

## IN HIS EYES

Stacey Wallace Benefiel  
C.K. Bryant  
Ali Cross  
Jessie Harrell  
Karen Amanda Hooper  
S.R. Johannes  
Katie Klein  
Cheri Lasota  
Heather McCorkle  
Lisa Nowak  
Cory Putman Oakes  
Laura Pauling  
Susan Kaye Quinn  
Elle Strauss  
Magan Vernon  
RaShelle Workman

<http://indeliblewriters.blogspot.com>

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**[First Kiss or First Kill?](#)** by C.K. Bryant, author of *Bound*: Love isn't always rainbows and kittens, sometimes it can be downright deadly. (A deleted chapter from *Bound*.)

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*Surprise, Surprise* is a short story set in the world of the *Zellie Wells* trilogy and takes place several months after the final book, *Glow*. Zellie Wells is a Retroact – someone who can get glimpses of the future - mostly about people dying or encountering danger, and rewind time to keep bad things from happening. Zellie's powers are hereditary, meaning her mom and grandma also have abilities. Most Retroacts have a Lookout – usually their younger sister – who helps with the logistics of the rewinds. Melody is Zellie's Lookout and *Surprise, Surprise* is about Melody and her boyfriend, Raleigh, who met under less than perfect circumstances.

**Surprise, Surprise**  
by  
Stacey Wallace Benefiel

Raleigh leaned against Melody's locker, reusable lunch bag in hand, and waited for her to meet him. He liked this time of day. He'd tolerated the boredom of Remedial Senior English for the Formerly Delinquent, Entry Level Drawing for the Untalented, and World Religions for the Argumentative, and now had hanging with his girlfriend and Auto Shop to look forward to.

Actually, World Religions wasn't so much boring as it was a subject that permeated every aspect of Raleigh's life. His mom owned the recently opened Rosedell New Age Emporium and was the type of person who thought prayer beads were the perfect gift for any occasion. He'd been trying (with ALL his might!!) to date a pastor's daughter for the past seven months and had sat through youth group, Bible study, *and* Sunday and Wednesday church services, all so he could be with her. His Jesusometer was at full capacity. And, as if that wasn't enough, last summer he'd spent a little time as a soul, clinging to his corporeal form. A form that now had to wear long sleeve shirts no matter what the weather because it was covered in some pretty hideous scars. This had resulted in earning him the nickname "Flannel Boy" when he'd started his senior year of school during the hottest September on record.

So yeah, some days he wanted to scream, "Hey Miss Contemplative Agnostic who spends the entire class period trading barbs with White Dude Who Half-Assedly Practices Rastafarianism, there is an Afterlife and if you don't go to the Light, it's a hell of a lot like high school."

But he didn't. He zoned out and kept his temper in check and he tried to be someone Melody deserved. Besides, he'd never be able to really explain how he knew what he knew anyway. Raleigh kept Melody's family secrets to himself.

He glanced at the clock hanging above the locker bank opposite him and did his daily countdown under his breath. "...3,2,1."

Melody rounded the corner at the end of the hallway, flipping her hair back off her shoulders. Her long, tanned legs stretched out from underneath a black mini-skirt, striding toward him, her face lighting up as they made eye contact.

He liked this time of day.

"Hey, you," she said, dropping her books to the floor. Oblivious to everyone else in the hall, she barreled into him, flinging her arms around his neck.

A tall, golden Goddess. His World Religion. Lips like...Raleigh kissed her, encircling her waist with his free arm, done with contemplating, preferring to use the body he'd almost lost.

"Mmm," Melody said, pulling back from him slightly. "We're totally good at that."

He smiled. "I feel like there's always room for improvement on my part. I might need more practice."

She sidestepped over the books she'd dropped and opened her locker. "You're in luck, then. I've convinced Dad to let you take me on a Valentine's date."

Raleigh bent and picked up her books, some of his dark blonde hair slipping from his ponytail, and handed them to her one at a time. "Is there a dance at the church or something?"

"Nope." Melody stashed the last book and grabbed her completely un-ironic Hello Kitty lunch box. "I have to be home by eleven, but we are free to move about town as though we are a normal couple and do normal couple-y things."

Raleigh took her hand and led her to the cafeteria. "An unchaperoned movie? The eating of greasy foodstuffs?"

Melody snorted. "I hope you can come up with something better than dinner and a movie, dude, because we won't get another chance like this until I'm sixteen in June."

"No pressure, then."

She frowned. "I could plan the date, if you want. I just thought it might be nice to not know what's going on for once."

Raleigh brought her hand up and kissed the top of it. "I believe they call that a surprise."

Her frown morphed into a grin. "Oh, I'm not familiar..."

"Well, get familiar. I'm going to plan the best Valentine's Day surprise this side of the Willamette."

Her face lit up again.

"And no fair asking your sister to get a little glimpse of the future," he whispered.

Melody held her lunchbox to her chest in mock indignation. "I would never abuse Zel's power like that!"

"Please, I know you and Claire got someone to future snoop on your Christmas presents."

She shrugged. "We were just trying to get an idea of dollar amounts."

Raleigh swiped the price gun over the row of dream catchers he'd laid out on the counter and then handed them to Avery to hang on the wall.

"What are you and Zellie doing for Valentine's Day?" he asked as he untangled another batch and lined them up to repeat the process.

Avery opened his mouth to speak, but Jason chimed in from the communal seating area in the center of the New Age Emporium. "I'm sure Avery's got some super romantic date planned

where he caps off the evening by giving Zellie a one-of-a-kind piece of bullet jewelry that holds all sorts of deep meaning or some crap like that.”

“I *have* had my eye on a particular shotgun shell...” Avery joked and then shook his head. “We’re actually watching Wyatt at the cabin so that her mom can go out to dinner. Besides, every day with Zel is like Valentine’s Day.” His face turned red, but Raleigh thought that he kind of liked being the boyfriend that all of them had to live up to. It was going to be tough to outdo the King of Romantic Gestures.

“I’m telling you, bro,” Jason said, snuggling down deeper in the batik-covered papasan chair his ass could be found in most afternoons while Raleigh and Avery did actual work. “You’ve got to knock that shit off. You’re messing up the game of every guy at Rosedell, me included, and you better recognize I got some gaaaaame.”

“Oh, yeah?” Raleigh asked, closing up the box of dream catchers and moving on to the glow-in-the-dark tarot decks. “What are you and Claire doing?”

Avery grinned and took a stack of decks from Raleigh, fanning them out on a table next to several wooden bowls full of healing crystals. “Provided she hasn’t broken up with you *again*.”

Raleigh chuckled under his breath. Since he and Melody had gotten together over the summer, Jason and Claire had split and rekindled their torrid love affair twice. From what he’d observed, this was because Jason was a hilarious dumbass and Claire was a hilarious diva. Despite himself, he enjoyed them both immensely.

Jason sat up. “What have you heard?”

Avery shook his head. “Nothin’ man, I’m just messing with you. Claire’s too smart to dump you the week before Valentine’s anyway. She’ll wait until after, that way she’ll have something new to dramatically throw at you in the cafeteria.”

“So, you’re saying I should go with a small box of chocolates and maybe request that the roses be de-thorned?” Jason smirked. “Nah, man, we’re just going to chill at the Lodge. Low key. I *did* write her a killer new song.”

“Jason Hearts Claire’s Rack in B minor?”

“More like double D major and you know it.”

Raleigh tuned them out. They could go on forever with the boob talk and he currently didn’t have access to any boobs, so he packed the extra tarot decks back into their box and scanned the store for other products that needed replenishing. The Sandalwood incense was looking a little low.

Stacking the boxes of dream catchers and tarot decks on top of each other, he took them to the store room/office and put them on the shelves.

His mom looked up from her desk, and then back at her computer screen, her right hand paused over the 10-key. “Hey, kiddo. I couldn’t help but overhear the boys talking about their V-day plans. Are you and Melody doing anything special?”

Raleigh could tell his mom was trying to be nonchalant, keeping her facial expressions passive, but her eyes always betrayed her. She may have been pretty cool for her age, but she was still a mom and still nosy. He kinda loved that about her.

“I’m in charge of planning our date, but I have no idea what I’m going to do,” he said, grabbing a box of incense from the shelves. He was probably going to regret this... “What’s, uh, the best date you’ve ever been on? Any suggestions?”

His mom’s eyes widened and the corners of her mouth turned up in a grin. “Wow, you must be desperate if you’re asking me.”

Raleigh shrugged. He'd never felt about any girl the way he felt about Melody and he'd do anything to make her happy. Asking his mom for help was the least of the jackassery he was bound to get into.

"Okay," she pushed back from her desk and started digging around in the cluttered top drawer, yanking out a notepad. She searched the top of her desk and then shook her head, pulling a pen from the haphazard bun she rolled her hair into every day. "Let's make a list." She uncapped the pen. "The best dates for me were ones where the guy either took me on an adventure someplace new or where we did something that I liked to do and I knew he didn't."

Raleigh sat on the edge of her desk. "I'd take her to Eugene or something, but I don't think her dad would let me leave town with her, so someplace new isn't doable."

She nodded, another pen falling out of her hair. "All right. How about things she likes to do that you're not that into?"

"Outdoor stuff, for sure." A smile broke out on his face. "Mani-pedis. Shopping. Art projects involving glitter. She loves The Sound of Music, but I already gave her the collector's DVD for Christmas."

His mom scribbled furiously on the notepad and then looked at what she'd written. "Well, no girl wants to go to the spa or shopping with a straight guy." She crossed those ideas out. "Looks like you're left with glitter and outdoor activities and I'm going to nix anything having to do with glitter – reminds me too much of my stripping days. Let's get specific with the outdoor stuff."

