grandma?”

He laughed, “Doesn’t everybody?”

He regretted saying it the instant it registered on her face. She stooped down to greet Rufus, embarrassed.

He cleared his throat. “Will you help me take him there? On the bike?”

“When?”

“How about right now? They probably already figured out he’s missing, and I bet they come looking here first.”

She looked worried, scanning up and down the street. Her eyes looked amazing in the bright morning light, and he tried not to stare. “What about school?” she asked.

“I thought we could skip it for today.”

“Can I leave my bag here?” she asked, without missing a beat.
They left the city and struck out on narrow back roads leading into the countryside. The row houses of suburbia gave way to farm fields and ranches, and Cal started to relax when she saw the familiar landscape. Rufus yawned and burrowed his face against Calvin’s back, perfectly content to be wedged between the two of them on the motorcycle.

They turned onto a gravel drive and finally pulled up in front of a tidy looking house and stopped. There was a small herd of sheep in a fenced pasture on one side, with a little grove of oak trees set in a meadow just beyond it. A pair of Golden Retrievers came running, barking out an alarm. Caledonia set Rufus down to meet them, and they stood watching the three dogs frolicking around like old friends. She looked up at Calvin with the tiniest hint of a smile.

The front door opened and a sturdy looking old woman stepped out on the porch. “Calvin!” she called, coming down the stairs to sweep him up into a warm embrace. “Well, just look at you! Have you grown some since Christmas? Are you getting enough to eat?”

“Yes, Grandma … and it’s Cal, all right?”

An old man came out on the porch behind her, looking doubtfully at Rufus and suspiciously at his grandson. “I hear your brother’s in trouble again,” he grumbled, radiating disapproval. “Takes after his father.”

“Thanks for taking Rufus,” Calvin said.

“Seems like he’ll do all right here,” his grandfather replied gruffly, looking at the three dogs playfully rolling around on a patch of grass alongside the driveway.

Caledonia stood off to the side awkwardly, watching the exchange with big eyes. The old woman smiled at her, asking her grandson, “Who’s your friend?”

“Grandma and Grandpa Costa, this is Caledonia,” Cal said, gesturing to her. “We go to school together.”

His grandfather nodded, but his grandmother came forward to peer closely at her, taking the nervous girl offered into both of hers warmly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Caledonia. My goodness! What a pretty name.”

“Thank you,” she replied shyly. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“She goes by Cal too,” Calvin added.

“That could get awfully confusing,” his grandmother laughed.

“You can call me Cali,” she said, trying to be helpful. She couldn’t help but notice Calvin’s broad grin.
Caledonia could see pink kindness and affection radiating from the older woman, and she watched in fascination. Both of the old people were unlike the teenagers she’d grown used to. Their feelings were modulated and controlled; they were just as powerful, but they seemed to transmit on a different frequency. She liked it.

Grandma Costa looked at Calvin. “You two look like you could use a good meal. Why don’t you show her around the ranch while I rustle up some lunch?”

Calvin was uneasy. “I don’t know. It’s a little early for lunch …”

“Not when you get up at a decent hour,” his grandfather crabbed.

Caledonia could see Calvin stiffen, and she wondered why there was animosity between them. He turned to address her. “Are you hungry?”

She looked at his grandmother watching them eagerly, and it was clear she wanted her grandson to stay and visit. Caledonia’s stomach was hollow and empty. If she missed her school lunch, she wouldn’t have anything to eat until Phil was asleep.

“Yes, please,” she said to his grandmother.

Grandma Costa hurried for the kitchen while Cali and Calvin went for a walk, following a fence for a while before stopping to lean against it and watch the sheep with their spring lambs. A lamb came trotting up to them and Cali squatted down, reaching her arm through the fence to feel its soft fleece.

She smiled up at him, and he thought she was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen.

“H-How do you do it?” he stammered. “How do you get animals to like you so much?”

She looked back down, not sure how to explain it or if she even should.

“Um, I just sort of figured out how to … I don’t know … help them to feel different.”

She got up and started walking, not wanting to go into further detail. Her parents had warned her not to tell anyone. For some reason she was afraid he wouldn’t like her because of it, and she felt like an idiot for caring what the idiot boy thought about her.

It was a beautiful sunny day and the meadow looked inviting, so she struck out for it, leaving him trailing along behind her. Her braid was starting to come loose, and she undid it, walking across the grass to sit under one of the oak trees. She leaned back against the trunk, combing the mass of curls with her fingers.
He sat down beside her, mesmerized. He’d never seen a girl so completely unaffected. Soft curls framed a face that had never been plucked or painted; she was as natural and fresh as the meadow they sat in. It occurred to him that she didn’t even know she was beautiful.

She caught him staring, and his dark eyes made her stomach shake a little inside. A blush spread up her neck, turning her cheeks a pretty pink color. When she looked down, her thick lashes shielded her eyes like a golden fan.

He swallowed hard. He wondered what it would be like to touch her, to kiss her smooth cheeks and pillowy lips, to put his hands in her soft hair. He wanted to feel the raised scars that ran down her slender arm.

“What happened to your arm?” he blurted out, unable to contain his curiosity.

“It was a cat,” she said casually.

“Must have been a pretty big cat!” he scoffed.

“It was a catamount.”

“A what?”

“A cougar … puma, mountain lion, panther.” She rattled off the names like she wasn’t sure which one he would know. “It jumped on me, caught me by surprise. It dragged me twenty yards before I could kill it.”

“Oh, come on,” he said with a sarcastic laugh. “You killed a mountain lion?” He remembered the sheer size and power of one he’d seen at the zoo once. “How did you manage that?”

She turned to glare at him. “With a jackknife.”

He was shocked, because from the look in her eyes, he somehow knew she was telling the truth. “You killed a mountain lion with a jackknife?”

“Well, it tried to kill me first!” she huffed, misunderstanding his horrified look. She got up and walked off, flustered. She didn’t like thinking about that day, and she really didn’t like being teased about it.

He caught up quickly, walking alongside her. “How old were you when it happened?”

She stopped to look him in the eye, defying him to laugh at her again. “Twelve.”

“What did your parents do?”

“They got me a bigger knife.”
She turned to stalk off again, finally settling down under the biggest tree in the meadow. She took in the view hungrily, admiring the poppy-strewn grass surrounded by trees and wooded hills; she wished she never had to go back to the city. He trailed behind her again, cautiously sitting down next to her. She was like a butterfly that had landed on his sleeve by accident; he got the feeling that one false move would send her flying off, never to be seen again.

“I loved coming out here when I was a kid,” he said. “My brother and I used to catch snakes and scare Grandma with them, and slide down that hill on cardboard boxes.”

She smiled, and he went on, encouraged.

“There’s a creek that runs right back there, it flows down to the river.” He pointed out the landmarks out to her, trying to keep her attention. “We used to get pollywogs and bring them up to that old horse trough. We’d come back later to see them turned into frogs.”

She listened, and he made her relax telling stories he recalled about his childhood visits to the ranch. It felt good, so he kept going, dredging up tales of the trouble that he and his brother used to get into when they visited. He was surprised at the images that came flooding back into his mind, memories he hadn’t visited for a long time.

Caledonia finally closed her eyes with a sigh, turning her face into the warm sun. “You’re so lucky to have grandparents.”

“My mom grew up here, right in that house,” he said, not sure why he brought her up. He usually tried to avoid thinking about her if he could.

“What happened to her … your mom?” she asked him innocently.

“She died in a car accident,” he said bitterly, and his color grew dark blue and red, sad and angry all at the same time. She felt bad for asking, her heart flooding with turquoise sympathy.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and when he looked into her eyes he felt better.

“Why did you come to live with your aunt?” he asked her.

She looked down, and then back up at him. The naked pain in her eyes took his breath away.

“My parents died in an accident, too.”

What she said next blew him away.

“They were on a motorcycle.”

“When?” he asked, shocked.

“Twenty-one days ago.”
She got up briskly, and started walking around the base of the tree while he just sat there, stunned. No wonder she had a problem getting on his bike, he thought, realizing what guts it took for her to help Rufus. He vowed to be extra careful from that moment on.

She meandered along under the oak, and he noticed that she was casting her eyes over the ground, hunting for something. She suddenly fell to her knees, picking up a twig and digging around until she extracted what looked like a gnarled little black potato, brushing it off carefully.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Oregon black truffle,” she answered, slipping it into her pocket.

“What’s it for?”

“People cook with it.”

She was as weird as she was brave, he thought.

Just then a bell started ringing and Calvin smiled at her. “C’mon, soup’s on.”

He showed her where to go and wash up, and she tried to straighten up her careless mop of hair in the mirror. They all sat down at a square wooden table with an enormous platter of fried chicken and biscuits in the middle. The smell almost made her faint from hunger.

His grandmother insisted that they all hold hands as his grandfather said a brief prayer of thanks, and then started dishing up the food.

Grandpa Costa stared at the tattoo that peeked out from under the sleeve of his grandson’s T-shirt. “Calvin, what the hell have you done to your arm?”

“It’s Cal, all right? Me and Jarod went and got some tattoos,” he said, adding, “For Mom.”

His grandfather cleared his throat and didn’t say anything else.

The old woman couldn’t seem to take her eyes away from Caledonia. “Well, look at you with all that curly hair! Aren’t you just as pretty as a speckled pup. … And those eyes! I had a cat with two different color eyes once. Smartest cat I ever saw.”

“She’s a lot smarter than I am,” Calvin said with a smile while Caledonia sat squirming with embarrassment. Once her plate was full, the food demanded her full attention.

She hadn’t eaten since the day before at school, and she dug in, emptying her plate before anyone else did. Cal’s grandmother noticed, wordlessly serving her a second helping. When Caledonia finally looked up from eating they were all staring at her, and again, she flushed a bright pink from her neck up to her cheeks.

“I like a gal that can eat!” Cal’s grandfather said, nodding his approval.
They all laughed, and Caledonia timidly asked if they knew they had truffles growing in their meadow, showing them the one she’d found. She asked if she could harvest them, offering to split the proceeds if she could sell them.

“Honey, they’re all yours,” Grandma Costa said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“But I can sell them for a lot of money,” she protested.

“Take all you want, sweetheart,” Grandpa Costa said with a wink.

“Okay … Thanks,” she said meekly. “Do you have a paper bag I can put them in?”

She spent the afternoon single-mindedly hunting under the oak trees while Calvin threw a stick for the dogs. The retrievers competed to get to it first, while Rufus just circled, barking with excitement. The dog looked happier than Cal had ever seen him, and it was hard to imagine that just a day ago he was doomed to a certain death.

Caledonia had changed everything.

He thought she was crazy, but he stood back and watched her work, admiring her swift grace and limber body. He liked the way she smiled up at him when she found a cache of the golf ball sized knobs.

“These are really good ones,” she said.

The sun was low in the sky when she finished. They said their goodbyes to his grandparents and Rufus, and Calvin watched as she bound her hair into a braid for the ride.

“Can you take me to the fanciest restaurant in town?” she asked him.

“Are you still hungry?” he asked with surprise.

She laughed at him, holding up the paper sack she’d filled with the ugly brown knobs. “Not to eat! I want to sell these.”

“No one’s gonna want to buy those dirt clods,” he said.

“Oh, I beg to differ.” She slipped on the bike behind him. “Humor me,” she spoke into his ear.

Wrapped up in his thick coat, with a full belly for the first time in weeks, she was comfortably drowsy. She leaned against his warm back, her arms wrapped around him. He didn’t go too fast, and she wasn’t even afraid.

Without the dog between them he could feel her body up against his, and when she rested her chin between his shoulder blades it sent a shiver down his spine. He drove her to the nicest
area he knew, a little downtown section with elaborate wrought iron benches and trees strung with lights that sparkled in the dusky twilight.

A well-dressed couple walked hand in hand into the restaurant, and a uniformed valet parked an expensive sports car. Another pricey car was waiting in line, and a woman wearing spike heels and a fur coat stood out front making a phone call.

He pulled up across the street. “Are you sure you wanna go in there?”

“Go around to the back.” Her soft voice tickled his ear.

He wheeled past the dumpsters, coming to a stop where a dishwasher in a dirty white apron was smoking a cigarette. She got off the bike and handed Cal the helmet.

“I’ll just be a minute.”

He was worried, watching her heading out on a fool’s errand.

She approached the man, pulling the paper bag out of her coat.

“Excuse me, can you get me the chef de cuisine? El cocinero?”

He looked startled, and ducked into the kitchen. A formidable looking man came out a minute later, and she stepped up to him boldly.

“Good evening, chef, I was wondering if I could interest you in some fresh black truffles. I just dug them today.”

She opened up the paper bag and handed him one. Calvin watched in amazement as the man inspected the ugly little lump and sniffed, his eyes widening with delight. He ducked his head back in the door and called out something in French.

Another man came outside, taking a paring knife and slicing a thin shaving from the truffle, inhaling deeply. “Tres bien. Sublime.”

She handed the first man the bag and he inspected the contents, pulling each one out and scrutinizing it like it was a jewel. Calvin couldn’t believe what he was seeing. The two spoke amongst themselves in French, finally offering her fifty dollars.

She could see they glowed violet with interest. She shrugged, shook her head no, and turned to go. The men spoke rapid French again, calling out, “One hundred dollars!”

She stopped in her tracks, flashing Calvin an I-told-you-so smile. “One fifty.”

They hurriedly agreed, and the second man went inside, coming back with a fistful of cash that he counted out into her hand. She folded the money and pocketed it, offering back her hand for a polite shake. Instead, the man took her by the wrist and kissed it, smiling seductively at her.
“It’s a pleasure doing business with such a rare beauty.”

She looked alarmed, pulling her hand back and nodding her thanks.

Watching them from the bike, Calvin felt his amazement turn to irritation. His first impulse was to run over and deck the flirtatious Frenchman, and he was surprised at himself. He felt better when she came back to the bike.

“Unbelievable,” he laughed, shaking his head.

“Do you think it’s enough for a bus ticket to Eureka?”

“I don’t know. Why?” he asked.

“Because I have to get out of this place,” she said desperately.

She put the helmet on and climbed onto the bike, holding onto him a little tighter on the ride back to his house.

They pulled up to see a row of motorcycles parked in front. The high pitched sound of a girl’s laughter cut through the loud music, and the air was filled with the pungent scent of pot smoke.

“Looks like Jarod made bail,” Calvin said, surprised at how disappointed he was. He had been looking forward to spending more time alone with her. “He’ll be happy to hear we saved Rufus. Why don’t you come in and meet him?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, hanging back nervously. “Can I please have my book bag?”

“Sure,” he said, disappointed. When he walked to the house to get it, painted faces smiled up at him from around a keg of beer. His brother jumped up to give him a drunken hug. Jarod’s girlfriend waved him over. “Hey Cal, come and meet my friend Candy!”

“She’s hot, huh?” Jarod asked, pointing out the girl bending over in a short skirt, pumping the keg up. He didn’t even ask about Rufus.

“I gotta go do something,” Cal told him, brushing past the party to the house.

He brought Caledonia her bag, and insisted on dropping her off at home. He watched as she made her way down the path to her aunt’s door, feeling defeated without really knowing why. Maybe a few drinks would make him feel better.

He had to get out of this place too.
Caledonia opened the door to her aunt’s house, slipping in and closing it quietly behind her. She started up the stairs in the dark, startled when the lights suddenly flipped on. Phil was waiting on the landing, towering over her with a grin on his red face.

“You’re not so innocent after all, are you Cal?”
“I knew it,” Phil said smugly.
She tried to brush past him to get to her room, but he moved to block her. He was drunk, confrontational, and pulsing with an ugly brownish red. It was a dangerous combination.

“Where’s Aunt Angie?” Cal asked, backing up.

He advanced on her, a stinking cloud of sour frustration. “You little tramp! Now I know what you’ve been up to when you sneak out of here at night. I saw you with that punk.”

“Did Angie get home yet?” she asked, her voice higher pitched with fear. He took a step closer, backing her to the door.

He leered at her. “Do you put out for all the boys, or just those bikers down the street?”

She spun around and darted back out the front door.

Cal ran down the walkway and out into the dark street. She never wanted to go back into that house ever again. Her mind was racing, wondering how far away she could get with her money. She thought about the scary man at the bus station, remembering that the world was a dangerous place, full of predators. She set out down the street, not sure where she should go.

She didn’t even have her knife for company.

Cal was scared and cold, thinking that she probably should have taken her chances with Calvin and his brother. She headed back towards his house hesitantly, trying to work up her courage. Maybe he’d know what to do. Maybe if she gave him all of her money he would give her a ride back home on his motorcycle, and she could hide in her parents’ little cabin without anyone knowing.

She was suddenly afraid that she could never find her way back to the remote place, panicking when she tried to remember the long, grief-filled ride to the sheriff’s house. Her memories were slipping away, and life back home was already starting to seem like something
that happened a long time ago. She struggled to remember her parents’ faces, scared she would lose the last trace that remained of them.

She closed in on Cal’s house to find that the party had gotten even louder. Slowing her pace, she crept past the motorcycles to peek in nervously from the shadows. A group of about ten people stood around a fire pit, laughing, drinking and smoking. All of the women had on skimpy outfits, their low-cut tops revealing a lot of cleavage despite the nighttime chill that was settling in.

She scanned the crowd anxiously, spotting Cal’s shaggy head with a little gasp of relief. He was sitting in a plastic chair by the fire, draining a bottle of something. He looked up and smiled his crooked smile, and her heart leapt into her throat.

A girl in a short skirt approached him, returning his smile and waving two more bottles in her hands. She handed him one and he tossed the empty over his shoulder with determination before reaching out for it. She flipped her straight blonde hair over her shoulder, and plunked down on his lap casually, playing with his hair while he drank from the second bottle, his other hand on her thigh.

Cali’s face burned with a sudden flash of heat. She backed up, turned around and fled as fast as she could. She was stupid, she thought, going to him for help. She walked off into the dark night, looking over her shoulder anxiously, realizing that she was completely, utterly, on her own.

~

Calvin got to school the next morning with a pounding headache, wondering why he even bothered. He was a senior, and had been pretty much phoning it in for the last few weeks before graduation. His grades had slipped, along with any real plans for life after high school. All around him his classmates were fired up about college applications and prom dates, but ever since the accident, none of that stuff seemed important at all.

Seeing his grandparents had brought back a flood of memories, and he was feeling more melancholy than usual. There was only one reason he even showed up today. The truth was, the only reason he even got out of bed was to see her.

He looked for Caledonia in the halls around her classes, but she was missing. He searched the hidden spots behind the buildings to no avail, waiting out front after school with a heavy
heart. He couldn’t reach her by phone, and he thought about going to the condo and knocking on the door. He didn’t know what he’d say after that.

He just wanted to see her, that’s all.

Angry with himself, he couldn’t understand why she had to be so difficult. He knew at least four or five girls he could call that would come running, happy to hook up with him at a moment’s notice. The last thing he needed was some girl that was always hiding away; he could get plenty of action without all of the head games. She was too much work.

But try as he might, he couldn’t stop thinking about her, and the images that flashed through his mind–wildly different images–were difficult to reconcile. The fierce, knife-wielding girl at the cemetery, her devastated, tear-streaked face at the pound … and his favorite, the radiant girl that smiled up at him as she petted a lamb. How could she be all of them?

She wasn’t like anyone he’d ever met, and just thinking about what to say to her made him nervous. He decided that he should drop it; he would forget all about her and move on. Deep down inside, he had to admit that he doubted he could.

~

Caledonia had also dragged herself to school that morning. She’d spent a cold night curled up in the brush next to the graveyard, getting up at dawn to pick the leaves out of her braid. She tried her best to make herself presentable until she could get to the school bathroom and splash some water on her face.

It took some doing to dodge Calvin that day; he seemed to be everywhere she had to be, and he nearly made her miss getting a school lunch. She couldn’t afford to miss her lunch. She used every trick she knew to blend in, hide out and evade him. She wondered why he even bothered hunting her.

He may not have seen her, but she saw plenty of him. Leaning up against a bank of lockers with a bored look on his face, he was as handsome as the first time he’d caught her eye at the bus station. A girl came over and draped herself onto him, and Cali felt a little surge of annoyance. She hated that it bothered her, swearing to herself she’d never be like one of those girls.

All of her romantic notions came from books, and the casual way he went from girl to girl disgusted her. Calvin was no gentleman like Mister Darcy, and he could never be as loyal or passionate as Heathcliff. The more she thought about it, the more she realized that she must protect her heart from him. She didn’t want what he had to offer.
She had to wait a long time after school for Calvin to leave. When she finally made her way down the street to her aunt’s, it was late afternoon and she was feeling drained. She stepped inside the house with trepidation, wanting only to take a shower and get some fresh clothes. Her aunt heard the door and appeared from around the corner, wiping her hands on a dishtowel.

“Cal, can you come into the kitchen? We need to talk.”

She followed her aunt in and stopped short when she saw Phil sitting at the kitchen table. He glowered at her, his eyes sending a warning.

“Phil tells me that you’ve been running around with those trashy bikers while I’ve been at work. He says you got dropped off here last night on a motorcycle.”

Cal was stunned at her accusatory tone. “I haven’t done anything wrong. I just got a ride from a friend.”

Her aunt looked at her sadly. “You should be happy that Phil cares enough about your well-being to let me know what’s going on. Cal–I know you’re naive, but those people are trouble. I thought I warned you to stay away from them!”

“But–”

“Listen, you’ll be eighteen soon, and then you can move out and do whatever you please. I just want you to know I won’t tolerate any foolishness under my roof. If you’re smart, you’ll stay far away from those losers.”

“But–”

She shook her head with a patronizing smile. “Don’t look so upset. We wouldn’t say anything if we didn’t care.”

Cal’s wounded eyes met Phil’s gloating ones over Angie’s shoulder, and she felt like throwing up.

She climbed the stairs numbly, exhausted and defeated.

Caledonia resumed her pattern, dodging Phil at night and napping in the afternoons before an increasingly harried Angie left to work her double shifts. One day she woke up to find Phil standing over her bed, watching her sleep with hungry eyes. She jumped up with a cry, running to tell her aunt.

To her dismay, Angie believed Phil’s story about needing to get something from one of the boxes of his things that remained untouched in her room.
“Don’t be so selfish,” she had scolded Cal. “You should be grateful that Phil was nice enough to give up his office for you! And don’t you think it’s kind of lazy for you to lay around sleeping all day?”

Cal nodded sadly; there was no point in arguing because her Aunt Angie had no desire to believe her. Caledonia knew by Phil’s color what he’d had in mind, but unfortunately, she had no proof. Instead of waiting around for something bad to happen, she continued to avoid the house as much as possible.

Her life became even harder now that she had someone to dodge at school too, but it pained her to see Calvin, and she was so stubborn about avoiding him that she even missed getting her lunch a couple of times. Constantly ravenous, she started wasting away, growing thinner and thinner.

Wandering the streets at night like a ghost, she stumbled upon a little convenience store that was open all night, shocked by all the different things she saw inside it. She was forced to spend some of her precious dollars on food, taking it with her to the little clearing that she rested in at night. She stayed quiet as a mouse, fearful of attracting the frightening vagrants that sometimes shuffled by her hiding spot in the middle of the night, muttering to themselves.

She was back to only being able to read in the daytime, curling up in the quiet recesses of the school library, usually falling asleep out of sheer exhaustion. By the end of the week, she was coming to the end of her rope.

On Friday, Calvin finally caught up with her at school, cornering her in the cafeteria. He sidled up to her in line, getting right next to her before he announced his presence.

“Hey,” he said casually.

Her head snapped up to see him, and she froze, poised to run like some wild thing. When their eyes locked, the two of them stood rooted to the spot, staring at each other. The world all around them faded into the background as he scrutinized her with deep blue concern.

“Where have you been?” he asked her.

“Nowhere,” she replied, her voice barely a whisper.

She recovered, taking her food and leaving the building with him hot on her heels. She walked fast, going to the farthest bench to sit down and take out a book. His shadow fell across her.

“Are you avoiding me?”
She looked up at him. “What do you want from me?”

He was startled by her directness. She was nothing like the coy, flirtatious girls he was used to. She unnerved him, and he found himself groping for words.

“Hey Cal! Where have you been hiding?” They both looked up to see a pair of girls approaching. One of them hooked her arm around Calvin’s in a territorial display. Caledonia recognized the girl he had been kissing.

“Who’s she?” the girl asked, following his eyes.

“Hillary, Debbie, this is Caledonia.” He said her name slowly, enunciating each syllable.

“That’s a weird name,” the girl clinging to him laughed shrilly.

“It means Scotland,” Cal said, making Caledonia’s eyes narrow up at him suspiciously.

“Oh my Gawd!” Hillary squealed, “What is wrong with your eyes? That is so freaky!”

Caledonia looked at Hillary coldly. “It’s called heterochromia iridium. That means they’re two different colors.”

Hillary laughed again. “Like, duh–I can see that! What, are you some kind of science geek or something?”

She looked down at her lap. “I read it in Grey’s Anatomy.”

Now Hillary really laughed at her, scoffing, “Oh really? You can read a TV show?” The other girl joined in, and Caledonia was confused.

“It was a book first, stupid,” Calvin said, pulling his arm back from Hillary.

Caledonia snapped her book shut and got up to leave without saying a word. Calvin stood watching her hurry away around the corner, too proud to chase after her.

“A bunch of us are going to the fair this weekend. Wanna go?” asked Debbie.

“I don’t know,” he said, finally stalking off to look around the corner and see that Caledonia had already disappeared into the crowd.

She’d slipped away again, like sand running through his fingers.

~

Calvin found himself growing increasingly dissatisfied and depressed, thinking it must be the upcoming graduation that had him in such a funk. The never-ending party atmosphere at home was wearing thin, and he started spending more time holed up in his room, playing computer games and drawing more than he had since his mother’s accident.
After another wild party on Friday, he spent most of Saturday in bed, nursing a hangover. He finally left the house that night, going out by himself to get some food. His heart leapt into his throat when he spotted Cali’s lonely figure walking along the dusky street, going in the opposite direction of her house.

He pulled up on his bike. “Where you headed?”

She looked down at her worn out shoes. “For a walk.”

“Alone? At night?”

She looked at him like he was the stupidest person she’d ever seen. “Why do you care?”

He rolled his eyes at her, but he was ticking off the reasons in his head. Because I can’t stop wondering about you. Because I never felt this way before. Because I think that maybe …

“Do you want to go for a ride somewhere?” he asked her.

“Where?”

“I don’t know.” He thought about what she’d said. “To get away from this place.”

She looked at the dark woods beyond the cemetery and back at him. She knew he wouldn’t harm her, but she didn’t want to trust him. He was annoyingly persistent, but she had to admit to herself that she wanted to go with him. He was back to his glowing golden color, only now it was ringed with a shade of hopeful pink.

No, he wasn’t scary … and a bike ride somewhere new was a whole lot more appealing than the prospect of another cold evening spent alone in the trees. He could see her struggle with something, and for a second he thought she was going to burst into tears. She took a deep breath and climbed on the back of his bike, tucking her bag between their bodies.

They rode off into the night, leaving the neighborhood far behind. After a while, she rested her cheek against his back, and he shivered a little at the contact. He had imagined the way her touch felt all week, and her hands were on him now, making him feel strangely protective. He drove like he was carrying precious cargo.

He climbed to the top of the highest hill in town, pulling up at a spot with a view of the entire city, laid out like a sparkling carpet of lights. She’d never seen anything like it, and she climbed off the bike to drink in the view, completely entranced.

“Wow,” she whispered reverently, “Look at how many people there are with electricity.”

He chuckled by her side. “Who doesn’t have electricity?”

“I didn’t … until I came to live here,” she said, back to being defensive.
“Really?” He looked at her incredulously.
She turned away, walking off a few yards for a different vantage point.
He followed her, standing by her side to watch her face in the dim light. “What’s that?” she pointed.
“The fairgrounds,” he said, “and the race track.”
“No,” she pointed, “That round thing.”
“That’s a Ferris wheel.”
“You mean … you mean it’s one of those carnival rides? Seriously? Are there people on it?”
“Yeah, the fair’s going on this weekend.”
She was fascinated, musing, “There are people on that right now. Do you think they’re scared?”
“I don’t know,” he said, trying to remember the last time he was on one. “Probably not.”
She took a deep breath, looking all around. “It looks like the stars at night. It’s prettier from far away than it is up close.”
“Wait till you see the city,” he said softly, imagining her surprise.
“What city?”
“San Francisco.”
She turned to him, her eyes shining in the moonlight. “Have you ever been to the art museum there?”
“Which one?”
“There’s more than one? Really?”
“Really.”
She sighed, thinking that those places were so far out of reach. “My parents went to museums. Someday, I’d like to go see them too.”
He watched her closely. “I could take you sometime … If you want.”
She looked over at him in shock, and he could see that she didn’t even think it was a possibility. Her reactions to everything he said were so strange, he didn’t quite know what to make of her. Half the time he thought that she was joking around.
She looked thinner to him, her skin translucent. Her delicate beauty seemed to be growing even more fragile by the day. He finally made her an offer she couldn’t refuse.
“Do you want to go get something to eat?”
He took her to the newest burger chain in town, watching her amazing eyes dart around, taking in all the details. She asked him to order for her, and then watched him do it like he was giving a speech. She followed him to a booth, sliding in and inspecting everything on the table.

She poked at the napkin dispenser and picked up a laminated advertisement to read with her brows knit together. She squeezed the catsup in the little packets from side to side.

“Have you ever tried this place before?” he asked.

“I’ve never been to a restaurant before,” she said lightly, like it wasn’t the weirdest thing in the world to say. She was constantly saying the last thing he ever expected to hear.

He looked at her in amazement, wishing that he’d taken her someplace nicer.

“So … why didn’t you have electricity?” he asked.

“We were too far away.”

“Away from what?”

“From everything.”

“So you had no TV?” he asked.

“I had books.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“I didn’t,” she said defensively, getting uncomfortable. All of a sudden she clammed up, folding her arms across her chest. She felt like he was interrogating her, and she remembered her parents’ warnings. She shouldn’t trust anyone, they’d said, and she should keep her abilities to herself. He’d already seen too much of what she could do.

She met his curious eyes. “How did you know what Caledonia means?”

He looked sheepish, smiling. “I Googled you.”

She looked confused. “You what-ed me?”
“I searched you on the net.” She looked even more baffled, and he realized that she really did grow up without electricity. “You know, on a computer.”

“Oh … computers. I don’t know how to use them.”

“It’s not that hard, and you can find out anything you want to know.”

Her eyes flew open wide. “And you found me?”

“Not you, just the meaning of your name.”

She looked down. “The school computer said that there were no records, and they didn’t want to enroll me. It took a long time to get an identification card. My aunt got really mad.”

“They’re a bunch of morons,” he scoffed. “There are records of everyone. They must not have looked in the right place.”

She was quiet for a minute, and she looked up at him with the biggest, clearest, most beautiful eyes he’d ever seen. “Could you show me how to search in the nets?”

“Sure,” he smiled. “What for?”

“I want to see if my parents had any records.”

“Okay,” he nodded. “We can do it after we eat.”

When their number was called he got up, returning with a tray of food. He watched her scarf down her burger and fries like she hadn’t eaten in a week. He was starting to suspect that her aunt didn’t do a very good job of feeding her. She leaned back in the seat with a groan.

“Are you full?”

“Completely … I think I ate too much,” she moaned.

He nodded his agreement. “This food is kind of a gut bomb.”

She giggled at the imagery like he’d just said the funniest thing in the world. He joined in, and they both started laughing. He was suddenly feeling really happy, and he wished he could make her laugh all the time.

They climbed back on his bike in the crisp night air, and again, he was acutely aware of her hands on him the whole ride home. He pulled up at the house, relieved to see the place was quiet this time.

“This way,” he said with a toss of his head, directing her to the front door. She followed him in warily, afraid of what she might find inside. She knew from Angie’s house that evil could be lurking inside, hiding right behind kindness.
The outside of the house was neglected and rundown, and the inside wasn’t any better. The walls were bare, the furniture sparse. Caledonia peeked in from the entryway to see a sunken living room that opened up to a dining area housing an octagonal table covered with plastic poker chips. The carpet was stained and there were empty bottles and cans piled up on the kitchen counter.

Cal’s brother and his girlfriend were lounging on a couch that was patched with duct tape, watching a huge television that was mounted on the wall. It was the one new-looking thing in the whole place. They both looked up expectantly.

“Hey, Cal.”

“Caledonia, this is Jarod and Crystal”

Jarod squinted at her, “Hey–I know you! You’re that dog whisperer chick!”

“She’s the one that helped me break Rufus out of the pound,” Cal said.

Jarod got up, advancing on her. She held out her hand, but he swept her up into an enthusiastic embrace, clapping her on the back.

“Thanks, man! You saved his life! If there’s anything I can ever do for you, just say the word!”

She stood stiffly, not at all sure if she liked him. “You’re welcome.”

He pulled back, taking a closer look at her. “Whoa! Your eyes are freakin’ awesome! What was your name again?”

“You can call me Cal.”

“Cal and Cal?” he asked, looking at his brother with a grin.

“Cal and Cal,” Crystal repeated from the couch. She squealed, “How cute is that?”

“I call her Cali,” Calvin said, rolling his eyes.

Calvin waved for Caledonia to follow him down the hall to his room, flipping on the light and directing her to have a seat on his unmade bed. She could see he was nervous, and she was too, standing awkwardly and looking around at the things that he surrounded himself with.

The closet stood open, clothes spilling out of it onto the floor, and a messy bookshelf lined the wall opposite the door. She saw more books than she expected, scanning the spines and recognizing a few of the titles. The walls were covered with nicely done pencil drawings of cars and motorcycles, tacked up in between posters of girls in bikinis rolling on sandy tropical beaches.
Calvin picked up a laptop computer from a bedside table and smoothed the blanket before sitting down and flipping it open.

“So what are your parents’ names?” he asked her.

“Mackenzie,” she said, “Jenny—um, Jennifer and David.” He started typing on the keyboard, and she sat down tentatively, leaning over to see the screen.

“Check it out!” he exclaimed, “There’s a ton of stuff here!”

She moved a tiny bit closer to see the image on the page he clicked open.

The first thing she saw was a picture of her parents that looked like it had been taken on their wedding day. Her mother’s big brown eyes were happier than she’d ever seen them, and her father looked so young and hopeful. A flood of emotion overwhelmed her, and she let out an involuntary sob.

He turned to look at her. He didn’t even have to ask if it was them.

Tears spilled out of her big eyes, streaming down her face to splash down on her lap, leaving dark spots on her faded jeans. She willed herself to stop crying, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. He could see her shoulders shaking from the force of her suppressed emotion.

“I’m sorry,” he said, wanting to take her into his arms, but afraid that he might drive her away. He reached over and patted her back gingerly.

She struggled to regain control, gulping, “I—I don’t have any pictures of them. I thought I’d never see them again. I was afraid that I’d forget how they looked.”

“I know,” he said. He understood, because he was afraid of exactly the same thing. He’d been fighting to hold onto an increasingly hazy image of his own mother. Caledonia took a deep breath, composed herself and scooted right up next to him. She leaned in for a better look. “What does it say about them?”

Her hair was coming loose, and she flipped it back over her shoulder, brushing it lightly across his face. She smelled clean, like soap and fresh air, without any of the cloying perfume that the girls at school were usually drenched in. He took a deep breath in through his nose, turning to focus on the computer screen.

The picture was from an old newspaper article about the mystery of her parents’ sudden disappearance, and the more they read, the more mysterious it got. The article described recently married graduate students with a bright future; it detailed two lives full of promise, abruptly
abandoned. They had disappeared into thin air, all of their material possessions and identification left behind. Foul play was suspected.

Neither one of them had any relatives to interview, but their landlord described them as “a nice quiet couple who always paid their rent on time” and “reliable.” A professor from the university had posted a huge reward for information on their whereabouts, sending out a heartfelt plea for their recovery. Professor Theodore Reed was quoted as saying, “Those kids were just like family to me. I even walked Jenny down the aisle.”

“Whoa,” Calvin said, clicking onto a few missing person reports. The more they read, the weirder and weirder the details became.

Her mother’s name appeared in a listing of MacArthur genius grants, her field of study listed as advanced neuroscience. They learned that both of Caledonia’s parents were brilliant graduate students, working on cutting-edge research in the field of neurosurgery and molecular neurobiology. They had been specifically recruited to come and work for Professor Reed on something called “Project Athena.”

“They were like, brain surgeons,” Calvin said.

“I only knew that they met in school,” Caledonia said, looking up at him with sad eyes.