Raleigh cleared his throat. "Specifically, she likes to be in the out of doors and I do not."

"Don't be such a butt, Ral." She rolled her eyes. "Skiing? Snowshoeing? Ice skating? We live in a winter wonderland now, babe, take your pick."

He thought for a minute. Skiing and ice skating had the potential for injury and he'd rather that Melody not have to drag his incapacitated person around again. "Snowshoeing might work. I can't really screw up walking, can I?"

"And her father certainly can't get pissy over you taking her to do something that requires wearing a lot of clothes."

Raleigh's shoulders slumped. "But is it romantic?"

His mom patted his knee. "Babe, anything can be romantic if you're with the right person." She threw the notepad back into the drawer and waved him away. "Now go stock the incense. I'm not paying you the big bucks to stand around talking about girls."

Raleigh turned off the ignition and took a deep breath. "Here goes nothin'." He reached into the backseat and grabbed the roses he'd carefully placed on top of the snowshoes and ski pants he'd bought at Play It Again Sports.

He got out of the car and gripping the roses tightly, bounded up the front steps and rang the doorbell.

Pastor Paul answered the door immediately; he'd probably been watching through the family room window, wondering why Raleigh had been sitting in his car talking to himself.

"Hello, Raleigh." Melody's dad motioned for him to come inside.

He cleared his throat. "Hi, Sir."

"Melody's still getting ready." He sat down on the couch and patted the seat next to him. "Why don't you tell me about your plans for the evening?"

Raleigh sat at the opposite end of the couch from the pastor, holding the roses on his lap. “Uh, it’s a surprise? I can assure you I’ll take very good care of your daughter, sir.”

He arched an eyebrow. “Oh, I’m not worried about Melody’s safety. I think we both know that she can take care of herself. I’d just like to get a feel for your intentions, if you don’t mind.” Pastor Paul smiled. He was enjoying this. Raleigh wondered if Avery had ever had to put up with this sort of crap. Probably not.

Once upon a time, everyone had thought Zellie and Avery were the good kids, until they found out that the good kids couldn’t keep their hands off of each other. At least that’s what Mel said. So, the former bad kids were paying for Zellie and Avery’s indiscretions. The irony.

“My intentions,” Raleigh whispered, “are to take your daughter snowshoeing and then stop at the See-Saw for hot chocolate afterwards.”

Pastor Paul looked taken aback and stared at him for a moment. “Huh,” he said, nodding his head. “That sounds like fun. She’ll like that.”

“I’ll like what?” Melody asked, walking into the room, narrowing her eyes at her father. “You promised no third degree, Dad. Raleigh is so not Avery.”

She said that like it was a good thing. Raleigh stood and handed her the roses. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

She blushed, looking at him like she wanted to drop the flowers and give him one of her tackle kisses, but she just giggled. “Thank you. Happy Valentine’s Day to you, too.”

Seemingly satisfied that Raleigh wasn’t going to kidnap his youngest daughter and steal her virginity, Pastor Paul saluted him and went into the kitchen.

Melody held up one of her feet. “Like my boots? I borrowed them from Mom.”

“How’d you know you’d need boots?” Raleigh asked.

She waved the question away. “You told me to dress warm, remember? I just have to put these flowers in water and grab my stuff.”

Raleigh watched as Melody went to the dining room table and put the roses into a vase already filled with water. Then she put on a heavy parka he’d never seen her wear before and slung a backpack over her shoulder.

“What’s the backpack for, Mel?”

She shrugged. “Nothin’, I just switched purses.”

He looked down at the floor, hiding his smile.

“I can’t believe you actually found ski pants that are long enough,” Melody said as she zipped her coat up all the way to her chin.

Raleigh slipped one of the batteries from his Maglite and tucked it into his coat pocket. “In the interest of full disclosure, you’re wearing men’s pants.”

Melody stepped into her snowshoes. “Hmm, some dude was very fashion forward then, because this shade of purple is pretty daring, even for me.” She came around to his side of the car, shaking her head. “Here, let me help you. You’re putting the shoes on backwards.”

When they were both outfitted properly, Raleigh took her gloved hand in his and they awkwardly started up the trail, trying not to trip over each other’s shoes. He held the flashlight in his free hand, sweeping it across their path as the last of the fluorescent light from the trailhead parking lot faded behind them.

“This was a really cool idea,” Melody said after they’d walked a while. “I’m glad you picked a Beginner’s trail, though, and one close to the Lodge.”

“Yeah,” Raleigh said, concentrating on his feet, “I checked out a bunch of snowshoeing tours, but they only go out when the moon is full, which it obviously isn’t tonight. So I thought, with my track record and all, we should stick to someplace you’d be familiar with.”

Melody giggled. “In the event I have to drag your lifeless body to safety?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Raleigh made a big show of thwacking the flashlight against his leg, the bulb growing dim. “Crap.” He hit the light against his leg again and it died.

The night was clear, the stars were full and bright, but the moon was just a sliver and they were still on a heavily treed part of the trail. Raleigh squeezed Melody’s hand. “Uh, sorry, I should’ve checked the batteries before we left. I guess we should turn back.”

He could feel her hesitating, deciding something, and then she dropped his hand and took her backpack off. “Don’t be mad, okay?”

“Why would I be mad? I’m the one that messed up,” Raleigh said, glad that the darkness hid his grin from her because he was having a hard time keeping it together.

He heard her unzip her backpack and then was nearly blinded when she twisted a headlamp on and handed it to him. “I may have gotten a little insider information.” She held her light up under her chin, illuminating her face. The corners of her mouth turned down. “I suck, I’m sorry.”

Raleigh put on his best disappointed look and sighed. “It’s okay, I guess. I just really wanted the chance to surprise you, Mel. Now all you’re going to remember about our first real date is that I was too stupid to remember batteries.”

She put her headlamp on and reached for his hand. “Don’t be a dumbass. You were sweet to even try to plan something. It’s just...not in my nature to be unprepared.”

“So, who told you?” He aimed his light at her face. “Zellie?”

Melody ducked her head sheepishly. “No, she’s not really good at seeing this kind of thing. I asked my mom.” She pulled at him. “Enough talking, let’s walk. There’s an open field over this next little hill.”

They made their way up the path, Raleigh’s hands sweating inside his gloves. As they neared the top of the rise, he stopped and twisted his light off.

“What are-”

He reached out and twisted her light off too. “Just look.”

There was a faint glow emanating from just over the hill, enough that Raleigh could see to guide her the rest of the way. “C’mon.”

To her credit, Melody didn’t ask any more questions and let herself be led. She gasped when she saw the field.

He’d used four hundred (to be exact) battery operated pillar candles nestled in the snow to spell out RALEIGH LOVES MELODY inside of a heart.

“Surprise!” he said laughing. “You’re not the only one who asked your mom how the evening might go. The Wells women are always helping me avoid disaster.”

“You,” Melody said, choking up at bit, “made me the World’s Largest Valentine?”

“It’s probably not the *world’s*-”

She launched herself at him, her mouth finding his as they lost their balance and a snowshoe each in the process and fell back into the snow.

“Just so you know,” she said, her lips hovering just above his, “Melody loves Raleigh, too.”

He kissed her, holding her close. He knew.



Without benefit of special powers, just in the way she made him feel, the way her eyes lit up as she walked toward him down the hall at school, he knew.

## The End

Want to know more about Zellie's powers, why Avery is the boyfriend all the guys want to be, or how Melody and Raleigh met? Check out [Glimpse](#), [Glimmer](#), and [Glow](#), or get all three books bundled together in the [Zellie Wells trilogy](#).

Stacey Wallace Benefiel is the author of the *Zellie Wells trilogy*, the *Day of Sacrifice* series and *The Toilet Business*, a collection of essays. Stacey lives in an orange house in Beaverton, OR with her husband and their two children.

For more information about Stacey and her other works, please visit her website: <http://staceywallacebenefiel.com>

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*The following is a deleted chapter from my young adult paranormal romance, BOUND. For those who have read the book, this chapter comes right after Kira is attacked by Bastian. After being rescued by Octavion, she falls asleep in a small lean-to he built in the forest. She wakes a few hours later from a nightmare and Octavion decides that one of his herbal concoctions will help calm her. Unfortunately, things don't quite work out as he'd planned. Enjoy!*

*FYI – Lydia is Octavion's sister and Kira's best friend. Her kindred spirit, Altaria, inhabits Lydia's body—Altaria is a fierce Royal and Lydia is a sassy teen, much like Kira. You'll meet them both in this scene. Toran is a white tiger (and by far my favorite character in the book) with magical powers. I wish you could see more of him in this piece.*

\* \* \*

## First Kiss

by  
C.K. Bryant

A cool night breeze whistled through the dark pines, causing a chill to rise up the length of Octavion's spine. He stepped to the neatly stacked woodpile, selected two large logs off the top and placed them into the pit. The warmth wouldn't give Kira much comfort tonight, but then, neither would his embrace. After all, he was what she feared most—he could see it in her eyes, feel it in her touch. Even after he'd rescued her from Bastian's attack, he could sense she questioned her safety with him. And she had every right to.

If she knew the truth, that one drop of her blood at just the wrong moment could cause him to give into his heritage and kill her, he was sure she'd want nothing to do with him. And who

would blame her? The curse that boiled within him flowed like a raging river with no way to stop it from wiping out everything in its path—even Kira.