There was a press release from the university announcing Project Athena, featuring a group photo in the laboratory. Her parents stood flanking the professor, surrounded by six other graduate students that were touted as the best in their respective fields. They all wore white lab coats and broad smiles.

It was too much to take in all at once, and Caledonia’s shoulders slumped with exhaustion. She fell backwards on the bed, her eyes squeezed shut tight.

He closed the computer and fell back too, propping up on one elbow and looking over at her. “I don’t understand,” Calvin said, “Didn’t they ever talk about any of this stuff?”

“No,” she shook her head. “They were always afraid whenever they thought about it.”

“About what?”

“About the past. About being found. They thought that someone might be coming for us.”

“Why?”

“They told me that if I ever saw a stranger I should hide, because they might try and take me away.”

His eyes flew open. “Is it because of what you can do with animals?”
“I don’t know,” she replied, wondering if she should tell him she was learning to do it with people too. She was suddenly afraid that he might not want to be her friend if he knew. Nobody would ever want to be around her because of it. It was a frightening thought.

He saw the look of fear flicker across her face, and it made his heart ache.

“Who did they think was after you?”

“They never said. Something awful happened that they never wanted to talk about. They had these terrible—”

She checked herself, remembering her parents’ constant warnings to be careful, to never tell anyone who she was, to never show anyone what she was capable of. And here she was, breaking all the rules, spilling her guts like an idiot.

“Terrible what?” he asked.

She turned her head to see his dark eyes watching her intensely, thinking how much she wanted to tell him everything. He was thinking that her hair looked so soft that he wanted to reach out and touch it. He reached down and took hold of her hand instead. She didn’t pull it away.

“I was ten years old before I met anyone aside from my parents,” she confessed.

“So … you spent your whole life hiding,” he said softly. “No wonder you’re so good at it.”

She relaxed and started to talk, answering some general questions about her childhood spent in the woods. She eventually told him about her parents’ horrific flashbacks and how they helped each other through their terrifying seizures. She confessed that she suspected it might have been what caused the motorcycle accident.

She told him about the day of the accident, and how the sheriff refused to let her stay all alone in the remote cabin. Calvin could hardly believe that she had lived in such a primitive way, but Caledonia protested, trying to explain what a happy, safe childhood she’d had.

“I never felt like I was missing anything. I wish I was back there right now.”

“What about your aunt?” he asked. “Don’t you like her?”

Her eyes clouded over. “She’s all right, I suppose.”

“Why are you always walking around alone at night?” he pressed.

Now she pulled her hand back and looked away, ashamed. Her own aunt didn’t want her around, and refused to believe her or protect her from Phil; everyone at school thought she was weird. She knew that she didn’t belong here, and so did everyone else.
Her parents were right. She was as different from other people as her odd eyes were from each other. She concluded that there was something profoundly unlovable about her; she was all wrong. Mama and Papa had probably kept her hidden away to shelter her, knowing that society would summarily reject her.

“I just want to go back home,” she said sadly.

“You’d go back … to living like that? All by yourself?” He seemed surprised.

She nodded without hesitation. “I suppose there’s one thing I’d miss.”

“What?” he asked, suddenly, irrationally, hoping that it might be him.

“Hot water,” she said firmly.

He laughed, and she couldn’t help but join in. She liked the way he sounded, and she liked looking into his smiling eyes, dark as deep pools of water. She relaxed, feeling completely safe for the first time since the accident.

She looked up at the walls. “You’re a really good artist.”

He was surprised. “How did you know I drew those?”

She shrugged. “An educated guess.”

“But you never went to school,” he teased her, his lazy laughing eyes smiling back at her.

She found herself growing drowsy, exhausted from a long week of sleeplessness. She felt like she was floating in the warmly colored glow he was casting over her. She yawned, prompting a yawn from him in response that made them both laugh again.

“Calvin,” she whispered, “Thank you … for everything.”

Her eyelids grew heavy, fluttered, and finally shut as she drifted off to sleep. Cal got up and bent down to lift her feet onto the bed, feeling a lump on her ankle. He looked up the leg of her jeans to see a leather sheath strapped to her calf. The handle of a large hunting knife was sticking out of it.

He pulled a blanket over her, tucking it under her chin. He stood there for a minute, admiring the way her golden curls spread out across his bed, marveling at how she could look so innocent and vulnerable, all the while concealing a deadly weapon that he had no doubt she was capable of using.

He flipped off the light and lay down alongside her as gingerly as possible, careful not to wake her up. He wanted to keep her there, and it surprised him.
He usually didn’t like to bring girls to his room, preferring to sneak into their bedrooms or apartments so he could leave whenever he pleased. In his experience, girls always ended up trying to control him, claiming him as their boyfriend and vying with each other for his attention. He never made any promises, unwilling to let some girl think that hooking up meant anything more than a good time. There would be no strings tying him down; no one would ever control him again.

But Caledonia was completely different from any other girl he’d ever met. Every little thing she did was interesting; her every gesture fascinated him. She was one surprise after another, and the more he was around her, the more he wanted to be around her. He wanted to know everything there was to know about her.

Calvin was amazed by what he’d learned already, but he sensed that she was holding something back, and it made him even more curious than ever. Her talk about leaving town bothered him, but he reminded himself that she was bound to disappear into thin air someday, like the ghost he first thought she was.

Like her parents had before her.

But she was here right now, and he lay as still as he possibly could, listening to her regular breathing. For some reason, he felt strangely peaceful.
Caledonia slept more soundly than she had in weeks, dreaming of woodlands that smelled of bay trees and damp earth. Birds chattered in the branches, the creek sang its watery song, and colorful salamanders crawled across mossy rocks. She meandered down the path that led her home, fully expecting to see Mama and Papa waiting there for her. She was finally at peace, content in the feeling that everything was going to be all right.

When she opened her eyes, the smell of leaves and wood smoke still lingered in her nostrils. She was confused, disoriented, and ultimately mortified when she realized where she was. She couldn’t believe that she had fallen asleep on his bed, like she was auditioning to join the ranks of the stupid girls that followed him around and hung on him at school.

Like she didn’t want to leave or something.

She looked over to see Calvin peacefully sleeping, and studied his face for a moment, trying to figure out what made him so attractive. Without his smiling eyes to distract her, she could focus on his beautiful bone structure, his careless hair, the sensuous curve of his lips. She suddenly understood what all the other girls were after. They wanted to possess him and keep him all for themselves. They wanted him to feel the same way about them.

She panicked, afraid he’d wake up before she could get away. He must think I’m ridiculous, she thought, or even worse, feel sorry for me because of what happened to my parents. She slithered off the bed as smoothly as possible, tiptoeing down the hall to slip out the front door and hurry back to her aunt’s in the early morning light.

She walked in the door to find Phil up earlier than usual, sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper.

“Well, well. Look what the cat dragged in,” he smirked.

Angie looked around the corner, shocked. “Cal? Were you out all night?”

She started up the stairs, calling back, “I fell asleep at a friend’s house.”
“A likely story,” Phil snorted, casting Angie a sarcastic look.

Caledonia kept moving, heading for the uncertain sanctuary of her room.

“Cal!” her aunt called after her harshly. She paused at the top of the stairs without turning.

“Phil was right about you! If you go and get yourself in trouble, I won’t be held responsible. I have enough to deal with without taking on a pregnant teenager!”

Stunned, Cal rushed off to her room. Phil was telling Angie lies about her, and her aunt had chosen to believe him. Her eyes filled with tears as she considered her options. School would be over in less than two weeks, taking away her one safe place and only reliable meal. She had a little over a hundred dollars left, and as much as everything cost, she knew it wouldn’t last very long.

She thought about her parents, striking out on their own without a thing to their names. She knew how hard they had worked to escape from their past, and she wondered how she could manage to do it all alone. She was going to have to formulate a plan and try. She grabbed her last pile of clean clothes with determination, hurrying to get a shower in before her aunt left for the lunch shift.

~

Calvin woke to an empty bed, disappointed to find her gone. He jumped up, checking the bathroom down the hall hopefully, but finding it empty. He went out onto the porch, looking up and down the street, but there was no trace of her. Now he was the one left behind, feeling abandoned, wanting more from her than she was willing to give.

The irony was not lost on him.

He went back to his room and flopped down onto his bed with a sigh.

Caledonia was an enigma. She was quiet and timid, but she’d chased off three grown men with a knife right before his eyes. She wolfed down food like a lumberjack, but seemed to be growing increasingly thinner. Strangest of all, she could bend animals to her will. … And now she had him acting like a lovesick puppy.

He shook his head, disgusted with himself.

He finally got up to distract himself with breakfast, but no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to keep his thoughts from straying back to her. Every little thing she said replayed in his mind, and he had a million questions he wanted to ask her. He finally gave in to the impulse,
racking his brain to think of an excuse to go see her. When the idea occurred to him, he clung to the hope it would work.

Hidden away in her room, Caledonia was curled up on the air mattress, so immersed in her book that she didn’t even notice the faint hissing from the slow leak that had started the week before. She’d been waking up on the hard floor every morning, so sleeping outside wasn’t really much different from staying at her aunt’s.

Sundays were particularly tricky, and she needed to make the most of the daylight hours in case Phil started in drinking early. Nothing really bad had happened yet, but she could sense the anger and frustration building up inside of him, and she wasn’t planning on being around when it erupted. She would probably be going for a walk tonight.

“Cal!” she heard him yell, startling her.

She sat up, her stomach lurching. He sounded angry.

“Cal, get down here right now!”

She rose with dread, peeking down the stairs to see Phil standing at the open door, glaring up at her in a cloud of muddy orange anger. Calvin was standing on the porch, casting his golden curiosity inside. He smiled when he saw her. She came down the stairs nervously, and Phil stepped up to block her path.

“Is your boyfriend back for another crack at you?” he snarled, brushing past her rudely as she flattened herself against the wall. Calvin flashed bright with anger, clenching his fists. He stepped forward and she rushed to block him; the last thing she needed was to have a fight break out.

Calvin glowered at the big man lumbering up the stairs; he knew a bully when he saw one. Phil reminded him of his father, and when Caledonia cringed, Cal saw red. If she hadn’t gotten between them he would have beaten the snot out of that man. He never considered himself to be a hothead like Jarod, but once again, he found himself incapable of thinking clearly where Caledonia was concerned.

She pushed him over the threshold and closed the door behind them.

“Was that your uncle?” he asked, fuming.

“No, he’s my aunt’s boyfriend,” she said, dropping her hand from his chest. She flushed bright pink and looked down, embarrassed.

“Well, he’s a real asshole,” Calvin said.
She looked up with a little smile. “Yes … Yes, he is.”

When their eyes met they both started laughing for no real reason, and Calvin felt better immediately. He completely forgot what he came there to ask her, looking into her beautiful blue and green irises.

“Your hair looks really pretty today,” he said lamely.
She touched it self-consciously. “I just washed it.”
They both smiled and laughed again, until he finally recovered his memory, “Hey, do you want to go to the fair with me today?”
She looked uncomfortable, shifting from foot to foot.
“We could take a ride on that Ferris wheel. …” he added, cocking his head charmingly.
“I’d better not,” she said, surprised to see his face fall. “It’s just … it’s just that I’m saving my money to get back home.”
“Oh, come on,” he said. “It’s on me. Let me take you … please?”
Their eyes met again, and she could see nothing but concern in his. She looked over her shoulder at the closed door, and down at her jeans with holes worn in the knees.
“I don’t have any more clothes … I was going to do some washing today …”
He raised his eyebrows with mock indignation, “You’d rather do laundry than go to the fair with me?”
She had to smile at that. “No.”
“Then c’mon,” he said, taking her arm to lead her away.
She balked. “I’m a mess.”
“You’re beautiful,” he said.
She scrutinized him for a second, wondering why he wanted her to go with him so badly. Seeing no sign of deception, she sighed, “Okay. On one condition.”
“What?” he smiled with relief.
“You have to wear a helmet too.”
Soon they were on the road, and she was surprisingly comfortable riding along behind him, familiar with the way his muscles tensed under her hands, relaxing into his warm back.
When they reached the fairgrounds and parked, he climbed off the bike after her, pausing.
“Um … we’re going to have to go through a metal detector to get inside.”
“Really?” she asked. “Why?”
She was like a foreigner he had to explain obscure local customs to.

“To keep people from smuggling weapons inside.”

“Why?”

“To keep people from hurting each other in fights.”

“Why on earth would you get into a fight at a fair?” she asked. “I thought people came here to have fun!”

“Yeah, well, the question is … do you have anything metal on you?” he asked with a knowing glance.

She was so cute when she realized that she was packing contraband, he thought, admiring how bright her eyes were when they flew open wide.

“It’s okay. I can stow whatever you might have on the bike. It’ll be right here when we get back.” Calvin told her. She looked around nervously, finally crouching to remove the sheath that was strapped to her calf.

When they were in line to get tickets, he bent down and whispered in her ear, “Why do you always carry a knife?”

She thought about Phil, and the big cat coming at her from out of nowhere. “You never know when you might need to defend yourself.”

He smiled, “There aren’t any mountain lions around here.”

“Yes, but people can be much more dangerous than animals,” she said, looking all around at the kaleidoscope of colorful emotions in the crowd. “You ought to know that.”

He thought about the night at the cemetery, and had to admit that she was probably right. She’d never asked him what he was up to that night, and it occurred to him that she might think that getting jumped was a normal part of city life. It was a normal part of his brother’s life, he realized, wishing that things were different.

Once they got inside the fairgrounds, Caledonia hung back, and he could see she was overwhelmed by the noise and the thick crowds. He took her hand, and she clung to it, keeping them in contact as they wove through more people than she’d seen in her entire life.

She paused at a cotton candy machine, watching it spin sugar into fluffy multicolored puffs. It looked like a magic trick to her. She looked up at Calvin in amazement. “Did you see that?”

He bought her some, showing her how to tear off a piece and stuff it into her mouth to dissolve.

She smiled with delight at first, but after a few mouthfuls grimaced. “It’s too sweet.”
He took it and tossed it into the garbage, noticing her frown a little as she looked down into the bin.

“What?” he asked.

“People in the city waste too much food,” she said sadly.

He remembered his suspicions. “Have you eaten anything today?” he asked.

“I’m okay.” She looked down and away, trying to avoid telling a lie. “Aren’t we going to ride on the Ferris wheel?”

“Well, I’m hungry now,” he announced, taking her hand again, “And you haven’t lived until you’ve eaten too much fair food.”

A few corn dogs, funnel cakes and shaved ices later, they wandered out onto the midway. Games testing every sort of skill were lined up with all kinds enticing prizes. Kids walked by with bags of live goldfish and stuffed animals, crying, screaming, laughing and pouting. It was a typical day at the fair, but Caledonia smiled at everything she saw like it was a revelation.

Calvin couldn’t stop watching her, entranced by her unexpected reactions.

“Look how cute!” She pointed to a rack of pink stuffed bears hanging from the awning of a carnival game.

“Step right up!” a portly man behind the booth called out to them. “One popped balloon wins a bear!” There was a rack of balloons behind him, and a sign that said five tries for five dollars.

“I’m pretty good at darts,” Calvin said, stepping up to the counter.

He knew it was stupid, but he wanted to win for her more than anything else in the world. He took his darts and threw them one after the other, frustrated when they bounced off the balloons without bursting them.

Caledonia scrutinized the game. “Can I try?” she asked.

Cal handed her his last dart, and she stepped up, rubbing her thumb across the tip. Just as she suspected, the darts were dull, and the balloons were thick. The only way to pop them was to marry extreme velocity with accuracy. She drew the dart back behind her shoulder and threw it hard, like a knife, popping a balloon.

Calvin smiled wryly and shook his head. “Give her the prize,” he told the barker. The man reached under the counter and handed her a plastic keychain shaped like a bear.

“Hey! What about those bears?” Calvin asked, pointing up.
The fat man gestured to a little sign with small print. “You have to pop five balloons with five darts to win the big prize. Why don’t you get the little lady some darts?” He smiled out a challenge. It was the same thing every time, he thought. He amused himself toying with swaggering boys and their foolish pride.

“It’s okay,” Caledonia smiled, looking at the little plastic trinket in her palm. “I like this.” Calvin narrowed his eyes at the man and paid for more darts, handing them over to her.

“You try again.” Caledonia stepped up to the counter, lining up the darts and throwing them methodically, with deadly accuracy. Nearby people stopped what they were doing to watch.

She popped a balloon on all five tries, surprising everyone.

The fat man pulled out a step ladder, and with a good deal of huffing and puffing, took down one of the big pink bears from the awning, handing it to Caledonia.

“Thank you,” she said politely, smiling like a little kid at Christmas. She hugged the bear happily. Calvin looked at her in awe as they walked away.

“How did you learn to throw like that?” he asked her.

“Quail hunting,” she said nonchalantly.

She pointed to a bunch of little kids jumping around inside of a ball pit with a laugh. “Did you do that when you were little?”

“Uh … maybe once,” he answered, visited by a crystal clear memory of his mother standing watch over him at some long-forgotten birthday party. Caledonia had a way of making him recall parts of his life he’d put behind him long ago, luring him into a minefield of suppressed memories.

They walked out of the hustle and bustle of the midway to the ride section, and she looked at the spinning, twirling rides with serious eyes. “I don’t know about this … They look dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” he laughed, imagining her throwing a knife. He was in danger, he thought, trying to get a hold of himself, fighting a losing battle to keep control of his feelings around her.

They got to the base of the big Ferris wheel, and she looked up with a grimace.

“Ready?” he asked her.

She swallowed hard and paused, her eyes scanning the crowds. “I’ll be right back.” Wondering what she was up to, he watched her walk over to a woman waiting for some children at the base of an airplane ride, jiggling a carriage with a baby. She was holding the hand
of a miserable little girl who had obviously been deemed too small to get aboard one of the little airplanes.

Caledonia knelt down in front of the tiny child, whispering something into her ear and offering her the bear. The girl’s frown was transformed into a smile, and her tear-streaked face lit up. She took hold of the fuzzy pink animal, throwing her arms around it with an expression of pure incandescent joy.

Caledonia beamed up at Calvin, her eyes glowing with satisfaction. She took his breath away, and at that precise moment, she stole the last little remnant of his heart. He watched her rise and come back to him with wonder.

“What did you tell the kid?” he asked.

“I said the bear wanted to live with her.”

“I thought you wanted it,” he said, his voice thick with emotion.

She shrugged, looking back. “It’s better off with her. Besides,” she held up her keychain with another heart-melting smile, “I have this.” She looked at it closely. “What is it?”

He gathered himself together, smiling with amusement. “It’s a keychain.”

She looked at him blankly.

“For putting keys on,” he added.

“Oh,” she smiled, sticking it into her pocket. “I love it.”

She looked up at the Ferris wheel again, thinking that it looked much bigger and scarier than she had imagined. When she looked back at Calvin she saw something unexpected.

His pink affectionate tint had grown stronger, and now it was surrounded by bright red, vibrating warm and strong. It was the same infatuated glow she’d seen so many times at high school, a love-struck intensity of emotion that she found flattering but frightening, because she knew how quickly it could fade or latch onto someone new.

She looked away, afraid of how he made her feel. She didn’t want to lose the only friend she had.

“Let’s go,” he said, leading her into the line for the ride.

Calvin kept having to fight the urge to put his hands on her, wishing he could grab her and plant a kiss on her pretty pink lips. Don’t screw this up, he told himself, surprised at how much it meant to him.
Usually when he was with a girl, he was giving to get something. He could expertly stroke and flatter with practiced skill, and with the girls he knew, he didn’t have to work that hard. He had it down to a science, calculating the least he could do to maneuver a girl into bed with him.

Somehow Caledonia made him feel completely different. He wanted to make her happy. He wanted to see her smile and laugh, but most of all, he wanted her to want him back. Go slow, he reminded himself; be careful with her.

She seemed tense, and he leaned down to murmur in her ear, “Don’t be afraid. I’ll be right next to you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

She nodded, looking at him strangely. When they boarded the ride she was too distracted to worry about him, and she didn’t shy away when he slipped his arm around her waist. When they started to move, she held onto the bar in front of her with white knuckles, her heart racing. They came to a lurching stop at the very top of the wheel, and she turned to him with a shocked face.

“They’re just letting someone else on,” he reassured her. She laughed with relief, looking all around at the panoramic view.

“There’s our hilltop,” she said, pointing to the lookout spot he’d taken her the night before. He liked the way she said “our,” noticing the scars on her outstretched forearm. He took her wrist, feeling the twin ridges with his fingertips; on an impulse, he bent to kiss them, running his lips down the length of each raised line.

Calvin felt her respond, quivering like the rabbit he’d once brought home from elementary school for the weekend. He remembered his mother demonstrating how to be patient with it, coaxing it out of the hutch with a carrot and a gentle voice. He put her arm down, twining his fingers through hers.

When he finally looked back into Caledonia’s colorful eyes, he was surprised to see her regarding him gravely. Other girls he knew would be all over him at this point, but she wasn’t like any of the other girls he knew. Hell, he thought, she wasn’t like anyone else at all.

Everyone saw Calvin as a carefree rebel, but he didn’t feel like he had to act like anything when he was with her. Her gaze reached deep down inside of him, and it was like she could see past his tattoos and don’t-give-a-damn attitude to the person he was trying to hide. Surprisingly, it didn’t bother him at all. It felt good.

The ride surged forward again, sending them spinning around in another revolution.
By the time they got back to Calvin’s place his fate was sealed. He would have said or done anything to spend some more time with her. The golden sun was sinking low in the sky, reflecting in her blue and green eyes when she climbed from the back of his bike to face him.

She handed him the helmet. “I had a really good time. Thank you.”

“Why don’t you stay and hang out for a while?” he asked.

Caledonia glanced down the length of the driveway, noticing a half a dozen bikes parked alongside a pink convertible and a big red pickup truck. She looked back up with worried eyes that pierced into his heart. “I don’t think I should.”

“Why not?” he asked. She scrutinized him like she was deciding something, and once again, he felt like she could see straight through him. He abandoned all of his pride, something he’d never done for any other girl before. “Please don’t go … Please?”

As wary as Caledonia was, there was no denying that the more time she spent with Calvin, the more she liked him. She could see his feelings growing stronger and stronger, and it scared her that she liked it.

The girls he kissed all glowed with the same passionate colors he was vibrating with, but she wasn’t about to open her fragile heart to him the way they did; she couldn’t bear to have it smashed again. She feared heartbreak much more than she feared loneliness.

His golden curiosity was stronger than ever, but she knew that once it was satisfied, the boredom he displayed with other girls would appear. She knew she would be left disappointed, and eventually, completely alone once more. She was starting to like having him for a friend.

She pressed her lips together. Her aunt would still be working, and she could use a place to stay until Phil turned in. At least that’s what she told herself.

“Okay,” she said, taking a chance.
Caledonia walked into the house behind him, finding Jarod and Crystal laughing and drinking around the card table with a motley-looking group of tattooed leather-clad men and heavily made-up girls. There were stacks of chips in front of each player, and they barely looked up, scowling at the cards fanned out in their hands.

“Cal!” Crystal squealed, waving. “There’s someone here who’s been dying to see you!” She gestured to a blonde-haired girl before she spotted Caledonia. “Oh … Hi, there.”

Caledonia recognized the girl she’d seen sitting on Calvin’s lap, and stopped in her tracks, immediately regretting her decision to come in. If it was possible, the girl had an even shorter skirt on than before. She tossed her long straight hair, looking Caledonia over and deeming her insignificant.

She smiled confidently at Calvin. “Hey, Cal, how’s it going?”

“Good,” he nodded, reaching behind him and clamping onto Caledonia’s hand before she could back out the door. He pulled her closer to him, and short skirt girl’s eyebrows hitched up a little.

Jarod stepped forward with a smile. He had a beer in his hand and a loopy grin on his handsome face. He saw Caledonia and lit up. “Hey, everyone! This is the chick that saved Rufus’ life! You guys hungry? I’m ’bout to grill some steaks.”

Crystal jumped in, telling her friend, “Her name’s Cal, too. Isn’t that cute?”

“Adorable,” the blonde said, simmering a resentful olive green.

“You can call us when it’s time,” Calvin said to Jarod, pulling Caledonia down the hall to his room. When she stepped inside it looked different. She could see he’d made the bed and tidied up the room; it occurred to her that he’d been planning to take her there. She looked at him suspiciously.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing towards the bed.

She stood there for a moment, finally perching uneasily on the edge.

He felt awkward too, unaccustomed to being nervous around a girl. All at once he was at a loss for words. He sat down a safe distance from her.

Caledonia was both blessed and cursed with the ability to see how people really felt, and she realized that this ability could spare her heartache as well as be the cause of it. She couldn’t be lulled into a false sense of security, she thought, because she could never be deceived. She
remembered her parents’ deep, calm love for one another, and decided she would settle for nothing less. She tried to ignore all of the intense colors he was throwing her way.

“Do you like steak?” he asked.

“I don’t know. What kind?”

He looked puzzled. “Just the regular kind, I guess.”

“I guess so,” she said, looking down at her hands. She could barely stand looking straight at him now, afraid of getting engulfed in his warm red glow.

“So … what do you like to do? I mean, what kinds of stuff are you into?” he asked.

“I like to read,” she said.

They were quiet for a minute, and then they looked up at each other simultaneously. She smiled first, and before too long they were both laughing despite themselves. The colors around them lightened to a pretty pastel.

“So, you never went anywhere your whole life?” he asked, falling backwards.

“Yes,” she replied, looking down at him. “I mean … no.”

“Is that why you’re so weird?” he smiled.

“I guess so.” She lowered herself down too, propping up on one elbow. “What’s your excuse?”

They laughed again, and he crossed his arms behind his head.

“What’s that for?” she asked him, pointing to the black tribal tattoo design that curved around his bicep and disappeared under his T-shirt. He pulled the sleeve up to reveal more of it, looking down at his shoulder.

“I don’t know … I turned eighteen and we were drinking. I was at this tattoo parlor with Jarod, and he thought we should get one for our mom. We were looking at a bunch of pictures and I just thought it would look good …” His voice trailed off, and he looked up into her eyes, trying to gauge her reaction.

She reached over and touched his arm with her index finger, tracing the designs.

“Did it hurt?” she asked.

He couldn’t talk for a few seconds, overwhelmed by the sensation of her finger trailing across his skin. He never wanted her to stop.

“Yeah.” His voice was husky. “It did. But I kind of liked it … at the time.”

“Because you were sad,” she said.
He was stunned, marveling at the way she seemed to know everything about him. He finally nodded, his voice rough with emotion, “Yeah, I guess I was.”

She sighed, “Life leaves marks on us.”

There was a loud shriek that made them both sit bolt upright on the bed. Crystal came bursting through the door in a panic.

“Help! Oh my God! Cal!” she screeched hysterically. “Jarod just cut himself real bad, but he won’t let anyone see! We gotta get him to the hospital!”

Calvin jumped up and rushed down the hall with Crystal following him, crying and blubbering hysterically. Caledonia trailed behind, peeking around the corner of the hallway to find everyone gathered in the kitchen around a belligerently drunken Jarod. He was standing with a towel wrapped around his hand; a butcher knife lay discarded on the blood-spattered counter.

“Make him listen!” Crystal sobbed, “He needs a doctor.”

“Shut up, woman!” Jarod snapped at her, “I ain’t goin’ to no hospital!”

“What happened?” Calvin asked, trying to get his brother to show him his hand. He took Jarod by the shoulders and steered him over to sit down at the card table. Jarod’s friends all backed away.

“Um … I gotta be taking off, man,” a burly-looking biker said, clearly rattled at the sight of blood. Jarod’s friends started to mill about uncomfortably, and the crowd began to thin as one by one they slipped out the door.

“Let’s party! Gimme another beer,” Jarod growled at his girlfriend. Crystal handed him a bottle and stood wringing her hands. The last few guests slunk out of the door, leaving three of them standing around watching Jarod drink defiantly.

“How bad is it?” Calvin asked his brother, prompting Jarod to draw his hand back protectively.

“S’nothing,” he said.

Calvin didn’t know what to do, and stood there helplessly. Caledonia could see how scared he was, and her heart went out to him.

She stepped forward, addressing Jarod, “May I see it?”
He looked up at her with bleary eyes, taking a swig of his beer. She directed a strong, calming blast of blue his way and his shoulders slumped. “Okay.” Calvin watched in amazement as Jarod offered his hand submissively.

Caledonia unwrapped the towel, wiping fresh blood from a long gash across his index finger. She inspected it carefully, bending the finger to check the tendons. She lifted his arm up over his head.

“You need to elevate it above your heart,” she told him firmly. “It should stop bleeding in ten minutes or so.”

Crystal came closer, but shied away from looking at the wound, asking Caledonia, “Is he gonna be okay?”

“Yes, but it’s going to need a few sutures,” she replied.

“Can you take him to the emergency room on your bike?” Crystal asked Calvin.

“It’s fine. I’m not going anywhere.” Jarod dug in his heels.

“But you need a doctor!” Crystal wailed.

“I can sew it up if you want,” Caledonia offered.

Calvin and Crystal just stared at her.

“Do you have a needle and thread?” Caledonia asked, perching on the edge of the pool table and concentrating on wiping around the cut as the bleeding slowed.

“Are you serious?” Calvin asked, “Have you ever done it before?”

She looked up at him like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Of course, lots of times. Sometimes my dad hurt himself chopping wood. I’m going to need some alcohol. Do you have any whiskey?”

Crystal looked at her with wide eyes. “You need to be drunk first?”

Caledonia burst out laughing, and Calvin couldn’t help but join in. Jarod started laughing too, and the last bit of fear wafted out of the room. Calvin shrugged and went to gather the supplies.

Caledonia turned to Crystal with an apologetic smile, explaining, “I only need it to clean the wound.”

Calvin brought out a little sewing kit in a box shaped like a heart, plunking it down on the table alongside a fifth of Jack Daniels and a roll of paper towels.
“This is going to sting, so don’t be a baby,” Caledonia told Jarod sternly. She looked directly into his eyes and sent him another tranquilizing blast of lavender blue just in case, watching him slump in his chair. She found Jarod as easy to manipulate as an animal, and wondered if it was because he was drunk.

She sterilized a needle and thread with the alcohol and cleaned the skin thoroughly, lining up the edges of the cut and putting in the first stitch. Jarod flinched when she pierced the skin the first time.

“You’re doing great,” she said reassuringly, patting his wrist.

Calvin winced, watching her work. “How did you learn to do that?”

“My dad showed me,” she said. “I helped tie off the stitches on my arm. That took a whole lot longer than this will.”

“Whoa … They did that at home,” Calvin said quietly.

Caledonia’s scars bore testament to much, much, worse wounds than the one she was working on, and he had a hard time imagining her enduring such pain. It made his heart hurt to think about it.

Jarod took one look at her arm and blanched. “Whoa! You’re a real badass.”

She paused, looking to Calvin for a translation.

“He means you’re tougher than you look,” he explained.

“Oh,” she said, getting back to work, “Thanks, I guess. Do you have some antibiotic ointment to put on this when I’m done?”

“No, but I can run to the store,” said Calvin. He got up to go, pausing at the threshold. “Wait for me, okay?”

She nodded, “Okay.”

There was an awkward silence when Calvin left, and Caledonia put in the last two stitches to the sounds of Crystal cleaning up the kitchen.

“There.” She set his hand down on the table, “The thread can come out after about a week or so.”

Jarod looked at the neat row of stitches. “Nice job.” He gestured towards the heart-shaped box. “That was my mom’s.”

Caledonia cleaned off the needle and rewound the spool of thread, packing them away neatly and replacing the lid on the sewing kit. She set it down with care.
Jarod scrutinized her, and seemed to have a rare moment of clarity. “Cal’s lucky he met you. We’re both lucky. You know, he’s a good guy. He could do a lot better than—” he gestured all around, “this.”

“What do you mean by that?” Crystal chimed in, offended.

He rolled his eyes at her, explaining, “I mean that Cal’s a smart kid. He could actually do something with his life. I suppose that I haven’t done a real good job of helping to bring him up … He took it real hard when Dad got put away.”

“Put away?” Caledonia was puzzled.

“He didn’t tell you our old man’s in jail?”

She shook her head no.

“He’s in jail for killing their mom,” Crystal said, coming up behind Jarod and rubbing his shoulders. “Not on purpose, though.”

“It was an accident,” Jarod explained. “He was drinking and he fell asleep at the wheel.”

“He killed, like, three other people too,” Crystal added, “Hit ’em head on.”

“That’s terrible,” Caledonia said quietly.

Jarod sighed heavily. “Yeah, well, he’s doin’ the time for it. It’s been five years and Cal still won’t go visit him. Not even once. Pops feels real bad about it.”

They all looked up when Calvin walked in the door. He handed a bag to Caledonia and she pulled out a tube and package of tape and bandages, lining them up on the table. Jarod held out his hand to her like an obedient child, and she set to work, applying ointment, carefully wrapping the wound and taping it up neatly.

Calvin stood watching her with soft eyes, overwhelmed. He almost wished that he was the one with the cut, just so he could feel the gentleness of her touch once more. There were so many sides to her that she had his head spinning. She’d surprised him once again; first by knowing what to do, and then by taking firm control over his belligerent brother.

Despite being deceptively fragile-looking, she was proving to be stronger than anyone he’d ever met.

He was falling further and further under her spell, and the way he felt about her was written all over his face. Crystal nudged Jarod, and when he looked up at his brother, even a drunk man could see it.
“Do your best to keep it clean,” Caledonia told Jarod, handing him back his hand and getting up.

“Thanks,” he said thoughtfully, “Looks like you saved the day again.”

“You’re welcome.” She finally looked up to meet Calvin’s anxious eyes. “I should probably go home now.”

“Why don’t you stay and have dinner with us?” Jarod asked.

“Yeah!” said Crystal, “I can cook!” She ran to the kitchen and came back with two beers, thrusting them into Calvin’s hands. “You two go wait on the couch and I’ll put some garlic bread in the oven.” She nodded at Caledonia, “Kay?”

Caledonia looked at the three of them watching her expectantly. It felt good to be wanted somewhere for a change, and she really didn’t want to go back to her aunt’s house anyway. She could see that they were all sincere, so she nodded back.

“Okay, thanks.”

She followed Calvin to the couch and sat, taking the beer he offered her. She sniffed it and took a little sip, wrinkling her nose and grimacing with distaste. “This is what all the fuss is about? It tastes awful!”

Calvin didn’t know why he was surprised. “You’ve never had a beer before?”

“No, but everyone keeps trying to get me to.”

“Who’s everyone?” he asked, laughing at the disgusted look on her face.

She stiffened up and looked down, unwilling to discuss it. He took the beer from her. “It’s okay. You don’t have to drink it.”

He set both bottles aside on the end table; he didn’t really want his, either. When he was with her he didn’t want to drink himself numb like he sometimes did. He was happy simply to be there, present in the moment. With her.

He reached over to pick up the remote control. “Do you wanna see a movie or something?”

“I don’t know,” she squirmed in her seat, uncomfortable. The last person who’d asked her that was Phil.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never seen a movie before.” He grinned his crooked grin at her. She looked at him with sad eyes, hating the fact that she was so different.

“Whoa,” he said, putting down the remote. “That puts a lot of pressure on me.”

“Why?” she asked, worried.
“Because I have to make sure your first movie is a really great one,” he smiled.
“You don’t have to do anything,” she said, looking down at her hands in her lap.
“Yes, I do,” he replied, completely overwhelmed by the way she made him feel. He wanted
to make everything perfect for her. He wanted her to be happy more than anything he’d ever
wanted for himself.
When she looked up into his dark eyes he was doing it again, casting the strongest, most
intense shades of bright fuscia and red at her that she’d ever seen, rendering her speechless. She
looked at his lips and wondered why he never tried to kiss her. He kissed all the other girls, so
she could only assume he didn’t want her that way. She blushed and looked away.
Calvin watched her in awe. He wanted to kiss her so much he could barely stand it, but there
was nothing coy or flirtatious about her, and he found himself waiting for a signal that never
came. She was so skittish that he was afraid she’d run away if he made a move on her, and he
was afraid to risk it, knowing how easily she could slip away from him.
She looked back up at him and his breath caught in his throat. Just sitting alongside her
made Calvin feel good, better than he’d ever felt before. Caledonia made him see the world
through fresh eyes, and drop his jaded act. He wanted to be the first one to show her everything,
and he wanted her sitting right next to him all the time.
That would have to be enough for now.
Caledonia studied his warm brown eyes and thought she could never feel cold looking into
them. Their eyes were locked onto one another’s when Crystal peeked around the corner. “Hey
Cal, Jarod wants to know how you like your steak done.”
“He already knows,” Calvin answered in a strangled voice.
“Not you … her!”
Calvin smiled at Caledonia, and the two of them burst into laughter once again.
Calvin walked her home after dinner, unable to convince her to stay and watch a movie. After a day filled with firsts, Caledonia was exhausted, and she knew that she risked falling asleep again if she stayed any longer. She remembered the ugly scene with her aunt in the morning, and she dreaded a repeat performance.