His sister, Altaria, crouched near the fire, stirring the herbal tea he'd concocted from ingredients she'd retrieved from the cave. Her long blonde braid came dangerously close to taking a dip in the mixture. She flipped it behind her back and looked up to find her brother's eyes. "Do not be so hard on yourself. You had no idea she would bring you these feelings."

"Feelings?" It had been so long since he'd allowed himself to feel. "I have no feelings for her," he lied. It was much easier to deceive Altaria. Her kindred spirit, Lydia, on the other hand, had a way of knowing when he was not being truthful, especially when it came to Kira.

In the past few months, he'd spent more time than he cared to admit watching over Kira, taking in her every move, the way her auburn hair swayed when she walked, the way her sweet voice drifted through the air and found his ears, even at a distance. Her laughter was like a finely tuned instrument that sang to his senses.

Octavion looked over his shoulder at Kira's delicate frame with her knees tucked under her chin, arms wrapped around her shins. Her back pressed against Toran's white fur in an attempt to stay warm. Even from a distance, he could see her shaking, her eyes staring at nothing, hypnotized by her fears. "Altaria, perhaps your kindred spirit would be better suited for this. Kira is closer to Lydia and she may bring her more peace."

Altaria smiled. "That is not up to me, brother—it is her choosing and at the moment she is angry with you."

"She needn't speak to me if she wishes." Truth be told, *he* could use her help. He was more accustomed to Lydia and right now he would benefit from the familiarity of her company—especially for Kira. He sat back on his heels, folded his arms, and watched Altaria, who was now in a similar position, watching him.

"I will wait as long as it takes," he said. "If Lydia is indeed a friend, she would not be able to watch Kira suffer." It only took a few seconds before Lydia appeared and made her feelings toward her brother quite clear.

"You cheat!" she said as she blew past him.

The events of the past few days flashed in his mind. Lydia's injury. Kira coming so close to death trying to save her life. The fear that surged through his veins as he raced to save Kira from Bastian's attack.

The steam from the pot rolled into the air, blurring the memories and bringing him back to his task. He glanced into the pot—one last ingredient, ginger, would cover some of the bitterness of the saffron and calm Kira's nerves. Still lost in his concerns for both Lydia and Kira, he systematically sliced off a section of the gingerroot, pierced the edges with the tip of his knife, and dropped the chunk into the pot. He let it steep for a moment before scooping up a mug of the aromatic liquid.

"Lydia, this is ready," he called.

"Well, don't just stand there. Bring it over."

A smile tugged at his mouth—he'd missed her sassy attitude. She'd adapted to earth life much better than he and had picked up the slang and the teen attitude Kira exemplified so well. They were more like sisters than friends.

He took the tea to Lydia, but instead of joining them, he returned to the fire and transferred the roots and herbs back to the box. Octavion picked up the box and started toward the cave when Lydia called his name, concern in her tone. He made his way back to the clearing, only to find that Kira was still awake. "Why has she not given in to sleep?"

“How should I know? What was in that stuff? She’s acting weird.” Lydia scooted back so he could see.

Kira took a swing at something in front of her face.

“Kira, what is it?” Octavion asked.

“Dang butterfly won’t leave me alone.” She grabbed at the empty space in front of her nose again. “And where did all these birds come from?” She brushed back her covers and waved her hands down the length of her long, lean legs. “They’re tickling me.”

Lydia threw her arms up. “See? She’s acting drunk.”

Octavion balanced the box on one arm and went through the contents. All the ingredients were correct until he got to the pouch that contained the ginger. When he opened it and took a whiff, he immediately grasped the problem.

“Lydia, you brought galangal instead of ginger.” He set the box down, and picked up Kira’s empty cup. “Did she drink it *all*?”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t my mistake—Altaria did it.”

“If you were not acting like a child, you would have been here to retrieve the correct items.” He knew the fault was his. He should have known to check the ingredients, but he wasn’t prepared to take the blame for, or accept the consequences of, what was about to happen.

Kira tried unsuccessfully to stand. Her equilibrium suffered from the effects of the root. Octavion knew she would also suffer from altered perception, which explained the hallucinations. Worse, galangal was a powerful aphrodisiac.

“Lydia, it’s going to be a long night. I hope you are prepared.”

“Me? You’re the one that messed up. *You* take care of her.” She stood, picked up the box, and walked across the clearing. “I’ll take these back to your lair.” She snickered. She knew full well the effects of the galangal.

“Kira, you need to rest.” Octavion tried to convince her to lie down and be still, but she had other ideas.

“I wanna dance. Can you take me dancing?” She tried to stand again. “I know. You can sing, and I’ll twirl for you.”

Octavion closed his eyes for a long moment and allowed his mind to wander. Her graceful image flitted about in his head. The sway of her hair as she spun around him warmed his heart. He pushed the image away and opened his eyes to find her curious face watching him. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said. “We’re in the middle of the forest and you’ve just been injured.”

“You’re a party pooper.” She jabbed a finger at his face. “You look mad. Why are you always mad at me?”

“I am not angry with you.” He took her by both hands and tried to keep her seated.

She laughed. “You want me dead. Lyd—Alre—Atla—what’s-her-face told me so. You know what I think?”

*That my sister and I needed to have a conversation?* “What do you think, Kira?”

She pulled one of her hands free from his grip and swatted at the air in front of her face again. “I think you love me.” Laughter erupted from deep inside her stomach, radiating through her entire body before escaping. Octavion let its melody soak into his heart for a moment.

Kira’s brow furrowed. “Are you gonna eat me now?”

He cringed, remembering the monster he’d turned into while saving her life. “No, Kira, I will not eat you.” Yet deep down, he knew it was a possibility. Regret that she’d seen him like that weighed heavy on his heart.

“But you could, right? I’ve seen your big teeth and . . . I mean you’re a . . . a . . . what are you, anyway?” She jerked her head around as though following the path of a flying insect. She pulled her other hand loose and clapped them together. “Gotcha.”

He couldn’t help but smile.

She looked at him and laughed again. “*Dimples!* I should call you *Dimples.*” She leaned close and almost fell against his chest as she put each index finger into the hollow of his cheeks. “Can I call you Dimples? Pleeeeease?” She fluttered her eyelashes.

“Lydia!” *I am not going through this alone.* “LYDIA!”

Kira slapped his arm. “You shouldn’t yell at her. She’s mad at you. Why are you so mean? You’re a *bad* boy. Are you gonna to eat me now?”

“LYDIA!”

Kira fell silent. She blinked hard, as if trying to focus. “I don’t feel so good.” She pushed to her knees and crawled into the clearing. The sudden movement caused her to grab her side and cry out. “I’m wounded. Don’t eat me, Dimples.”

Why did she have to fixate on that one thing, the thing that cut right through to his heart? What he wouldn’t give to go back in time and have her not witness the monster he’d become. Her nightmares should be of their enemies, not of him. He knelt by her side and wrapped his arm around her, pulling her against his chest. Was he deceiving himself by denying his feelings for her? But he knew it would never work. They were literally from two different worlds.

“Will you dance with me?” Her voice had softened to a whisper.

“Not tonight.”

“Oh, look!” She pushed him away and pointed to the treetops. “Rainbows. Can you see ‘em? Who tied rainbows to the trees?”

He shook his head. “What color are they, Kira?” He might as well play along.

She slapped him again. “Silly. *Rainbow* colors.” She paused for a long moment, gazing into the depth of his eyes. Her sweet aroma taunted his senses as she leaned closer and kissed him square on the lips. At first, it was clumsy and awkward until she softened her advance. The tenderness of her touch became sensual, stirring his desires and he couldn’t resist her—*chose* not to resist her. He pulled her close and took full advantage of the situation—for the kiss—no more.

“Octavion!”

He quickly pushed Kira away and turned to face his sister. “She—”

Lydia propped her hands on her hips. “Don’t blame it on her. Have you no shame?”

“Dimples! You love me, don’t you?” Kira tried to kiss him again, but he dodged her by rolling to the side.

He stood and walked a few feet away. “You would be better suited for this situation, Lydia.” He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and left the clearing.

“Dimples, don’t leave. He loves me,” he heard her say in the distance.

*Octavion. I’m going to get even with you.* Lydia forced her thoughts into his mind, causing his head to throb. She enjoyed doing that—she knew how much it irritated him that he couldn’t send messages back to her.

*Octavion, this isn’t funny anymore. She’s going to get hurt.*

Octavion took in a deep breath, expecting to cleanse his lungs and calm his desires from her kiss, but when the sudden scent of Kira’s blood struck the back of his throat, his appetite for feeding raged through him. The curse that had plagued his people for generations was too strong to fight, and for a brief moment he imagined his razor sharp, feline teeth ripping the tender flesh from her body. It didn’t matter what he felt for her—he was no longer in control.

*Octavion! Stay where you are. Don't come!*

He grabbed at the pain in his head, closed his eyes, and in less time than it took for his heart to beat once, he was completely transformed and standing next to Lydia. He towered over her, a hybrid of man and beast with claws, fangs and bulging tendons rippling across his back and shoulders. His eyes burned like fire as they locked on Kira. She held a dagger in one trembling hand, blood seeping from a deep cut in the other.

Lydia slammed her hand against Octavion's chest and tried to push him away, but the scent of Kira's fresh blood was like a blade, cutting the back of his throat, sending him into a wild frenzy. The desire was in him, fighting to get out. He'd been able to fight it before, but only because he was prepared. Now it was different. He felt the muscles in his back swell and his eyes burn. He needed to feed.

"Octavion! Stop!" Lydia grabbed his jaw and pulled him to face her. Meeting his eyes, she instantly became Altaria, her strong hand now on his throat, cutting off his lungs. "Leave. Go to the river and hunt."

Octavion's eyes shot to Kira then back to Altaria as he let out a fierce roar of protest. Kira cowered to the ground and screamed. It was enough of a reaction to pull him from his needs. He grabbed Altaria's arm, forcing her to release him.

"You must cauterize the wound," he managed through clenched feline teeth. "She won't be able to heal it on her own, and I...cannot resist for long." With that, he turned and instantly appeared at the river.

He stood at the water's edge, trying to gain control, but the stiff breeze was not in Kira's favor. Her scent reached him. Why did her blood make him react this way? He'd always been able to control his cravings long enough to put distance between him and those of this world, but with Kira it was different. Her scent was sweet and he longed for it. He'd never experienced anything like it.

His transformation enhanced his perceptions. He couldn't just hear his prey—he could feel it stirring in the forest. Something moved to his right. A white-tailed buck stood near the river, its racing pulse drawing Octavion's attention. One swift leap and he was on the unsuspecting creature, crushing its jugular with his powerful jaws. Its flesh wasn't what he craved, but it would subdue his real desires for now.

When he'd had his fill of blood and meat, he went to the creek to wash away the evidence. He'd just begun when he sensed someone behind him. He looked over his shoulder to find Altaria, transformed and hungry, Toran by her side.

"Are you finished with Kira?" Octavion asked.

She shifted her eyes to the deer carcass lying a few feet away. When her eyes met her brother's again, they burned with the desire to feed. The need wasn't as strong for her, being the kindred spirit to a commoner, but after what she'd just been through with Kira, the scent of a fresh kill had driven her into the forest. Octavion nodded his consent, letting them both finish off what was left of the animal.

Watching their ravenous behavior reminded him of his own weakness. For the first time in all his years of hunting, he felt like a monster. How could Kira know this about him and still want to stay? Would exposing their secrets drive her away? It was a risk he would have to take. She needed to know how much danger she was in.

Octavion returned to the clearing to find Kira collapsed in the dirt near the fire. Altaria had left her there with little concern for her comfort or safety. Kira's beautiful auburn hair lay askew

on the ground, pieces of leaves and pine needles tangled in its lengths. At least Altaria had taken the time to wash away the blood.

He gently lifted Kira from the cold ground and placed her in his shelter, brushing the debris from her hair and covering her with a blanket. He examined the burn on her palm and wondered if the pain was what caused her to pass out.

When she began to stir, he sidled in next to her trembling body and leaned his back against the shelter, not quite touching her. He feared waking her would bring back the hallucinations, so he simply watched as she struggled to relax.

“Dimples?” she whispered.

“Yes, Kira.” He had to smile.

“I love you.”

Her words pierced his chest and into his heart. She wouldn’t feel the same in the morning, he was sure of that. “Shh. You need to sleep.” He drew her up to lay alongside him, his arm cradling her.

“Where’s my blanket?” She grabbed at the air behind her.

“It’s right here.” He pulled the covers around her shoulders and brought her closer.

“No, my fuzzy white blanket, silly.”

*Ah, Toran*, he realized. “He’s gone for a walk with Lydia. He’ll be back soon.”

She opened her eyes and tried to sit. “Here, kitty, kitty.” She sighed as she snuggled back under the covers and went to sleep.

Octavion could feel her heart beating against his chest as he watched her breathe. The thought of being responsible for taking her life made him fear himself. He couldn’t be trusted. He’d come so close to killing her already. What if Lydia hadn’t been there to stop him? The risk was too great. Tomorrow, he would take Kira from this place whether she understood or not. But whatever wrath she unleashed on him would be a small price to pay for her life.

\* \* \*

You can read more about these characters in *BOUND*, by C. K. Bryant.  
Watch for *BROKEN*, the sequel, spring of 2012.

To purchase *BOUND*, visit this link:

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To learn more about the author and other projects she's working on, you can visit her blog at <http://www.ckbryant.com>

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*In my young adult urban fantasy, BECOME, James lives with, and works for, Daniel—a powerful servant of Lucifer. The devil’s daughter, Desi, is sent from Hell to live with Daniel so she can be trained in the art of enticement and deception. So she can be groomed to lead Hell*

*alongside her father. James and Desi use each other in an effort to cling to the darkness in each of them, but in the end they discover that love changes everything.*

## **Shattered**

by  
Ali Cross

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die.

But it's not true. Not completely, anyway. For me, it wasn't my life, but my love. All the things I wished I hadn't done and all the things I should have. All the things I wanted to say and all the times I stayed silent.

I thought of Miri and how I wished I'd been able to kiss her one last time. To look into her eyes, her brilliant, blue eyes, and tell her I loved her.

I didn't want to be with any other girls. Didn't care if Daniel threw me out. Didn't care how my life would change. I loved her. But she was already gone. And I was about to die.

I always figured I'd die in a car crash, driving too fast around some bend along the coast, the ocean stretched out beside me like the sky. A fiery crash in one of Daniel's babe-magnet sports cars, my body tangled around some bombshell. Didn't matter who, just as long as she looked as good as me in the pictures. Just so long as I went out in style.

In my darkest fantasy I never thought I'd die like this.

Like a scene from one of those late night kung-fu thrillers—*the death of a thousand cuts* I think the Chinese called it. Leave it to the pansy-ass Chinese to think up something so evil and lame. This dude, Daniel's friend Akaros, was one twisted mumbo-jumbo. He couldn't just kill me and get it over with. He had to bleed me dry and go on about my friend Desi and the "blood of the lost" and all sorts of weird fairy tales I didn't understand.

The whole thing played out like a bad daytime soap opera featuring some pasty vampire trying to get his lost mojo back. But this was no soap, and there'd be no miraculous resurrection for me in episode two.

I watched the slow progression of a trail of blood as it made its way down my arm. I didn't feel it. The pain had reached its crescendo long ago. The cacophony of sensation had short-circuited my nervous system to where I felt nothing at all.

I hung upside down, totally naked, with a million slashes carved into my body and my blood slowly dripping into a kiddie pool with a staff, some martial arts looking weapon thing, lying in the middle of it.

I watched the blood as it thinned, stretched, then dropped from the tip of my finger. It plinked into the pool, shattering the calm surface into a million reflections of the only face I would miss.

I'd just finished a swim when I walked into the kitchen.

"James," Daniel said, scowling at the water pooling at my feet.

"What?" I said. "I towed off." Truth was, toweling off was a work in progress and I didn't really care how much water I got on the floor. It was tile. And we had servants to clean it up.

“I have a job for you,” Daniel said, taking a sip from a steaming cup of coffee.

It was like this sometimes. There’d be a girl he wanted me to show a good time. Maybe a girl he had devious plans for. Show her *more* than a good time. Show her she can’t live without the good time 24/7. Those girls usually ended up checked into rehab somewhere so their daddies could be free of them for a while. It was all the same to me. A good time was just part of the job.

I slid into the seat across from Daniel at the kitchen table.

“She’ll be coming to dinner tonight. Her father’s Governor Carr; I expect you to treat her with utmost respect—so far as they know. But I want you to take her out. Show her a good time.”

Ah, the magic words. “No prob,” I said, standing up.

When I got to the doorway, he said, “I hear she has a thing for black malt.”

“Got it.”

And I thought I did. Thought I had it all figured out.

Turns out I had no freakin’ clue.

I waited for the guests to arrive. My room overlooked the drive, so I saw the governor and his family pull up. He was typical; his wife was typical. When it comes down to it, all rich people look the same. But the girl.

*She* was not typical.

She climbed out of their Town Car more slowly than her parents. They’d already stepped into the house, didn’t even look back for her, didn’t wait for her, by the time she’d closed the car door.

She took a few steps, and then she looked up.

For a second, my blood froze in my veins, my heart stopped pumping, my lungs ceased breathing. *Get a grip*, I told myself. *She’s just a girl*. A stupid, whiney, needy-little-rich girl with a thing for the hard stuff. I looked back out the window. The girl had disappeared.

I did a few pull-ups on the bar in my bathroom while I thought about all the faceless girls I’d dated. They didn’t have names. They didn’t need names. They were bodies, hands, limbs, lips. I found a spot inside myself for this girl. She was younger than the others—I’d Googled her. Hadn’t found a picture, but I knew the basics. Fifteen, spoiled Catholic good-girl. I was seventeen—it’d be a piece of cake.

Finished with my pull-ups, I straightened my shirt and checked my hair. I bleached it platinum—or the girl at Get Glitzed did, in between sexy whispers and the odd lick of my ear. But I went for the cleaned up prep boy look tonight. Wanted to impress the parents and all that.

Satisfied, I wandered down to the back patio. In June, the garden bloomed with color, and Daniel was entertaining *al fresco* tonight. The house made jaws drop, but Daniel said the patio was more alluring. Something that encouraged people to step outside their comfort zones. Something that encouraged them to trust him just a little more than they might have done otherwise.

I followed the laughter and the low sounds of Vivaldi. I knew all the voices, could guess who each one belonged to, but I didn’t hear the girl.

I didn’t see her, standing to the left of the arbor, nearly concealed in the vines and foliage. I bumped into her, knocking her off-balance, and in seconds she was in my arms—until she pulled away.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, forgetting to turn on the charm.



“Oh, no. It’s okay. It was me. I was, you know, standing in the way.” She covered her mouth with one hand, her other arm wrapped around her waist, like without it she might come undone, break apart, shatter.

I knew that look. She’d been drinking and didn’t want me to smell it on her breath. For a minute I felt like myself again and I leapt into action.