He took hold of her hand as they walked, and she didn’t pull it back. He was encouraged, but he felt her tense up as they drew closer to her house, so as tempted as he was, he dared not try to kiss her goodnight.

Frustrated, he watched her slip silently into the dark condo, waiting on the sidewalk until he saw a light flick on in an upstairs bedroom. He wandered back home slowly, images from the day flashing through his mind.

He shook his head, remembering the no-nonsense way Caledonia had managed his drunken brother. He was doubly impressed by her lack of squeamishness in dealing with the bloody cut—he didn’t know anyone else who would have been so cool and collected. He remembered that both of her parents were practically doctors and figured that they must have been the same way.

He tossed and turned that night, having a hard time falling asleep. When he finally nodded off, his dreams were filled with images of her, clinging to him on his bike or lying on his bed with her hair spread out across his pillow. He vividly recalled her smile, her laugh and her scent. When he woke up he missed her, closing his eyes and trying to worm his way back into his idyllic dreams.

By the time he rolled out of bed he’d replayed every moment from the day before in his mind. He checked his phone and found dozens of texts piled up. He scrolled through the invitations, flirtatious messages, and raunchy come-ons; there were messages from everyone but the one person he truly wanted to hear from.
He smelled coffee brewing, and when he headed for the kitchen he saw the bandages and sewing kit still sitting on the card table. Everything he looked at screamed out her name, taunting him with her absence. He started making a mental list of the places he’d like to take her next, trying to imagine what might please her the most.

“Morning,” his brother called from the couch.

“How’s the finger?” he asked, helping himself to a cup of coffee.

“It’s good. Are you gonna see Cali today?” Jarod asked. “Because I want you to thank her for me.”

“You thanked her last night,” Cal reminded him.

“Yeah, well … Just tell her again, okay?”

“Sure,” Calvin nodded. He sluggéd his coffee and headed for the shower, eager to get to school for the first time in years.

“Hey Cal–”

He stopped in the hallway. “Yeah?”

“Don’t blow it with that one … She’s a keeper.”

He was quiet for a beat. “I know.”

When Caledonia woke up the next morning, she was still clutching the little plastic keychain she’d gone to bed holding. She thought about Calvin and held it up, studying the little bear. Images of their day at the fair danced through her mind, making her smile.

She remembered all the people, the strange and greasy food, and the thrill of riding on the Ferris wheel. Every memory was tied to a picture of Calvin’s face watching her, and his beautiful dark eyes would not stop preying upon her mind.

She stretched out her arms, feeling strangely happy. She got ready for school, thinking it would be nice to see him again; she felt a tiny flicker of optimism for the first time since the accident. She heard voices in the kitchen, and came down the stairs with her book bag to find Angie sitting at the table with Phil.

“There you are,” Angie sounded exasperated, her voice filled with sour muddy disappointment. “Come sit down. We need to talk.”

Caledonia edged into the kitchen, taking a seat across the table from Phil uneasily. Angie looked at her with tight lips, turning pale yellow with suspicion.
“I got an e-mail from school that you missed some classes last week.”
Caledonia looked down. She had skipped school the day they took Rufus to Calvin’s grandparents, but she never imagined her aunt might find out about it.
“I made up all the work,” she explained. “I’ve gotten perfect scores on every test.”
“What were you up to?” her aunt asked.
Cal shifted in her seat, unwilling to tell the truth. If Angie was upset about her skipping school, she really wouldn’t like the story about breaking a dog out of the pound. Caledonia didn’t like to lie, so she didn’t say anything.
Phil and Angie exchanged a look, and her aunt’s lips tightened. “Cal, we were worried about who you’ve been running around with, so we looked in your room and found this.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a stack of twenty dollar bills, “Where did you get all of this money all of a sudden?”
Caledonia’s eyes flew open wide. “You were in my things?” she said in horror.
“Phil found it,” she replied.
Cal reached out for it, but Angie snatched it back. “Where did this come from? Tell me!”
“It’s mine. I earned it.”
Phil laughed derisively. “I bet I can guess what she did for it. Those bikers must be paying her for her services.”
He was exuding such an evil ugly color of greenish brown that Caledonia recoiled as if she’d been slapped.
She turned towards her aunt with tears in her eyes. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”
“Then where did you get this?”
She tried to explain, but the more she talked, the more the two of them exchanged knowing looks. They didn’t believe her about selling truffles any more than Calvin had before he actually witnessed it. Her aunt nodded at every nasty comment Phil made, mirroring his ugly skepticism.
Phil was enjoying the interrogation, a sadistic glint in his eye. “I think we’re gonna have to hold onto it. Can’t you see that Angie has been working day and night to put a roof over your head? You don’t do a thing around here to earn your keep.”
“And you do?” Caledonia retorted, indignant.
Angie looked shocked. “Cal! You apologize to Phil right this minute!”
Caledonia got up with a sob, running out of the house. With her aunt turning against her, now she was certain that she couldn’t stay any longer. Her money was gone, and her vague plans for getting away quickly were completely ruined. She wiped her eyes and shouldered her bag resolutely, setting out on her long march to school.

Calvin stood in front of his house, leaning against his motorcycle with a helmet in his hand, waiting. He saw her figure approaching and couldn’t wipe the smile from his face.

“Hey, I was thinking—” When she drew close he could see that she looked utterly miserable.

“What happened?”

She only shook her head and looked down, ashamed.

“What can I do?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she mumbled.

He handed her a helmet. “Come on, I’ll give you a ride to school.”

She hesitated, and finally reached out for it. He got on the bike, waiting for her to don the helmet and join him. When they pulled into the school parking lot there was a group of people standing around a shining new car, and she could see sour green clouds of surprise and jealousy appear when the girls spotted her riding behind him.

“Hey Cal,” called Hillary, patting the hood of a candy-apple red Mustang with a smile as wide as the Cheshire Cat’s. “Check out my graduation present.”

“Nice ride,” he nodded. Caledonia took off the helmet and handed it to him, eager to flee the scene. Seeing the girl he’d had his hands all over not so long ago made her stomach twist with jealousy. She reminded herself that she must keep her emotions in check.

“Wanna take it for a drive?” Hillary asked Calvin, dangling the keys in his face with a suggestive smile.

Caledonia took her bag and slipped away, walking swiftly with her head down.

“Not so fast,” Calvin said, coming up alongside her. “Talk to me. What happened this morning?” he asked.

She paused, looking back to see the girls all staring at them. She sighed, “They took all my money.”

“Who?” he asked, flashing crimson with protective anger.

“My aunt and her boyfriend. They think … They think … They don’t believe that I earned it. They think I did something bad to get it.”
“That’s bullshit!” He was suddenly very angry. “I’ll go tell them what happened! I’ll make them give it back!”

She shook her head no, looking up at him with alarm. “They think you’re the one who gave it to me.” She looked away quickly, embarrassed.

“Oh,” he said, feeling guilty.

Calvin was used to the parents of girls he dated disliking him, but it had never bothered him at all before. He made it a habit to defy authority, and he liked being seen as a troublemaker. Girls were attracted to it, and he really didn’t give a damn what their parents thought. Now that his reputation was the cause of Caledonia’s troubles, he felt terrible.

“Well, they’re fools.” He thought for a minute, “How much did they take? I can give you some money.”

She looked at him with shocked eyes, and then shook her head no, “I couldn’t pay you back.”

“How much do you need?” he asked.

“I have to save enough to get back home and hide until I turn eighteen. Then they can’t make me come back.”

He frowned, “I’ll give you whatever you want, but there’s only one problem …”

“What?” she asked.

He looked into her blue and green eyes, working up the courage. “I don’t want you to go.”

She dropped her head, afraid that if she looked back up she wouldn’t be able to look away. She would drown in the deep pools of his eyes, and eventually be left as alone and dejected as all the other girls he’d toyed with and abandoned.

When she failed to reply, Calvin felt a cold shiver of fear. Caledonia had singlehandedly ruined all other girls for him, and he hadn’t even worked up the nerve to kiss her. The thought of never seeing her again filled him with dread. He vowed right then to do whatever it took, deciding he had to figure out a way to make her want to stay.

“A bunch of us are gonna cut out early and head to the beach,” a girl’s voice interrupted them. “Wanna come along?”

Calvin looked up with irritation to see that Hillary had followed them from the parking lot, and Caledonia took the opportunity to try and slip away again, hoping to dodge his unspoken question. Calvin snaked out his hand, lightning quick, and clamped onto her wrist.
“No,” he told Hillary curtly.

She looked down at his hand on Caledonia, her eyes narrowing in anger. She stalked off, radiating emerald green envy, anger and disappointment.

Calvin turned back to Caledonia. “Let’s do something after school, okay?”

She looked into his eyes and she could see that he was still glowing bright with affection, but there was something else behind it, a hard core of steel gray determination.

“Okay,” she agreed.

When lunchtime came he went looking for her, waiting outside of her classroom. Hillary reappeared, flirting, posing and trying to engage Cal in conversation. Caledonia peeked out to see them, thinking that any boy in his right mind would prefer the fashionably dressed girl with the new car to her. She silently exited the other side of the room, slipping away unnoticed.

After a frantic search, Calvin finally caught up with her at a different hiding place behind the school. “Hey,” he said softly, not wanting to startle her, coming closer to sit down by her side. He leaned back against the wall, watching her pretend to read. She finally looked up at him with a question in her beautiful blue and green eyes. Why me?

A cat peered out from behind one of the storage sheds, capturing her attention. “It’s all right,” she told it, “He won’t hurt you.” The painfully thin creature slowly emerged from the shadows, skirting around Calvin to come close to her. She reached into her bag and pulled out her lunch, tearing off pieces of her sandwich and offering them to the starving animal.

The cat wolfed them down, consumed by need; Calvin was reminded of Caledonia at his grandparents’ house.

“How does it work?” he asked. “How do you make them so tame?”

She was hesitant, but he already knew a little, so she tried to explain how the animals were surrounded by colors that she could both see and understand. She told him how she’d experimented, finally learning how to throw her own color over them like a net, changing their state of mind.

“Wow,” he whispered, at a loss for words. She was even more incredible than he had ever imagined.

She looked down, shy, and he watched her in awe. The hair escaping her braid was blonde silk catching the light, surrounding her with a glowing halo. She looked like one of the angels in his mother’s old Picture Bible, but that didn’t stop him from having impure thoughts about her.
He wanted to reach out and touch her, to undo her braid, let her hair loose and weave his fingers through her soft curls. He wanted to pull her face to his and kiss her hard, wrap his arms around her and feel her body next to his. He wanted to crush himself into her and protect her all at the same time.

He swallowed and blinked. He had never felt so insecure, and it was frightening. He wished that he knew how she felt about him, but she seemed either maddeningly indifferent or terribly shy.

She looked over to see him staring and blushed prettily, looking back down again.

He was in big trouble, he told himself.

Calvin waited anxiously after school, only relaxing when he finally had her on the back of his bike. He sighed with relief when he felt her hands grip his sides, wondering if she was throwing a net of color over him. He didn’t care if she was, because when he was with her he felt so good that he never wanted it to stop.

He took her to a park with a little lake in the middle, and they walked along a path that wound around it, startling frogs into the water. Calvin stooped to collect some pebbles from the shoreline, standing back to skip a few across the water. Caledonia watched him, admiring the way he moved, his broad shoulders and long arms sending the rocks skittering across the glassy surface.

They walked on, coming across a duck dabbling comically in the water. A little band of fuzzy ducklings swam out of some reeds to surround it, making Caledonia smile. Calvin took her hand boldly, leading her to a grassy spot along the bank to sit and watch.

There was a small patch of daisies growing in the lawn and she picked them, splitting the stems and threading them together to make a chain. When it was long enough, she formed it into a necklace, facing him as she slipped it over her head with a little smile. He was about to kiss her right then, but she turned away, watching as the mother duck came out of the water, leading her little family up the bank to settle in at their feet.

He watched her in wonder. “You’re doing it now, aren’t you?”

She looked over to see Calvin glowing with a bright purple and red affection, ringed all around with pink. It was the prettiest blend of colors she’d ever seen, and she was surprised to find it strengthening and growing more and more saturated.
He must really like animals, she thought, watching him smile as they played with the ducklings that kept trying to climb onto their laps. His hair reflected the long rays of the sun like a raven’s wings, and when his deep brown eyes smiled at hers she felt like her heart would burst with happiness.

Shadows chilled their spot on the grass, so they returned to his bike for the drive back to his house. He felt her tense when they pulled up and parked, and he reached back to pat her leg reassuringly. Even though it was a Monday, the party at his house was already in full swing, and there were a dozen or so people outside. Caledonia had just gotten down from the bike when Jarod came flying at her.

“Hey, Cali!” He grinned just as handsomely as his brother did, engulfing her in a big drunken hug. “Good to see you!”

She pulled away. “Are you keeping your wound clean?” she asked sternly, making him smile. He liked the way she scolded him. “You have to watch it carefully for signs of infection.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” He winked at his brother. “You guys hungry? We’re barbequing.”

“Later,” Calvin told Jarod, not wanting to join the party. He took Caledonia’s hand. “Come on.”

She followed him past the crowd of people to his room, and her heart started beating a little faster when he closed the door behind them. Neither one of them wanted to join the crowd, so Calvin left and brought some food back for them. He spread out a blanket for a picnic on his bedroom floor, and they ate, groping for things they could talk about, trying to learn more about each other.

She picked up the sketch pad from his nightstand, leafing through the pages.

“Wow.” She slowed down to inspect each one closely. “You’re really talented. Are you going to be an artist?”

He laughed at the idea. “Me? No, no way. It’s just something that I like to do sometimes.” He reached to take the pad back but she turned away from him, looking at every page.

“Why not?” she asked.

“I don’t know … I think you have to go to school for it or something.”

“So why don’t you?”
No one had asked him about his future for so long that he didn’t know how to answer. His mother was the only one who’d ever encouraged him to draw, and when she died, all of his secret dreams of being an artist went with her.

“Oh!” Caledonia exclaimed, smiling up at him, “I really like this one!” She held the book open to a detailed drawing of a woman. She had long dark hair and gorgeous sloe eyes. “It’s beautiful.”

“That’s my mom. I drew it from an old picture of her.”

Caledonia looked down at the drawing and back up at him. “You look a lot like her. She must have really loved your artwork.”

“Yeah,” he said, remembering. “She did.”

“She knew that you wanted you to be an artist, didn’t she?”

He looked over at her, amazed again at how well she seemed to know him. He was an open book she could read at will, and it didn’t bother him. She understood him in a way that no one else did, and he nodded, savoring the feeling.

He maneuvered a little closer to her, slowly edging his arm around her. The warmth of her leg brushing against his was making his head spin, but he got none of the usual receptive signals from her. He wondered what she would do if he tried to kiss her, afraid of being rejected by her like he’d never been afraid of a girl before.

She sat stiffly, wondering why he didn’t try.

As the afternoon wore on, the party outside grew louder and louder. The sky darkened a little, and all at once, red and blue lights were flashing in the window. Calvin groaned, getting up to peek through the blind slats, seeing that two squad cars had arrived. She could see his alarm and taste the metallic fear, bitter on her tongue.

“Not again,” he said under his breath. He headed for the door, “Wait here. I’ll go see what’s going on.”

Caledonia watched out the window as the police got out of their cars and started to shine flashlights at the partygoers.

“Break it up, people,” they called out, “Time to go home!”

The crowd started to disperse, with some people going inside, but most heading for their cars and bikes. Jarod came barreling towards the officers boldly just as Calvin arrived, grabbing his older brother’s arm, trying to hold him back.
“We weren’t doin’ nothing wrong! This is straight-up harassment!” Jarod bellowed.
“We got a noise complaint.” A big cop with ruddy face shined a light into his eyes. “Had any alcohol today?”
Crystal came running up, taking Jarod’s other arm. “Come inside baby, let’s get something to eat.”
Jarod tried to shrug them both off. “I got my rights! You can’t just come onto my property—”
All at once Caledonia was between him and the police, looking into Jarod’s eyes. “Why don’t you go inside with Crystal?”
Calvin watched in amazement as Jarod nodded calmly, “Okay.”
“Take him inside and turn off the music,” Caledonia told Crystal firmly. She turned to the cops. “We’re sorry to have caused a disturbance. There won’t be any more trouble tonight.”
The red-faced cop opened his mouth, shutting it again like he forgot what he was about to say. He took a deep breath, thrusting his chest out. He looked around at the cars and motorcycles pulling away, and back down at Caledonia. “Okay, miss … just keep it down, all right?”
“Yes, officer, everything’s all right,” she said, nodding towards him with an intense look on her face. Calvin felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.
Calvin and Caledonia stood side by side, watching the policemen return to their cruisers and drive away. When they were the last two people outside, he turned to look at her.
“You can do it with people too, can’t you?”
She looked up at him, her eyes huge. This was the moment she’d feared since she first realized that she liked him.
“Yes,” she whispered.
Calvin’s mind was racing, considering the implications. “So people have colors too, just like animals? And you can see them?”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“Whoa.” He was stunned. “Is that how you always know what I’m thinking?”

“No!” She looked at him, her eyes stinging. “I can’t tell what people are thinking … only what they’re feeling.”

He was quiet for a few seconds, realizing that she must know exactly how he felt about her. The thought frightened him; he would have given anything to know if she liked him even half as much as he liked her.

She saw his fear and looked down. “I better leave now.”

“No!” he blurted out loudly, “Don’t go!”

She looked back up at him, surprised to see strong orange ringed with fuchsia. He was vibrating with concern and affection instead of the anger and disgust she was expecting.

“I’m sorry about tonight,” he rushed to apologize, “Jarod’s a good guy. He just gets, I don’t know … aggressive … when he drinks.” He exhaled hard. “My dad was like that too.”

“You’re not mad?” she asked.

He looked at her like she was crazy. “Why would I be mad? You just saved the day again! Stay for a little while longer … Please?”

She followed him inside numbly, still surprised he wasn’t finished with her. Her parents always made it seem like it would be the end of the world if anyone found out about what she could do, and now they’d been proven wrong again. She felt a wave of relief; maybe it would be all right, she thought. Maybe she could handle staying at Angie’s a little while longer.
They walked in to find that Jarod and a few friends had started a card game. He looked up to see Caledonia and grinned, “There she is! All you guys bailed on me and that little lady over there stitched me right up.”

“Are you like a nurse or something?” a big bearded man asked. “Because I have this thing on my hip …” Caledonia’s eyes flew wide open when he came towards her, pulling up his shirt.

“Show it to your own girlfriend!” Jarod said, getting up and cuffing him playfully on the back of the head. “Leave Cal’s girl alone.” Everyone laughed, and Caledonia blushed bright pink.

“Hey, Cal!” Crystal called from the kitchen. She was standing with another woman that looked very much like her, with very long white-blonde hair and big round breasts spilling over the top of her small dress.

“Huh?” Calvin asked.

Crystal rolled her eyes dramatically. “Not you–Cali.” She gestured for Caledonia to come and join them, and she did, eager to get away from the laughing men.

“Cali, this is my friend Brandy,” Crystal said, introducing her.

“Nice to meet you.” Caledonia held her hand out formally.

“So you’re Cal’s new girlfriend,” Brandy said knowingly, shaking her hand with amusement.

“We’re friends,” Caledonia answered, blushing again. Crystal and Brandy exchanged a look that she didn’t quite understand.

“Candy is so jealous of you,” Brandy laughed.

“What?”

“She’s a girl we work with,” Crystal said, “She has the hots for Cal.”

Brandy giggled, “She thinks you stole him from her.”

Caledonia’s eyebrows rose. “I wasn’t aware that he belonged to anyone.”

They both started laughing, and she looked behind her to see Calvin watching them with a worried look on his face.

Brandy scrutinized her unruly braid. “Who does your hair?”

“Does what to it?” asked Caledonia.

Crystal started giggling, “You’re so funny. You should have Brandy fix up your hair. She does mine. Brandy is going to beauty school.”
“Oh … What do you learn there?” Caledonia asked.

“All kinds of stuff,” Brandy replied, ticking off a list of courses, “Cosmetology, electrology, massage therapy. I’m gonna be a stylist, or maybe even an esthetician someday.”

“That’s nice,” said Caledonia, nodding politely. She had no idea what Brandy was talking about.

Brandy came closer and peered at Caledonia’s face. “You don’t have any makeup on at all, do you?”

“No,” she replied, reeling back a little. “I don’t.”

“I know! Let’s give Cali a makeover!” squealed Crystal.

“A makeover?” Caledonia asked nervously.

“Come on!” Crystal started down the hall, tugging Caledonia by the arm. “It’ll be fun!”

Caledonia looked back to Calvin uneasily, hesitantly trailing behind them.

“Where are you going?” he called after them.

“It’s a surprise!” Crystal exclaimed.

Caledonia was led down the hall and taken to the room opposite Calvin’s. She walked into a larger bedroom than Calvin’s, peeking around a corner to see that there was a bathroom attached. There was a bed with a huge wooden headboard and a ceiling covered with mirrors. She looked up at herself looking back down.

“Sit,” Crystal said to her, rummaging through a dresser and pulling out an assortment of tools. She turned back to Brandy with a brush in her hand and a sparkle in her eye. “I have a drawer here now,” she said meaningfully.

“Oooh … So it’s getting serious.” Brandy raised her penciled-on eyebrows.

Caledonia sat down on the bed and almost fell over, jumping back up with a start. “Oh!”

Crystal laughed, “It’s a water bed, see?” She patted the bed, sending rippling waves across the surface.

Caledonia had never seen anything like it, sitting down again on the moving mattress. “Why is there water in it?”

Crystal shrugged. “It’s comfortable … and besides, Jarod likes it.”

Brandy set to work on Caledonia, undoing her braid and brushing out her masses of curls. She plugged in a flat iron and used it to straighten out the coiled strands lock by lock. After a lot of tugging and pulling she stood back to admire her work.
“My God, girl, your hair is so long when it’s straight! I wish I had hair like this.”

“But your hair is long,” Caledonia was puzzled.

She snorted. “I wish it was mine!” she said, confusing Caledonia even more. “So, what’s Cal short for?” she asked, “California?”

“No—Caledonia.”

“Oooh, that’s pretty. That would make a good stage name.”

“Are you an actress?” Cal asked.

“No, we’re dancers,” Crystal said. “Whoa, look at how long your eyelashes are!” she cried, whipping out her makeup kit and lining up a variety of brightly painted tubes and small jars. “Look up and hold still.”

Crystal and Brandy gossiped, talking about relationships and dating. Brandy complained bitterly about catching her boyfriend cheating on her with another dancer. She warned Crystal not to be so quick to trust Jarod.

“Men can’t help it,” she said flatly. “I don’t think that any of them are capable of being monogamous.”

“Jarod isn’t always such a jerk, you know,” Crystal defended him. “He can be really sweet. He had to grow up real fast when he was only eighteen, to take care of his brother and everything. He tries real hard to be there for Cal … you know, ’cause of what happened.”

Crystal chattered away while she outlined Caledonia’s eyes, talking about the future. “Yeah, I should go to school, too. I need to have something to fall back on when I’m too old to dance. I could be a makeup artist someday. And maybe get married …” her voice trailed off wistfully. Caledonia could see her colors, hopeful and melancholy at the same time.

“Dancing sounds like it would be a fun job,” Caledonia said encouragingly. “Do you dance ballet?”

Brandy’s eyes narrowed, and she turned a dull shade of annoyed green. “That’s not funny.”

Caledonia looked at the two of them innocently.

Crystal smiled wryly, realizing they weren’t being teased. “We’re exotic dancers,” she explained.

Caledonia stared blankly. “You’re what?”

“We dance at a gentleman’s club … you know, we strip. It’s good money.”
Caledonia didn’t know, but she kept her mouth shut, sensing their defensiveness. Crystal explained to Brandy that Cali had just moved here from the country, “She grew up, like, way, way out in the boondocks. She didn’t even have TV.”

“Are you serious?” Brandy asked, horrified. “What, were you guys, like, Amish or something?”

“No.” Caledonia fidgeted uncomfortably.

Brandy couldn’t get over the fact that she had been raised in such isolation, quizzing her about things that she always took for granted.

“No electricity–really? No fridge? So you never had ice cream?”

“My father brought some home once,” Caledonia said sadly, “For my birthday.”

“Her parents died,” Crystal mouthed.

They were quiet for a minute, and Caledonia could feel their compassionate and friendly natures. They meant well, and she let it cut through her pain, allowing them to soothe her.

“And,” Crystal added, “Get this–she’s never ever seen a movie before.”

They continued working on her, applying makeup while discussing which movies Caledonia should see.


“And all the Bond movies,” Crystal added, looking up dreamily. “I always wanted to be a Bond girl when I was little.”

“Oh my God!” Brandy exclaimed, “What about The Wizard of Oz?”

Caledonia brightened, finally hearing something familiar. “I’ve read that one!”

“It’s a book too?” asked Crystal.

“I’ve read all fourteen Oz stories,” Caledonia replied.

“Whoa–there are fourteen? I don’t think I’ve even read fourteen whole books,” said Crystal with a laugh, making Brandy join in.

Caledonia was horrified at her admission. “Oh, no! Crystal, you don’t know what you’re missing.”

Crystal shrugged. “Maybe … but then again, you’ve never seen Johnny Depp.”

“Johnny who?”

They laughed again, standing back to scrutinize Cal’s transformation.
“You look so cuuute!” Brandy squealed. “Calvin won’t be able to keep his hands offa you!”

Caledonia blushed at the thought, looking down. “I don’t think he likes me that way.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” said Crystal, “Can’t you see how he looks at you?”

Caledonia could see, but she could also see that he was treating her very differently than he had all the other girls she’d seen him with. Girls that he clearly liked “that way.” Girls that were nothing at all like she was.

“But … He doesn’t–He doesn’t ever …” She stopped, stammering with embarrassment.

“Well, he will when he sees you like this!” Brandy said, pulling Cal up from the bed and marching her over to the mirror in the bathroom.

Caledonia was stunned, looking at the stranger in the mirror. Golden honey hair flowed straight down to her waist, and her face looked like a stranger’s. She was reminded of the girl she’d seen sitting on Calvin’s lap, and she couldn’t help wondering if he would like her better this way; she had to admit that she wanted him to.

Crystal finished up with a brush of blush. “Geez … you look just like Malibu Barbie!”

“Who?” Cali asked.

Her eyes rolled up as she shook her head. “Nevermind.” She looked Caledonia up and down, grimacing with distaste at her baggy clothes and grubby sneakers. “Lord! You need a new outfit!”

She went back to her drawer and pulled out a micro miniskirt. “Put this on.”

“I don’t know …” Caledonia hesitated, but when Crystal gave her a look, she finally slipped off her sneakers and oversized jeans.

“What the–” Brandy stared as Caledonia removed the large hunting knife strapped to her calf and placed it on the dresser. Brandy and Crystal exchanged a look.

“It’s for self-defense,” Caledonia rushed to explain, afraid they might think she wanted to fight like people at the fair.

Crystal shrugged, and then winced. “Ugh. Granny panties. We need to take you shopping.” She handed her some high heels. “Put these on. We’re about the same size.”

Caledonia put on the skirt and slipped on the shoes, standing tentatively.

Brandy took the sides of Caledonia’s man-sized T-shirt and tied them into a knot in the front, revealing her taut stomach. She stood back to give her a once over. “Girlfriend, if I had legs like you do, I’d never wear pants!”
Caledonia wobbled on the tiny spikes of the heels like a newborn fawn, struggling to maintain her balance. “How do you walk in these things?”

Brandy snorted. “Honey, I can pole dance in them!”

Before Caledonia had a chance to ask, Crystal grabbed her arm and steered her down the hall, nearly tripping her. “Come on! Wait ’til Cal gets a load of you!” When they came into the room Crystal cleared her throat.

Calvin looked up and did a double take, his eyes widening in shock. It was Caledonia, but not like he’d ever imagined her. Shining straight hair fell to her waist, and her legs looked long and shapely in super high heels. Her huge eyes were rimmed in black eyeliner, making them stand out even more than they already did. She could have been one of the unattainable girls from a poster or a magazine; she looked older, and not innocent at all.

Taken aback, he just stared, speechless.

She was a far more beautiful version of the girls Jarod was always bringing around and partying with, and he wasn’t sure how he felt about her sudden transformation. When Jarod’s friends started wolf whistling in the background, Calvin wanted to turn around and smack all of their mouths shut. Caledonia looked like she wanted to run away.

“Well …” Crystal asked, “What do you think?”

Jarod nudged him with his elbow, “She looks hot, huh?”

Caledonia stood awkwardly, wishing that she could simply disappear. She looked at Calvin fearfully, seeing his surprise and confusion turn to irritation and anger. She wasn’t sure exactly what kind of reaction she expected, but it wasn’t this. She had donned the costume of a desirable girl, and he clearly didn’t like it. There was no denying anything; colors never lied.

Her face burned with shame. “I better go change. It’s getting late.” She wheeled around and rushed down the hall.

“You jackass,” Crystal scolded Calvin. “I think you hurt her feelings.”

“Yeah, dude!” Jarod added. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I didn’t say anything!” he cried.

“Exactly,” snapped Crystal.

Brandy and Crystal turned and followed Caledonia back down the hall. By the time they caught up with her she’d already slipped back into her jeans, and was crouched down on the floor, strapping her knife back onto her ankle.
“Boys are stupid,” Crystal said.
“Yeah! You look totally hot,” Brandy added.
Caledonia shook her head. “It doesn’t matter,” she lied.
She was ashamed, angry at herself for acting like such a fool and pathetically allowing herself to be transformed in a desperate bid for his approval. She’d known better than to get involved with him all along, and she only had herself to blame for her wounded feelings.
“It doesn’t matter at all,” she repeated.
She had recognized the trap, and yet she had still fallen in; she was no different than all of the girls vying for his attention at school. She bit down on her lip and collected herself. There was no point in feeling bad about it. Nothing had really changed. She hardened her heart and straightened her spine. She’d be all right once she got back to her little cabin in the woods.
She stood up and forced a smile. “Thank you for everything. I have school tomorrow, and I should really be getting back.”
“Back where, sweetie?” Brandy asked sympathetically.
Caledonia thought for a moment, refusing to call it home. “The place I stay. My aunt’s house.”
Crystal stepped forward to enfold her in a sympathetic embrace, patting her back while Caledonia stood stiffly. “Don’t feel bad … I think we just surprised him,” she said.
“I’m fine,” Caledonia said. She decided it would be best to feel nothing at all. There was a knock on the door and Brandy went to open it.
“Cali?” Calvin called, looking over Brandy’s shoulder. “Can you guys give us a minute?”
Brandy and Crystal both gave him the stink eye as they filed out past him, and Caledonia met him on her way out the door. She seemed completely calm, her blank face registering no emotion.
He stood in the threshold with anxious eyes. “Umm … they sure made you look different.”
She nodded blandly, keeping her voice steady, “Yeah … That was funny. I’d better be going now.”
“But–”
“I have some homework I should do.”
Now he looked worried. “I thought you were going to stay for a while. We can just hang out …”
“No.” She was firm. “I have to go now.”

He tried to think of another reason to get her to stay. “We could watch a movie.”

“I’m really very tired,” she countered.

He looked at her with pleading eyes, “But I wanted to talk some more … about … You know, about everything.”

She looked down. “I don’t want to talk about it. I really want to go home.”

“Okay … Okay. I’ll take you.”

He watched her as they walked along down the street, a feeling of dread taking root in the pit of his stomach. She was distant and reserved; he could feel her pulling away from him, and he didn’t know what to do about it. All of the progress he’d made with her had vaporized. All of the patience he’d shown had amounted to nothing.

“I’ll give you a ride to school tomorrow. Okay?”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “If you want to.”

He raked his hand through his hair with a grimace, not sure what to say to say. “I’m sorry,” he said softly. “Please don’t be mad at me.”

She looked up to see him radiating bitter blue-green regret.

“I’m not mad,” she told him. “You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I was just … I didn’t want …” He groped for words.

“What?” she asked.

He sighed, “I didn’t want you to look like those other girls.”

“Why?” she asked, thinking that they were the kinds of girls he couldn’t seem to keep his hands away from.

“Because you’re not like them.”

Caledonia had to agree with that. She knew she wasn’t like them, and she never would be. She was a hopeless freak that saw things that no one else did with her oddball eyes. She would have to accept the fact that she’d never be his type of girl. She would never be anyone’s type of girl.

He looked at her earnestly, radiating concern. She was sorry he was feeling so anxious, but she was anxious too, looking over her shoulder to see that the lights were on at her aunt’s place.

“Goodbye,” she said, rushing off before he had a chance to say any more. She couldn’t bear listening to Calvin apologize for something he had no control over.
He stood on the sidewalk, watching as she made her way to the door, looking back just once at him before the building swallowed her up. He wanted to chase after her, to take her in his arms and beg her not to go. He wanted to kiss her until he felt her kiss him back, but he was terrified that she would reject him once and for all.

He was afraid again, and this time it was for himself.
Phil appeared before her the instant the door clicked shut, staggering over from the kitchen.

“Where’s Angie?” Caledonia asked, her guard up.

“What–no hello for me?” He leered at her. She could smell the alcohol on his breath from three feet away. His eyes narrowed as he scrutinized her made-up face; she could tell right away that he approved. “You’re looking good tonight.”

She thought about him pawing through her things, and her lips curled in disgust. “You stole my money,” she spat out, all of the pain and injustice flooding back to her at once.

“Maybe we can work out a trade …” he said, coming closer.

She darted towards the stairs, but he lunged for her arm, jerking her to a stop. She tried to stoop for her knife, but he pulled her arm up. She composed herself and turned to look at him with a blast of scalding yellow confusion.

He blinked a couple of times, dropping her arm.

“Leave me alone!” she growled, imagining carving him up with her knife, “or I swear to God you’ll regret it.”

“You little tramp! Are you threatening me?”

“Yes I am,” she said in a low throaty voice. She channeled all of her bitter disappointment into building up the next color bombardment. Staring directly at him, she sent a shockwave of frigid greenish-white fear his way. His eyes flew open in surprise, and he took a step back. She could see he wanted to hurt her, but he was terrified, and completely unable to act on the impulse.

He clenched his fists. “I’m telling Angie what a little slut you are!” She watched as he stumbled back the way he came in a blind panic.

Caledonia stood in the foyer for a moment, collecting her thoughts. It was growing more powerful–she could feel it. She was surprised at how easy it was becoming; first pacifying Jarod
and the cop, and now decisively repulsing her aunt’s sinister boyfriend. She realized that she no longer needed to fear Phil, and she grew strangely calm inside, considering what she should do next.

She climbed the stairs, lost in thought. After a long hot shower she retreated to her room, curling up into a ball on the deflated mattress. All of her practice on animals must have strengthened her abilities, and she wondered what it all meant.

Her parents must have somehow known, she thought. They probably realized what she would eventually become, hiding her away as best they could, like some kind of monster in a labyrinth. Maybe she was to blame for their terrible panic attacks.

Calvin knew what she was capable of. He knew, and surprisingly, he still wanted to be her friend; he didn’t hate her at all. But he didn’t desire her either—not in the way she wanted him to. It was obvious that he was simply not attracted to her. She had submitted to the makeover, wanting to please him, and the experiment had failed miserably. She felt like a fool.

She was certain of one thing. She didn’t belong here anymore, and although she pitied her aunt, she did not love her. It was time for her to strike out on her own. There was only one thing in the whole wide world she would truly miss when she left, and she rubbed her temples, trying to forget about how his dark eyes made her feel when she looked into them.

~

The next morning Caledonia dressed for school and went down to the kitchen boldly, with a stiff set to her shoulders. She was done being afraid, and now fully prepared to flex her newfound power.

“Good morning,” she told Angie.

When Phil looked up at her she cast him a withering glance filled with sour green fear, smiling to herself when she saw him look down and shrink away from her. She helped herself to an apple from the counter and sat down across from her aunt.

“I want my money back,” she announced. When Angie looked up at her, she received a strong pulse of tranquility, along with a sweet shade of lavender acquiescence. She smiled and nodded.

“Phil?” Angie asked dreamily, “Could you give Cal her money?”

Phil looked up in shock. “I thought we agreed …”

“Phil,” Cal said, holding out her hand with a threatening smile. “My money, please.”
He stared, and the longer he maintained eye contact the more afraid he became. He blinked, unable to comprehend what was happening to him. He looked to Angie for reassurance, but she was staring off into space, her head resting on her propped-up arm.

Caledonia snapped her fingers, catching Phil’s bulging eyes again. “Now.” Phil found himself reaching for his wallet, sweat beading on his upper lip. He knew something was terribly wrong, but he couldn’t stop his shaking hand from opening the wallet and handing her the contents. He had a feeling that something awful might happen if he failed to comply, but he couldn’t think of what it might be.

Caledonia snatched the cash with a triumphant smile, leaning closer to send a punch of the most powerful black despair she could manage in Phil’s direction. She watched his face crumple, and she told herself that he deserved it. Despite everything he’d done to terrorize her, she still felt a twinge of guilt; she’d never done anything so intentionally cruel before.

She pocketed the money and walked out the front door, her head held high. When she neared his house, Cal was waiting out front, and even from a distance she could see that he was pacing, agitated.

“What happened?” she asked, surprised to find him so worked up. “What’s wrong?”

His anxious eyes searched hers. “I was worried about you,” he said.

“Why?” she asked, confused.

“You left so suddenly last night …”

She looked down, her face flushing hot, remembering her humiliation. She kicked at the ground, resolute. “Can we not talk about it?”

She had already decided that they would only ever be friends, but when she looked back into his face he was blazing with the strongest, most powerful affection and concern she’d seen since her parents last looked at her.

“Why do you like me so much?” she wondered out loud.

He chuckled, and then he started laughing, slow at first and then harder as she joined in. Soon they were both immersed in a soothing turquoise sea of amusement. He handed her a helmet, climbing on the bike and starting it up.

“Get on,” he told her, eager to feel her touch.

She climbed behind him, putting her book bag between them and taking him by the waist. She felt him leaning back into her, his broad shoulders warm against hers. He was vibrating with
the most delicious shade of fuscia she’d ever tasted, and when they made contact she could feel
him sigh with relief.

She sighed too, because his colors made her feel the most contented she’d been since before
the accident. As much as she was afraid to admit it, it felt like somebody loved her, and the
feeling was intoxicating. They arrived at school much too soon.

He pulled into the lot but didn’t cut the engine. He turned around, murmuring in her ear,
“Do you want to just bag it and go to the art museum today? In San Francisco?”

He was radiating warm affection and hope. Caledonia looked at the low grey institutional
buildings of school and back at him. She chose happiness.

He smiled his relief, pulling back out onto the road. Within a few minutes he had dropped
off her bag at his house and handed her a leather jacket. “It’s gonna be cold.”

They headed down the highway, passing by hills and valleys, towns and farm fields. The air
grew cooler and then moist. Caledonia pressed her face between Calvin’s shoulder blades,
tasting the salt in the air mingled with his easy blue contentment. Then they rounded one last
corner, and the view that unfolded before them made her gasp.

She clutched him tighter with excitement as she took in the endless expanse of deep blue
water. She’d seen pictures of the sea, but they hadn’t prepared her for its sheer majesty, and she
drank it in, her heart swelling with joy. Calvin pulled off the freeway just before they crossed the
Golden Gate Bridge into San Francisco, coming to a stop at a lookout point.

He pulled off his helmet. “Are you okay?”

She followed suit, scrambling off the bike to rush to the edge of the walkway. Leaning
against the rail, she took in the panoramic view, breathing in the cool fresh sea air through her
nose. She turned back to Calvin with an enormous smile, and he came over to join her.

“So much … so big,” she said.

Calvin looked out at the horizon, trying to imagine how it would seem to him if he’d never
seen it before. He draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her close, wanting to be as
near to her as he could possibly be. They stood there for a few minutes, hip to hip, and she
shivered a little bit with an unfamiliar happiness.

Emboldened, he turned towards her. “Are you cold?” he asked, his breath warm in her ear.
She froze, thinking she had to keep control of herself; they were, after all, only two good friends
out on an adventure. She didn’t realize that he was about to lean in for a kiss when she turned her face away, cringing into her shoulder.

“No … I’m just happy,” she told him.

He was unable to resist brushing his lips across her hair, finally sighing, “Ready to see the museum?”

She looked up at him, her eyes bright. “Completely.”

They crossed over the Golden Gate Bridge and entered into the hustle and bustle of the city. Once again, Caledonia carefully observed all the new sights and sounds. They drove through a vast park, winding past botanical gardens and paths crowded with joggers and dog walkers.

Calvin pulled up and parked close to a large modern building. He climbed off the bike, stowing their helmets and stretching out his arms. He held his hand out with a smile. “Knife, please. They don’t like them in museums either.”

“People fight in museums?” she asked, horrified.

“No. But they might damage the art.” The shocked disbelief on her face made him realize exactly what a crazy world it was.

“I don’t have it with me today,” she told him.

“Why not?” he asked.

She thought about her newfound powers. “Because I’m not afraid anymore.”

They wandered across the grounds, and he took hold of Caledonia’s hand, watching her head swivel around, taking in as much as she could. Walkways lined with tall palm trees and fountains led them to a pair of sphinxes, standing guard over the wide stairs leading to the entrance. She laughed and climbed up onto one of the giant statues, smiling down at him, bursting with peachy pink joy.

She slid down from her perch, looking at the other people coming into the entrance. “I don’t think I’m dressed appropriately,” she worried, looking down at her worn jeans.

“You’re perfect,” he told her, taking her hand to lead her inside.

They walked into the museum, wandering from gallery to gallery and pointing out their favorite paintings and sculptures to each other. Calvin showed Caledonia things he remembered from a visit long ago, and she saw his colors cloud over with a melancholy blue.

“My mom liked museums,” he said. “She used to take me here a lot when I was a little kid.”

“You must miss her.” She squeezed his hand gently, soothing him.
“Yeah,” he smiled sadly at her, “I do.”

It felt good to acknowledge it, and his mood lightened. As usual, being with Caledonia had stirred up more submerged memories. They bubbled up to the surface along with a rush of conflicting emotions; around her, feelings were as difficult to contain as the dancing mercury of a broken thermometer.

Caledonia seemed to know everything about the paintings and the artists that created them. She was like a museum docent, relating little anecdotes about the historical era they lived in, what their families were like, and whether or not their lives had ended happily.

“How do you know all this stuff?” he asked.

“I’ve read a lot of books about art,” she explained. “And there was a lot about artists in the encyclopedia too.”

“What, did you read the whole encyclopedia?” he teased her.

“Yes,” she replied, completely serious.

“How do you remember it all?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I just do.”

They strolled past a painting of primitively rendered jungle animals, and Caledonia stopped abruptly, gasping in surprise.

Calvin read the nameplate aloud, “The Peaceable Kingdom. Hicks. 1846.”

She latched onto his hand tighter than she ever had before.

“What is it?” he asked.

She took a deep breath, “We had a copy of this picture hanging in our house … Mama cried when Papa brought it home.” She stared at it with shining eyes. “She told me that he took her to a museum on their first date. It must have been this one. They must have stood right here … on this exact spot.”

He understood the feeling, slipping his arm around her waist to draw her closer. She smiled up at him. “Thank you so much for bringing me here.”

He looked down at her, thinking he’d never seen anything so beautiful. He couldn’t stand it anymore, and he bent down to kiss her softly on the lips.

Her amazing eyes flew open wide with surprise, but she did not pull away, so he turned to wrap his arms around her, pulling her up against him. His kiss deepened, and then she was
drowning in the sensation of his lips, his tongue, and his breath mingling with hers. She could see why all the other girls liked it so much.

He reached up to caress her cheek and rake his fingers through her hair, flooding her senses with the most delicious red she’d ever tasted. Her knees buckled, and he dropped his hands to her waist, steadying her and bringing her closer at the same time. When their lips finally parted they were both panting.

He pressed his cheek to hers. “Whoa,” he whispered into her ear.

A museum guard strolled past them, clearing his throat pointedly, and they collected themselves, walking hand in hand through several more galleries in a daze. They rounded a corner into an unattended room full of African masks and he was all over her once again, taking her face in both hands and kissing her again like it was the first time.

Calvin never wanted to stop; it was like the floodgates had opened up, and all of his suppressed desires overcame him. He looked into her innocent eyes and his heart swelled with the power of his newfound feelings. She blushed self-consciously, and he pulled back, trying to get control of himself.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his voice hoarse.

Caledonia was dazed too, overwhelmed by the intensity of their flaming emotions. “Why?” she asked, “Am I doing it wrong?”

He held her close and started laughing, shaking her with the force of it. Soon they were both laughing with happiness, drawing the attention of the museum guard. They straightened up and moved through the gallery, with Calvin trying his best to pay attention to the art and keep his lips away from her soft pink mouth. They passed through an archway into a gallery of art from Oceania, and came to a display case of shields and masks carved of wood, alongside planks and oars decorated with swirling waves, triangles, and rows of dots.

“Look!” she said, pointing out the carvings on the side of a ceremonial drum. “It’s the same as your tattoo.” She leaned in, reading the description of the piece.

Calvin looked closely, surprised to see the exact same design he was wearing on his arm.

“It says it’s for honoring ancestors,” she smiled up at him, “so it’s perfect for your mom.”

He stood behind her, taking her by the waist and resting his chin on her shoulder. He read the description along with her, amazed at the coincidence. He wouldn’t have known a thing about it if it wasn’t for her, and he felt like it was some kind of sign.
“All of this stuff is in their permanent collection,” Caledonia said quietly. “So that means that my parents saw it too.”

Standing there, wrapped in Calvin’s arms, Caledonia was happier than she could ever remember being. She leaned back into him and he pressed into her; before too long he was kissing her neck and ear, his warm lips making her dizzy.

He burrowed his face into her hair. “You smell so good,” he murmured.

“It’s the pheromones,” she replied.

“The what?” he laughed.

“You know … chemicals.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s you.” He kissed her behind the ear, making her giggle. She sighed with pleasure and melted into him. The museum guard strolled past them again, his footfall pointedly loud.

“Let’s get out of here,” Calvin whispered into her ear.

They walked out into the bright shining day, arms locked together.

“Have you ever heard of Fisherman’s Wharf?” he asked her.

~

Suddenly everything between them had changed, and they walked hand in hand, neither one wanting to break physical contact. Bathed in contentment, they took in the sights and sounds together, mingling with tourists from all over the world. They stopped to watch the street performers and Caledonia smiled at them all, charmed. When Calvin dropped a dollar into an open guitar case she asked him why.

“That’s how they make their money,” he explained, constantly amused by her inexperience.

“How much do you pay them?”

“You’re not really paying them … It’s more like you’re showing your appreciation for what they do.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” she asked.

He chuckled, and had to admit that she had a point. They stopped and watched a juggler toss flaming batons into the air alongside a magician producing doves from a top hat. Caledonia gasped with amazement, her eyes bright. There wasn’t a cynical bone in her body, and the performers played to her, singling her out of the crowd to pick a card or assist in their performance. Calvin thought she was more fun to watch than they were.
He kept his arms around her as much as possible, loving the way it felt to be able to touch her whenever he wanted to. He spoke under his breath, “You do realize that it’s not really magic, right?”

She rolled her lovely eyes at him. “I’m not stupid. I’ve read books about magic tricks. I’ve just never seen it done.”

He whispered in her ear, “You’re the only one who can do real magic.”

Their eyes met again, followed by their lips, and they ended up spending most of the day kissing. They sampled the food stands, feeding their leftovers to some remarkably docile seagulls that landed at their feet.

She tried to pay, but he wouldn’t let her. “It’s okay,” she said. “I got my money back this morning.”

“Your aunt finally wised up?” he asked.

“No. I just … I have the situation under control now.”

He raised his brows at her, his eyes asking the question, but hers clouded over and she turned away. Caledonia was unwilling to discuss her newfound power, and he let it go, keeping his mouth shut and taking her hand quietly.

Their perfect day was over much too fast, and they climbed back on the bike just as the fog started to roll in. It engulfed the city in a cool, damp cloak, following them across the bridge while the sun set over the dancing sea. She turned back to see a grey blanket creeping across the mouth of the bay, swallowing everything in its path.

She nestled against Calvin, her lips curling into a smile on the back of his neck. They were about halfway home when he pulled to the side of the roadway, stopping to climb off. He took his helmet off, set it aside and reached over to remove hers.

“Why are we stopping he–”

He took her face between his hands and kissed her, sweet and slow. It started out warm and comforting, like wood smoke and butterscotch candy, slowly building to a bright burning red that made her stomach quiver. The roar of traffic rushing by was drowned out by the sound of her heart pounding in her ears.

When they finally broke apart she was dizzy.

“I wasn’t going to make it all the way home,” he explained. He embraced her once more, handing her back her helmet.
Then they were back on the road, and Caledonia clung to him tightly, happy in a way she’d never imagined she could be. She thought about the art museum and the painting that her mother had loved so much. There was something else her mother had told her about her parents’ date at the museum—something that made her heart skip a beat when she thought about it.

It was on that exact spot, standing in front of that same painting so many years ago, that her parents had shared their first kiss.
They pulled up at Calvin’s house to see a dozen big motorcycles parked in the front yard. He was disappointed because he wanted to be alone with Caledonia, and suddenly afraid that his brother’s rough crowd might put her off again.

“Let’s go get something to eat,” he suggested, relieved when she agreed.

He took her to a Chinese restaurant with red and gold walls and a giant fish tank on one side of the room. They were seated in a booth next to the tank, and once again, Calvin watched Caledonia’s enormous eyes scan the room, taking in every detail.

She smiled across the table at him. “It smells good in here.”

A waiter approached, bringing them a pot of tea and pouring it into small china cups. Caledonia watched closely and flashed another brilliant smile at him, taking the menu he offered and studying it, her brows knit together in concentration.

She looked up at Calvin with serious eyes. “What if I pick the wrong thing?”

He chuckled, “What do you like?”

She looked back at the menu. “I don’t know. There’s too much to choose from.” She bit her lip, looking so worried that Calvin had to fight the urge to lunge over the table and kiss the look right off her face.

“I can order if you want,” he offered.

She set the menu down with a relieved look. “Yes, please.”

Calvin told the waiter that she’d never tried Chinese food before, asking him for suggestions. He ended up ordering more food than they needed, wanting to show her as many new things as possible. Caledonia turned around to inspect the fish tank, fascinated by the fancy goldfish with huge bulging heads and diaphanous tails.

“Look how bizarre…” she said, pointing to one with telescoping eyes.
He got up to slide into the booth next to her, watching her watching the fish. He rested his chin on her shoulder, and before too long he was trailing kisses down her neck, making her squirm and giggle.

“What happened here?” He brushed his lips across two round marks just above her collarbone, “Vampire?”

She shivered a little at the sensation. “I told you the cat dragged me, didn’t I?” She pulled the collar of her shirt down a little to show him two corresponding puncture scars on her back, “That’s where he bit into me.”

Calvin groaned, pulling her closer. The image of a cougar closing its jaws on her was a terrible one, and he kissed her scars again, swearing to never let anything bad happen to her again. He wanted to protect her, and she could feel it, sweet and warm and purple and pink. Her parents used to feel the same way.

The waiter arrived with a tray and Calvin got up to sit opposite her, eager to see her reaction. The man set two soup bowls down with a flourish, placing a pile of browned rice in each and ladling broth over them. He stood back to watch the expression on Caledonia’s face as the soup exploded with cracking popping sounds.

She sat bolt upright, reeling back in her seat with her eyes wide open. “What’s it doing?”

“Sizzling Rice,” the waiter said with a wink.

Her eyes darted back and forth between the waiter and Calvin, and she finally smiled, breaking into delighted laughter that they couldn’t help but join in.

“That was my favorite when I was a kid,” Calvin said, remembering.

The dishes started arriving fast and furious, and the waiter presented each one to her personally, describing it in detail as if she were a visiting dignitary. They dug in, and the waiter came around often, anxious to please her.

“Everybody loves you,” Calvin smiled, feeling happy.

“That’s not true,” she replied, thinking about the girls at school. “But it’s nice of you to say it.”

After they finished eating, Caledonia leaned back with a sigh. “There’s too much food here. What a terrible waste.”

“It’s okay. We can take it home.”

She was surprised. “They let you do that?”
He smiled at her again, wondering how she could be such a contradiction. She knew so much, and yet almost nothing at the same time. He paused for a second, thinking about how she was about food.

“How come you don’t eat at your aunt’s house?”

She stiffened in her seat, looking down and fidgeting with her fingernails.

“Tell me,” he said, and something in his voice demanded the truth. She looked up to meet his eyes.

“My aunt works a lot . . .” she started out.

“And?” he leaned forward intensely.

“I don’t like to be there when she’s not around.”

Calvin’s eyes widened. He remembered the big jerk that had answered the door and clenched his jaw with a flash of anger. “Why?”

“I don’t like her boyfriend.”

He sat up straight. “Why?”

“He’s always trying to—” She looked down again, ashamed.

His voice rose, “Trying to what?”

Calvin was so upset it was overwhelming, and she was alarmed at his intense reaction. “I just don’t like the way he looks at me.” She started backpedaling, “It’s only when he drinks . . . and nothing’s happened yet . . . not really.”

He burned hot with anger that she could feel from across the table, “So that’s why you’ve been wandering around outside at night? To keep away from him?”

“Yeah,” she admitted.

“I’ll kill him!”

She looked up at him incredulously. “If I wanted him dead, I would have done it myself.”

He clenched his fists. “Does your aunt know? What does she say?”

“He denies it, and she believes him. She wants to believe him.”

“I’m gonna kick his ass!” Calvin hissed, and from the colors he was putting off, she didn’t doubt he was planning it.

“No! Please don’t do anything,” she tried to reassure him, surprised to see him getting so worked up. “I have the situation under control.”

“If he so much as looks at you . . .” His voice was dripping with menace.
“It’s okay now. I figured out how to stop him. I can … scare … him. He won’t be bothering me anymore. And now that school’s going to be out I can get a job to save enough money to get away.”

He paused, taking a deep breath and exhaling. “Is he why you want to leave?”

She nodded yes.

He pressed his lips together tight, unclenching his fists despite his lingering anger. “You did your thing … Right? To him? That’s how you got your money back.”

She nodded, looking away with embarrassment. “Yeah. I’m getting a lot better at it.”

He took her hand across the table. “If he ever bothers you again, I want you to come to me, okay?”

She remembered the last time she’d run to Calvin for help, only to find a girl on his lap just moments after he’d dropped her off. Her stomach churned when she remembered how it felt, and she realized that nothing had really changed. Her parents had told her to trust no one, and yet here she was, confessing everything, admitting to what she could do. She withdrew her hand.

“I can handle Phil,” she said.

“I just want to help,” he replied.

She could tell he did, but she was confused and afraid. The thought of Calvin kissing another girl again scared her much more than Phil ever did, and she remembered what Brandy had said about guys not being able to control themselves.

The waiter came to take their plates, bringing them two fortune cookies.

“These ones are true,” he told Caledonia with a wink.

Calvin demonstrated how to snap open the cookie to find the little slip of paper inside.

“I read about these in a story once,” she said somberly. She read hers aloud, “Change is coming soon.” She looked up at him with scrutinizing eyes. “I suppose that’s always true.”

He read his: “Your wish will come true.”

“What do you wish for?” she asked him.

His eyes blazed at her, and he spoke intensely, “I don’t want you to go away.”

She looked down, afraid to trust what she saw right in front of her. When they got up to leave, Calvin escorted her out the door, his warm hand pressing on the small of her back. They got to the bike and he folded his strong arms around her, burrowing his face in her hair and breathing in deeply.
He pulled back to look at her, stroking her cheek softly and forcing her to lock eyes with him. “What color am I putting out right now?”

She gasped. He was doing it again, flooding her with colors so intense that she felt she might drown in them. “Pink,” she breathed.

“Pink?!”

She couldn’t help smiling at the look on his face. “There’s some purple too … and red.”

“What color are you?” he asked, searching her phenomenal eyes.

“Same,” she whispered.

“Is that good?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she answered honestly.

He drew her back into his chest, and she could feel his heart pounding against hers.

“It feels good to me,” he whispered in her ear. “You have no idea what you do to me.”

She froze, suddenly serious. She reeled back to look up at him with big fearful eyes. “I swear I’m not doing anything.”

He smiled, cupping her chin and looking at her with his eyes wide open. “Whatever it is, I like it.”

She watched his face as he leaned in to kiss her, overwhelmed by the flood of emotions washing over her again. She couldn’t tell where his began and hers stopped, and she’d never felt anything so intense in her entire life. I might not have to leave, she thought again, and the idea made her shiver inside.

He pulled up to her aunt’s house, reluctant to drop her off. She reassured him again that she’d be fine, and agreed to let him take her to school in the morning. She climbed down from the bike only to be wrapped back up into his enthusiastic embrace once again.

“Thank you,” she said solemnly between his goodbye kisses. “Thank you for taking me to the museum …” He swooped in to kiss her. “And for the Chinese food … and showing me the sea …” He kissed her again. “And … Just– just everything.” He sent her off with one last kiss that had them both reeling, and she stumbled in the door and up to her room. She got into bed and hugged the pillow, her mind a tumult of confusion.

Caledonia spent hours lying awake, her head and her heart fighting a vicious battle over whether or not she should trust Calvin. She thought about his ardent kisses and blushed, smiling
at the memory of how it felt. Then she remembered that his lips had been all over another girl not so very long ago. She flushed an ugly envious green that quickly turned to deep blue shame.

Now that she knew what Calvin’s kisses tasted like, she couldn’t stop thinking about kissing him again. She could no longer see things clearly when she was around him; her logical thoughts were drowned by a sea of emotion. She needed to be away from his intense colors to get some perspective, but the only place she really wanted to be was with him.

She had witnessed his nature with her own two eyes. He was reckless, both with his own safety and with the feelings of others. The way he callously toyed with girls was a red flag; Caledonia knew she would be a fool to ignore it. But she wanted to. She wanted to believe that his colors would never change–she wanted to believe in him with all of her heart. She thought about her Aunt Angie, and how deluded she was about Phil.

Calvin was making her parents’ little cabin in the woods start to seem less like a refuge and more like a lonely and desolate place. If she stayed she was afraid she would end up behaving like a fool, or worse, be left behind, drowning in his wake like one of the sad girls from school.

That night, both Calvin and Caledonia lay in bed awake a long time, thinking about each other. The last thought that crossed both of their minds was their first kiss in the museum, and they each brought their fingers to their lips, in awe at the power of it.

~

When Caledonia left for school the next morning, he was right there, waiting outside her front door.

“Hey,” he said, his voice velvety smooth.

“Hey,” she replied.

He took her bag and her hand, leading her out to where his bike was parked. Then he put everything down and greeted her with a kiss. Everything seemed brighter in the fresh new morning, and Caledonia had a renewed sense that somehow, someway, things were going to be okay after all.

When they got to school Calvin walked her to class with his arm draped around her. He was staking a claim on her for all to see, and it did not go unnoticed by the girls that competed for his attention. He was by her side at lunch too, lounging on the grass and nudging his head onto her lap as she tried to read a book. He made it nearly impossible for her to focus.
A couple of girls followed her into the library when she went to return her books, talking in loud voices for her benefit.

“I don’t get it,” said one of them. “I mean, look at her.”

Caledonia turned around to see Hillary and Debbie. They were both scowling at her with open contempt, and neither one of them held any books.

“You know, you’re totally not his type,” Debbie snarled at her.

“He probably just feels sorry for you,” Hillary added. “He told me I was the hottest girl at school.”

Caledonia returned her books and tried to get past them to leave, but they stood blocking the doorway. She turned sideways to pass between them, surprised when she felt a sharp tug on her braid. She spun around to see them laughing, and her eyes flew open with a flash of indignation. They laughed even louder, unaware of how numerous and fierce her defenses were.

Lightning quick, she swung her leg around, scooping Hillary right off her platform heels, sending her crashing onto Debbie, toppling them both like dominos. She stood staring down at them, delivering a powerful blast of ice-cold fear.

The librarian glanced up to see two girls sprawled on the floor, looking up at Caledonia with completely horrified faces. “What happened over there?” she called out.

“They tripped,” answered the quiet girl who’d been haunting the library for the past few weeks. She flipped her braid over her shoulder, and walked out the door with a lighter bag and a heavier heart.

After school Calvin was waiting for her again, throwing his arms around her like they’d been apart for days instead of just hours. She was a little taken aback, unused to being showered with so much affection. He kissed her worried face, and she relaxed a little, letting his sweet happiness flow over her, tempering her own dark mood.

She looked up to see a trio of girls walking by with stares so filled with vibrating red and green hostility that Caledonia could feel the burning heat coming off of them. “Slut,” she heard one of them say under her breath. She turned her face away from Cal’s, uncomfortable again.

“They hate me because of you.”

“Ignore them. They’re just jealous,” he said, kissing her behind her ear.

“I know,” she replied. “But now they want to hurt me.”
“They won’t do anything. They’re just a bunch of stupid girls,” he added, concentrating on the way she fit so perfectly into his arms.

“Then why did you kiss them?” she asked, stopping him.

“Uh … I don’t know.”

She pulled back from him. “I suppose I’m just a stupid girl too.”

“No! It’s not the same thing!”

“It looks exactly the same,” she said sadly.

He struggled with his words, “It’s different … You’re different. You’re not like other girls.”

She frowned, looking down. “I’m aware of that.”

“That’s not what I mean. It’s me … I’m different. You make me feel different.”

Her eyes flashed angrily. “I told you, I’m not making you feel anything!” She tried to walk off but he grabbed her arm. She looked up to see the girls had been joined by Hillary and Debbie, watching them from across the courtyard with palpable hatred. All of their hurtful words came rushing back into her mind. “Let me go.”

He shook his head no. “Don’t let them get you all upset. They have nothing to do with us.”

She looked over at them, and back at him, hesitating.

“C’mon, let me take you home. Please?”

She drew a shaky breath and agreed, following him out to the parking lot.

“Do you wanna come over and hang out for awhile?” he asked hopefully.

She shook her head no, afraid to look him in the eye. “I better go to my aunt’s. I have some things I need to take care of.”

Truthfully, she was shaken. Seeing girls he’d been intimate with so recently made her feel even more insecure and frightened than ever. She was scared because it was too late; despite all of her caution, and whether she wanted to admit it or not, she’d already surrendered her wounded heart to him.

Calvin drove the short distance home extra slowly, racking his brain for a reason to make her change her mind. She promised to see him first thing in the morning, reminding him it would be their last day at school. He watched her make her way into the condo with a heavy heart, feeling lonely the minute the door closed behind her.
Chapter Fifteen
DISCOVERED

Professor Reed was having a bad day. His subjects kept inexplicably dying, his most senior employee was growing increasingly insolent, and he was having trouble procuring a rare synthetic compound. He logged onto his computer, sifting through investment accounts and bank statements until something stopped him cold in his tracks.

Mackenzie, David and Jennifer. The names had appeared on a long forgotten automated search, materializing like ghosts from the far distant past. He scanned the information with a dry mouth, reading an obituary notice posted in a small town newspaper. He picked up the phone and dialed it with shaking hands.

“I need you in the office immediately,” he said.

Within minutes a hulking man in a black suit appeared, taking a seat opposite him.

The professor leaned forward in his chair. “Maximillion, I need you to drop everything and retrieve some information for me immediately.”

The big man frowned. “Listen, doc. I have a little problem to dispose of, if you know what I mean. Two more of ’em dropped dead this morning and–”

“It can wait. This is a matter of the utmost urgency.”

“It’s your call,” Max shrugged.

“Someone crucial to this entire project has surfaced, and I need you to locate her at once.” Reed’s voice was vibrating with excitement, making the big man sit up and take notice. “There’s a substantial bonus in it for you if you get me her location within the hour.”

Max had never seen Reed so agitated, and he used it to his advantage. “It’ll cost you double my fee.”

The professor nodded, showing Max the obituary. He pointed out the line that mentioned the couple was survived by a daughter. “Find the girl,” he ordered. Max got up, leaving Professor Reed to his thoughts.
The old man stared off into space, a faraway look in his eyes. How incredibly fortuitous, he mused, to have such a gift fall right into his lap just when things were looking so bleak. It must be a sign that all his hard work would soon be paying off, and all of his sacrifices would prove to be worthwhile.

He was stunned to know that David and Jennifer had not only survived all this time, but that they had eluded his efforts to find them. Somehow they had slipped through the electronic dragnet that he’d monitored for years.

And there was a daughter! He had always assumed that they’d succumbed to the madness that had engulfed the others of the first generation, never imagining that they might be capable of raising a child.

He mustn’t get his hopes up, he thought. There was a possibility that the child wasn’t theirs, or perhaps some cretin at the small town newspaper had gotten the facts wrong. Still, the timeline was about right, and if it was true …

He remembered Jenny and David fondly, saddened that he didn’t get a chance to perform their autopsies. They truly were amazing, he thought, among the brightest of his little family of research students. He would have liked to have seen the condition of their brains after all these years.

He leaned back in his chair, fingertips together. The child would be, what … sixteen, seventeen years old. If his hypothesis was correct, she would be in possession of powerful second generation abilities. With both parents in the first generation she could have double the Athena effect; she would truly be a one-of-a-kind specimen. He cursed the fact he’d been denied the opportunity to raise her as his own.

He must have her at all costs.

Max came back into the office within the hour, unbuttoning his suit coat and taking a chair with an air of satisfaction. The professor looked up eagerly. “Well?”

“The kid is in Santa Rosa, living with her aunt, one Angela Jenkins. The aunt has custody until she turns eighteen in October. Kid’s name’s Cal-ah-do-ni-a,” he said slowly. “That’s weird.”

“It’s lovely,” smiled the professor. “Ah, yes, I met with Angela once when David and Jenny first went missing. It makes perfect sense. So she has guardianship?”

“Yes.” He slid a piece of paper over to the professor. “The address and phone.”
Professor Reed smiled, “I’ll have to call and offer my condolences.”

“My bonus?” Max asked.

“I’ll have it deposited immediately. I’m going to need a driver. We’ll be leaving to retrieve the girl as soon as possible.”

Max got up to leave, pausing at the door. “What if she doesn’t want to come?”

“We’ll make the aunt an offer.”

“What if she won’t take it?”

The professor was irritated by his questions, but he wasn’t going to let the big oaf’s doubts ruin his glorious day. He waved his hand dismissively. “I’ll take Layla with me. That should do the trick.”

“Whatever you say,” Max shrugged, turning to leave.

The professor’s brow knit together, thinking he really couldn’t afford to take a chance.

“Wait … I’d like you to assemble a team and be ready to go, just in case.”

When the door clicked shut he sat back in his chair with an excited smile. Jenny and David’s child—nearly within his grasp. And a girl to boot! It was almost too good to be true. Surely the offspring of two such brilliant minds would be extraordinary. He got up to pace, unable to contain his excitement as he considered the possibilities.

A door may have closed, but a window had just opened.

~

Calvin got home from school that day, passing through the partying crowd with a serious look on his face. They called for him to join in, but he waved them off, heading straight to his room to flop onto his bed and wrestle with his feelings.

Caledonia was driving him crazy.

He wanted to be with her every minute of the day, but she obviously didn’t feel the same way. She made him think about the future and question the way he’d been living his life; she made him dream about having things that he never thought he’d want. He’d never felt this way about anyone ever before.

But she didn’t trust him, and he knew it.

He could feel her resistance, and it scared him; it seemed like she was always on the verge of slipping out of his reach. Her ability to control animals, and now even people, only pointed out to him how far out of his league she was. She might not know much about everyday life, but
she was the smartest person he’d ever met, and from what he’d read on the internet, both of her parents had been practically geniuses. They would probably never have approved of her being with someone like him.

His feelings were so powerful it was alarming; he couldn’t imagine going back to the way his life was before he found her.

Or rather, before she found him, he thought, recalling the night she’d saved him from a brutal beating. The fact that her aunt’s boyfriend was the reason she wandered the streets at night filled him with a renewed surge of vengeful hatred, and he had to fight the urge to run back to her house and beat the hell out of the big bastard. He sighed, remembering the way she controlled his brother and the cops.

She really didn’t need his help.

She didn’t need him for anything at all, he thought, a lump of dread settling in his stomach. She could run away and disappear as mysteriously as she had arrived, and he had no idea where he would look for her if she did. As far as he knew, Caledonia was still planning on leaving, and he knew how elusive she could be when she wanted to hide.

He sat up with determination.

He had to find a way to make her trust him. He had to make her want to stay. He started formulating plans, thinking about all the places he could take her. Her strange upbringing made her easy to impress, because even the simplest things were brand new to her. Maybe if he kept her entertained enough she’d want to stick around … Maybe even forever.

He wondered about her parents, finding it hard to imagine why two such intelligent and highly educated people would choose to raise their only child in such a primitive way. What could possibly be awful enough to make them hide out for all those years? The more he considered it, nothing about their story made sense at all. He reached for his laptop.

He went back to the group photo on a hunch, looking up a few of the other student researchers to see what had become of them. What he uncovered made his hair stand on end. All six of the other students in the photo with Caledonia’s parents had taken their own lives.

There was a hanging, two overdoses, and a flying leap from the Golden Gate Bridge. One graduate student had jumped from a twentieth floor balcony, leaving her twin toddlers orphaned. All the accounts attributed the bizarre suicides to depression, alcoholism, or paranoid schizophrenia.
The most astounding death was the widely covered case of a man who had set himself aflame on the steps of the university’s admissions office. Calvin remembered hearing about the shocking self-immolation when he was a little kid, and his mind started racing.

Caledonia had described how her parents suffered from terrifying visions and seizures, and now he knew that all of their fellow researchers had killed themselves. Project Athena must have done something to them.

Calvin took a closer look at the professor. He came across a university newsletter that reported the suspension of his funding, announcing his immediate dismissal for ethics violations. Professor Reed left the university in disgrace, and there was nothing more to be found about him; it was as if he simply dropped off the face of the earth along with Caledonia’s parents.

Calvin fell back on his bed with a great whoosh of an exhale.

Whatever the cause, it was clear that Caledonia had been raised in isolation by a couple of very troubled people. Her parents sounded disturbed at best, and it was possible that they were slowly going insane. Could they have been afraid of something that existed only in their own minds?

Calvin went back to look at all of the smiling young faces in the original photo, searching for any sign of the tragedy that lie ahead of each of them. There was nothing there but hopeful optimism and great expectations for a brilliant future. He could see Caledonia in her parents’ faces, and he was suddenly more afraid for her than he was for himself.

~

“Cal! You’re finally home!” Angie called out happily. “Come in here!”

She walked in the door to see Phil and Angie seated at the kitchen table with a flame-haired boy and girl. The pair looked up simultaneously, sizzling with curiosity.

“There’s someone here to see you,” Angie smiled up at her, “He was your father’s college professor.”

An older man rose from a chair with a warm smile, and Caledonia stepped forward, politely shaking his outstretched hand. He was practically vibrating with excitement, scrutinizing her with an intensely saturated yellow orange. Although he looked quite a bit older, she recognized him from the internet photos Calvin had shown her.
“My goodness, you certainly did inherit David’s hair!” he said, his eyes studying her face avidly. “Please allow me to introduce myself. I’m Doctor Theodore Reed, but you can call me Teddy.”

Something inside Caledonia recoiled, and the girl on the other side of the table startled. She turned to look at the two teens, struck by their unusual coloration. They were pale and heavily freckled, each one crowned with a head of curly red hair. Unlike the other teenagers she’d seen at school, their posture was oddly formal, and they dressed like they’d come from another era.

The girl wore a cardigan sweater over a full skirt, her lacy buttoned-up collar accented by a cameo pinned primly at the neck. The boy had on a suit and tie, a neatly folded handkerchief poking out of his breast pocket. Their eyes hadn’t left her since she walked in the door, and they both stared intensely.

Caledonia looked closer and gasped, surprised to see that the girl had mismatched eyes; one green, the other a light golden brown.

The professor cleared his throat. “These are two of my brightest students, Layla and Michael.” The girl smiled benignly, sending a calming lavender cloud wafting in Caledonia’s direction.

They rose from their chairs, and Caledonia shook their hands as well, pushing the feeling back the way it came. Did the girl’s eyes just narrow?

“You have heterochromia too,” Caledonia observed, fascinated to see another person whose eyes did not match. Layla glanced to the professor for direction.