“Looks like neither of us wants to be stuck with them, eh?” I tipped her chin up, knowing she couldn’t resist me if she make eye contact.

I didn’t count on being struck stupid when *I* looked into *her* eyes.

I’d seen a million different kinds of cute-beautiful-sexy and this girl fell more into the cute category—five-foot-nothing, spiky blonde hair framing her perfect oval face, full lips and eyes that sparkled like blue diamonds. And yet when she looked right at me, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

“What?” she asked. “Oh, God. Do I smell?” She cupped her hand over her mouth and breathed.

“What? No. I just...” *Got lost in your eyes? Lame, James.* Until that moment, I had never been at a loss for words with a girl. But it was like all my experience just abandoned me when I got a load of one fifteen-year-old girl’s shining blue eyes.

I stuck out my hand and said, “I’m James.” And cursed myself for acting like a virgin. She dropped her hand, revealing a small smile, and shook my hand. She was beautiful. Her eyes were like stars shining in the daytime—she was all sunshine and blue skies and birds singing and green grass and oh man, I could just imagine rolling around in the grass with her.

Her hand in mine felt small but electric. I returned her smile, and it wasn’t to seduce. It was a new smile. One I didn’t know I had. I hadn’t known there was anything more to me than what I’d always been. It made me wonder what else I had hidden inside, and if this girl would be the one to unearth it.

“Um, I’m Miri,” she said.

“Wanna get out of here?” I nodded toward the gardens that wound away from the dinner party and down across the vast lawn. In the distance a white gazebo nestled against the woods that bordered our property. “Come on.”

I tightened my hold on her hand and walked her past Daniel and her parents. “We’re just going for a walk,” I said for the benefit of the Carrs.

Daniel gave the briefest of nods, the slightest indication of his approval. All he cared about was that I distract her, entertain her so he could work his magic on Governor Carr. Which was fine with me because all I wanted to was to be anywhere with this girl, anywhere alone, with her hand in mine, with her eyes on mine.

Let him think whatever he wanted.

Miri held my hand the whole way. We walked along the garden path until it finally spit us out onto the lawn, the gazebo just another hundred yards or so ahead.

“It’s really pretty,” Miri said. I didn’t know how to respond. I’d taken lots of girls out here and they all thought it was pretty. Pretty enough to party all night long, or all day or... Well, it was a popular place to take my “dates.”

And all of a sudden I wished we weren’t there. Wished we were anywhere but there.

I said as much, but Miri pulled her hand out of mine and sat on the white steps. The same steps where I’d messed around with . . . crap, I couldn’t remember her name. The brunette chick with the tattoo of Jiminy Cricket on her shoulder, just last night.

I pushed the memory aside and concentrated on the girl sitting in front of me. Miri—who looked at me like I was a regular guy and not the guy who up until thirty minutes ago had pictured my evening going in a completely different direction. I sat down on the steps, not too close, and turned so I could look at her.

She glanced at me, her bright eyes flashing, and smiled. When her skin warmed into a gentle pink color my stomach clenched. God, I wanted her. And didn't . . . I didn't know what I wanted.

Her.

Just. . .her.

Daniel was, to say the least, pissed when the night ended.

He barely waited for the Carrs to round the curve in the driveway before letting his snake-oil smile slip from his face to be replaced with his *I'm-so-disappointed-in-you* sneer.

“What the hell was that?” he said, quivering with fury.

I brushed past him and through the door—hoping he knew it was less accidental and more *get-the-hell-outa-my-way*. I kept walking, too. Ignoring Daniel. Ignoring the anger rising within me. Ignoring the confusion and the doubt.

With any luck I'd make it to my room before he exploded.

Just as I closed my door I heard the vase—Waterford crystal, I knew because one of Daniel's clients had bragged over it when they gave it to him—shatter against the wall several feet up the stairs.

The next day I waited for Miri in front of her posh private school—a monolith of a place. I needed to redeem myself, to get my head in the game and resist the strange pull she had on me. I knew who I was, what I was. Daniel had shaped me in his image since he'd taken me in as a kid. One day, all that was his would be mine. I couldn't let one *girl* mess it all up.

I'd staged the scene perfectly.

Hot guy (me), hot car (red, top down), and right on time to be admired by every single girl. Every guy too, though they'd never admit it.

I saw Miri before she saw me. Saw the bounce in her step. Saw the sun light up her face like a long lost lover. Saw the moment her brilliant eyes finally fell on me.

But I was ready. I'd prepared for this moment. I glanced away from her to the other girls who'd slowed their pace, gauging my reaction to them, figuring out if I was available or not.

There were a few surprised expressions when it was Miri who walked up to me. Her friends reluctantly peeled away from her when she made those last few steps into what anyone would recognize as private space. She came right up to me until her toes touched mine.

Still I didn't move. I leaned against the hood of the car, ankles crossed, arms folded, smiling. Waiting. Wanting.

“Hey,” she finally said. And while her eyes were a bit glassy from alcohol withdrawal, they still sparkled. I saw a hint of something else, too. Desire.

I carefully avoided looking directly into her eyes, and instead concentrated on her eyelashes. I'd discovered long ago that I could give a girl the impression I was really listening if I never took my eyes off of hers. All by looking close, but not directly at, her eyes. Worked every time.

I needed every edge I could get if I was going to do what Daniel expected. First, don't look the girl in the eyes. Second, feed her need.

And while Miri thought her need was me, the slightly blotched flush on her skin and the glassiness of her eyes told me liquor would do nicely. And I had just the elixir she needed.

We went to her place, where no one was home—and Daniel wouldn't be shadowing me. She didn't see the bottle of whiskey I held tucked behind my back as she led me to her room. When she pulled me in, I admit I stumbled a bit. Lost my cool.

Her room was nothing—not one thing—like what I'd imagined, and I'd spent plenty of time thinking about it. I thought I'd see sunshine and stars and green grass and smiles. Her room felt like death. Freezing. Empty. Black. It made me shiver.

“Cold?” She pulled me all the way into the room and pushed the door closed. She wrapped her arm around my waist. “I can warm you up.”

The room and her brazenness made me doubt the innocence that shone from her. She held mysteries I couldn't unravel. But I wasn't here to figure her out.

I pulled the bottle out from behind me and held it up between us. “I've got something that'll help.”

She didn't look away from me. She kept her eyes glued to mine (or so she thought—I was counting her eyelashes). But she'd grown totally still. Like a statue. She didn't even breathe for the space of

one

two

three

heartbeats.

She licked her lips.

Her eyes flicked to the bottle.

We drank then. Drank and kissed.

It was perfect.

I mean, it should have been perfect.

But it wasn't. Not by a long shot. Every day we spent together, her glow dimmed. There were fewer smiles. Less of what she'd had before, less of who she truly was.

I hated myself for the easiness with which I had broken her. Hated what she'd become with me. Hated all I'd taken from her. Hated that when she looked at me, the diamonds in her eyes had shattered, fractured by her all-consuming need.

It seemed like the smallest of sacrifices, nothing at all in the grand scheme of things, to think about her now. To let the blood drain away and leave me with nothing but regret. Nothing but shame. I deserved this, all of it.

My vision spun—I thought I saw Desi, furious and terrible, darkness and light, wings spread wide behind her. I was hallucinating. So I closed my eyes and thought of Miri—but there was no relief for me there, no refuge from the horror my life had become.

When I found out Miri had befriended Desi, it terrified me. Desi was like a fierce storm, all lightning and thunder and totally unpredictable. And, she was at least as evil as me. Whatever I was, I was less than Daniel. But Desi made Daniel look like a Boy Scout in comparison. And her father was Daniel's boss—a mysterious benefactor who could drive Daniel to his knees with just a phone call.

I showed up at the school, planning to surprise Miri with lunch and liquor, but instead I saw her driving away with Desi in the passenger seat of her yellow VW bug. To say that I was one hundred percent freaked would be an understatement. I knew what I was doing to Miri wasn't good. But I had plans to change it. I was going to stop, ease up on the booze, take her out on a real date. Whatever I did, I wouldn't hurt her—not anymore than I already had, anyway. But I didn't think Desi would have the same reservation.

And when I got a break-up text from Miri late that night, my whole world shattered.

I tried to get her back. Tried to get her to listen to me, to forgive me.

Her eyes were perfectly clear, shining with determination, when she pushed me away and told me it was over. That she'd gotten clean, gotten off the booze, was almost enough for me to be happy she'd moved on. I knew I was no good for her. But I wanted to be.

Oh, how I wanted to be.

Tears dripped off my lips, though the bleeding had slowed. It wouldn't be long now, I didn't think. I hung from the center of the gazebo, so it was easy to remember that first day, before everything fell apart. To think of Miri.

The way her eyes shone. *There was no pain.* The way her lips curved into a bow when she smiled. *The sound of my blood dripping into the pool matched the rhythm of my heartbeat that June day.* The way her hair framed her perfect face.

Then Desi was back, breathing hard and wild, grasping my hands, saying soft things I couldn't understand. I fell, fell from the ceiling, my body flopping half into the pool, half on the deck, like a dead fish.

Because I was dead. Or at least I would be any second now. And that would be a good thing. Miri'd looked good the last time I'd seen her. Really good. Nearly whole. And she deserved that. Deserved to be happy. I could never make her happy. I wasn't good enough.

So I'd close my eyes. Just...go away.

I dreamt about space, absolute darkness. I saw stars, but maybe they were Miri's eyes. Maybe they'd haunt me forever. And maybe that wasn't such a bad thing. But then blinding light and brilliant colors beamed against my eyelids. Someone's hands touched my face, prying open my eyes and shining lights into them that had no business in my afterlife. But I didn't have the strength to push them away.