“You’re clearly a very clever girl,” Professor Reed jumped in, “and that’s why we’re here today.”

“Sit down Cal. We need to talk.” Angie smiled tranquilly, radiating the same lavender that the girl had just launched in her direction. Cal couldn’t help but notice that her usually harried and scatterbrained aunt seemed strangely calm. Even Phil was staring off into space with a dreamy look on his beefy face. She looked back at the girl, wondering.

The professor cleared his throat, getting Cal’s attention. “I can’t express to you how sorry I was to learn of your parents’ tragic accident. When I found out that they had a child, well, naturally I wanted to do something to help.”

“How did you find out?” Caledonia asked suspiciously.
“I came across the obituary in the Anderson Valley Gazette.” He made a little woeful clucking sound. “Tragic … simply tragic. Those two kids– your parents–they were like family to me. I loved them as if they were my own children.” Caledonia remembered the article that described how he had presided so paternally over her parents’ research project.

Though she saw nothing to suggest he was lying, Caledonia couldn’t shake the queasy feelings of alarm that were emanating from deep within her belly. The old man had none of the calm and steady wisdom that poured from Calvin’s grandparents. He looked at her with undisguised interest, a rapacious hunger twinkling in his eager eyes.

He went on, “So, in their honor, I’d like to offer you an all-expense paid education. Everything covered, including room and board.”

“Isn’t that great?” Angie chimed in.

“Great,” Phil echoed.

“Layla and Michael can show you everything. I’d like to take you with us today, so you have time to get settled in,” said the professor.

“She can pack her things and leave right now,” Phil said. He’d already made the decision for her.

Caledonia’s guard went up, and she tensed, poised to flee. “I need to think about it.” She wasn’t sure why, but somehow she knew that she must play for time.

“Your aunt has signed over your guardianship to me,” the professor smiled, pointing to some papers on the table. “So it’s official.”

“It’s all for the best,” Angie nodded.

Caledonia looked to her peacefully smiling aunt for help. “But I–I still have one more day of school … And I want to see my friend graduate this weekend.”

“Surely it’s not necessary for you to go back.” The professor answered for her in the most soothing tone, smiling patronizingly, “Why don’t you listen to Layla? She can tell you all about our program.”

Cal turned to watch as the girl started to talk about their studies, describing to her how wonderful their teachers were. It sounded like a scripted sales pitch, and as she spoke she projected a powerful tranquilizing lavender, flooding Caledonia’s senses with a sweet syrupy complacency.
Caledonia listened and started to nod in agreement, soothed by Layla’s droning voice. She began to think that maybe this was just what she needed … A ticket out of this place … A fresh start and an opportunity to continue her education …

But it would mean leaving Calvin behind, and the thought was like a knife twisting in her heart.

“No,” she said, pushing back firmly against the feeling. This time, Layla clearly flinched, and all Caledonia could think was that she had to get out of the room. She rose from the table, backing away. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go … d-do some schoolwork.”

The professor got up from his chair. “I hope you’ll consider my offer.”

“Of course,” she nodded goodbye. “I will.” She flew up the stairs, taking refuge behind the locked door of the bathroom. There were more voices, and then the sound of the front door closing. Her mind started racing, and she looked out of the small window over the shower to see the three visitors leaving in a cloud of greenish grey frustration.

She splashed cold water on her face and wrists, trying to make sense of what had just happened. She had a gut feeling that there was something terribly wrong, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it. She heard Angie and Phil go into their bedroom and she froze, straining to hear their voices through the vent in the wall.

Angie sounded worried. “Are you sure it’s the right thing?”

“That professor will straighten her out.”

“But—”

“Baby, you know she’s just going to get herself into trouble here. Running around with those bikers …”

“But she’s family.”

“It’s for the best. Besides, we need that money.” He chuckled happily, “Did you see his watch? Boy, that old man is loaded! He must have really liked your brother.”

Their voices trailed off as Caledonia looked at her saddened face in the mirror. For the second time in as many months she was going to be sent to live with strangers, only this time she had been sold. She thought about the professor’s avid eyes and cringed, walking to her makeshift bedroom in a daze.

Something bounced off the window with a sharp ping, and her head snapped up. She rose to look down and see Calvin standing on the walkway below, pitching pebbles at the glass. She
could see his worried aura from the second floor, and she wondered how he found out about the
professor’s visit. She sighed with relief; Calvin would know what to do. He gestured for her to
join him.

She raced down the stairs and out the door. “How did you find out?” she asked him,
breathless.

“Find out what?”

“About the professor,” she said.

“Professor Reed?” he asked, the name still fresh in his mind.

“Yeah.” She looked over her shoulder at the parking lot, nervous. “I think he’s gone now.”

His eyes opened wide. “He was here?”

“Isn’t that why you came?”

His voice was deadly serious, “What does he want?”

“Me,” she replied, “He wants me to go with him ... and so does my aunt.”

Calvin’s face was stony, and he went ice cold with a bitter fear she’d never tasted before.

“Come with me,” he said. “There’s something you need to see.”
When they got to Calvin’s room he pulled out his computer and showed her everything. She read over his shoulder as he scrolled through one shocking article after another, hardly able to believe the gruesome fate that all of Professor Reed’s student researchers shared.

“Besides the suicides, do you see what they all had in common?” he asked her.

Caledonia looked up numbly. “What?”

“None of them had any next of kin.”

“Is that unusual?” she asked.

He looked at her seriously. “For all six of them to be orphans? Yes.”

Caledonia sat up with a jolt when she came to the story about the double-suicide and the poor abandoned twins. “They were there today,” she gasped. “Twins–They came with him. A boy and a girl … Layla and Michael. It must have been them.”

Calvin was surprised. “How do you know it was the same ones?”

She pointed to the picture of their mother. “They both had hair exactly like hers.”

“Lots of people have red hair,” he said.

She shook her head no, looking at him with shocked eyes, “The girl… She had eyes like mine. Heterochromic.”

Calvin’s eyebrows shot up, and he went back to the computer, determinedly searching for more information about the twins. There was no mention of them after the tragedy that orphaned them, and nothing came up in any search of their names. He finally quit looking, frustrated.

“Why would they end up with him?” he asked her.

“I don’t know. They’re going to the university … He had them tell me all about how great it was, and how he would pay for everything.”

“He’s not with the university anymore,” Calvin said grimly.

“They were trying to convince me to go with them. She tried …”
Her voice trailed off, and she sat back quietly, thinking about what had happened. She wondered if the girl really had tried to change her mood, thinking it might have only been her imagination. Layla was obviously doing exactly what the professor told her to, but why?

It could be perfectly innocent. It was possible that he simply wanted to help the children of his former students out of sentimentality, but maybe it was a guilty conscience. The research could have been the reason for her parents suffering, as well as all of the suicides.

Then there was the girl’s eyes …

She sat quietly, lost in thought, considering the implications. There were too many coincidences to ignore, and she felt the same creepy sensation that she had when she first met the old man. Every cell in her body told her that she must avoid going with him at all costs, and now she had no time to save money for her escape. Caledonia rubbed her temples, confused and frightened by the things Calvin had shown her.

She looked up to see him watching her with fear in his dark eyes, and her face softened, touched that he was so worried for her. It occurred to her that appearances could be deceiving, and that he was a far better person than her first impressions had led her to believe.

She reached over to lay her hand on his cheek, thinking how much she liked his handsome face. He sighed, pressing into her palm and closing his eyes. She leaned in closer and kissed him softly on the lips, realizing how much she would miss him when she left.

He took her into his arms and pulled her close, shuddering with relief.

“What are we going to do?” Calvin asked.

“I have to go,” she said sadly.

He jumped back like he’d just been punched, surprising her with his extreme reaction. He took hold of her by the shoulders, panic in his eyes. “Are you kidding? You can’t go with him! Don’t you see? There’s something really bad going on!”

“I know, I know,” she tried to calm him. “But I have to leave. I can’t stay here anymore.”

“Why not?” He looked agonized. All of his worst fears were coming true.

“I have no choice. My aunt has made him my guardian.”

“Why would she do that?” he asked in horror.

She looked up at him with sorrow in her beautiful mismatched eyes, “He gave her money, but she didn’t want me around anyway. They wanted me to go with him today, but I told him that I wanted to stay for the graduation. I have to run away now, before he comes back for me.”
“No!” he said harshly. He pulled her close again, seized by a fierce protective instinct that he didn’t even know existed. “Please don’t go,” he pleaded. “Come stay here with me.”
She stiffened, suspicious. “Here?”
He nodded vehemently, pulling back to look into her eyes. “Yes! Why don’t you move in with me?”
He held his breath, watching her eyes darting around like she was considering it.
“Please?” he asked.
“What about Jarod? What will he say?”
“He won’t care. He likes you. Besides, if he knew what was going on …”
Caledonia thought about what Hillary had said and winced. She didn’t want pity, especially not from Calvin. When she looked back at him her eyes brimmed with tears, and her lower lip trembled. “I don’t know …”
“There’s no way you can leave,” he said, brushing a stray curl back from her cheek.
“Why not?” she choked out.
He pressed his forehead to hers, his eyes burning bright. “Because I love you.”
Their lips met, and his emotion came through them so clear and true that it overpowered all of her doubts. He threaded his fingers in her hair and kissed her tenderly, and then fiercely, like he was about to consume her. There was no denying anything now, and she succumbed, engulfed in his intense fiery colors. He laid her back down onto the bed and she returned his kiss, floating away on a sweet honeyed cloud of emotion.
“Please stay with me,” he whispered in her ear, sending shockwaves down the entire length of her body. He kissed her again, and by the time their lips parted, she would have said yes to anything.
“Okay,” she whispered, “I will.”
She could feel a relieved joy wash over him, sweetening his next kiss even more than she ever dreamed possible. Now he was aflame with color that she could sense even with her eyes closed, a lusty, passionate red, brightened by pulses of vivid pink and purple.
“I know what you’re doing,” she gasped.
“Yeah?” he breathed into her ear. “What?”
“Oxytocin.”
“Huh?”
“It’s a hormone. You’re making me produce it.”

“Oh, really?” he chuckled, moving his lips along her jawline. “What does it do?”

“It makes you fall in love,” she said.

“Good,” he smiled, rolling onto his back and pulling her on top of him. She pressed into the length of his hard lean frame as he trailed his fingers up and down her back. She didn’t know what to make of the unfamiliar sensation, gasping again from his gentle touch.

There was a knock on the door, and a second later Jarod burst in and saw the two of them tangled up on the bed.

“Oh … Hi Cali,” he grinned at her.

She sat up, dizzy with desire. “Hi,” she squeaked, smoothing her clothes self-consciously.

Jarod leaned against the door frame. “You guys hungry? Me and Crystal are gonna call out for some pizza.”

“Yeah,” Calvin answered in a strangled voice, sitting up himself.

“Pepperoni okay?” Jarod asked, clearly amused at the state they were in.

Calvin turned to Caledonia. “What do you like on your pizza?” She shrugged, uncertain.

“Don’t tell me, you never had pizza before?” he asked incredulously.

“I had it at school once,” she said.

He groaned, “That crap isn’t even close to real pizza!” He turned to Jarod. “Get one with everything.”

“Sure thing,” Jarod said, turning to go.

“Hey, Jarod?” Calvin called after him.

“Yeah?” He ducked his head back in.

“Cali needs a place to stay. Is it all right with you if she crashes here for awhile?”

Jarod didn’t hesitate. “No problem.” He turned to leave, stopping and spinning back around.

“Hey, Cali …”

“Yes?” she asked.

“Do you know how to cook?”

“I’m good with eggs,” she offered.

He smiled. “Awesome. You can be in charge of breakfast then.”
Soon the four of them were gathered around a delivery box on the coffee table, Calvin’s leg pressed close to Caledonia’s. He watched her avidly, seemingly unable to take his eyes or hands away from her. Jarod and Crystal exchanged a look, smiling wryly.

“So, how do you like pizza?” Calvin asked her.

“I think it’s the best thing I ever ate,” she said solemnly.

Jarod and Crystal laughed, but Calvin knew that she was completely serious, and it made him love her even more.

Crystal was delighted with the news of Cali moving in, seeing it as one more step towards the domestication of Jarod. She pulled Caledonia aside in the kitchen. “I hope you’re being careful … You know, using protection.”

“Protection?”

“You know,” she leaned in, “When you get it on.”

She was met with a blank stare. “Get what on?” Caledonia asked.

Crystal rolled her eyes. “Have sex!”

“I … I … I don’t know that much about all that.” Her face flushed hot.

Crystal adopted a sisterly tone. “Listen, Cali, Cal’s a good guy, but you can’t always leave everything up to the dude, if you know what I mean.”

“No,” said Caledonia. “What do you mean?”

Crystal exhaled hard, reaching for her purse on the kitchen counter. She rummaged through it, pulling out a handful of little packages and presenting them to Caledonia. She shook her head at the confused look on her face. “Here’s some rubbers. Just take them! Don’t get all stressed out, it’s just something us girls gotta deal with.”

Caledonia put them into her back pocket uncertainly. “Um … Thanks?”

“Oh, and now that you’re gonna be staying here, you should get these guys to spring for a new couch.”

Calvin came in and noticed how flustered Caledonia looked; her face was as red as if she’d just been slapped. He took her by the hand, leading her out of the kitchen and back down the hall to his room.

When they sat down on his bed he eyed her suspiciously. “What did she say to you?” Caledonia flushed pink again, looking down nervously, worrying him. The last time Crystal had gotten hold of her there was trouble. “Tell me!”
“She was asking me about sex.”

“What?” his eyes flew open in shock. “What did she say?”

She reached in her pocket, handing him the packages. “She gave me these.”

He looked angry, confusing Caledonia even more. “That’s not why I asked you to stay!” he protested, rushing to explain. “I don’t expect … I mean, I really just want you here. Please don’t think I’m only trying to get you to do something!”

“Why would I think that?” she asked.

“Uh, she gave you condoms …” he said.

“Oh!” It was her turn to be shocked. “So that’s what they are!”

When their eyes met again they started laughing, finally falling back onto the bed. He reached over and took her hand, looking at her with soft eyes. “I was afraid you were going to get all upset at me. I want you to trust me. I’ll never push you into anything.”

“I know,” she said.

“I’ll give you my room tonight and go sleep on the couch.”

“Why? Don’t you want to stay with me?”

“Of course I do. It’s just … It might be better if I didn’t stay in here.”

“Why?” she asked innocently.

He shrugged, smiling sheepishly, “Because I can’t keep my hands off you.”

She met his gaze, thinking how beautiful his dark gypsy eyes were. “I don’t mind.”

“You know, when I first saw you I thought you were a ghost,” he whispered.

“When I first saw you I thought you were an idiot,” she replied, sending them both into spasms of laughter.

They lay there for a long time, talking about everything and nothing at all. She speculated on what kind of job she should look for, making him realize just how aimless he’d become. When she asked him about his plans after graduation, he admitted to having none, not really. Her direct questions about the future dredged up old abandoned dreams that seemed like they belonged to an entirely different person.

“I used to want to move to the city and go to art school,” he admitted.

“But you don’t anymore?” she asked.

He sighed, “I don’t know. Now it just seems kinda … stupid.”

“Because of what happened to your mom?” she asked.
He looked into her eyes, still taken aback by how well she could see straight through him.

“So, what did you think about the city?” he asked her.

She smiled, remembering their perfect day at the museum. “It’s big. There was a lot of stuff to see … And so many people.”

“Do you think you could ever live there?” he asked.

She shrugged, thinking about the tall crowded buildings in the city. She knit her brows together. “I was wondering …”

“What?” he asked, imagining what it would be like to wake up with her every morning.

“Why do they call them apartments when they’re all stuck together?”

He laughed, lifting her hand to his lips to kiss it. “I have no idea.”

“Tomorrow is your graduation rehearsal,” she said. She had been planning to go and watch, but she started thinking about the hostile girls that were sure to be lying in wait for her. “I think I’ll skip it, if you don’t mind. I can go pick up my stuff after my aunt leaves for work tomorrow.”

“I’ll stay home and help you move in,” he said, trailing the back of his hand down her cheek.

She shook her head firmly. “No. Remember your promise? You should go. Jarod wants to see you get your diploma.” She yawned, drained from all the stress of the day.

He got up and hunted through a laundry basket for a clean T-shirt and pair of sweatpants. “Here, you can sleep in these tonight.” He left her alone to change, and when he made his way back to his room he found her sitting up in bed, her arms wrapped around her knees.

He stripped off his shirt while she watched, admiring his muscled shoulders and arms, noticing the thin line of fine hair that trailed down his flat stomach, disappearing into his faded jeans.

“You look like the Vitruvian Man,” she said.

“The what man?”

“Vitruvian. It’s a drawing,” she said. “By Leonardo. It’s all about … proportion.”

“Leonardo Da Vinci?”

“Yes,” she nodded, looking down when he unzipped, changing into a soft pair of drawstring pants.

“Then I’ll take it as a compliment,” he smiled, sitting next to her on the bed.

She blushed, focusing on his tattoo. He held his arm out for her to inspect it in its entirety, watching her peek around the sides to see the parts that were previously hidden from view. She
looked up to meet his warm gaze and could feel her pulse hammering in her ears. He slipped his arm around her, and she froze, nervous.

“Relax,” he kissed her ear. “I’ll let you sleep tonight.” She wasn’t too sure that was what she wanted to hear, but she nodded anyway.

Calvin looked into her anxious eyes and reminded himself to be patient. Just a few hours ago he thought he might lose her forever, and now that he had her in his bed he didn’t want to do anything to scare her back out of it. He pulled the covers down and climbed under them, patting the mattress next to him. She sighed, lying down with her head on his shoulder, feeling his heart beat through her cheek.

He’d messed around with plenty of girls, but Caledonia made him more nervous than he had ever been before. He never really cared what other girls were thinking, as long as they let him do what he pleased, but what she felt mattered to him far more than his own desire. No, he wasn’t going to blow it by moving too fast.

He kissed the top of her head and stroked her hair, feeling her relax and melt into him. She yawned, and he pulled her a little closer, unable to resist nuzzling the side of her cheek, feeling her skin, silky smooth under his lips. Stillness washed over them both, and Calvin found himself feeling calm and peaceful inside.

“Calvin?” she asked.

“Hmm,” he rumbled.

“Why don’t you ever ask me to call you Cal?”

“I dunno … I guess I like the way my name sounds when you say it.”

She was impossibly warm, full and safe, and she yawned again. He watched her eyelids droop and flutter, and he held as still as he possibly could, wanting to keep her there, just like that, forever.

“Go to sleep,” he whispered, but it was too late, because she already was.
She thrashed about, arms and legs flailing, making the horrible sounds of a trapped and wounded animal. Caledonia cringed under the quilt, watching as he held her down, trying his best to soothe her with a calm, steady voice.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Everything’s all right ... I’ve got you.”

“Where’s Cal?” she asked, still consumed by panic.

“Look.” Her father pointed in her direction. “She’s right there in bed ... Safe and sound.”

“I dreamed that Teddy got her.” She heaved a great sobbing breath, finally laying her head back down. “Are you sure he can’t find us here?”

Caledonia’s eyes sprang open, and she bolted upright in bed, hyperventilating.

Calvin sat up in the dim light of the new morning. “What happened?” he asked, his voice rough from sleep. He rubbed her back. “You okay?”

She nodded yes, taking a shuddering breath and settling back down. He lay down behind her, coiling his body around hers. “Did you have a bad dream?”

She shook her head no, wiping her eyes with a shaking hand. “I think it might have been a memory.”

“What was it?” he whispered into her ear, snuggling closer to her.

“My mother,” she said quietly. “It was a long time ago, but I remembered her having a nightmare. She was crying ... scared. She thought that someone named Teddy had taken me away.”

“Teddy?”

“Professor Reed told me that I could call him Teddy yesterday. It must have made me remember.”

“Whoa,” he said, holding her tighter.
“There’s something else I didn’t mention,” she said.

“What?”

“The girl—I think she might have tried to do it … to change me. She wanted me to relax and go along with them.” She rolled over to face him. “They all seemed surprised when I wouldn’t.”

He was quiet for a beat. “Has it ever occurred to you that your parents weren’t hiding themselves? Maybe they were only hiding you.”

She turned back away. “Yeah,” she admitted.

He kissed the back of her neck. “Well, I won’t let him bother you anymore. Go back to sleep.”

Caledonia tried to relax, focusing on Calvin’s steady breathing, but sleep would not come. Her mother’s frightened face kept flashing in her mind, and she thought about the terrible feeling that she got when the professor made his offer. She finally slipped out of bed, rolling up Calvin’s too-long sweat pants and padding down the hallway silently.

She took her promise to make breakfast seriously, and she went into the kitchen, rummaging through the refrigerator. There were a few eggs and some milk, along with a stick of butter, some leftover pizza and a suspiciously old-looking bucket of fried chicken.

She looked in the pantry to find a bag of potatoes that were partly sprouted, along with a couple of onions that were starting to grow as well. She found some stale bread, a bag of sugar, and a drawer of spices that probably dated back to the last time his mother had baked something. She thought for a minute, and then got to work.

When Calvin followed his nose out to the kitchen he found Caledonia standing over a pan of frying potatoes and onions that smelled delicious. She looked up and smiled brilliantly, so cute swimming in his baggy T-shirt that he could feel his heart swell in his chest.

“What are you doing?”

“I said I’d make breakfast,” she replied.

He looked over her shoulder at the stovetop. “Yeah, but I figured we needed to go grocery shopping first. We don’t do a whole lot of cooking around here.”

She shrugged, “I’m used to improvising. It should be ready in about fifteen minutes.” She bent over to peek at something in the oven and Calvin had the urge to pick her up, set her on the counter and kiss her passionately. She looked up at him quizzically, as if she’d just read his mind, and it occurred to him that she pretty much could.
“I’d better go take a shower,” he said, kissing her on the cheek instead.

Crystal staggered out of Jarod’s room, yawning and stretching. There was black mascara smeared under her eyes and a knot of tangled hair on the back of her head. She took a cigarette out of a pack and lit it, pulling out one of the barstools that were lined up in front of the kitchen counter. She smiled wryly, “You’re making me look bad.”

Caledonia looked worried. “How?”

Crystal held up her palms. “Kidding. What are you making anyways?”

“Bread pudding and potatoes,” Caledonia answered. “Where are the plates?”

Crystal stubbed out her cigarette into an overflowing ashtray, getting up to help set the table. Jarod appeared in the kitchen, looking surprised. “Smells good in here.”

“Cali made breakfast,” Crystal said.

Soon the four of them were sitting down together. Caledonia served them all a plate and they settled down to eat, quiet at the table.

“It’s good,” Jarod nodded. “What did you put on the potatoes?”

“Rosemary.”

“Where did you get that?” asked Calvin.

She looked at him like he was mad. “It’s growing all alongside of your house!”

Jarod laughed at the look on her face. “So, Cali, did your mother teach you how to cook?”

“No, my father did. He was good at cooking things. Mama was good at growing things.”

“What were you good at?” Jarod asked.

“Hunting things,” she said.

Jarod raised his eyebrows at his brother. “Yep … She’s a keeper, all right.”

After they finished eating, Caledonia excused herself to go change into her clothes. She came back out after a few minutes, her face scrubbed and her hair freshly braided. “I’m going to get my things from Angie’s while she’s at work,” she announced. She was eager to move on and put all of the bad memories from her aunt’s house far behind her.

“I’ll give you a ride,” said Calvin.

They pulled up in front of the condo complex, and she checked the parking lot to make sure that her aunt’s car was gone. Caledonia was in no mood for any more awkward or angry confrontations; she was ready to clear out once and for all.

She climbed off the bike, leaning over to kiss Calvin goodbye.
“I’ll wait here and drive you back,” he said, looking at the condo suspiciously.

“No. I only have one bag, and you’re going to be late. Besides, I need some time to write a letter and tell her why I’m leaving. I think I owe her that much.”

“You don’t owe her anything,” he said angrily.

She put her hand on his chest. “I’ll be fine. Go to school. I’ll be waiting back at your house when you get home.”

He reached in his pocket and pulled out a key. “Here’s a key for you in case Jarod goes someplace.”

She was delighted. “I can put it on my keychain!”

He smiled at her enthusiasm and pulled her close, leaning over to kiss her softly. “I want you to feel at home.”

She sighed, liking the sound of it, and liking his kisses even better. He watched her walk down the pathway and let herself in the door, reluctantly starting his bike and heading off for his last day of school.

~

“Out catting around again?” Phil’s sarcastic voice rang out from his regular spot on the couch. “That professor was calling here all night. Your poor Aunt Angie barely got any sleep!”

She ignored him, hurrying up the stairs for her things. She reached under her pillow, taking her pink keychain and thrusting it into her pocket with a smile. She groped under the air mattress for her knife and sheath, strapping it firmly onto her calf. Most of her clothes were already stashed in the old duffle bag, so she cast about for a pen and paper and sat down on the floor cross-legged, contemplating what her last words to her aunt should be.

The squeal of brakes startled her, and she looked out the window to see a van had pulled up in the street directly in front of the complex. Three big men dressed all in black with mirrored sunglasses rushed out, purposefully coming straight towards her aunt’s unit. There was a pounding on the door, and she crept out into the hall to peek down the stairs.

Phil opened the door, “That was fast–Hey!”

The men brushed past him. “Where is she?”

“Where’s my money?” Phil asked belligerently. “You better tell him I was the one who called you!”
Two of them started up the stairs, ablaze with color and radiating a purposeful eagerness that she knew all too well. It was the same kind of excitement that Caledonia felt when she was closing in on her prey: the acid yellow anticipation of hunters. She doubted her ability to combat three grown men with such strong emotions working in concert.

Caledonia backed up, realizing she was trapped. She darted into the bathroom, locking the door and pulling open the vanity drawers as a barricade. She had just started the water running when the sound of a fist banging on the door made her jump.

“I’m busy,” she called, “I’ll be out in a minute.”

The banging on the door grew more insistent, so she went to the small window above the shower, sliding it open and popping the screen out. With considerable effort, she climbed up, contorting her body to get through the tiny opening. Once she was out, she reached up for the rain gutter, hauling herself onto the tiled roof, panting with exertion.

Within moments she heard the shattering sounds of wood splintering, and she realized that they were actually breaking down the door. Now she was really scared. They were too big to follow her out the window but she knew they could climb up from the outside, and she looked for a way down, trapped again.

When the door gave way she could hear the men cursing, and she paced on the roof, with no time to think. The identical buildings in the complex were at least ten feet apart, but there was no other way. She took a deep breath, visualizing how she used to jump over spring-swollen streams. She backed up as far as she could, and with a running start, took a great leap across the two-story chasm between the roofs, landing with a thud and three feet to spare.

Emboldened, she leapt from that roof to the next one, and the next, until she came to the end of the development. She swung down onto a second story balcony, surprising a woman with a towel wrapped around her head. Without stopping to explain, she climbed down from the balcony, dangling with her feet groping for the fence below. A small dog on the patio started in with a frenzied barking.

“Shhh … Calm down,” she whispered. She sent a cloud of tranquility to engulf the hysterical creature, but it was too late; there were footsteps on the gravel heading straight towards her. She reached into her pocket, pulling out her keychain and flinging it into a hedge of shrubbery around the corner, holding her breath to listen.

The footsteps sped up, crunching away in the direction of the noise.
Caledonia tumbled to the ground, scraping both her elbows with a rough landing. She sprang up to bolt from the spot, leaping over a retaining wall behind the complex and sliding down a steep cement bank. She landed with a splash in a shallow muddy drainage ditch, and scrambled into a bank of shrubs on the opposite side of the waterway. Moving carefully, she worked her way deep into the underbrush, where she sat as still as possible, scared, bleeding and bruised, but free.

If she needed any more evidence that Professor Reed was up to no good, this was it. He obviously knew that she was different, and he wanted to collect her because of it. The violent way in which the men had been sent to take her stood as a testament to his ruthlessness. No wonder her parents had feared him so much.

She heard voices as the men searched all around the complex, and saw them looking over the fence through a veil of leaves. It seemed like they were there forever, and just when she was about to break cover they were back, looking again. It occurred to her that if she was caught, she might never see Calvin again. She touched her knife for reassurance, and settled in to wait them out.

Hours passed, and she finally stirred from her spot, brushing the leaves and cobwebs out of her hair. She dared not take the road back to Calvin’s, so she headed south, walking along the drainage ditch, picking her way through broken glass and discarded tires. She passed a row of bushes loaded with Juneberries, and stopped to eat her fill, gathering some extra in the pouch in front of her sweatshirt.

When she reckoned she was near enough to Calvin’s house she climbed up the embankment and through a stranger’s backyard, peeking around to the street to find she had come up within a couple of houses of her target. Staying well back from the road, she stalked across the landscaping, finally bursting through a hedge to find Calvin and Jarod standing out front by their bikes. Both of them looked up with surprise.

“See? Told ya she’d be back,” Jarod said, turning to head back into the house.

Calvin rushed over to take her by the arms and look her up and down in a panic. “What the hell happened to you? Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you!” He crushed her in a tight relieved embrace, and she tried to push him back to no avail.

“It’s okay! I’m fine!” she gasped, finally pulling away and looking down. A large red stain appeared, spreading across the front of her sweatshirt.
His heart nearly stopped. “Oh my God! Are you hurt?”

She looked down and started laughing, overcome with relief that she had made it back to him. “I’m fine … It’s just berry juice … I picked some berries back in the creek over there … I wanted to make you guys a pie.”

He looked at her like she was crazy, making her laugh even harder.

“What were you thinking?” he said in horror. “There’s bums living back in there!”

“I was hiding,” she explained, trying to catch her breath. “Some men came to my aunt’s house to take me … to take me to him.”

They both knew who she meant, and the look on his face made her stop laughing.

“What happened?”

“There were three of them–Phil called them right after I got there. I had to climb out the window onto the roof to get away. I’m sorry I took so long, but they looked for a long time. They were really very persistent.”

“How did you get down?” he asked.

“I jumped to the side over by the creek and climbed down from there,” she explained.

“You jumped between the buildings?” Calvin asked, aghast.

She cocked her head at him. “I didn’t really have any choice, did I?”

He embraced her again, heedless of the smashed berries between them. “I was so worried. I went over there and that jerk told me that you ran away. I was afraid. I–I thought–”

He took her face in his hands and crushed his mouth to hers, needing to convince himself that she was really there. She kissed him back, as much in need of reassurance as he was.

When their lips parted she looked down at her muddy, berry-stained clothes. “Is it all right with you if I take a shower?”

He smiled, awash with relief. “Of course.”

“I didn’t get my books … or my clothes,” she complained.

“We’ll get you some new ones. And a phone.”

She panicked, reaching into her pocket and sighing with relief to find the key was still there.

Then she looked so sad and dejected that he held his breath. “What?”

“I lost my keychain,” she said with a pout.

Now it was his turn to laugh out his relief. “I’ll get you all the keychains you want.” He slipped his arm around her waist and walked her to the front door.
She paused in the threshold, anxious. “Do you have lots of hot water? Phil says I use too much.”

“Use all you want. I want you to feel at home.” He kissed her again, opening the door for her and standing back.

She had the power to take him from fear and despair to joyful bliss in an instant, and he realized that she held his heart in the palm of her hand. It was a fearsome and awesome thing, and he watched her go inside, surprised at how fast his whole world had changed.

He had the overwhelming feeling that something big was about to happen, but he wasn’t sure if it was something wonderful or terrible. All he could do was follow her inside, and take his chances on love.
Calvin waited for her in his room, stretched out on the bed with his arms behind his neck. He looked up to see Caledonia framed in the doorway, clad only in his oversized shirt. She was flushed pink, soft and warm from the shower, damp hair coiling around her face. His breath hitched in his throat.

“Do you have a washing machine?” she asked. “I really need to clean my clothes.”

He nodded, his mouth suddenly dry.

She held up her raw elbows. “Do you still have those bandages?”

“I thought you said you were okay!” he cried, sitting up in dismay.

She smiled. “It’s no big deal.”

Caledonia sat on the edge of the bed, waiting as he left and returned with the bandages. He carefully applied them, his handsome face serious, black coffee eyes filled with tenderness and concern. She watched him, overcome by his expression.

“I love you,” she finally said, with absolute certainty.

He put the box down and leaned in, kissing her softly on the lips. She responded, surprising him by threading her arms around his neck and melting into his lean, hard frame. He couldn’t resist taking her in his arms and laying her back on the bed, his hand behind her head. He lowered himself down onto her carefully, kissing her again as she let her palms glide slowly over his back. She could feel his muscles knotted with restraint as he hovered over her.

“I love you … I love you … I love you,” he groaned, pouring out his feelings into her ears between kisses. He couldn’t believe how good it felt to say it out loud, and she could see the colors of his aura strengthen and deepen each time he spoke.

“I love your eyes,” he said, kissing each one of her lids. She writhed underneath him, getting to know the way his hard muscled body felt pressed against hers.
“I love your hair.” He brushed it back from her face to kiss her again, making her sigh into his mouth. Their passionate colors rose and blended, and she matched him kiss for kiss, never wanting him to stop.

She felt suspended, tension coiling in her belly as he stroked her body with a confident touch that made her tremble. She kissed his neck, brushing her smooth cheek against his rasping stubble, discovering a sensitive spot at the base of his throat that made him shudder.

Despite her inexperience, she was pleased that her touch could get such a strong reaction, and she wanted more. She gripped the bunched muscles in his back, her body rising to meet his, pushing him past the limits of his restraint. He sat up and removed his shirt in one sweeping motion, taking hers off next and descending upon her again, his chest brushing against hers.

A surprised gasp escaped her lips at the skin to skin contact and he froze. “Are you okay?”

She answered him with a kiss, and soon they were both completely swept away, bodies entwined. He was overwhelmed by the sensation, the scent of her hair, and the silken softness of her skin.

He lifted a shaking hand to smooth back her tousled curls. “Are you sure?”

She nodded, catching her breath. “Completely.”

~

They spent the afternoon in bed, holding each other close until the sky began to darken. Calvin was unable to get his fill of her, overjoyed at the reality of finally having her curled up in his arms, all pink and gold, peaches and cream.

“You’re so beautiful,” he told her over and over, making her blush every time.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Calvin scrambled to pull the blankets up over them before Jarod could burst through the door.

“Hey, are you guys–” He poked his head in, averting his eyes when he saw them. “I, uh, just wanted to say I got some eggs and stuff.” He ducked his head back out and closed the door.

“I’ll have to talk to him about knocking,” Calvin said.

She sat up and reached for a shirt, but before she could slip it on he snagged her around the waist and pulled her back down, kissing her swollen lips. “I don’t want you to ever leave this bed.”

“You’re going to have to let me go sometime,” she laughed.

“Never,” he said, his dark eyes intense. “I’ll never let you go.”
He pulled her close and wrapped his body around hers to make his point. Caledonia closed her eyes and sighed in utter contentment, finally drifting off into a peaceful sleep. Calvin couldn’t remember a time when he ever felt happier, and he would have been perfectly content to stay in bed all day and all night if it wasn’t for his growling empty stomach. He got up slowly, careful not to disturb her, and slipped out of the room quietly.

He came back to find her lying across his bed, propped up onto her elbows, reading a book. Her long legs were sticking out of the bottom of his shirt, her golden hair wildly cascading down her back. He had never seen anything so sexy in his entire life. She looked up and smiled at him.

“Hungry?” he asked, brandishing a brown paper sack.

She closed the book and sat up. “Shouldn’t we go eat in the kitchen?”

He shook his head no. “Jarod’s got a poker game going, and I wanna be alone. Besides,” he said, his lips twisting into a slow, devious smile, “I was serious about keeping you in bed.”

She put her book down, and he handed her a foil wrapped package and a stack of napkins. “I hope you like Mexican.” Together they sat on the edge of the bed, sharing a meal of burritos with a couple of bottles of orange soda to wash them down.

“So, what are you reading?” he asked her.

“One of your books,” she held it up to him, “Moby Dick.”

“Ugh,” he said, “I had to read that for English class.”

“Had to?” she asked.

“Yeah, it’s about some dude trying to catch a whale.”

She looked shocked. “It’s really much more than that … It’s about good and evil, obsession and madness … the existence of God …”

“You’ve read it before?”

“Twice.”

“Then why read it again?”

“Because with a really good book you get something new every time you read it. Because … well … Because you’re a different person each time.”

He looked into her extraordinary eyes. “You make me a different person.”

“Then you need to read it again.”

“Let’s eat first,” he laughed. The burritos were huge, and despite her prodigious ability to eat she still couldn’t finish hers.
“How was it?” he asked.

She rubbed her stomach. “It was great. It was a gut bomb,” she said seriously, making him laugh again.

“How have you ever had one before?”

“My father made burritos,” she said, remembering. “He made tortillas with beans and rice all the time, but we never had any cheese or meat inside.”

“Were your parents vegetarians?” Calvin asked.

She shook her head no. “We ate a chicken once in a while, but if we wanted meat I had to go hunting.”

“Wow,” he said, finding it hard to imagine. “What did you hunt?”

“Mostly just mushrooms,” she said, “but if I was lucky I might get a few birds or a squirrel.”

“You ate squirrels?” he looked shocked.

“You just ate a pig,” she pointed out, making him laugh again.

They cleaned up, discarding the wrappers and straightening out the rumpled bedding. He propped a stack of pillows against the wall and slipped his shoes off to kick back comfortably, patting the mattress next to him with a smile. “Why don’t you come over here and tell me all about Moby Dick?”

She looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Are you teasing me?”

“I might be.”

They spent the rest of that long night in bed, alternating between heated passion and languid, relaxed cuddling. There was a raucous party going on elsewhere in the house, but the two of them were oblivious to the outside world. They were wrapped up in the insulated cocoon of lovers, completely unaware of anything but each other.

Calvin kissed every scar on her body, watching her face as he made love to her slowly, his fingers entwined with hers. Neither one of them wanted to sleep, but they finally succumbed to exhaustion, curled up around each other in a woven tangle of arms and legs.

He woke up late the next morning to find Caledonia gone, and sprang out of bed in a panic. He raced out of his room to find her cleaning up the kitchen, elbow deep in a sink full of soapy water. She looked up at him and smiled shyly.

“Good morning,” he said, drinking in the sight of her in his baggy clothes. The ashtrays and beer cans on the counter had been replaced by a straggly bunch of wildflowers in a vase he
hadn’t seen in years. He remembered how much his mother loved flowers, and had a sudden urge to go out and buy her some nicer ones.

He came up behind her and kissed her neck. “Can I give you a hand here?”

“I thought I’d make breakfast,” she said. “Do you like omelets?”

Jarod stumbled down the hall, looking like he’d had a rough night. He nodded his approval, “Bout time someone cleaned up around here.”

Crystal followed behind him, yawning. “There she goes again,” she said with good humored sarcasm. “No coffee yet? I’m gonna go take a shower.” She headed back down the hallway.

Caledonia pulled the plug to drain the sink, drying off her hands and turning around to meet Calvin’s laughing eyes.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He took her in his arms, bending down to whisper in her ear, “You just make me happy.” He drew back after he kissed her, adding, “Without even trying.”

Caledonia saw something move over his shoulder, glancing through the window with a sharp intake of breath. The van from yesterday was pulling up in front of the house, and the same three big men with mirrored glasses piled out of it. They headed straight for the door, moving with serious intent. Calvin turned around and saw it too.

“Oh no! It’s them! It’s the same ones!” she said, panic in her voice. “What should I do?”

“Go wait in my room. I’ll get rid of them,” Calvin said tersely.

“Who is it?” Jarod asked from the couch.

Caledonia darted towards the hall, pausing around the corner to listen as the men started pounding at the door.

“Cal?” Jarod stood up. “What’s goin’ on?”

Calvin’s face was stony, “These guys are here for Cali.”

“Why?” asked Jarod, as the pounding grew more insistent.

“Long story,” Cal said, steeling himself and opening the door a crack. He asked them what they wanted in an angry voice, and Caledonia strained to listen.

“Send out the girl … We’re here to return her to her legal guardian.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Calvin said.

The man’s voice was low, menacing. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way. It’s up to you. Now, give up the girl and nobody gets hurt.”
Jarod came over to stand beside Cal, “Are you threatening him? Get the hell offa my property!”

“Wouldn’t you rather deal with this matter without involving the police? I’m sure your parole officer would be interested to hear all about how you’re harboring an under-aged runaway. We could have both of you gentlemen prosecuted for statutory rape.”

Caledonia’s stomach twisted; they’d certainly done their homework.

She heard Jarod’s voice, raised in anger, “You must not have heard me. I said, GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!”

“Hey!” Calvin yelled. She heard a scuffle, and the bang of the door slamming against the wall. The sounds of fighting were followed by a series of clicking noises and the sickening thud of a body hitting the ground.

“Where is she? Tell us or you’re next!”

Caledonia looked around the corner to see Calvin backed up against the wall, his angry eyes trained on some kind of device brandished by one of the men. Jarod lay on the ground, eyes closed.

She stepped out from the hallway, yelling, “NO!” She looked at the three big men with fiery eyes, “Stop it right now!”

They all paused, their target in sight. Caledonia rushed to get between Calvin and the men, facing them again and projecting a powerful cloud of soothing aqua blue towards them. It did nothing to temper the predatory colors they were emanating.

“You’re coming with us,” one of the men said, “whether you like it or not.”

“No she’s not.” Calvin tried to pull her behind him.

“Wait a minute,” she held up her hands in a compliant gesture, playing for time, mustering a massive fog of tranquilizing lavender and casting it in the closest one’s direction. With his reflective sunglasses on, she could not see where his eyes were looking, and she realized that it rendered her ability useless.

She gestured towards Jarod’s still form. “What did you do to him?” Moving slowly, with her hands in the air she knelt by his side, reaching down to feel his neck for a pulse. His eyes fluttered, and to her relief he let out a groan.
Caledonia felt a hand clamp onto her arm, and she instinctively dropped and spun around on her back, landing a vicious kick directly to the knee of the man who’d touched her. He let out a shriek and crumpled to the ground in pain.

Calvin lunged at the man with the Taser, but it was too late, and she heard the same rapid series of clicks as before, watching in horror as Calvin’s eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped to the floor.

Now both Calvin and Jarod were sprawled in the entryway, and Caledonia scrambled backwards while two men advanced on her.

“Tase her!” the one on the ground cried. He was clutching his knee, his face contorted in agony.

“No,” Max replied, “He wants her untouched.”

The men finally backed Caledonia into a corner, and despite putting up her best fight, Max seized her in an immobilizing bear hug. The injured one struggled to stand, unable to put any weight on one of his legs.

“I think that bitch just broke my knee,” he gasped.

Max gripped her tightly from behind, marching her towards the door, while the other one went to help his comrade up from the floor. Caledonia refused to stand, kicking and squirming to resist as best she could.

She forced Max to half carry and half drag her dead weight towards the door, and by the time he’d maneuvered her to the threshold he was sweating from the effort, swearing under his breath. He grew increasingly frustrated and angry.

It was a good thing the professor was so interested in receiving her intact, because Caledonia could tell that Max wanted to hurt her, intuitively sensing that this was a man who was capable of doing terrible things. The thought made her redouble her efforts to resist, hooking her legs onto the doorframe, fighting a losing battle to avoid being dragged from the house.

A low rumbling sound grew louder and louder, and by the time Max had forced her out onto the porch a half dozen of Jarod’s biker friends pulled up in front of the house, blocking their path out to the van. They dismounted from their bikes, advancing on the house suspiciously.

“Where’s Jarod?” asked a big man with a beard and bandanna.

“Help!” Caledonia cried, struggling even harder.
Max dropped her, reaching for his weapon while the other two men stood behind them. His color changed to a fearful sour green, not so tough once he was outnumbered. For the first time, Caledonia was overjoyed to see all of Jarod’s thuggish friends.

“Max, we have to abort,” the injured one said.

A blonde blur flew out of the front door and slammed into Max’s back, sending him flying off the porch and into the dirt. It was Crystal, and she jumped onto his back, flailing away with her fists, clawing at his face with her long fingernails.

“You sonofabitch!” she shrieked.

The bikers stood in a semicircle, laughing at the big man trying to disengage the furious woman from his back.

“Hey Crystal. We came as soon as you called,” said the biggest one, “but it looks like you don’t need our help so much.”

Jarod staggered into the doorway, looking dazed as he took in the scene. Max managed to disengage Crystal, stumbling to his feet with a bloody lip, his black suit covered in dust. He brandished his weapon, clearing a path for the three men to retreat to their van. They were utterly humiliated, wounded and disheveled, trailed by the sounds of derisive laughter coming from the crowd.

“Oh, baby!” Crystal ran to Jarod, throwing her arms around him.

Caledonia caught her breath and crawled on her knees over the threshold to where Calvin lay unconscious, kneeling over him in a panic. She pressed her ear to his chest, and when he started coughing her eyes spilled over with relief, splashing fat tears onto the front of his shirt. She looked up to see Jarod and Crystal watching them from the doorframe.

“Holy shit, Cali!” exclaimed Crystal, “What the hell just happened?”
Before Caledonia could say anything Calvin spoke, struggling to open his eyes, “Cali?”
“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” she sobbed.
“What happened?”
“You got tased, bro,” Jarod answered, helping him up and walking him over to sit on the couch. “Just breathe … you’ll be back to normal in a minute.”
Caledonia followed behind them with her head bowed, tears of guilt and relief blending on her cheeks. She had brought this trouble down upon all of them, and the horrible truth dawned on her all at once. Staying here would only hurt Calvin and Jarod; her safe haven had just been yanked out from beneath her. She felt like she was going to be sick.
“You okay, Cali?” Crystal asked.
She wiped her eyes and fought to regain her composure. “Thank you. If it wasn’t for you …” She turned to Jarod, “I’m so sorry.”
A burly biker poked his head in the door. “Everything okay in here?”
Crystal and Jarod went out front to thank their friends, leaving Calvin and Caledonia alone. She sat down by his side, looking into his eyes anxiously. “Are you sure you’re all right?”
He swallowed, taking her hand. “We have to call the cops. They can’t just walk into our house and kidnap you!”
“No,” she said firmly. “We can’t call the police. You heard them. The professor will have your brother thrown in jail. He has the law on his side.”
“But if we tell them–”
“They won’t believe us,” she said quietly. She already had too much experience not being believed.
The sounds of motorcycles leaving rumbled away in the background. A few minutes later Crystal and Jarod came back in and stood in silence, unanswered questions hanging in the air.
“Excuse me,” Caledonia said woodenly, getting up to go to Calvin’s room. She pushed back all of her turbulent emotions, and slowly, methodically changed back into her dirty clothes. She reached into her pocket, counting what was left of her money. She could hear Calvin’s voice, telling his brother what they had learned about the professor, and she shuddered to think how close she had just come to being taken by the man she now knew to be completely ruthless.

Her parents’ blood whispered in her veins, telling her she must not ever allow it to happen. She had to run away again, and as scared as she was of being alone, she was even more frightened at the prospect of being under the professor’s control. Calvin came into the bedroom to find her strapping her hunting knife onto her calf.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he blurted out. She looked up and could see that he already knew.

“I’m going to try and get back home. I have to leave before they come back.”

“NO WAY!”

“Don’t you see? He knows where I am, and he won’t stop now. For whatever reason, he’s determined to—collect—me. He won’t give up, and he doesn’t care who he hurts. I can’t stay here any longer. I’ll only get you and your brother in trouble.”

He sat down next to her, taking both of her hands. “We can fight him! We can get a lawyer or something …”

She shook her head. “You don’t understand. He won’t give up because he knows. I tried to change them today … I tried as hard as I could but it wouldn’t work. That’s why they wore the glasses.”

“So you couldn’t see their eyes?” he guessed.

She nodded grimly. “Will you—” the words caught in her throat, “Will you please give me a ride to the bus station?”

“NO! You can’t just leave!”

She squeezed his hands. “It’s okay. In a few months I turn eighteen. I’ll be able to come back and visit then.”

“A few months? You can’t just take off alone! What if something happens to you?”

“I’m not your responsibility just because of … of … of what happened.” She looked down, her cheeks flushed.
He wound his arm around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. “That’s too bad, because now I’m yours.”

He turned her face to his, laying his hand on her cheek and finally pressing his lips to her forehead. Caledonia was the finest, best thing he’d ever had in his life, and he wasn’t about to let her walk out of it. He got up and pulled a leather bag out of his closet, rummaging through his drawers to pull out a few things and stuff them in hastily. She watched him with eyes like saucers.

He talked while he packed. “For the past few years I stopped thinking about what I wanted to do with my life. I’ve just been letting it happen, you know? My mom used to say that when I found something I loved that I’d know it. Well … I found you. And you’re not leaving without me.”

“But I’m not even sure where I’m going …”

“We’ll figure it out together.”

“You can’t just—”

“Oh yes I can. I’ll go anywhere you want to go.”

“But—”

He silenced her with a long and passionate kiss, the kind that left her unable to think clearly. “Wait right here,” he demanded, leaving the room to go talk with his brother. Caledonia sat in a daze, listening to voices coming from the next room. When they grew louder she got up, timidly creeping down the hall and peering around the corner to see their heated discussion.

“What about your graduation?” Jarod asked. “I promised Dad I’d send him some pictures.”

“I don’t care about that crap. If you want to send him something, send him the diploma.”

Jarod sighed. “I suppose that’s better than I did. But I still don’t see why you have to take off.”

“We only have to be gone a few months,” Calvin explained.

“No way!” Jarod was upset. “Don’t let those dudes chase you away!”

Calvin shook his head. “We have to get away from here. Those guys can make a whole lot of trouble for us.”

“They don’t scare me! I can handle them!” Jarod stuck out his chest belligerently.

“Not from inside a jail cell,” Calvin said.
Crystal nodded in agreement, looking up to see Caledonia’s stricken face watching them. She raced over to give her a hug. “You poor thing! First you lose your folks and now some weird dude is trying to kidnap you? How screwed up is that?”

~

Before Caledonia had time to think it through, they were headed out on the road, pulling away from Calvin’s house with his bag strapped securely onto the back of the motorcycle. They drove past the high school and the now familiar suburban streets. All at once, Calvin started taking a series of strange turns, and Caledonia wondered if he was lost. He finally pulled into a busy gas station and turned to speak in her ear.

“Don’t look up, but we’re being followed,” he said in a calm voice. “I’m going to need you to hold onto me really tight, okay?”

She nodded, and when he pulled back out he gunned the engine. She clung to him as they surged through the city streets, turning her head to see two big black cars weaving through traffic to keep up with them. She buried her face in Calvin’s back, putting all of her faith in him.

They made a sudden turn, cutting through a narrow alley that let out onto a dirt path meandering alongside a tall concrete wall. The road got bumpy, and Calvin turned into a little grove of trees that concealed a break in the wall just wide enough for a bike to slip through. The next thing Caledonia knew they were out on the freeway, with no sign of anyone following.

They traveled along at high speed for a while, finally taking an exit that led into a landscape of farms and orchards. Calvin pulled to a stop at a gas station attached to a little country store, taking off his helmet and turning to flash a cocky grin at her.

She couldn’t help but smile at how proud he was. “I suspect you’ve done that before.”

He dismounted, bending down to merge their smiles with a kiss. “Maybe once or twice, but back then I was only trying to get out of a speeding ticket.” He got up to fill the gas tank, going inside to pay and coming back out carrying a couple of bags. He handed her a sack, saying, “I got you a few things.”

She looked inside to see a new toothbrush, comb and hairbrush, along with a souvenir T-shirt. She smiled, touched by his thoughtfulness. “Thanks.”

He straddled the bike, reaching back to squeeze her thigh. “Let’s go!”

They drove along the back roads for a few miles, meandering along in air scented with green leaves, dried grass and rich warm earth. Caledonia closed her eyes and breathed deeply, relaxed
by the comforting scents of home. Calvin turned down an overgrown gravel road, pulling up to park in a little thicket of brush.

“Why are we stopping here?” she asked.

He just smiled, taking her by the hand. “C’mon.” He led her down a dirt path that wound through a jungle of trees and blackberry bushes, holding back some overgrown branches for her to pass. All at once the trail opened up onto a small pebbled beach with a view of a wide lazy river. It was a gorgeous sight.

“What’s this place?” Caledonia asked.

“It’s my favorite swimming hole.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, looking around at the secluded little beach. “But what are we doing here?”

“We’re going to have a picnic,” he replied, pulling a towel out of his bag and spreading it out on the beach, gesturing for her to have a seat. He pulled a couple of sandwiches out of the bag, handing her one. “I hope turkey’s okay.”

She nodded, suddenly ravenous. They ate facing the river, and he told her all about how he and his brother had found this swimming hole on one of their trips out to see their grandparents. He pointed out the tree they used to tie a rope on, describing how they swung over the river and jumped, daring each other to see who could get the highest.

Caledonia imagined the two boys playing here, watching the sun’s reflection dancing on the shimmering water. The air was still, and an occasional fish jumped for the insects that swirled and dipped over the lazy river. The day was wearing on, and the hot breath of summer hung all around them.

“What’s it called?” she asked.

“The Russian River.”

She looked out at the water slowly rolling by. “It certainly isn’t rushing now.”

Calvin laughed, “No, Russian as in Roulette.”

She looked confused. “What?”

He smiled wryly, regarding her with warm eyes. “Like the country.”

There was no point in trying to explain trivia to her. Being with Caledonia was like being with a toddler or a space alien. She constantly made him explain himself, challenging his beliefs about everything. She made him see the whole world fresh and new.
After they ate she fell silent, lost in thought. She was worried about where they would spend the night, and if Calvin would come to regret his decision to accompany her. She wondered if she’d be able to find her little cabin in the woods, and if Calvin could stand to live there for more than a day or two. She looked up with a frown, only to meet his happily shining eyes.

He seemed lighthearted, like he wasn’t taking anything too seriously. Caledonia thought that he looked awfully cheerful for someone running from evil kidnappers.

“Don’t worry,” he told her, “Everything’s gonna be okay.”

“How can you say that?” she said. “We don’t even know where we’re going to sleep tonight.”

“Trust me. I have a plan,” he said, leaning over to kiss her. “Besides, nothing matters as long as we’re together.”

She looked into his confident dark eyes and wanted very much to believe him. Her world had been thrown into chaos so many times in the past few weeks that she barely knew which way was up.

A fly buzzed around them in the dense, hot air, and Caledonia twisted her hair into a bun, pushing a twig through the thick mass of curls to hold it away from her neck.

“Are you hot?” There was happiness in his voice, “Let’s go skinny-dipping.” He got up and stripped off his shirt with a challenge in his smile. He shucked his jeans and plunged headfirst into the water, coming up to let out a whoop and disappear back underwater. When he didn’t surface right away she grew alarmed, coming up to the river’s edge to anxiously search the water for him.

His head finally broke the surface. “Come on in.” He grinned from ear to ear. “The water’s fine.”

Caledonia hesitated on the bank, the water deliciously cool around her ankles. Calvin watched her from the river as she wavered, pacing back and forth along the smooth pebbles, squinching up her face and looking cuter than he ever thought possible. He covered his eyes with his hands. “I won’t look!” he called out to her.

She glanced over her shoulder, wavering. “No peeking … promise?”

“I promise,” he called.

He could pinpoint the precise moment that she finally gave in to temptation, watching through his fingers as she hesitantly starting to lift her shirt over her head.
Some promises were impossible to keep.

~

It was late afternoon when they turned onto a familiar-looking gravel driveway, pulling up in front of Calvin’s grandparents’ house.

Three dogs came running out to greet them, barking with excitement and wagging their tails. “Rufus!” Caledonia cried, delighted to see her old friend looking so happy and healthy. The dog was equally glad to see her, groveling at her feet for attention.

Calvin knelt to pat Rufus, looking up at the house. “You two wait here for a minute.”

He climbed up the stars to the porch and knocked, looking back to see Caledonia turning her attention to the whining beast rolling on the ground before her. She laughed, rubbing his belly until his legs kicked uncontrollably.

The door flew open. “Calvin!” his grandmother cried, enfolding him in a warm hug, “How nice to see you! What brings you here?”

He gestured towards Caledonia. “I’m heading up north, to take Cali back home.”

“On your motorcycle?” she asked, looking worried.

“She had to leave right away.”

Grandma Costa peeked around him to see the girl with the golden hair nearly getting tackled by the overjoyed pit bull. “And you’re the one who has to take her?”

He turned to look at the laughing girl. “I’d do anything for her.”

The old woman nodded slowly. “She’s the one … isn’t she?”

Calvin was surprised at her observation, responding truthfully, “Yeah. Yes, she is.”

“Your grandfather should be home soon. Can you stay for supper?” she asked hopefully.

“I was hoping we could say the night, and get a fresh start in the morning.”

His grandmother beamed. “Of course you can! I’ll fix your favorite!”

“Sounds good,” he said, calling Caledonia up to join them. She smiled shyly, climbing the stairs to be greeted with an affectionate hug from Calvin’s grandmother.

“Is it okay with you if we stay here tonight?” Calvin asked her. She nodded, slightly overwhelmed by the peachy pink aura the old woman was cloaked in. Once again, Caledonia felt the calm peacefulness of her steady demeanor descend upon her.

Grandma Costa took note of Caledonia’s disheveled state and her dirty clothes. “Come on in, sweetie. Why don’t you get your bags and we’ll get you settled in.”
Caledonia looked down, embarrassed. “Um…”

“She had to leave kinda suddenly,” Calvin explained, “We’re gonna have to get her some new clothes and stuff.”

“Well … come along,” the old woman said, unflappable. “I think I have a few things that might just fit you.”

Caledonia followed her down the hallway and into a cozy little room. There was a lace curtained window with a cushioned reading nook built into it that looked like something from a fairytale. Framed pictures of beautiful wild horses were displayed on pale blue walls, and model horses pranced on top of a long bookshelf. A small bed was adorned with a hand-stitched quilt, pieced together from hundreds of tiny flowery prints.

“This was my daughter’s room,” Grandma Costa said wistfully, with a touch of vanilla-scented sorrow. “I was saving her things in case I ever had a granddaughter.”

It was by far the prettiest room Caledonia had ever seen, and she looked around, trying to imagine what it would be like to actually live in a place like this.

“Oh! Look at all of the books!” Caledonia’s eyes lit up when they scanned the loaded bookcase that lined one wall of the perfect little room. She knelt down to scan the titles. There were several of her childhood favorites, along with a great many books about horses and dogs.

“Our Rebecca was quite a reader,” Grandma Costa said proudly. “Why, she spent most of the time with her nose buried in a book. I was always afraid she’d ruin her eyes …”

“Is it all right if I look at them?” Caledonia asked quietly, afraid to break the older woman’s nostalgic reverie.

“Of course,” she replied, smiling warmly, “It’s about time someone got some use out of them.”

The clicking sound of dog paws running down the hall was followed by a brindle blur that lunged for Caledonia, knocking her to the floor. Rufus whined and showered her face with doggie kisses while Calvin’s grandmother tried to shoo him out of the room.

Calvin arrived to fetch him, wrestling the overly-excited dog out of the room.

“Can you lock that beast in the barn for tonight?” Grandmother Costa called down the hall after him. “Put all of the dogs inside!”

She turned back to look at Caledonia’s attire with her lips pressed together, moving purposefully across the room to search through a wardrobe that sat opposite the little bed. She
pulled out a floral printed dress and handed it to her. “Here, why don’t you put this on and let me get your things washed for you?”

Caledonia looked at the dress in awe. There was eyelet lace all around the hem and collar, and dozens of shiny pearl buttons in a line all down the front; it was the sweetest, most feminine dress she’d ever seen. She looked down at her dirty and torn clothes, embarrassed again. “I don’t want to trouble you. I can wash them myself.”

The old woman made a clucking sound. “Don’t be silly. Leave them outside the door and I’ll take care of it.”

“All right. Thank you very much,” Caledonia said politely.

Grandma Costa started to leave the room, pausing at the threshold. “It’s good to have a girl in the house for a change.”

She left the room and Caledonia slipped out of her clothes, unstrapping her knife and putting it under the pillow. She put on the dress, twisting and turning to see how she looked in the big oval mirror that was propped up on a stand in the corner of the room. She ran her hand through her unruly hair, trying to smooth it into submission.

After a while, Calvin ducked his head into the room. Caledonia smiled up at him from where she sat perched in the window seat with a book. “This is a really pretty room,” she pointed out, “and your mother had very good taste in books.”

Her hair was backlit by the last long rays of the sun streaming into the window, creating a soft golden glow all around her head and shoulders. Calvin sat down beside her, looking at her in awe.

“You look really pretty,” he said.

She smoothed the dress, explaining, “Your grandmother gave me this to wear while she washes my things.” Her face was serious. “She’s really being very nice to me.”

She made him smile, and he leaned in to look over her shoulder. “What are you reading?”

She held up the book. “Hatchet.”

“Have you read that before, too?” he asked.

She smiled sheepishly. “Yes. It was one of my favorites when I was little.”

“What’s it about?” He turned to nuzzle her ear.

She giggled, squirming in her seat. “It’s about a boy who gets into a plane crash … and how he…”
He started kissing her neck, making her lose her train of thought.

“And how he survives … all alone … in the wild.”

The sound of a throat clearing made them both look up to see Calvin’s grandfather standing in the doorframe. He looked in at them with disapproval. “Time to wash up for supper.”

“Hi Grandpa,” Calvin said, sitting up straight.

Caledonia stood up, embarrassed. Her face was burning hot, but when she looked into the old man’s eyes, all she saw was kindness. Once more, she was surprised at the steady, mellow aura the older people exuded. He extended his hand in a no-nonsense greeting, “Nice to see you again, young lady.”

“Thank you for letting us stay,” she said, shaking it firmly.

He turned to address Calvin. “Son, you’ll be bunking in the guest room upstairs.”

When he walked out of the room Calvin groaned dramatically, “They have the squeakiest stairs in the world!”

Caledonia didn’t understand. “Is that bad?”

“He doesn’t want me to sneak into your room tonight,” he said, stepping closer to wrap himself around her tightly. “You’d better kiss me now while you have the chance.”

So she did.
She woke up with a start, opening her eyes to see a dark figure looming over her bed. “Calvin?” she whispered, just before a hand clamped down over her mouth.

The dead weight of a large man fell upon her, pinning her onto the mattress. Another figure materialized at her side, and she felt a pinprick on her shoulder. She sank her teeth into the hand on her face, kicking her legs and trying her hardest to scream as the whole scene slowed and blurred.

She could feel her body being lifted as she struggled to keep her eyes open. Weightless, suspended, she felt like she was floating, lying on her back in the river. She remembered Calvin’s face when he leaned in to kiss her. It was the last thought that crossed her mind before everything went black.

Max unwrapped the handkerchief that was tied around his palm, cursing under his breath. He scowled, turning to look at the heavily sedated girl sprawled out in the back of the van. She looked sweet and innocent, lying there with golden curls framing an angelic face, but he suspected that she might just be the devil in disguise.

He had serious doubts about the wisdom of taking her so soon, and a gut feeling that they were making a huge mistake. They had a good thing going with the twins, and everybody was making plenty of money. So why rock the boat?

He’d tried to convince the professor to wait, to fully assess the situation before bringing her into the building, but Reed was adamant. From the moment the professor had learned of her existence she’d become his sole obsession, and he’d been preparing for her arrival with a frenzied rush of energy. The maniacal gleam in his eye was troubling; when it came to this girl, the old man would not listen to reason.
Once he got a close up look at her it got even worse; the old fool couldn’t stop crowing about how all his years of work had been vindicated. Now Max was even expected to supply women for his freaky experiments … like the chimps hadn’t been hard enough to come by!

The girl was trouble, all right, and nowhere near as delicate as she looked. Max had personally witnessed her disable a battle-hardened veteran, delivering a crippling blow with no hesitation. She’d left him a man short of a full security detail, and now he had her to deal with on top of everything else. He rubbed his temples, and the throbbing in his bitten hand only served to reinforce his misgivings.

“Headache?” the driver asked.

“Yeah,” Max replied, “A huge one.”

~

Caledonia woke up in a strange room, blinking at a lacy canopy looming over her pounding head. She struggled to sit up, disoriented, groggy and nauseous. She looked down at the ruffled sleeves on her wrists and came fully awake with a burst of adrenalin.

She sprang up, wobbly on her feet, looking around in a panic as she tried to get her bearings. It was a bizarre room she found herself in, all light pink walls and floral prints, plush white carpeting soft beneath her feet. There was an elaborately carved armoire, a mirrored vanity and a bureau that was painted with delicate pink roses. The walls were decorated with pictures of ballerinas in tutus, mounted in ornate rococo frames.

It was as if she had fallen down a rabbit hole into some kind of alternate universe.

A golden clawfoot tub sat on a raised platform on one side of the room, its waterspout shaped like a swan. The vanity held a silver brush and comb set, alongside dozens of bottles of perfume displayed on a mirrored tray.

She turned back to see the bed she had risen from was even more ornate than the tub, its gilded headboard populated with carved cupids and cherubs, tumbling and swirling in a scrolled rococo sky. Four tall bedposts held up a lacy canopy that looked like a wedding dress. When Caledonia lifted her eyes her head began to pound.

She looked down at the ruffled white robe she was wearing, seeing that it covered a white satin nightgown. When she peeked down the top she found a lacy camisole and underwear beneath it. She turned to the mirror over the vanity, looking back at herself with a horrified face.

Someone had dressed her.
The shock jolted her into action, and she scanned the room for a way out, realizing that there were no windows, only a locked door. She yanked on the knob, unable to budge it; the hinges were on the opposite side. A clock on the wall told her it was nearly twelve o’clock, but noon or midnight, she couldn’t say.

She looked around again, taking in all of the details. Although luxurious, the room was artificial and affected, and it stood in stark contrast to the charm of Calvin’s mother’s room. The place felt like an elaborate set—it was an old man’s idea of a little girl’s room, and everything about it was wrong.

She was trapped, and she paced like a zoo animal, growing more and more agitated as she shook off the lingering effects of whatever they had knocked her out with. There was a ringing sound, and she startled, following the noise to a pink princess-style phone that sat on the white dresser. She picked it up cautiously.

“I hope that you find the room to your liking,” the professor’s voice said.

“Let me go,” she said with a shaking voice. “I don’t want to be here.”

“We need to talk. I’ve arranged for tea in my office.”

“No! I want to leave now!”

He ignored her demand. “Go ahead and look in your new wardrobe. I’ve taken the liberty of picking out a few things. You’ll find I’ve spared no expense for you.”

“I won’t stay here,” she said defiantly.

“There’s so much that you simply don’t understand. I can tell you all about Jenny and David.”

“My parents?” her voice cracked.

“I’ll see you in fifteen minutes.”

She frantically pushed the buttons on the phone, hoping to reach someone for help, but the line went dead. She squatted down, wrapping her arms around her legs in a futile attempt to self-soothe. She thought of Calvin, and her vision blurred with tears, wondering what he would think when he woke up to find her missing.

“I’ll get out of here,” she whispered, “I swear it.”

She started pacing again, anxiously checking the clock every few minutes. She peered inside the wardrobe to find it stocked full of clothes with the tags still on them. She curled her lips in disgust at the thought of dressing to please him, pulling the robe tighter around her body. A few

...
more minutes passed and the door barged open, revealing two big men, both wearing mirrored
glasses. Caledonia recognized them from Calvin’s house, and backed herself into a corner
defensively.

“We’re here to take you to Doctor Reed,” Max announced. The other one said nothing, his
face expressionless.

They advanced on her with a wary and determined mindset; she knew that she’d lose against
them in a physical fight. Caledonia stared hard into the mirrors of their lenses, doing her best to
frighten them. She got no reaction whatsoever, and she realized that they knew to avoid looking
directly into her eyes.

She exhaled, holding up her hands. “All right, all right … I’m coming.”

Caledonia was escorted out of the room and into a hallway with one man on either side of
her. They led her down the corridor and into a wood paneled office that was filled from top to
bottom with leather bound books and framed diplomas. The professor glanced up from behind an
imposing desk, gesturing to a chair.

She looked around nervously at the ostentatious room, finally taking a seat.

“Welcome,” Professor Reed inspected her from his desk, smiling warmly. He nodded to
Max, “That will be all.”

“She’s dangerous,” Max replied. “You shouldn’t be alone with her.”

Professor Reed took note of the big man’s bandaged hand and nodded. “Why don’t you wait
just outside?”

The professor watched him leave the room, straightening himself at his desk and smiling
again. “Max tells me you’re quite the athlete. I understand you put up a vigorous fight.”

She stared at him, sending him a stupefying blast of confusion.

“My goodness! I could certainly feel that.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out a pair of
mirrored sunglasses. “You’ll have to forgive the lenses, but it’s only a safety precaution until I
can assess your skill level. You’ll discover I’ve trained myself to be quite resistant to the Athena
effect.”

“The Athena effect?”

“That’s what I call the second generation synesthesia … and the ability to project an
emotional state onto others.”
If she had any doubts at all that he knew what she could do, he had just dispelled them once and for all. Her parents’ warnings echoed in her mind.

“What do you want with me?”

“Why, to welcome you to our little family,” he smiled paternally. “You belong to quite an exclusive group–Michael and Layla are so excited about your arrival. We’ve gone to a great deal of trouble to plan a welcome home dinner for you.”

“This isn’t my home.”

He leaned back in his chair, his fingertips together. Even without being able to look into his eyes she could see his eager excitement, and feel the weight of his expectations. “Let me explain to you how special you are … how very rare. There are only two of you in existence.”

“Two of who?”

“Female offspring of the original test subjects. I’d always suspected that it was the Athena compound that caused Layla to be born with her extraordinary talents, but now you’ve come along and absolutely confirmed it! I’m responsible for your creation so, in a way, you’re like my own daughter, and I expect you’ll grow to see me as a father figure eventually.”

She recoiled with distaste, leaping to her feet. “You’re nothing like my father!”

Max darted back into the room, glowering at her, and Caledonia slowly sat back down. The big brute was right, she was dangerous. At the moment she was fighting the overwhelming urge to lunge across the table, grab Professor Reed by the throat and squeeze. Hard.

He flinched, and she realized he must have glanced into her eyes from behind his mirrored lenses. She redoubled her efforts, sending a cloud of fear his way. He shifted in his seat, clearing his throat.

“Perhaps I should begin at the beginning.”

He reached across the desk for a teapot that rested on a tray along with two flowery cups on saucers. He poured tea into both of them, putting cream and sugar into each one without asking. He stirred them methodically while he spoke.

“I met your parents when I interviewed them for Project Athena. In fact, I was the one who introduced them. They were both so young, so eager to take part in the research, so very, very brilliant. Ah … I can still remember when they first laid eyes on each other–the sparks really flew!”
He paused, studying her for a minute. “You certainly do take after both of them … and you have such extraordinary eyes. Heterochromia is definitely linked to your synesthesia.”

“My synesthesia?” she asked.

“The neural cross wiring … the blending of sensory perception. You and Layla have a most unique variety of the phenomenon.”

He slid a cup across the desk, cautiously watching to see what she would do. She took it, pushing aside the impulse to hurl it in his face. Despite her anger, she had a terribly dry throat. She took a sip, her shaking hands betraying her fear and loathing.

“What kinds of research did my parents do?” she asked.

His voice crackled with excitement as he described his work in the area of human intelligence. He spoke broadly about his efforts to improve the human mind, explaining that his goal was a noble one. Caledonia watched him gesture wildly, and she could feel the maniacal zeal he exuded. She didn’t need to see his shielded eyes to know that they were on fire when he claimed that he could speed up evolution and improve all of mankind forever.

“You didn’t tell me what my parents did,” she pointed out.

He ignored her, going on to explain the many exciting advances in brain research, describing how large portions of the brain were under-utilized.

“I realized that if I could open up previously dormant areas of the brain to higher functionality there would be virtually no limit on human intelligence. I alone discovered how to increase the brain’s connectivity–to increase neurogenesis and actually spur the growth of new synapses!”

He leaned forward in his chair. “Imagine a mind that learns faster, is more creative … a mind capable of storing and recalling virtually unlimited amounts of information.”

She just stared at him.

“I began by looking at various psychotropic drugs like LSD. They can induce a temporary synesthesia … I found a way to increase these neural pathways.”

She leaned forward. “So you gave them drugs?”

“Not just any drugs,” he said pompously. “My proprietary creation. The Athena Compound.”

He explained how years of trial and error had led to him synthesize a drug that enhanced brain function. He claimed that it increased the intelligence of animals from lab rats to chimps,
and was considered so promising that he was provided with an entire wing of the science building in which to conduct human trials.

“I named it Athena,” he said proudly, “after the goddess of wisdom.”

“What did it do to them?” she asked, thinking that there was nothing wise about the man who sat before her.

He shifted in his chair, and she could see him grow uncomfortable. “At first it worked brilliantly. It made them all more intelligent … better. They scored higher on recall, cognition. We were just beginning to see some signs of induced synesthesia when the side effects started to appear.”