Something cold burned through my veins and the darkness, complete this time, no colors, no twinkling stars, no memories of Miri, closed down on me.

I thought things would stay that way. I was surprised I could think at all. But I could think. And...I could feel.

An eternity later, a hand slipped into mine, and my cold, lifeless heart lurched into a painful rhythm that screamed her name with every beat.

*Mi-riMi-riMi-riMi-ri.*

She said my name, said many things I couldn't understand. But it didn't matter, because it was her voice, the only voice I wanted to hear.

*Miri.*

Wherever I was, no matter how I had died, I'd brought Miri's memory with me. So as far as I was concerned I'd made it to heaven—but I wasn't about to tell the powers-that-be they'd made

a mistake. I'd spend an eternity listening to Miri's sweet voice. Feeling her small, warm hand in mine.

"James?" Miri said. An interactive dream. I could handle that.

"Hey, bright eyes," I tried to say. Except something clogged my mouth, blocked my throat, making it impossible to say anything at all. Against my will, my eyes flicked open. Just once, but enough. Everything around me blazed with bright light—way, way too bright.

"James." Miri's hand moved on my face, her fingers brushed against my eyes, my eyebrows, my cheeks, my lips. "Oh, James." And then kisses landed at my temple, my ear; Miri's breath seared my skin. Even if I could never speak to her again, even if the light always shone too bright, if I could hear her voice, feel her kiss, touch her hand, I could live like this. Or die like this. This could still be heaven for me.

But something dragged me forward and upward, like I was a barrel in the very far bottom of a deep well. Up and up they pulled—Miri pulled—until my eyes cracked open again.

But this time I was ready for the brightness and I hungered to see just one thing.

Her face inches above me; her bright beautiful eyes locked with mine, ready to see me. And so I saw her. Really saw her and she really saw me, pitiful and broken.

"You're here," she said, her voice barely a whisper.

"You're here," I said—and found I could talk. And there was something I needed to say.

"I'm sorry, Miri. I'm so, so, sorry."

"No..."

"Please forgive me. I love you." I didn't hesitate. I'd never said those words and meant them. But I meant them now. If Miri only knew one thing before I died, she needed to know how sorry I was, and how much I loved her.

"You're gonna be okay, James. You are." And she was still there, her eyes shining down at me, her tears dropping on my cheeks. I tasted their sweet saltiness on my lips.

"I love you, too." She pressed her lips against mine, and I wrapped my arms around her, held her tight against me.

Every kiss, every breath, every whispered word crack, crack, cracked the wall I'd erected around me. I tore it down, crushed it beneath my will, shattered every part of me that wasn't worthy of her. I left it all in that pool of blood. The old James died that night.

Only I remained.

And Miri.

And love.

THE END

To learn about Ali's full-length novel, BECOME, featuring Desi and James and Miri, or to find out more about the author, visit Ali's website at [www.alicross.com](http://www.alicross.com)

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**Before:  
Eros before Psyche**

by  
Jessie Harrell (author of DESTINED)

Exile is supposed to be punishment. Temporary exile, temporary punishment.

The last time I shot Zeus with my arrows and made him seduce a mortal woman in the form of a goat (it seemed funny at the time), he imposed the later sentence. Six weeks in Media. Six weeks in a region where the gods are ignored in favor of some sort of religion called Zoroastrianism. Whatever that is.

Zeus even took my wings, so I couldn't sneak back. I didn't know he could do that, but one shake from his staff and they were gone and I was dumped on my ass in the middle of some City I'd never seen before. There I was, the god of Love, cast off Olympus like a leper.

*Someone needs to learn how to take a joke.*

As I stood and dusted off my cloak, the reality of my exile hit me. I felt like a thirsty man in the middle of the ocean. People were everywhere in this overrun region, yet not a single one would offer me a tribute. No small clay figure, no offering of incense. Nothing to feed my hungry ego.

Without the prayers and tokens I so desperately craved, I figured I'd be dead on my feet by the end of those six weeks. I was right about being dead on my feet, just wrong about the reason.

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Greeks don't build places like this. An artificial hill, surrounded by a low, stone wall, rose up to meet the night sky. At the top, flames licked at burning logs, reducing them to brittle bones. The air stank of sandalwood as revelers pressed against each other, battling for space to toss their meager twigs into the hungry inferno.

Hunkered down in a rough wool cloak, I'd snuck in to watch the religious ceremony. I stayed against the perimeter, hoping to enjoy the spectacle anonymously. But the flames cast these creepy-seductive shadows against the walls, making me feel watched. And present in the moment of the dance.

The longer I watched, the more I wanted to join the swirling crowd. The movements of those performing the ritual were hypnotic, reminding me of the way Maenads twirl for Dionysus. But one figure dancing before the firelight stood out from the rest.

Her slender hips pulsed with the rhythm of the drums. Soft, brown curls swirled down her back, caressing her shoulders and barely tickling her waist. I watched her move, entranced by the way motion flowed from her.

When she turned her head and caught my prying gaze, her eyes were as emerald as any gem. Finding my stare, she narrowed her lids for a moment. Then she smirked, shot me a wink, and went back to her dance.

That was all the invitation I needed.

The rest of the night was a blur of sour wine, too much smoke from the bonfire, and lust so consuming I thought it might swallow me whole. There I was, the god of Love, but she held all the power without even realizing it. Or maybe she did know. Maybe that was part of what intoxicated me too. In Greece, no mortal girl could bend me. None dared. But in Media, I was anonymous in a way that gave me a freedom to just exist. Here, I could be anyone. No pressures. No expectations. No women holding back in reverence to a god.

I remember circling her in our dance. The flames shot shadows across her face as we spun, still not touching. In the changing light she was mysterious. Then aloof. Then hungry. Her eyes seared into mine, like burning pools of emerald oil. My skin ached for her to touch me. Just reach out across the centimeters separating us and ignite every nerve ending in my flesh.

But I waited for her to close the distance. If I was giving her the power, she could control the timing as well. I just enjoyed the burn.

Following a fast spin to the raging drums, the scent of almonds overwhelmed me as her locks whipped across my face. I nearly reached out to stop her then, or at least help her after such a wild twirl, but she was still in control. And seductively moving away so that all I wanted was to draw her closer.

When her fingertips finally brushed my shoulder, the faint tickle of her nails sent a delicious shudder down my spine. With the connection made, I couldn't hold back any longer. Reaching out, I threaded my fingers through hers and squeezed. She drew closer, until her lips hovered just below mine.

"Hi," she whispered. Her moist lips glinted in the firelight.

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I could ask you the same thing." She smirked.

"Then do it," I prompted, contemplating the lie I would tell. The name I would use when pressed.

Her dancing stilled. She looked up at me from under her thick, dark lashes. "Does it matter?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

As she started to rise on her toes, I met her halfway. Our lips meshed together with an intensity that made them swell. She tasted of cinnamon and another spice that felt foreign on my tongue.

And I loved it. Religious ritual be damned, once we started, I couldn't stop drinking her in. Her kiss was potent. Like pure ambrosia coursed through my veins, making me invincible.

For the next two weeks, I was lost in her embrace. The world didn't exist for me beyond her. When she called to me, my heart nearly liquified. Her laughter was like the delicate clinking of coins. She made me forget my temporary exile. Forget everything aside from her perfect face. Her delicate name.

Lelah.

The way the word rolled off my tongue was a music all its own, smooth and velvety. I didn't think I could ever find a woman more perfect for me and I silently thanked Zeus every day for his punishment.

Of course, I hadn't told Lelah who I really was. Or why I was in Media. I'd conjured a lie. Something vague about being a deserter from the Greek army and needing to remain hidden for a little while. It seemed like a good idea to make sure she never wanted me to meet her parents. Never expected me to marry her.

And like a good little co-conspirator, Lelah kept me hidden in her room; locked away right under her parents' noses. The secrecy of the whole thing only added to the intensity of our passion. I can only imagine what they must have thought, their daughter suddenly spending so much time in her room. But neither one of us cared. All that mattered was that when we were apart, we both ached with a need we couldn't explain.

There was this one night, her parents had some guests and Lelah was late returning with my contraband dinner. My stomach clenched and gurgled from hunger, but the minute she stepped through the threshold, those pains were forgotten.

I watched her from across the room as she set her oil lamp on a table and unrolled the cloth concealing my dinner. Her movements were hurried. I could tell she felt bad about keeping me waiting and was trying to make up for it.

While she was distracted arranging my meal, I slipped behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. As my nose nuzzled into her thick hair, I was lost in scent of almonds.

"I'm sorry," she said, turning around to face me. "I know you must be famished."

"I am," I admitted.

Her gaze shifted away from mine and her lip quivered the tiniest bit. She truly felt terrible for making her stowaway wait. She'd never looked more delicious.

I caught her chin and tilted her face back up to meet mine. "But the food can wait." Sweeping the rolls and hunks of meat to the side, I lifted Lelah onto the table and found all the sustenance I needed that night in her kiss. Her lips parted softly for me; her long, delicate fingers wound through my hair and gently scratched at my scalp.

The more time we spent together, the more I contemplated taking her back to Olympus with me when my exile was over. The problem was, I wasn't sure how well a mortal would be received by the rest of the gods. They seemed to like humans well enough as toys, but not necessarily permanent additions in our estate. So where did that leave me?

Leave *us*?

I wasn't sure, but for the time it didn't matter. All I knew was that I'd stay with her forever if she asked me.

But she didn't.

Instead, she asked me the one question I was foolish enough to answer. Lying in bed early one morning, before the rays of the sun pried us apart, Lelah nudged my nose with hers.