“Side effects?”

He sighed with disappointment, remembering. “At first it was only the headaches, but after a few weeks they started to experience increasing anxiety. It gradually turned into full blown panic attacks, escalating into extreme paranoid delusions … After the suicides began I did my best to tweak the formula and recruit new subjects, but the university was concerned about lawsuits—”

Caledonia gasped, “You mean, you just kept going? After people died?”

He looked at her like she was hopelessly naïve. “If I quit, their sacrifices would be for nothing.” He was indignant, and his color turned an ugly shade of yellow green. “Those short-sighted fools at the university cut off my funding just when I was on the verge of a breakthrough! They forced my resignation and locked me out of my own laboratory!”

“You chose my parents because they had no family, didn’t you?”

He seemed surprised. “Why, yes. Yes, I did. It was the best way to avoid any possible legal complications. The students that agreed to participate had their debt forgiven and were provided free tuition and housing for graduate school. But I believe that most subjects participated out of sheer intellectual curiosity.”

“Subjects,” she repeated, taking note of the clinical, detached way she spoke about them. It was a far cry from the way he’d gushed about his “family” in the newspaper article she’d read. “You knew it was dangerous and you still gave it to them.”

He took a deep breath, and she could see how intensely bitter he was. “Despite being cut off from my lab and my funding, I kept in contact with the survivors, continuing my observations. When the twins were born I monitored them … Right away I knew the female was special.”

“The female?” Caledonia echoed his choice of words, appalled at his detached tone.
“Layla,” he pointed out, unaware of her rising horror. “Her heterochromia, the way she could alter her mother’s mood—even as a toddler I knew she was possessed of a remarkable gift! The three of you were conceived while your mothers were taking the Athena compound, and your unique talents are a mutation brought on by it!”

“A mutation?” Caledonia asked.

“Of the X chromosome … A rare gift created by my Athena compound. A gift bestowed on you and Layla alone.”

“How did you end up raising the twins?” she asked, remembering the tragic story of their mother’s death.

“Trina made me their guardian shortly before she took her own life.” He smiled triumphantly. “Just as your aunt has given you to me.”

The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, and she shrank back in her chair. “I don’t belong to you. I won’t stay here. Let me go now and you can forget that I even exist.”

He shook his head with false sympathy. “I could never forget about you—you’re part of my research whether you like it or not. I’m getting older, and I’m running out of time. I need to study you now … to understand precisely how my Athena compound has altered your DNA.”

“I’m not one of your subjects.”

“You have no choice in the matter. You must understand, I’ve devoted my entire life to this research. If I could only go back in time, I’d give the Athena compound exclusively to pregnant women and devote years of study to second generation subjects.”

Caledonia was horrified. “You’d give it to pregnant women … at the cost of their sanity? No one would agree to that! The university was right to stop your research!”

He leaned forward in his chair. “I fund myself now. And no one can stop me! The Athena project will succeed! I will be remembered for improving all of mankind. You,” he pointed a bony finger at her, “should consider the greater good!”

She could see his fervor and feel his burning desire for vindication. Like an obsessive captain Ahab, he was driven, unable to admit defeat, and pushing forward against all codes of ethics and human decency.

“You’re insane,” she said quietly.

Again, he chose to ignore her, lamenting, “It’s a shame that I didn’t discover your existence earlier. There’s a certain amount of brain … plasticity … that is lost with age. If only I had raised
you as my own. With both of your parents’ exposure your gift must be strong indeed. I look forward to learning exactly what you’re capable of.”

He smiled to himself at the prospect, and Caledonia shuddered. She remembered how afraid her parents were of him, and silently thanked them for hiding her away as long as they did. The magnitude of their sacrifice was just beginning to dawn upon her.

“David and Jenny must have developed a method to cope with the hallucinations.” He shook his head in admiration. “They really were the cleverest of subjects … Did they have some kind of system? How did they manage it?”

“Love,” she said quietly, remembering their tenderness with each other. “It’s called love.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Whatever it was, it’s fascinating to know that they were able to survive as long as they did.” He spoke to himself like he forgot she was in the room. “Perhaps I should start pairing up test subjects from now on.”

Her eyes flew open, and she looked at her teacup in horror.

He laughed, “Not you, silly! The latest manifestation of the Athena compound is currently being administered to primates under highly controlled conditions in my private laboratory. Once I perfect the formula I’ll show everyone how wrong they were!” He leaned forward. “I’m on the verge of a real breakthrough!”

“That’s what you said eighteen years ago.”

He flashed a tight smile. “Dinner will be served in exactly two hours. The twins can tell you all about our house rules. I’m sure you’ll be very happy here.”

“You can’t keep me here,” she said.

He nodded towards Max. “Take her to her room.”

She stood, and with a final look at Professor Reed, she walked out, pausing to listen when he called after her.

“Oh, and Caledonia, your attire today is entirely unacceptable. Now that you’re living with us, you’ll be expected to take care with your appearance. If you refuse to change into some proper clothes for dinner, I’m afraid I’ll have to send Max in to dress you.”

She turned back to see that he meant what he said. Max was smirking at her, and she wondered if he was the one who’d put her into the nightgown. Her stomach twisted as she was escorted back down the hallway to her opulent little prison cell.

Max pushed her back into the room more roughly than necessary.
“Be ready for dinner at eight,” he said, slamming the door.
By the time eight o’clock drew near Caledonia had gone through a rainbow of emotions, switching from dark blue despair to red-hot anger. Cold white fear changed to stubborn green defiance and back again; she finally understood exactly what her parents had been so terrified of.

Professor Reed was a true sociopath. Judging by the lengths he went to capture and hold her, she got the distinct impression that even after she turned eighteen she would not be free to go. She was certain of only one thing: she would get out of here one way or the other.

She looked into the wardrobe in her room, digging through dozens of outfits that were very much like the ones that she’d seen the red-haired girl wearing in her aunt’s kitchen. She sorted through a variety of cashmere cardigans, lace-trimmed blouses and long, full skirts. She bit her lip with determination, pulling out a red sweater and skirt set, but finally deciding on a pale blue one, slipping it on just as the door to her gilded cage swung open.

This time, Max and his silent cohort led her to a pair of double doors that opened onto a statue-lined foyer. She looked inside, surprised to be walking into a luxurious apartment. A panoramic view of a waterfront with city lights beyond it was visible through a broad expanse of windows on the farthest wall. Judging by the height, they looked to be on the third or fourth floor. Caledonia scanned the horizon, desperately searching for a landmark by which she could get her bearings.

“Where are we?” she asked.

A sharp jerk on her arm directed her to the right, through an archway where they entered into an elaborate dining room. Three heads snapped to attention.

“Welcome home,” Professor Reed said, standing up. The twins rose from their seats at the table with matching false smiles. An eerie nervous energy hung in the air, a sour-smelling cloud of yellow curiosity ringed with cold blue and acid green.

The professor gestured to a chair, and Max steered her over to it. “Sit.”
She settled down with a defiant air, taking note of the anxious twins. She was surprised to see that the girl’s curiosity was tempered by a healthy dose of fear.

“Wait in the parlor,” Reed told Max, settling into his chair and gesturing for the twins to do the same. Caledonia looked all around the opulent room, her eyes zooming in on the knives lying on the table. She looked up to see three pairs of eyes watching her. The boy’s mouth was hanging open.

The professor cleared his throat. “Layla, Michael, why don’t you tell Caledonia all about our routine and the privileges she can earn with good behavior.”

They started talking, taking turns telling her about how much they liked their tutors, describing field trips they took to various museums and the zoo. She looked back and forth between their eyes while they spoke, noticing how Layla kept trying to send her a mesmerizing blast of soft lavender. She batted the color away easily, sending her back a sharp rebuke of orange annoyance.

Caledonia scowled at her. “Stop it. I know what you did to my aunt.” She turned to look at the old man with contempt. “And you paid off her boyfriend.”

Professor Reed seemed surprised. “You should be thanking me for removing you from that poor excuse for a home. You’ll find the education I provide to be superior to anything you could have gotten in that dreadful environment. Now just listen to Layla and Michael.”

The twins continued their sales pitch, and Professor Reed watched with a clinical, detached air, obviously expecting the girl to succeed in pacifying Caledonia. The two teens took turns speaking, and Layla grew alarmed as her redoubled efforts were easily rebuffed. Her glances toward the professor became increasingly anxious, and Caledonia realized that the fear she’d sensed was because of him; she was afraid of displeasing him.

Layla finally complained, “It won’t work. She knows how to block it.”

“Fascinating,” noted the professor, ringing a bell. “Do you like vichyssoise?” he asked Caledonia.

A small, nervous woman wearing a black dress with a white apron appeared, bearing a tureen of soup. She carefully set it down on the elaborately carved sideboard, ladling out four bowls meticulously. Caledonia tried to catch her eye, but she would not look up, and her serious face betrayed none of the anxiety she felt. She served each one of them, her attention completely focused on the task at hand.
“That will be all,” Reed said, dismissing her.

The professor pantomimed opening his napkin and placing it in his lap, nodding at Caledonia to follow suit. “Judging by the tattooed hooligans that Max found you keeping company with, I didn’t fetch you a moment too soon. You’ll soon come to see that I did you an enormous favor by removing you from that crowd.”

“You mean kidnapping me?”

“Now dear, I’d hardly call it kidnapping. I’m your legal guardian.”

Michael jumped in. “You’ll like it here. If we follow the rules we get to do whatever we want.”

“Really? All I want to do is leave,” she snapped.

She ignored the boy’s wounded face, her eyes scanning the room from top to bottom. A pair of sparkling chandeliers hung from the high ceiling like diamond earrings, and the marble paneled walls were covered with framed art that looked like it belonged in a museum. She had never seen a place so richly decorated, or a dining table so extravagantly set.

A long, low flower arrangement divided the tabletop, and there was a bewildering array of polished silverware surrounding each place setting. Caledonia studied the gilded china, remembering the article that described Reed’s dismissal from the university.

“No, who pays for all of this?” she asked.

The twins both looked to the professor to answer, but he dodged the question with a faint whiff of annoyance. “It’s not polite to discuss money at the dinner table.”

“Didn’t you get fired from the university?” She pressed him, pleased to see his colors betray his rising irritation. “Because of your failed experiments?”

“Professor Reed is a brilliant scientist.” Layla came to his defense. “His research is groundbreaking.”

“His research only broke ground to put graves into it!” Caledonia spat out bitterly. “He’s the reason that our parents are dead!”

Once again, the twins seemed surprised, looking to Professor Reed for an answer. They were obviously not used to his authority being challenged, and they looked back and forth between him and Caledonia, their colors blending into a bewildered shade of blue.

Caledonia addressed the two of them. “Did you know that he’s still doing it?”

“Doing what?” Michael asked, staring at her with pure fascination.
Caledonia was indignant. “He’s still experimenting with his Athena drug—giving it to helpless animals! Don’t you realize that it was his research that drove your mother to commit suicide?”

“That’s enough of that!” Reed exclaimed. “One more outburst and you’ll be taking your meals alone in your room.”

Caledonia looked up to see Max appear in the archway, ready to take her away. She slumped in her chair with her mouth shut, glowering menacingly at the professor. She knew he felt her malice, because he reached for his mirrored lenses, surprising the twins.

“That’s better. Now, let’s all try to enjoy a nice meal together.”

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Layla rushed to fill it with small talk. “That’s a really pretty sweater,” she told Caledonia.

The professor nodded with approval, “Yes, the blue is much more becoming on you than the red.”

Layla jolted in her chair as if she’d just been shocked by an electric current, for Caledonia’s violent reaction was transmitted from across the table before any words were even spoken.

“You watched me GETTING DRESSED?!” Caledonia bolted to her feet, knocking over her chair behind her with a thump that brought Max running.

“You’re under surveillance as part of a scientific study,” Professor Reed explained calmly. “It’s purely clinical. There’s really no reason to get so upset about it.”

“You bastard! How dare you!”

“Max,” the professor called over his shoulder, “I’m going to need you to remove her from the table.”

Max entered the room and advanced on her, holding out his hand. “Nice try.” He smiled grimly. “Now give me the knife.”

Caledonia reached slowly behind her back for the steak knife she’d slipped into the waistband of her skirt. Before anyone could move, she drew her arm back and threw it hard. It stuck in the table directly in front of Professor Reed with a dull thud, vibrating like a tuning fork.

Three pairs of shocked eyes watched as she straightened herself and went with Max, turning back once to spew a burning red cloud of volcanic anger into the room. The twins gasped simultaneously.
Caledonia was roughly deposited back into her room, and once she was alone the reality of her situation came crashing down upon her all at once. Everything her parents had feared had come to pass; she was at the mercy of the madman who had ruined their lives.

She thought about Calvin with a sharp stab of pain, and threw herself onto the bed, burying her face in the pillow with a sob. It was hard to believe that it had only been a day since they swam in the river, splashing and playing like a couple of otters until they finally wound up in a passionate embrace.

She remembered how the water ran off his body as he rose from the river, and the way he pulled her down on top of him and made love to her right there on the riverbank. They held each other close afterwards, lying in the dappled sunlight and letting the warm summer breeze dry their bodies.

Life could not possibly be so cruel as to give her a taste of love only to snatch it right back again. What if he forgot all about her before she could get back to him? She looked through a veil of tears at the childish artificial room she was trapped in, overcome by despair.

Then she got mad.

Calvin had awakened something within her, and she didn’t want it to go back to sleep. She went from grieving her loss to being enraged, and it was the powerful rage of a woman in love, a blaze of angry red that darkened to nearly black. Caledonia got up and paced, the anger swelling within her, making it impossible for her to sit still. She thought about the hidden camera somewhere in the room and got even angrier.

If he was going to watch her, she might as well put on a show.

She picked up the perfume bottles, hurling them at the wall one by one, filling the room with a sickeningly sweet stench that only served to inflame her more. She tore apart the armoire, smashing the drawers and ripping the clothes inside them to pieces.

Professor Reed watched the monitor in his office, turning to Max. “Do you think she might hurt herself?”

Max shook his head with disgust. “I knew this was a mistake. We should have waited.”

“It’s only a childish tantrum,” the professor said, watching as the violence on the screen escalated. “I couldn’t simply sit back and allow an innocent girl to be compromised by lowlife scum.”
Max looked down at the monitor, thinking she looked more like a vicious beast than a girl. “We’re going to have to move her.”

They watched as Caledonia rocked one of the bedposts until it snapped, sending the canopy crashing down onto the mattress. She used the post as a club, swinging at the dresser, shattering the glass in the picture frames and the mirror, and finally punching great holes in the walls.

By the time Max flung open the door she stood heaving and panting in the wreckage. There wasn’t a thing left to break, and she was spent. The second guard lifted his glasses to stare in disbelief; it looked like a bomb had gone off in the room.

“Put ’em back on,” Max barked at him.

The two men took Caledonia by the arms, leading the shaking girl out of the room and into the hall. She used her last ounce of energy to kick at their legs as she was lifted off her feet, half dragged and half carried down the corridor to an elevator. Max pressed a button and Caledonia could feel her stomach drop as they went down three floors to the basement.

Max was fuming.

All of his worst predictions were coming true, and here he was, spending his precious time putting out fires instead of taking care of business. The stupid old man wouldn’t listen to reason, and now they had a huge problem on their hands, a problem that threatened all of his plans.

He’d just put a down payment on a sweet little beach house in Aruba, and he didn’t get to see his expensive girlfriend nearly enough. Now he was going to have to spend even more time here, riding herd on this little hellcat and taking orders from a crazy old man. Max gripped Caledonia’s thin arm even tighter with irritation.

The elevator door opened to a sterile white hallway lined with doors, and the men dragged her increasingly less resistant body down to one of them, opening it to reveal a small cell. The two men picked her up and heaved her in like a sack of potatoes, standing back to rub their bruised shins.

The door slammed behind her with a resounding thud, and Caledonia found herself alone in a room completely unlike the one she had just trashed. It held only a metal sink and toilet, with a thin mattress set on the floor in the corner. She looked up to see a camera trained down on her, and crouched on the floor with her head between her knees, hands trembling from hunger and fatigue.
A few minutes later the door flew open, and Professor Reed’s voice filled the room. “I hope you’re happy with yourself. You’ve completely ruined our dinner.”

She looked up, bleary eyed. “I’m elated.”

He shook his head with disappointment. “Do as I say, and you’ll see I can give you everything you’ve ever wanted.”

She laughed bitterly. “How about giving me my parents back? How about letting me go?”

“What’s done is done,” he said. “They signed onto the project. They knew the risks.”

“I doubt they ever expected that you’d kidnap their daughter.”

His colors betrayed his frustration. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to withhold some privileges from you until you learn how to behave.”

She dropped her head again, shaking it with disgust. “Withhold away.”

“I went to a great deal of trouble to prepare your room for you. I’m afraid that your new quarters won’t be nearly as lavish.”

She looked into the face of a madman, still unable to see his eyes. “Go to hell.”

He turned to leave and the door slammed shut again. Caledonia’s shoulders slumped, and she crawled over to the thin mattress, unable to hold her head up any longer.

“Oh, Calvin …” she curled up and whispered his name, missing him with increasing desperation. Unable to maintain her brave front any longer, tears began to stream out of her eyes, so she covered her face with her arms, unwilling to let the professor’s camera see her give in to despair.

She swore that she would get back to Calvin if it killed her, and she meant it. If Layla had been watching the monitor she would have seen the pool of deep blue anguish that surrounded Caledonia change, becoming a cloud of steely gray determination that dissipated like a puff of smoke when she finally drifted away to an uneasy sleep.
Chapter Twenty-Two

MUTINY

She dreamed she was with Calvin, walking hand in hand through endless museum galleries. He bent down with a smile to deliver a toe-curling kiss that sent her heart pounding and her blood pumping. She woke to find herself tucked into a fetal position on a thin mattress, fighting a losing battle to return to her dream before reality set back in.

Caledonia felt the girl arrive before she saw her, and she sat up to watch the door open, revealing Layla standing anxiously in the entrance, two guards directly behind her.

“Excuse me,” she said timidly. “But I brought you something to eat.” She held a covered dish on a tray in her outstretched arms, “May I come in?”

Caledonia scowled at her. “Did he send you to try again?”

“No, I asked if I could see you.”

“Why?”

“I want to talk.”

“Sure you do,” she scoffed, rubbing her eyes defiantly.

“Please?” Layla begged, her eyes intense.

Caledonia looked at the tray, and the big man standing behind the nervous girl. She knew that she’d better eat. She couldn’t afford to weaken if she expected to fight him again, and one way or the other, she knew that she’d be fighting him again.

“All right,” she agreed.

Layla stepped into the room and turned back to Max. “Can you leave us alone?”

“You have fifteen minutes with her,” he said, closing the door on them.

Layla handed the tray to Caledonia, stepping back to smooth her skirt and sit on the floor with her legs folded under her. “Don’t worry, I won’t try anything.”

Caledonia shrugged, lifting the lid over the plate to reveal a sandwich. “Do I look worried?”
Layla smiled wryly. “He did ask me to try and change you again, but I know that it won’t work. You’re just as good at it as I am … Maybe even better.”

Caledonia looked up with narrowed eyes; she could tell that Layla was being truthful. She gestured to the camera with a toss of her head. “He’s watching us, you know.”

“Yes, but he can’t hear us. Please don’t frown. He thinks I’m trying to make you relax.”

Caledonia scrutinized her, and she could see that beneath her nervous anxiety lay a burning hunger. She wanted something. Bright red hair floated all around her shoulders like a flaming cloud; her yellow curiosity made her look as though she were on fire.

Layla cleared her throat, not sure of how to start. “Caledonia … That’s a pretty name.”

“You can call me Cal … I mean, Cali,” she answered. “Why are you here?”

Layla leaned closer, her voice intense. “What do you know about my mother? Please tell me.”

“First I need to know where we are … What city is this?”

Layla looked surprised. “San Francisco.”

Caledonia sighed with relief. At least she hadn’t been taken too far. “Do you know how to get to the deYoung Museum from here?”

If she could only make her way to someplace she’d been before, she felt certain she could find her way back to Calvin’s house.

“Um, I’m not really sure … We have a driver take us wherever we go.”

Caledonia chewed her lip, frowning.

“Please … What do you know about my mother?” Layla’s eyes were blazing.

“Do you have a computer?”

She nodded yes, her curly red hair bobbing up and down.

“It’s on the internet. Why don’t you just look it up?”

“Michael and I are only allowed on educational sites. Teddy says that there are a lot of bad things on the web, and he doesn’t want us to get any misinformation.”

Caledonia cringed at the sound of the Professor’s nickname. “My parents were afraid of Professor Reed. They hid me from him my whole life.”

“Why?” she asked, her gold and green eyes honestly curious.

“Because of what he did … to them and to your mother. They were afraid he was going to come and take me away.” She drew a shuddering breath. “They were right.”
Caledonia thought about how brave and resourceful her parents had been. She had a newfound respect for the way they had struggled for their sanity, feeling a surge of pride at the way they’d handled themselves. They were far better people than Professor Reed would ever be, and echoing his twisted sentiment, she vowed to make sure that their sacrifice would not be in vain.

“Teddy says that you belong with us,” Layla said. “He says that we’re the only ones who can really understand you.”

Caledonia shook her head, thinking about Calvin. “That’s a lie. I wouldn’t believe anything he says.” Her empty stomach growled and she reached for the sandwich, unable to wait any longer. She opened it and sniffed suspiciously, but started eating.

Layla watched her somberly, deep in thought. She could see that Caledonia was speaking honestly, but Teddy also believed that what he said was true. She was confused–how could they both be right?

“Teddy told me that my mother wanted us to be with him.”

Caledonia was disgusted. “I seriously doubt it. He stole you … just like he’s trying to steal me.”

She could see Layla’s mind racing, and taste the bitter green doubt setting in as the horrible truth occurred to her. She felt sorry for having to break the news to her, and when Layla looked at her with worried eyes, she recognized Cali’s kindness, and was touched by her pity and regret.

Caledonia groped for something nice to say, “I liked your mother’s name–Alastrina. It’s pretty.”

Layla looked surprised, “Alastrina? Teddy said her name was Trina.”

“Oh, that must have been her nickname.” Caledonia remembered the group picture, and how the smiling girl with the mop of curly red hair had stood out from the group. “You look a whole lot like her… You and your brother both have exactly the same hair as she did.”

Layla was shocked. “You saw her?” she gasped.

“I saw a picture. Don’t you have any pictures of her?”

She looked down, “No. Teddy doesn’t like us to talk about her. Sometimes I think I remember, but it all seems so far away … so hazy.” She pulsed with a deep blue melancholy, and the ache in Layla’s heart felt all too familiar to Caledonia. She gulped down the last few bites of the sandwich, pushing the tray away.
Layla broke the silence, wringing her hands together in her lap. “Please tell me everything you know.”

Caledonia pressed her lips together, and finally started explaining what she had discovered about the professor’s research project. She reluctantly told Layla the awful stories of the suicides, and how her own parents suffered for years from the aftereffects of the Athena drug. She told her that the professor admitted to selecting people with little or no family connections because he knew exactly how dangerous the research was.

“He knew, and he didn’t care,” Caledonia spat out bitterly. “He kept giving it to people even after the first deaths!”

“That doesn’t seem like something Teddy would do,” Layla said, perturbed. “He says that he wants to help mankind … to make people better.”

Caledonia shook her head sadly. As damaged as her parents were, at least she had been brought up by people who loved her, and not a cold manipulator who only saw people as subjects for his self-aggrandizing experiments. She had a sudden rush of sympathy for the girl who had been raised by a monster.

Layla felt Caledonia soften and she brightened up a little. “Why don’t you at least try and stay here with us? We can be friends, and maybe after a little while it won’t seem so bad.”

Caledonia shook her head sadly. “I can’t stay. I have to get out of here.”

Layla looked disappointed. “But why? Your aunt’s house really wasn’t a very good place to live.”

Caledonia looked into Layla’s eyes, noticing the flecks of gold that ringed both of her green and tawny brown irises. They were so strange, and yet somehow so familiar. She could see honesty in them, and so she returned the favor, speaking the truth.

“There’s a boy … and I have to get back to him.”

“Oh!” Layla gasped, because she could feel Caledonia’s powerful emotions as surely as if they were her own. “Do you love him?”

Caledonia thought of Calvin with a fresh surge of longing that made her want to cry. Layla couldn’t stop her own heart from aching with the pain of lovers torn apart; her eyes welled up with involuntary tears.

“Yes,” Caledonia answered with absolute conviction, “More than anything else in the world.”
Layla was speechless, feeling the passion flowing straight through Caledonia’s eyes deep down into her own soul. She had never known anything so real, or so moving, in her entire life. Before she could recover, two men in glasses burst into the room and ushered her out, slamming the door behind them.

Hours passed, and Caledonia paced, thinking. She wondered what would have happened if she’d never met Calvin. She wouldn’t have known anything about the professor’s amoral experiments, and she would have gone with him willingly, relieved to get away from Phil. She shuddered to imagine how she might have tried to fit into the professor’s weird little family, unaware of the tragic past.

Ignorance truly would have been bliss.

But that was then, and this was now; there was nothing anyone could do or say to entice her to stay. She would sacrifice everything she had and crawl through broken glass to get back to Calvin. She straightened up, steeling her spine with renewed determination and pacing away her anxiety.

The minutes crawled by like hours, and eventually the door opened again and Layla was back with another cloche-covered tray. This time she came in without asking, and the door was immediately closed and locked behind her.

“I talked him into letting me come back for tea,” she said, her eyes darting nervously to the camera.

Caledonia smirked, “He’s big on tea, isn’t he?”

Layla sat down on the floor again, lowering her voice. “If he thinks you’re calming down he’ll let you out of here. So smile.”

She removed the cover from the tray, revealing a teapot shaped like a cat, cups, and a plate of little brown biscuits. Layla poured some tea from the pot and handed Caledonia a flower shaped cup on a saucer shaped like a leaf. Caledonia looked down at it and back up at Layla, bursting into laughter she didn’t even have to fake.

“Cute,” she said, “Let me guess—he picked these out.”

Layla laughed too, even though she wasn’t really sure what was so funny. Caledonia sipped the tea and picked up a little cookie, looking at it critically.

“Is this supposed to be an elephant?”
“It might be a bear,” said Layla, “You know how animal crackers are. They don’t always come out quite right.”

“Oh. These are animal crackers?” She popped one in her mouth and ate it. “Funny, I didn’t expect them to be sweet.”

Layla was surprised. “You’ve never had an animal cracker before?”

Caledonia sighed. Even a girl raised by a psychopath in an ivory tower knew more about the everyday world than she did. “My parents did a very good job of hiding me away … from everything.”

Layla barraged her with questions about her life in the countryside. She couldn’t seem to hear enough about what it was like for Caledonia to roam the wilderness, free to come and go as she pleased. “Weren’t you afraid out in the woods, all by yourself?”

“Not when I had my knife with me,” she replied, laughing at Layla’s shocked expression.

“You were just like Karana,” Layla said dreamily.

“The Island of the Blue Dolphins?” Caledonia smiled. “I love that book!”

They discovered that they both loved to read, comparing books and finding that they shared many of the same favorites. The more they talked, the more Caledonia realized how much they had in common. Layla may have been brought up with all of the modern conveniences, but both girls had coped with their isolation by escaping into the make-believe world of books.

Soon they were laughing and joking like they’d known each other for years, and they weren’t even acting for the professor’s camera. They discussed little quirks about their synesthesia, excited to find out how similar they were.

Layla liked having someone to talk to, someone who understood, and Caledonia wondered if this was what it felt like to have a real girlfriend. Honestly curious, she questioned Layla about her life, reading between the lines and finding out more than Teddy probably would have liked.

“So he never lets you go out of the house without him?” Cali asked, realizing that the twins were just as much prisoners as she was.

Layla nodded. “Him or one of the guards. He says that because I’m different, other people won’t understand. He says they’ll think I’m crazy like my mother was.”

“Your mother was fine before he poisoned her,” Caledonia said angrily. “Teddy’s the one who’s crazy!”
Layla’s eyes flashed to the camera nervously, and Caledonia plastered on a big fake smile, throwing her head back and feigning a happy laugh. Layla relaxed, smiling at her gratefully.

Only Caledonia’s eyes betrayed her irritation. “When did he first find out about what you could do–about the colors?”

“I’m not sure … he just always seemed to know. He said that he expected us to be different. Michael tried and tried, but he couldn’t do it. He had me practice a lot when I was little. Teddy would bring in different people, and he wouldn’t let me and Michael play unless I could change them.”

“Change them how?”

“Make them laugh or cry. It was a lot better when he wanted me to make them happy. I always hated to make people sad or scared … I only did it because I had to.”

“Why? What happened if you didn’t?” Caledonia asked.

She looked down, wincing. “Teddy would separate us. It was much harder on Michael than it was on me. He used to cry, and beg me not to be so stubborn.”

“That’s terrible,” Caledonia whispered, tasting her bitter memory.

“It’s not so bad. I only have to practice on the help once in a while now.”

Caledonia raised her eyebrows. “The help?”

“You know, the people who clean and cook for us.”

Caledonia recoiled. “Don’t you feel sorry for them?”

Her face looked completely innocent. “Teddy says that’s what they get paid for.”

“What about that Max guy? And those guards … did you ever try to change them?”

“No!” she exclaimed, shocked at the very idea, “I only do it when Teddy tells me to.”

“What about … Teddy?” The word left a bad taste in Cali’s mouth. “Did you ever try it on him?”

Layla looked down again. “Once, when we were little, but he was so hard on Michael … I wouldn’t ever do that again.”

Caledonia could only imagine how ruthlessly the professor had manipulated the small children.

Layla checked the expensive watch she wore on her pale wrist. “Cali, when Max comes back, please be nice to him. Try not to be so angry. If the professor thinks you won’t cause any trouble, he might let us spend more time together.”
She nodded, seeing the wisdom of playing along. She certainly wasn’t going to get anywhere locked away in a dungeon. She put on her most pleasant face and flashed another enormous fake smile for the camera. “Okay.”

Soon the men arrived to take Layla away, and Caledonia smiled brightly at Max’s mirrored sunglasses. “We had such a good time. Thank you so much for bringing her by.”

He drew back a little, scrutinizing her. She could see his surprise give way to suspicion that was tinged with a tiny whiff of relief. It was a small start, but it was all the encouragement that Caledonia needed.

When the door clicked shut she smiled again, only this time it was genuine.

~

Professor Reed watched the scene unfold on the monitor in his office, mistaking the girl’s blooming friendship for evidence that Layla was successfully manipulating Caledonia.

“Excellent,” he said, drumming his fingertips together. “This is coming along beautifully.”

Max entered the office, taking a seat and reaching into his breast pocket. “She seems a little better, but it might be a trick.”

“Let’s see what Layla reports back,” Reed mused. “In the meantime, go ahead and prepare Layla’s room. I think she’ll be a good influence on Caledonia.”

Max pulled a cigarette out and lit it, ignoring the professor’s irritated glance. “I still don’t get why you had to have her here. You’ll never be able to put her to work.”

The professor smiled condescendingly. “I don’t expect you to understand the intricacies of the scientific method.” He reached into his desk drawer for an ashtray, sliding it across the table with tight lips. “I do expect you to earn your lavish salary and procure me some female subjects right away.”

Max blew smoke across the desk. “I got a line on some girls coming in from Cambodia. No papers. I’m going to need access to the accounts–these guys want cash on delivery and no foolin’ around. I need to be ready at a moment’s notice.”

Professor Reed nodded, “All right. I want to get started immediately. Offer double their asking price.”

“Sure,” he replied, getting up to leave. “I assume the usual bonus will apply?”

“After delivery,” Reed replied, waving the last wisps of smoke away with annoyance.
Max left the office, thinking how much easier life would be without having to deal with the crazy old nut-job. He could put Layla’s freaky abilities to much better use, he thought, and plenty of other people would pay good money for the smuggled girls. He cracked his knuckles and exhaled loudly.

He reached down to rub his sore shin with his sore hand, and felt a surge of irritation. All he needed was more money, and all he was getting was more trouble. That little bitch with her wide spooky eyes was the final straw.

It was high time he made a few phone calls.
When Calvin woke up to find Caledonia missing and the window standing open, he ran outside, checking all around the ranch. The awful thought crossed his mind that she had abandoned him, and he went cold with fear, unable to imagine what he’d done wrong. He wondered if she’d had second thoughts about running away with him, and the idea was as painful as a punch in the gut.

Then he found her knife, still in its sheath under the pillow.

When he realized what lengths they’d gone to in order to track her down, the magnitude of what she was up against scared him like he’d never been scared before. He could call the police, but he knew they’d only declare her a runaway, file a report and forget all about it. He was sick with fear, afraid of what they might be doing to her.

By the time he got home, it took both Jarod and Crystal to calm him down and get him to explain what had happened. He could barely sit still while he told them, pacing and ranting like a wild man, blaming himself for taking her someplace she could be tracked down. He was panicked, not sure where to begin looking.

“I bet it was those same guys,” Crystal said.

“Probably,” Calvin moaned, raking his hand across his scalp with despair. “I’ve been all over the internet. I can’t find anything about the professor.”

“So … This dude came to her house? To talk her aunt into handing her over?” Jarod asked.

“Yes,” Calvin’s voice was dark.

“I have an idea,” Jarod said.

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Crystal knocked on the door, dressed in the highest heels and shortest skirt possible. When Phil opened it, his eyes nearly popped out of his head to see a scantily clad blonde standing on his porch, holding a bottle of Jack Daniels in front of her ample cleavage.
“Well hello there. Can I help you?” he asked, looking her up and down with avid eyes.

“I’m here for the party,” she giggled, wobbling unsteadily on her heels.

“Sorry, sweetie, there’s nobody here but me.”

She knit her brows together and pouted her lips. “But they said number four …” She staggered back a little to look up at the house number, cocking her head flirtatiously. “Are you puttin’ me on?”

“No,” he grinned, baring his teeth with a wolfish smile. “But you’re welcome to come on in and check for yourself.”

“Kay,” she giggled, waving the bottle. “But only if you’ll have a little drinkie with me …”

Jarod and his brother watched the exchange from the parking lot, and when she disappeared into the condo, Calvin grumbled, “I’d rather we just beat it out of him.”

“Take it easy,” Jarod replied. “Crystal will have him down in no time.”

After about twenty minutes the door opened again and Crystal peeked out, waving them in. They hustled over and slipped inside, closing the door quietly. Crystal pointed to where Phil was sprawled out on the couch, eyes closed, snoring with his mouth hanging open.

“How long do we have?” Jarod asked her.

“The roofie should last him all night … but I dunno, he’s kind of a big guy.” Crystal looked at him with disgust. “He told me his roommate wouldn’t be home till after midnight. Typical pig.”

Jarod headed up the stairs while Calvin searched the countertops, flipping through stacks of papers. Crystal went through Phil’s wallet, pulling out a condom and tossing it back on the couch with a grimace. A devious smile spread on her face, and she retrieved the packet, tearing it open and leaving the wrapper on the coffee table between the two tumblers full of liquor.

“I might as well get him in trouble while we’re at it,” she muttered.

She pulled a tube of red lipstick out of her purse and applied it to her lips, then picked up one of the glasses from the table to place an obvious lip print on the rim. She bent down to mark Phil’s cheek with a grimace, trailing her face down to be sure to smudge the collar of his shirt.

She stood and wiped her lips with the back of her hand just as Jarod came down the stairs waving a cell phone, grinning. “Got it!”
After another night on the hard mattress Caledonia was brought into Reed’s office. She did her very best to remain as neutral as possible when she was forced to sit and face the man she detested.

The professor looked her over clinically. “Layla tells me that you two really hit it off. How would you like to move into her room with her?”

Caledonia arranged her face into a pleasant mask. “Why, yes, I’d like that very much.”

“Are you ready to apologize for your little … outburst, and behave yourself?” He took off his glasses, testing her.

She met his watery, faded blue eyes, and it took all of her restraint not to cringe outwardly. She stilled herself inside, projecting a tranquility that did not tamper with his suspicious yellow aura. She looked down, seemingly embarrassed. “I’m sorry I lost my temper. It’s just that those men who came for me were awfully rude.”

Professor Reed sighed, nodding in agreement. “It’s a pity, but the kind of people who do the work I need done … Let’s just say that they’re not always the most well-mannered of characters.”

“My mother used to say that if you lie down with dogs, you get up with fleas,” Caledonia said, looking up to gauge his reaction.

He smiled at her words. “That sounds like something Jenny would say. I certainly hope you haven’t inherited her sarcasm.”

“She always said I was like my father,” she replied, holding back her outrage; showing him only a bland facade.

He paused, looking closely into her eyes for a long moment. “I’ll have Max take you to Layla’s room.”

Max escorted her to a door in the same hallway as her first room, gripping her arm tightly enough to leave a mark. “If you pull any more of your shit, you’ll regret it,” he growled menacingly. He opened the door, shoving her inside.

Layla looked up from where she was folding some clothes on her bed with a triumphant smile. Caledonia’s eyes darted around, taking in a room that was very similar to the one she’d destroyed. There was the same lacy canopy over a large four poster bed, and furniture every bit as ornate as the things she’d just reduced to kindling. The only difference was, this room had a window. Her heart leapt when she saw daylight peeking in through lace curtains.
“Don’t bother,” Max snarled, reading her mind. “It’s four stories straight down, and just in case you try and grow wings, I’ve had it barred.” He spun around to leave, slamming the door and locking it behind him.

Layla cringed sympathetically, as if to apologize for his rudeness. “You’ll like it much better here, I promise.” She got up and showed Caledonia around her large and well-appointed suite, pointing out the drawers she’d emptied out for her. “Teddy sent some more clothes for you, and if you don’t make any trouble, he’ll let you take your studies with us. You’ll see … he’s not all bad. He’s always been very good to me and Michael.”

Caledonia spotted a phone sitting on her dresser and raced over to pick it up. She raised it to her ear, unable to hear a sound. “Does this phone work?”

“It’s only for calling cook or maid.”

Caledonia looked at her oddly. “Don’t they have names?”

“No,” Layla replied matter of factly. “Teddy says that we shouldn’t develop any attachments with the help because they won’t always be around. If we call them by name he fires them.”

Caledonia said nothing, her lips curling in disgust. Reed had purposely kept the twins from forming any bonds aside from him. It was ironic how Layla’s and Caledonia’s lives had taken parallel tracks; her own parents had done exactly the same thing for entirely different reasons.

She rushed over to inspect the window. The metal bars were bolted down tight; she’d need tools to get them off. Looking down, she saw a long, sheer drop to the pavement below. There were no balconies or awnings to climb out onto. She slumped with disappointment.

Layla started explaining their schedules and routines, “We have dinner every night at exactly six o’clock, and we mustn’t be late or Teddy gets very cross. We call in our breakfast orders after dinner, and it’s delivered to our rooms at seven o’clock. Lessons start at eight, we take lunch with our tutor, and then–”

“Sounds like every second of your day is planned out for you!” Caledonia exclaimed. She was frustrated, realizing she’d only been moved from one jail cell to another. She wondered how long she could keep up the pretense of compliance.

“Teddy says that it’s important to be organized,” Layla said, honestly surprised at Caledonia’s reaction. “Is that bad?”

Once again, a rush of pity softened Caledonia’s heart, and she shrugged, “I don’t know … I was raised out in the woods like a wild girl, remember?”
“From one extreme to another,” Layla said.

Their eyes met, and they smiled at each other as they tasted the irony simultaneously. A sharp rapping knock made Caledonia look to the way she’d come in, but Layla headed towards a door that was off to the side of the room.

“It’s Michael,” she explained, “His room is connected to mine.”

She opened the door and Michael walked in, approaching them nervously with a curious and excited aura. Looking at the twins side by side, Caledonia was struck by their coloring; they were like a pair of rare orchids, pale and speckled, topped with fiery red crowns of hair.

Michael stared goggle-eyed at Caledonia, burning with interest, and Layla rolled her eyes, nudging him with her elbow. “Put your tongue back in your mouth and say hello,” she chided him.

He reached his hand out to Caledonia, stiffly formal. She stepped forward to take it, shaking it politely while trying to ignore the intense way he was staring at her. He seemed shyer than Layla, almost like he was her younger brother.

“It’s nice to see you … I mean, h-how are you? I mean … How do you like it here so far?” he asked.

She raised her eyebrows. “Let’s see: I’ve been drugged, kidnapped, imprisoned and spied on. It’s been great.”

He was taken aback, speechless, uncertain of how to respond to her sarcasm. She had to remind herself that the twins were just as much victims of Professor Reed as she was, and there was no point in taking her frustrations out on them.

She took a deep breath. “I’m sorry.” She smiled apologetically. “It’s been a rough couple of days. You can call me Cali.”

“Why don’t you two have a seat,” Layla interjected, gesturing to a pair of couches in the corner by her book shelves. “I need to finish putting Cali’s clothes away.”

Caledonia sat down, tempted to make a snide comment about how those were definitely not her clothes, but she refrained, instead turning to the nervous boy who sat perched on the edge of the couch opposite hers.

“So, tell me about these field trips you take. How often do you get let out of here?”

“We go out every few weeks. If Layla is good at work, we go to the library, or we get to have dessert after dinner.”
“Good at work?” she asked.
“You know, jobs. For Teddy.”
“Like what? What does she do for him?”
He looked over to his sister on the other side of the room. “She changes people. Like you do. She makes them do what Teddy wants.”
Caledonia was starting to get it. “Like she changed my aunt?”
Michael squirmed uncomfortably, “Layla said she was a lot easier than some of the others.”
Layla returned and looked at Michael with a sympathetic smile. “Cali’s nice. You don’t need to be so nervous.”
“We were just talking about the jobs you do for Teddy,” Caledonia said. “Tell me more about your work.”
She started out reluctantly, but Caledonia nodded and smiled encouragingly, and soon she was telling her everything, detailing exactly how the professor was using her to finance his continued research.
The twins would accompany him on various business meetings, posing as grandchildren he was setting up trust funds for. Layla would manipulate bankers and investment fund managers, softening them up so Michael could question them. Together, they forced the money managers to give up passwords, access codes, and insider trading information. Sometimes they would get lucky, ferreting out corporate or personal secrets to blackmail them with.
That was where Max and his crew fit in, working as debt collectors.
Caledonia scoffed, “So that’s how he makes his money—he steals it.”
Michael got defensive. “That’s how they all do it on Wall Street. They use complex trading derivatives to make billions. We only take advantage of a little extra information.”
“So it’s okay, then,” Caledonia said sourly.
Michael smiled, completely oblivious to her sarcasm. “I bet you’d be really good at it. Teddy even lets me manage some of our holdings. I get higher returns than most institutional investors.”
“Michael is really good at math,” Layla said proudly.
“Yeah.” He puffed up a little. “Max even asked me for help with the accounts today. He says I’m going to be his new right hand man.”
Caledonia looked back and forth between them. “Why do you two stay here? You’re both over eighteen. Why don’t you just leave?”

They looked at her like she’d gone mad. “This is our home. We’re a family.”

“The professor is not your father!” Caledonia exclaimed.

“Teddy is good to us. All we have to do is follow the rules and everybody’s happy.”

“I won’t be happy until I get out of here.”

“He’ll never let you go,” Michael said firmly. “He cares about his research more than anything else. He’s very interested in testing your capabilities.”

“Well, he can’t,” she spat out vehemently, hatred and anger swelling in her heart. “I’m not one of his subjects.”

She looked at Layla’s shocked face and took a deep breath, trying to get hold of herself. She had to maintain a positive attitude or they were never going to let her go on one of their little trips. She thought about the possibility of waiting weeks or months to get back to Calvin, and wondered where she would find the patience.

She realized that twins had been trained, groomed from the first moment they could talk to be obedient. The professor had brainwashed them into the docile pair that sat before her now, and Caledonia wondered what their poor mother would have thought about it.

Layla jumped up, “Oh my gosh! Look at the time … Out of here, Michael! We need to get dressed for dinner!” She was flustered, clearly in fear of being late and incurring the wrath of Teddy.

Michael got up, heading for the portal that separated their two rooms. He turned for one last glance at Caledonia and bonked his head on the door frame, rubbing it sheepishly as he stumbled out.

“He’s not usually like that,” Layla apologized for him. “It’s just that you’re the prettiest girl he’s ever seen.”

“I have a feeling I’m the only girl he’s ever seen,” muttered Caledonia.

Layla picked out an outfit for her, and she dressed swiftly while looking around for a camera. She let Layla fix her hair, tying it back neatly with a large black bow while she frowned at herself in the ornate gilded mirror.

“Ready?” Layla smiled encouragingly.
Ready as I’ll ever be, she thought. Dressed in a jumper over a frilly blouse, she looked just like a doll stuck inside a pretty little dollhouse. She clenched her jaw and prepared herself to face Professor Reed once more.

There was a rap on the door leading out into the hallway, and this time it was their escort to dinner.

“Layla?” Caledonia asked, following her towards the door, “Does your brother have a window in his room too?”
Calvin and Jarod checked every number in Phil’s phone, finding only three without names attached. The first was a phone sex line, the second, a waitress at a local bar. The third and final number rang to a mysterious voice-mail account with no message. They took the phone to an old friend of Jarod’s, a reclusive computer gamer who hacked into a reverse directory to track down a billing address in San Francisco.

The brothers rode their motorcycles across the bridge and into the fog-shrouded city, ending up in an industrial area by the waterfront. The building was a tall concrete monolith that looked completely unremarkable from the outside. There were no windows on the first few floors, and the only entry was a pair of metal gates facing the street with security cameras trained down onto them.

Calvin and Jarod stashed their bikes between two buildings across the street, watching from the shadows. “Let’s hang back and see who we’re dealing with,” Jarod said, squinting at the building from around a corner. “I don’t wanna get tased again.”

Jarod was worried about Cal. He hadn’t seen him this upset since the horrible day he’d had to break the news to him about the accident. That day, he’d sworn to their father that he’d look after his little brother, but there wasn’t much he could do for him now.

For the past two days Cal wouldn’t rest, and he’d barely eaten a thing; he looked worn out and drawn. Jarod waited by his side for a few hours, but when there was no sign of any comings or goings, he started losing patience.

“I bet everybody who works here already went home,” he said. “C’mon, let’s go grab a bite and check back later.”

“Go ahead,” Calvin replied, “I’m not hungry.”

“Listen bro, it’s not going anywhere …”
“No,” Calvin said quietly, his hollow eyes filled with grim determination. “She has to be here.”

Jarod looked up at the darkening gloom, and back at his brother. “I’ll go pick up something to eat.” He headed towards his bike, turning back. “Don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

Cal nodded without taking his eyes off the building; this was the last lead, and he wasn’t about to give up on his only hope.

Caledonia was his only hope.

Like a light at the end of a tunnel, she had signaled a way out of the darkness that had become his life. She’d made him question his shiftless existence and want to be a better person. His grandmother had guessed right: she was the one, and he could never go back to the way he was before she came along.

He felt like he would die if he couldn’t find her. No amount of money or alcohol or girls would ever be enough to fill the hollow empty ache in his chest. This was his last chance and he knew it.

“She has to be here,” he repeated out loud.

He paced back and forth, coming out onto the sidewalk when lights illuminated a pair of windows on the fourth floor. It was getting dark, and he knew that when Jarod got back he wouldn’t want to stay much longer. He had to take a chance. He reached down and picked up a handful of gravel.

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The professor was pleased with himself, and now that everything seemed to be going his way he felt young again, ready to tackle a whole new round of research. He stood at the head of the table, watching the three teenagers arrive, checking to make sure that they were properly dressed for dinner. He nodded his approval and took a seat.

“Children,” he said warmly, making Caledonia cringe inside.

Layla looked at her with trepidation.

Professor Reed rang the little bell he kept by his side, and the same woman as before came in to serve them, moving around the table silently. No wonder she refused to make eye contact, Caledonia thought, imagining the professor directing Layla to manipulate his employees. She looked at the old man with a fresh surge of anger.

Layla bit her lip fearfully.
“My dear Caledonia,” the professor beamed, “are you getting settled in all right?”

She smiled warmly back at him, showing him only peaceful tranquility, keeping all of her dark anger contained. The twins both watched her performance with fascination.

She realized that it didn’t even occur to Layla that she could openly defy him. Layla believed that she was powerless against the professor, and never thought to question his authority. She was much more imprisoned than Caledonia could ever be, because her mind had been shackled by his lies.

Caledonia remembered a story about a baby elephant that had been kept on a small chain, eventually growing into a huge and powerful beast that still believed that the chain binding it was unbreakable. It didn’t even try to escape, because the concept was simply unimaginable.

She made it a point to show Layla just how easy deceiving Teddy could be, smiling sweetly with a placid smile. “Everything is wonderful. Layla’s room is so pretty! I think I’m going to like it here.”

“That’s terrific,” he smiled, pleased that his plans were working out so beautifully. The professor thought that he was smarter than everyone else, and his smug arrogance made him doubly easy to fool.

Caledonia opened her eyes innocently. “When do I get to meet our tutor?”

“Soon enough, soon enough.” He smiled again, nodding his approval towards Layla, who flushed bright red. She looked down and started eating to avoid his eyes. When she looked back up Caledonia winked at her, and she nearly choked.

The professor clasped his hands together. “Now that we’re all on the same page, I have a little announcement to make. As you know, I’ve been conducting my research with primates for years, and while I’ve seen some remarkable success, it’s been nothing on the scale of what I envision. You see, my Athena compound, instead of inducing synesthesia in its subjects, has now been proven to alter their offspring’s DNA.”

He was beaming with excited pride. “You two girls are my greatest triumph. You’re living proof that I was on the right track, and you’ve inspired me to resume my studies with human subjects!”

Michael looked down, burning with wounded feelings. Caledonia was absolutely horrified.

“But … But after what happened with our parents …” Her voice trailed off as she looked at him with outrage she wasn’t able to squelch.
The old man didn’t seem to notice her distress, lost in the excitement of the moment. “It’s a pity that they didn’t live to see what a tremendous success our little experiment was. I think David would have really appreciated the genetic implications …”

Caledonia gathered herself, her hands shaking under the table with the force of her suppressed emotions. She managed to choke out, “Who … Who will be your new … subjects?”

Professor Reed practically rubbed his hands together with glee, “Max is handling the logistics as we speak. Just imagine! If I alter the dosage I might be able to actually be able to achieve individuals with telekinesis! Who knows what wonderful things second generations might be capable of … I’ve already begun the process of sequencing your DNA, and comparing it to Layla’s.” He gloried in his triumph. “Once I pinpoint the mutation, I’ll be able to test for it prenatally, and produce only female offspring that show signs of the Athena Effect!”

Caledonia was shocked and disgusted by the sheer evil of his plans, and she gazed at him, hating him with all of the blackness in her soul. It took every ounce of restraint she could muster to arrange her face into a reflection of what he wanted to see.

Layla just stared, surprised by Cali’s ability to fool him so completely. Only she could truly feel the force of Caledonia’s emotions and fully comprehend just how difficult a feat of self-control she was witnessing.

She looked back and forth between the two of them incredulously. She’d grown up believing that something terrible would happen if she ever deceived Teddy, and now this amazing girl was making a fool out of the man right before her eyes. Her mind started racing with the possibilities.

Caledonia swallowed hard. “Teddy? Is that your laboratory downstairs?” she asked with another painfully forced smile, “In the building?”

“Yes, it is,” he said, sipping his tea. “This entire building is devoted to my scientific research. One day I intend to donate it as a museum.” He smiled to himself, imagining his glorious vindication. He couldn’t wait to see the looks on his former colleague’s faces when he was finally published in the medical journals.

“Wow … I’d like to see it someday.” She looked at him adoringly.

He was satisfied with himself, radiating confidence. “I’ve been making arrangements to start your testing as soon as possible. I’m eager to compare your abilities to Layla’s. I’m so happy to know that you’ll be cooperating.”
They ate the rest of their meal in silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. After the last plate was cleared the professor stood up and clapped his hands together.

“Now it’s off to bed, children!” he said cheerfully, a bizarre imitation of a concerned parent. He looked at Caledonia, nodding meaningfully. “Be sure to get plenty of rest. We have lots of work to do.”

They filed out of the dining room and into the foyer where Max was waiting to escort them back to their room. Unlike the professor, Max didn’t trust Caledonia’s new attitude, and he planned to keep her on a short leash until he was absolutely certain that she didn’t pose a threat to everything he’d been working for.

Max scowled at the girl from behind his sunglasses, still wary of her. Professor Reed may have bought her little act hook line and sinker, but Max had seen her in action, and judging by the scars she bore on her arm, she was made of much tougher stuff than the doctor could even imagine.

He watched her following along behind the twins with her head down submissively, but he could see the difference between them. There was something about the way she moved, something in the set of her shoulders. Something unmistakably free.

The girls said goodnight to Michael in the hallway, and they were locked into their respective rooms for the night. It was commonplace ritual for the twins, but Caledonia cringed when she heard the bolts slide on the door. She started pacing around the room anxiously, full of pent-up energy. She finally sat down on the couch with a sigh.

Layla wanted to talk, eager to find out more about her glamorous new roommate. She asked Caledonia question after question about what it was like to attend classes with other students, curious about everything she’d ever heard or read about high school. She was particularly curious about what the boys were like.

“I’m not the best person to ask; I didn’t really fit in,” Caledonia said. “It was a little overwhelming for me to be around all those people.”

Layla dropped her head, disappointed. “Then there would have been no hope for me.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Caledonia said, “You grew up around people, with electricity and fancy clothes … I bet you would have had lots of friends.”
Layla looked up, and when the girls’ mismatched eyes met they both smiled wryly. Despite their completely different upbringings, again, they were both aware of how similar they really were.

“I wish I had a blue eye,” Layla said. “I hate my brown eye.”

Caledonia got a lump in her throat. “Don’t say that. Brown eyes are my favorite.”

“I’m sorry,” Layla frowned sympathetically, reminding Caledonia that their emotions were an open book to each other. “His eyes are brown … aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Caledonia nodded, feeling even sadder.

“Did you kiss him?” Layla asked innocently.

Caledonia’s blush brightened her cheeks and spread across her chest.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Layla laughed, barraging her with questions about Calvin, and what it was like to go on a date.

Caledonia started talking, reliving all of her powerful emotions as she told Layla about saving Rufus, and the crazy goings on at the biker house. She described their trips to the fair and the museum, and the more she remembered, the more she missed Calvin. She realized that she had been in love with him long before she’d allowed herself to admit it.

Layla listened raptly as Cali spoke, sharing the colorful feelings that burned bright and true; she could taste the sweetness of the memories, and her chest ached with the agonizing pain of their separation. She was deeply moved, feeling almost as though she were in love as well.

She sighed, full of frustrated longing for a boyfriend of her own that wasn’t only a story in a book. “Your life was so exciting. I can’t even imagine how I’ll ever meet a boy, much less date one.” She looked thoughtful. “Maybe if you do really well on jobs for Teddy he’ll let us go shopping together! That would be fun. I bet we could even make him let us pick out our own things …”

The sharp ping of a pebble bouncing off the windowpane startled them, and Layla stood up, pulling the curtains aside and squinting down to the twilight street. “I think there’s someone out there.”

Caledonia’s eyes flew open wide, and she sprang up to press her face against the bars, looking down into the swirling foggy night. It was hard to make out the lone figure standing in the gloomy twilight, but when he moved, she knew his walk. “It’s him!” she gasped.
Calvin saw a cloud of golden hair appear in the window, and his heart skipped a beat. He stood rooted to the spot, holding his breath.

Layla looked again, turning to Caledonia. “Oh my! Just look at his color … He sees you! He looks like he’s going to explode!”

Caledonia was frantic. “I have to get down to him.” She turned to Layla with a plea in her voice, “Will you help me?”

Layla saw her vibrating with the same powerful energy as the boy on the street. Their combined feelings galvanized something inside of her, giving her the courage to go against years of conditioning.

“What can I do?”

“Get me into Michael’s room,” Caledonia said, her voice shaking.

Layla nodded, thinking she’d never seen anyone so intensely determined. They rushed to the door on the side of the room and entered into a short corridor, rapping on a door at the other end of it. Michael opened his side, and Caledonia brushed past him, racing to his unbarred window. She frantically tried to pry it open, looking down to see Calvin pacing back and forth in the street.

“You aren’t supposed to be in here. What are you doing?” Michael asked fearfully.

“Help me get this open!” Caledonia grunted. “Do you have any rope?”

Michael was stunned. “You can’t get down from here.”

Caledonia turned to Layla, wild-eyed. “I need something to climb down on!”

“I know!” Layla cried, “We can tie the bedsheets together to make a rope!”

“That might work!” Caledonia exclaimed.

She ran to Michael’s bed, tearing it apart and pulling off the sheets.

“I’ll go get mine!” Layla ran back to her room.

“Oh my God! You’re not going to … We’ll get in trouble,” Michael said, backing away.

Caledonia started knotting the corners together as best she could, her hands shaking with adrenalin. When Layla returned and handed her more sheets, she looked up with a shaky smile.

“What a great idea! You’re a genius!”

Layla returned her smile and shrugged. “I saw it in a cartoon.”

“A cartoon?”

“I think it was Daffy Duck,” Layla admitted.
Caledonia went back to the window, struggling to slide the heavy casement open. Layla came to help, groaning with exertion by her side as they slowly forced it up.

Neither one of them noticed that Michael had picked up the phone.

When the crack was big enough for her to get through, Caledonia popped the screen out and lowered the makeshift rope, tying one end of it to the leg of a nearby desk. She turned back and embraced Layla with tears in her eyes. “Thank you!”

Michael looked towards the door. “Don’t do it! Max is gonna be here any second.”

“What?” Layla looked at her brother, horrified. Both of the girls could see the fear and guilt pouring out of him. “What have you done?” she asked.

The door on the far side of the room swung open, and Caledonia darted for the window, scrambling out of it and dangling from the tied up sheets. She fell a few feet and stopped short with a snap as the desk slammed up against the wall. Clinging on for dear life, she got her bearings, straddling the sheets and using her feet to rappel against the building as she lowered herself hand over hand.

Calvin stood on the street, shocked to see a makeshift rope drop from the window.

“Oh no,” he said, seeing Caledonia come flying out the window to slam against the side of the building. He raced over to the sidewalk to position himself beneath her, his heart hammering in his chest.

“You can do it,” he choked out, barely believing what he was seeing. The end of the blanket rope stopped a good ten feet off the ground, and he held his breath, praying with all his might.

Max burst through the door just in time to see Caledonia dive out of the window. At first he thought she’d jumped, but he raced to the windowsill and looked out to see the little witch nimbly climbing down a line of blankets.

“Godammit it!” he roared. She’d made it about halfway when he grabbed the end and heaved on it, nearly making Caledonia lose her grip. She started to twist, swinging wildly and bouncing off the building.

“Hold on!” Watching her struggle, Calvin had never felt so helpless in his entire life.

Max heaved on the sheets again, enraged, thinking that if he couldn’t reel her up, he would settle for making her fall. He wanted to see her hurt, and he couldn’t care less what the old man thought about it.

“Stop it!” Layla screamed, “Stop it!”
Max ignored her, stooping to untie the sheet from the desk leg, but having a hard time because it was pulled taut. Layla grabbed at his arms, trying to stop him. He turned around, his face ugly with anger, and backhanded her across the cheek.

Layla went flying to the floor, gasping for air. She had only slowed him down for a few seconds, but that was all it took. Caledonia shimmied to the end of the line, dangled for a moment, and dropped the last few feet into Calvin’s arms. The line of blankets fell a split second later, puddling in a pool at their feet.

She wrapped herself around him with a sob, and he hugged her tightly. He could hardly believe what had just happened, and his breathing was ragged with enormous shuddering gasps of relief.

“You made it,” Calvin said hoarsely, “You made it.”

There was a grinding sound of metal on metal as the entrance to the building started to roll open, and Cali turned to see Max sprinting towards them, glowing bright red with murderous intent. They ran across the street towards the alley, footsteps hot on their heels. Calvin glanced back to see Max closing in on them, stopping to place himself between her and the enraged man.

Out of nowhere, Jarod came roaring between them on his bike, hitting Max in the back of the head with a bag of take-out food. The big man went flying, landing hard in the middle of the street. Jarod skidded to a stop and spun the bike around, making Max roll across the spilled milkshakes to avoid his second pass.

Calvin made it to his bike and Caledonia jumped on behind him, clinging to him as they peeled out onto the dark city streets. She turned back to see Layla’s pale face in the window, watching her new friend make the escape that she could only dream of.

Caledonia burrowed into Calvin’s back and held on tight.

Max groaned, wincing with pain as he struggled to get up, swearing that if he ever saw her again he’d kill her. He rose from the pavement, dripping with goo and clutching his broken wrist.

Starting right now, the old man was gonna pay dearly for this one.
They drove away fast, Calvin’s powerful motorcycle weaving in and out of traffic. After a few minutes they were joined by Jarod, who signaled for them to pull over. The two bikes turned off the main road, finally stopping to park on a quiet residential street.

Calvin swung off the bike, running his hands up and down Caledonia’s arms as if to inspect her for damage. “Are you okay?” he asked, brushing her hair back from her face to lean in and search her eyes.

“I am now,” she said, touching his face. “You found me.” He kissed her, and she could taste his sweet relief mingling with her own. He pulled her close with a heavy sigh, enveloping her in his intense emotions. Love, worry, and happiness all blended together, cloaked in an intense violet relief.

Jarod cleared his throat. “Hey Cali, you all right?”

She looked up with an enormous smile. “Yes. You have perfect timing.”

“You’re not gonna believe how she got out of there,” Calvin said, smiling for the first time in days.

“Let’s go home and you can tell me all about it over a beer,” Jarod grinned.

“No.” Calvin shook his head, keeping her tucked in close to his body. “We’re gonna take off from here. We’re going where nobody can find us.”

“Aww, c’mon. We can figure something out. We’ll be ready for those guys if they come back around. Maybe Cali can stay at Crystal’s place for a while …”

“No way.” Calvin was adamant. “We’re leaving. We’ll come back after Cali’s birthday.” He looked around the gloomy city streets suspiciously.

Jarod sighed, stepping forward to clap his brother on the back and give Cali a bear hug.

“Take good care of him,” he spoke in her ear. She nodded solemnly.
They promised Jarod they’d call when they could, waving goodbye to him as he pulled away. Calvin zipped open the pack on his bike and extracted two helmets, helping her into an extra leather jacket without commenting on her unusual attire. They had the rest of their lives to talk about what happened. For now, he was anxious to get her as far away from the professor and his goons as possible.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, giving her one more kiss before they climbed back onto his motorcycle and sped away.

After a couple of hours on the road they pulled up to a motel that faced out over the freeway. Calvin swung off the bike and stretched his sore arms. “How are you doing?”

She stretched too. “I’m fine. Are we stopping here?”

“We should get some rest so we can get an early start. Wait right here while I get us a room.” Calvin looked around suspiciously, “If anyone comes, I want you to hide, okay?”

She nodded. “Go ahead. I’ll be fine.”

When they were safely locked away in their room, Caledonia excused herself to take a long hot shower, discarding the clothes she wore in the wastebasket. She washed away all the fear and anxiety of the past few days, purposefully sending it down the drain along with the soapy water. She stepped out and slipped into a shirt from Calvin’s bag, imagining how horrified the professor would be to see her now; the thought made her smile at herself in the mirror.

She came out of the bathroom to find Calvin pacing at the window, anxiously peeking through the drapes every time the flash of a headlight passed by. Caledonia could see how tired he was, and she came up behind him to encircle him in her arms. “You need to rest.”

He turned to look into her calm eyes and let his guard down with a sigh, allowing her to lead him to the bed. He sat down and kicked off his boots, lying back while she snuggled up to him, listening to his heartbeat with her ear pressed to his chest.

He kissed the top of her head. “I was so scared. I still can’t believe you climbed down on bedsheets …” He chuckled, his chest gently shaking her head. “That was like something out of a cartoon.”

She looked up, “Let me guess … Doofy Duck?”

“Donald,” he sounded tired.

“Doofy Donald?” she asked.

He smiled wearily, too fatigued to explain. “I love you, Cali.”
She crawled up to whisper in his ear, “I know.”

Calvin’s eyelids were growing heavy, and she could tell he was fighting to stay awake. She stroked the dark hair back from his forehead, kissing his tired brow.

“It’s okay now. Go to sleep,” she whispered.

“Promise you’ll be here when I wake up,” he mumbled.

“Cross my heart,” she said softly, watching him drift off.

She pulled the blankets up around him, shuddering with a sudden overwhelming happiness. She put all of her doubts behind her, deciding to believe, without any reservations, that everything would be fine. At that moment all was right in the world, and she laid her head down beside his, watching him until she fell asleep too.

Sometime in the middle of the night Calvin woke up and clung to her, desperate for reassurance. “Oh man, I thought you were gone,” he groaned in her ear. “I was so scared.”

They came together tenderly, overcome by the joy of their reunion. Caledonia calmed him with her every touch, feeling his fear slip away as his confidence strengthened. She was happier than she’d ever been, soothing him and taking her comfort from his relief. He finally burrowed his face into her neck and fell back to sleep, his body still entwined with hers.

The bright sun streaming through a crack in the drapes woke him up, and he jumped out of bed, racing to the window to look outside. Relieved to find nothing amiss, he turned back to see Caledonia still curled up sleeping, her wrists tucked under her chin. He climbed back under the covers, arranging himself around her with a satisfied sigh.

He swore that he’d never sleep apart from her ever again, remembering how awful it had been to wake up and find her missing. He knew he should let her sleep, but he was unable to resist kissing her shoulder, trailing his lips across her soft skin, following the curve of her neck.

Her eyes opened, and she stirred, stretching as luxuriantly as a cat. “Mmm … Good morning.”

“It is,” he said, kissing her ear and making her giggle.

She rolled over to look at him, and he was struck by the beauty of her clear eyes in the morning light. “What are we going to do now?” she asked.

“I have an idea,” he said, rolling over on top of her.

“Oh, really?” she laughed, “I can tell.”
They pulled up to a small-town feed store, greeted by the suspicious stares of a few old men populating a bench out front. They all had the weather-beaten faces and bowed legs of retired ranchers, and they eyed the scruffy-looking bikers suspiciously. Calvin filled the gas tank while Caledonia went in, nodding and smiling at the men as she passed by, encasing them in a potent cloud of disarming aqua serenity.

She went to the clothing section, picked out some jeans and boots, and changed into them in the dressing room. When she came out of the store, Calvin was bent over a map spread out on the bench, listening politely as two of the men argued about the relative merits of one roadside restaurant over another.

He looked up to see her and smiled wide, making her heart skip a beat. He was even more handsome than he was the first time she’d laid eyes upon him, because now his colors were very different. His cocky nervous energy was gone, replaced by a confident and purposeful rosy peach that was growing pinker as he looked her up and down.

“You look like a cowgirl,” he said.

Then they were back on the road, wind in their faces and Caledonia’s hands gripping his waist. She rubbed his stomach, laughing into his back when she felt his muscles clench and quiver. His colors strengthened, intensifying to the deepest and sweetest hues she’d seen yet. She pressed her face into Calvin’s back, perfectly satisfied.

Caledonia was back on a journey into the unknown, navigating a world full of danger, only this time she wasn’t alone. The future ahead of them was uncertain, but neither one of them cared. They were in love, they were together, and for now, that was all that mattered.

They were heading south.
“What is taking so long? I need you to get moving! I must have her back immediately!” Professor Reed screeched, leaping to his feet when Max appeared in his office.

The big man took a seat, unbuttoning his coat with his good hand and settling in with an air of insolence. “I’m glad to be rid of her.”

The old man was so agitated he was practically jumping up and down. “Hire more staff if you need to, but I want her back right away or else–”

“Or else what?” Max asked, a challenge in his voice. He leaned back in his chair.

Reed sat down, struggling for composure. When he spoke his voice was menacing. “You imbecile. What kind of security operation are you running?”

Max was disgusted. “You really are a crazy old coot, aren’t you?”

The professor was taken aback, not used to such blatant disrespect from his staff. He paused for a moment, finally asking, “What about the women? Have you procured them for me?”

Max leaned forward with an evil smile. “There’s been a little change of plans. I’m no longer working for you.”

Professor Reed looked at him incredulously. “Are you serious? Is this about money?”

Max threw his head back with a laugh; he’d been waiting for this moment for a long time. He pulled out a cigarette, lighting it and drawing deeply. He calmly explained to the professor that he’d drained the bank accounts and was going to be leaving, taking Layla and Michael with him.

“You probably should have been a little nicer to that boy. He’s been a big help to me. I know all about how you’ve been running your scams, and now that I’ve got the accounts, I don’t need you at all now … do I?”

The professor gasped as the enormity of his mistake was revealed. “Layla would never betray me …”
“Oh, but she has no choice in the matter. She’ll be working for me now. And you can rest assured that I’ll be putting her talents to much better use than you ever did.”

The professor frantically logged onto his computer, checking his accounts; his face blanched. He reached for the phone with a shaking hand and his eyes flew open with shock when he found the line had gone dead.

Max stood up. “I’m going to need you to stay in your office until we clear out. Don’t worry about the twins,” he snarled. “You won’t be seeing either one of them ever again.” He buttoned his coat and reached over to grind his cigarette out on the desk, nodding towards the big man standing just outside the door. “Joe will be keeping an eye on you for me.”

Max smiled again, clearly enjoying the professor’s shocked reaction. He left the room without saying goodbye.

Professor Reed dropped his head into his hands. He had made a fatal error; he should never have told Max how to avoid being manipulated by the Athena effect. He wouldn’t have needed to know if it wasn’t for the mission to collect Caledonia … And now she was gone forever.

His servant had become his master.

“When you lie down with dogs …” he whispered.

He slid his desk drawer open and pulled out a picture. It was a group photo of the first research subjects smiling happily. They all looked very young, and so did he, standing with a smile between David and Jenny. The thought occurred to him that his entire life’s work had been a waste, and his lips tightened into a thin line.

“NOOOOO …” he screamed, his voice cracking from the effort.

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Layla was trapped in her room without so much as a new book to keep her company. The help refused to answer questions or make eye contact, and the corridor between her and Michael’s room was locked up tight. She nursed a bruised cheek and hurt feelings, thinking Teddy must really be angry with her to allow Max to get away with treating her so brutally.

Restless, she got up to look out through the bars of her window, wondering if she would have had the courage to climb down like Cali did. Maybe, she thought, if there was a boy blazing with passionate love waiting to whisk her away. She sighed, going back to the couch to re-read one of her old favorites.
A muffled scream echoed throughout the building, and she sat up, straining to listen. She heard a door slam shut, followed by an eerie silence. She frowned, settling back down to return to her book.

Before too long, she was lost in the story.

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THE END

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Excerpt from the sequel to “The Athena Effect,” “The Mackenzie Legacy”

Caledonia watched his assistant steel herself and cast a cloud of intense blood-red infatuation directly into the volunteer’s eyes, topping it off with a compliant amethyst. The woman in blue looked adoringly at the magician, and he took her in his arms, twirling and dipping her theatrically to the hoots and hollers of the audience. He released her and took a deep bow to delighted applause, exiting the stage.

His assistant led the dazed audience member back to her seat, stopping briefly to send her an unmistakable pop of lemon yellow confusion. The woman took her seat, asking her giggling friends, “What did I do?”

Caledonia was shocked. She had just witnessed the Athena effect in action, and yet this woman was far too old to have been mutated in the womb by Professor Reed’s drug experimentation. How could it be? If she hadn’t seen it with her own two eyes she wouldn’t have believed it. She followed her over to the bar in the darkened lounge.

The woman sat down heavily, motioning to the bartender. “Scotch and soda.” She wore theatrical makeup, and her thick black hair was teased high and piled on top of her head. She looked hard, and even older up close than she did from the stage. She took the tumbler the bartender handed her, lifting her glass to drink with a tired air.

Caledonia studied her profile, trying to make sense of what she’d just witnessed, finally speaking, “I saw what you did. I saw you change her.”

The woman sighed, turning to look up. Her own mismatched eyes mirrored Caledonia’s, flying open in shock and recognition. “Well, I’ll be damned … Where did you come from?” She looked around. “Who are you with?”

“M-my boyfriend,” Caledonia answered, stammering in disbelief as she looked into one golden brown eye and one blue eye, “You have heterochromia …”

“I have what?” she asked, sizing Caledonia up with an appraising glance. She knocked back her drink and motioned to the bartender, “Gimme two more Joe–neat.” She nodded to the stool next to her, “Have a seat. You look like you just saw a ghost.”

“The Mackenzie Legacy” is available at all major e-book retailers.
Other books by Derrolyn Anderson:

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“Between The Land and the Sea”
“The Moon and the Tide”
“The Fate of the Muse”
“The Turning Tides”
“The Mackenzie Legacy”

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