"You know, I don't believe you're really a deserter. You're too smart for that. And too perfect." She ran her hands over my shoulders and pulled me closer. "So who are you really Mr. Mysterious? A diplomat? A prince?"

When I told her my true name, she laughed. Only this time, it wasn't tinkling and merry. It was raucous and jarring. Her head tilted back as her chortles escaped up her throat and tangled around me. She must've thought I was joking. At the very least, she didn't believe.

Didn't believe in me.

The more I persisted, the weaker she laughed. The dimmer her eyes grew. In a moment of blind outrage, I ignited my inner light, intending only to show her a spark of my divinity. As my skin began to glow beneath the surface, Lelah scrambled backward in our bed like a crab. Her legs tangled in the sheets and she fell to the floor, shrieking.

"Sorcerer, get out!"

Where her eyes used to be awash in love, they were now mired in fear. I wanted to hate her for denying me, sending me into another sort of exile, but the fault was just as much mine. Had I not met her in a country that denies the gods? At a ritual for another religion?

I was a fool for thinking she'd believe in a concept so foreign to her. I was a fool for not recognizing that she'd never believe in me.

Her cries didn't go unnoticed, of course. Lelah's father burst into the room like a cyclops with a grudge. His meaty hand reached for my neck and I did the only thing left to do. I ran.



Being younger and faster, I easily out paced him down the hall and burst into the crowded streets of Media. People were everywhere and my eyes watered under the intense sunlight. I hadn't been outside in weeks and the sudden presence of it was overwhelming. But I couldn't stop. I ran until I was sure Lelah's father could never track me down. I ran faster, pushed harder, hoping my heart might actually explode from the exertion. Anything other than have to think about what had just happened.

Even death sounded better.

As I wandered through Media in the month that followed, I was able to encase the shattered pieces of my heart in a wall thicker than the one surrounding the bonfire that first night I'd met Lelah. The weeks drifted by in a hazy blur as I drank too much wine and grew weak from the lack of prayers. I recall spending more than one night sleeping under whatever tree was nearest the entrance of the last bar I'd visited. But as I passed the time in a stupor, I quickly realized that my temporary exile was the least of my punishments; it was nothing in comparison to the wrenching pain of lost love.

The one thought bouncing through my slogging brain with any clarity was that I would never trust again. Never love again. Especially not a mortal. Once my heart was whole, I would never again let it be shattered. For nearly two years, I kept that promise to myself. I found comfort in the arms of various nymphs and women, but I never let myself get attached. Never let down my walls.

And then came Psyche.

THE END

Bio:

By day, I'm an appellate lawyer. By night, I'm a wife, mother of two, and author/lover of all things Greek mythology. I'm a native Floridian, frustrated world traveler, unrepentant dreamer, lover of acoustic music and not-so-closet geek. *Destined*, a re-imagining of the ancient myth of Eros & Psyche, was released November 2011.

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### **The Qualm Before The Storm**

A SEA MONSTER MEMOIRS short story told by Treygan

by

Karen Amanda Hooper

One more sunset until I blurred the line between right and wrong. I would become a pebble tossed into a pond of despair. Ripple effects from my actions would forever change the lives of so many sea creatures. So why did I feel so insignificant? Because tomorrow, I would take away a human's right to choose. Tomorrow, I would do whatever it took to turn Yara Jones into one of us. Not one of us, one of *them*. I had to stop pretending that I was a pure or noble merman. Tomorrow, I would prove that I'm a monster, by turning an unsuspecting girl into a mermaid.

In front of me spanned a turquoise ocean. Behind me, a valley full of merfolk who I'd give my life to protect. I worried that what I was about to do wouldn't be enough to save my people. For eighteen years we had waited for this one chance to return to our world. My kind had suffered from illness, many had died, and all of us longed to return to our realm so badly that nothing else seemed to matter.

Not even the life of an innocent girl.

"What's on your mind?" Delmar asked.

I squinted until the seashell between my fingers became a fuzzy vision of silver and white. "I want to discuss it with Yara first. Maybe she will want to convert. No one has ever asked her, or explained her options."

Delmar sighed and sat on the boulder beside me. He had his back to me, which was fine because the lack of eye contact made all of this easier. I had avoided eye contact with everyone for weeks. Cowardly, yes, but it was easier to detach myself if I didn't truly look at anyone. Delmar noticed the change in my behavior and he respected it, so for several seconds we just sat in silence; me, staring at a small fragile seashell, while Delmar looked out over the massive and sacred island of Solis.

Delmar and I had come to the top of these cliffs many times in the past eighteen years: planning, plotting and counting down the days until the day we might return home, the Triple Eighteen. I stood up and walked to the edge of the cliffs, staring at my toes and wishing for my fins. Part of me wanted to dive into the water and swim as far away from the Florida Keys as I could. Part of me wished tomorrow was already over, so my job would be done.

"I assure you, Treygan," Delmar said, "Yara won't be physically hurt in any way."

"How can you be certain? You've never done this before. And what about emotionally, or mentally? What will it do to her spirit?"

"I can't answer that. But she might like being one of us."

"Sure, with time." The mer existence was too spectacular for anyone not to like it. "Another reason why I should discuss it with her and let her *choose* to be transformed. She shouldn't be forced."

Delmar walked up behind me and laid his hand on my shoulder. "The Violets said we can't risk her saying no. If she knows it's coming, she has a much better chance of—"

"I know what the Violets said." I shrugged him away and looked to the west where the sun had begun to melt into the ocean. "But in this case, I think they're wrong."

"It doesn't matter what we think. They have given the order."

My jaw tightened at the word. Order. As if Yara's fate should be decided by a vote, or an educated guess at what was best. Her future and my entire existence were the results of orders, deals and consequences. So many decisions were made for Yara without her consent, and they might not have been the right path for her. Tomorrow, I would force her down a one-way road—the same way others did to me. No one had the right to sentence me to the life I'd been living. At least Yara would never be as monsterish as me. Thank gods for that.

I studied the seashell I'd been clenching one last time then hurled it into the air and watched it fall into the waves below. I could feel Delmar watching me, and I knew my skin was turning shades of gray and blue. I didn't need to hide my emotions from Delmar. He knew me better than anyone in the worlds.

"I know why you're angry, but why are you sad?" he asked.

I stuck my helpless hands into the pockets of my shorts. “Because I’m a hypocrite. I made decisions for Yara too. I have robbed her of so much, and tomorrow will be my worst offense to date.”

“You’ve always done what’s best for her. “

“I’m not so sure about that.” I turned and gave Delmar a look that said more than I ever could with words.

He nodded toward the streak of red and white wings in the sky. The last thing I needed was to talk to meddling sirens, so I leapt off the cliffs and dove into the water. I kicked off my shorts and morphed into my tail and fins. Being back underwater eased my soul a bit. I wanted to forget everything that lurked above the surface—at least until tomorrow. Brightly colored coral and swaying plants reminded me that soon, we might be able to return to our world.

I let out a high-pitched whistle, calling to the dolphins I had seen swimming nearby. Two of them answered and I followed their chatter westward until I found their pod. The smallest dolphins were playing a game of *Dive for the Leaf*. One of them caught the large seagrape leaf with his nose and darted in my direction. I swiped it from him and spiraled through the water, releasing it and dipping backward just before another dolphin caught it with his nose and burst through the water, spiraling into the air before gracefully returning to our underwater playground.

The entire pod clicked and chattered with joy and excitement. I smiled, pushing aside all my worries and troubles. After a few more exchanges of the leaf, it ended up floating in front of me. Before I could grab it and move out of the way the largest dolphin charged it and used my chest as a pinning board for the leaf. I let out a grunt as her weight slammed against me and pushed me deeper and deeper. I could have moved, but I opted for enjoying the ride. She slowed when we reached the ocean floor, but I still hit the bottom with a thud. An explosion of sand floated up around us, but our eyes met long enough to exchange smiles of mutual respect.

She had won. I had lost. As always, I was okay with that.

*This is your world, I thought to her. I’m just living in it.*

She whistled quick and sharp, communicating that I was welcome to return and play whenever I wished. I thanked her, but I knew this had been our last time. Tomorrow I would initiate my complicated journey to a different world, a different life, to a dark place where no one played or laughed.

I waved goodbye to the rest of the pod and swam away, hovering as close to the ocean floor as I could. I had sunk to the bottom a long time ago. It’s where I belonged.

The water surrounding me grew darker and so did my mood.

I began praying to the gorgon sisters for a divine intervention, knowing they couldn’t hear me. Even if they could, I was certain no mercy would be granted. It was time to face the inevitable. I agreed to this. I made a vow and I would see it through. Tomorrow I would start a world-changing ripple effect. I would become the ominous stone cast into Yara’s tranquil life. I would take the first step to saving my fellow merfolk, and opening the gateway home. I would accept my fate and fulfill my destiny. Tomorrow I would prove that I’m a monster.

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The day had arrived. I broke through the churning waves and cursed at the black clouds and raging winds. Lightning momentarily cracked the sky into jagged pieces. The bending palm trees confirmed this was no longer just a storm; it was a hurricane. Yara would be alone today. We

had made sure of that. I worried this day would do more damage than I originally predicted. Hurricanes were very dangerous to land dwellers.

After searching two different hiding places for clothes, I found a pair of shorts and raced to Yara's home. The house was boarded up. No one answered when I banged on the plywood over the windows and yelled for her. The only other place she could be was Lloyd's house.

I sprinted through the howling winds then stepped onto Lloyd's front porch. The door was wide open. A towering wood portrait sat just beyond the doorframe, and there was Yara, pushing the massive slab of teak with everything she had, but going nowhere.

Her hair hung over her eyes, and her flip flops squeaked against the tile floor as she adjusted her stance. Her grunting reminded me of a frustrated baby manatee.

"Would you like some help?" A gust of wind howled, swallowing my words and whipping my hair around my head. Yara was still grunting and pushing as if she hadn't heard me, so I spoke louder. "Would you like help with that?"

Her head snapped up, and her dark seal-like eyes went wide. "Who are you? Where did—get in here!"

Thunder shook the sky. One last warning from the heavens not to do this—not to interfere—but I stepped inside. As I squeezed past the wood portrait I saw that it was a carving of a mermaid. And not just any mermaid. My heart felt as black as the sky.

"Are you a guest?" Yara asked.

Without the veil of wind or hair between us, our eyes met. She didn't remember me. At least there was that. "A guest?"

"You're vacationing here on the island, right?"

"No. I'm not." I couldn't lie, nor did I want to. I also wasn't ready to carry out my orders. She deserved to know who she was. I'd make her understand without acting like a monster. The eyes of the haunting mermaid portrait bore into my soul. "Any reason you're pushing that outside during a hurricane?"

Yara explained that she needed to get the mass of wood onto the front porch to protect the living room window, but then her voice lowered with caution. "More importantly, who are you and why are you here?"

I stepped in front of her and grabbed the edge of the portrait, rocking it up over the doorsill and sliding it out onto the porch. This was it. I could disobey orders and handle this my own way. I could talk to Yara about what needed to happen. I could let her decide for herself. I positioned the portrait so it covered the window, took a deep breath, and went back inside. "My name is Treygan. Do you need help with anything else?"

"No, that's it. Everything else is boarded up."

I stared at her, wishing she was already a mermaid and that we were underwater so she could hear my thoughts. Saying them out loud was much too difficult. *I'm not here to hurt you. Please let me explain who you are, why I'm here, and why you are the only one who can save a race of amazing and loving creatures.*

But she wasn't a mermaid—yet—and she couldn't read my mind. She told me, "Be right back," and left the room as she mumbled something about hurricane warnings.

What if it all went wrong? I'd risk the lives and futures of all merfolk just to ease my conscience. I'd never forgive myself if my selfish actions caused us to be trapped in this world forever. As the Violets had said, I'd been given my unique gifts for a reason. My destiny had been decided. And so had Yara's.

Returning in a hurry, she slipped on the puddle that had formed at my feet. I caught her by the arm as she blushed and handed me a towel. Little did she know that I preferred to be wet, and soon she would too. She nervously prattled about the storm, safety, and then offered me clothes. It was time to get on with it.

I said her name calmly, hoping to put her at ease. “Yara.”

She went rigid—not the effect I had hoped for—but her shocked eyes locked with mine. That was all I needed. “How do you know my name?”

For almost two decades I had refused to use the power within me, but now I summoned it, channeling the courage to do what must be done. My vision narrowed and the telltale whooshing sound grew louder, like a funnel of water spiraling around us. Controlling a human’s mind was wrong in many ways. It was only because of a fluke of nature, and an extinct brotherly bond, that I even possessed the ability. But here I stood, proving that I was indeed, a monster. “I need you to trust me.” I stepped closer. “Let me take you someplace safe.”

She no longer had a choice. I could see it in her iced-over eyes, and feel it as our energies intertwined. Having control over her mind was intoxicating in a way that I hated myself for enjoying. Guiltily, I took her hands in mine to lead her to the ocean, but the warmth of her touch startled me—and centered me. I couldn’t force her to be one of us. I couldn’t just take her. I wanted her to have a choice.

I mentally dropped the funnel that allowed me to control her freewill, but my body continued to tingle with a physical connection I couldn’t break. I kept trying, but we were running out of time. The storm raged louder, rattling the windows and howling so loud I could feel it in my spine. “If you want me to take you someplace safe, you have to say that’s your wish.”

*Because you will be safe with us, I thought. I have made sure of that.*

She lifted her chin and leaned toward me. Her fingers laced with mine. “I wish for you to take me someplace safe.”

The urge to protect her overwhelmed me. I pulled her tight against my chest and threw the funnel up around us again. She sighed and relaxed against me, so I scooped her up and carried her out onto the beach. Waves of unfamiliar heat rippled through me with every step I took toward the ocean. The hurricane seethed and snarled around us, but for the first time in almost two decades my soul felt at peace.

Yara squeezed me tighter and I knew this was right. If I had any doubts before, they had disappeared with Yara’s touch. She would save us. She truly was the key to unlock the doorway home. She would embrace her destiny and become the most influential mermaid the worlds had ever seen. If that meant I had to control her freewill for several minutes then so be it.

Stepping into the crashing surf, I sensed Delmar several yards away but quickly swimming closer. My voice would be no match for the roaring wind and rain, but I couldn’t bring myself to shout at her. I lowered my lips to Yara’s ear and whispered, “Take a deep breath.”

Her chest rose, and I was painfully aware that it was the last pure human breath she would ever take. My legs morphed into my tail as I slid beneath the water and swam toward Delmar. Like a well-choreographed dance, he took her from my arms and pressed his mouth to hers. It felt like an eternity passed before he pulled his lips away from hers and looked at me.

*Her lungs are safe, he assured me. But this water is too rough for me to perform her transformation here. We need to travel to calmer waters.*

*You swear it won’t hurt her?*

*I give you my word, Treygan.*

We swam deeper, taking Yara far away from her tiny island, to a new and extraordinary life. We rescued her from this hurricane, but a much more powerful storm awaited her when she woke.

THE END

This is a short story from the THE SEA MONSTER MEMOIRS series. It takes place before the novel TANGLED TIDES begins, but overlaps with the opening chapter which is told from Yara's point of view. To read more, you can purchase TANGLED TIDES using this link: [RHEMALDA BOOKSTORE](#)

To learn more about the author, visit Karen's website at [www.KarenAmandaHooper.com](http://www.KarenAmandaHooper.com)

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**Unspeakable**  
**(A Short Story to *Untraceable*)**  
by  
S.R. Johannes

*Survival Tip: No plan survives contact with the enemy.*

\*\*\*

I don't know why I plan out a route.

Because I never seem to stick to it.

I stop along my route and run my hands through my hair. It's hotter than peas in a pot out here. After gulping some water from my canteen, I decide to head back to camp.

Nothing out here but trees.

Just as I turn around, a strange sound cuts through the chirping forest. My brain flips on red alert, *what the bloody hell was that?* There shouldn't be anybody out this far. Especially here. I quickly slide out my hunting knife and creep along the path. You never know who you will run into this deep in. Usually, only bands of nutters troll these deep woods.

And the deeper they go, the crazier they get.

The bellowing noise breaks through the silence again. Sounds like a dying cow. Only I happen to know cows are not common forest creatures.

I cautiously head in the direction of the sounds. As I round the bend, I make out a flash of brown and white thrashing a few yards ahead. I crouch slightly and inch my way forward. If some whacked out bloke with a shotgun comes at me, I'll be ready. Since last year, I've never trusted anyone I meet in the wilderness. Not about to start now.

As soon as I get to a dip in the trail, I slide behind a tree to get a better look. Even from this far away, I can make out what's causing all the noise.

A baby deer. He jumps around in the thick underbrush, bellowing for help. After a couple of minutes fighting something I can't see, he drops on the ground to catch his breath. From here, I can see his nostrils flaring from exhaustion.

Even though I want to hurry over and help, I wait a few minutes to see if anyone shows. It's dangerous to go towards a deer in these parts. Never know when a hunter is around, whether it's

hunting season or not. When I'm sure I'm clear to move, I make my way towards the frantic animal, my knife still in hand. As I approach the little guy, I can see his back leg is twisted up in some kind of animal trap.

I stop. I'm miles from any town or home. So if there is a trap out here that means there's probably a trapper close by.

As I scan the woods, I whisper to the animal, "Got yourself in quite a pinch." The little deer doesn't move, he simply stares at me. Every now and then, his large brown eyes shift around wildly, looking for a way out of this. I don't blame him. If some tall English bloke came charging at me in the North Carolina wilderness with a large knife, I'd be suspicious too. "If I help, are you going to kick me? Because that would not be polite."

I ease closer and just when he starts to thrash again, I grab him with my hands and pin him under me, the whole time talking quietly. "Take it easy buddy. I've got to see what's going on here." I inspect his leg and give him the news as he wiggles under me. "You're lucky. Doesn't look broken and with your leg being so small, looks like the trap didn't do much damage. You might just walk out of here. Though your thrashing isn't helping much."

I grab a large, thick stick and press down on the release button, all the while keeping my eyes on the area around me. Hunters aren't happy when their catches are set free. And since all hunters have weapons, that makes them very dangerous. No matter who they are.

Finally, the hinge pops open and the leg falls out. Beyond some scratches and a little blood, it doesn't seem too damaged. I toss the trap in my bag. Shouldn't be out here anyway with the no trapping laws.

I pet the little deer's head to calm him. "All right. I'm getting up now so take it easy on me." I slowly slide off him. Instead of bucking around, he just sits there panting, watching me with large eyes. "Well, go on. What do you need, an invitation?"

For a second, I wonder what I'm going to do if his leg is broken and he isn't able to walk. I can't carry a deer back to camp with me. He wouldn't last a day.

Suddenly, he pops up to all four legs and bounds off into the trees, startling me. I stand up and watch him licking his leg about fifty feet away. I grab my stuff and nod at him, "Cheers then."

Just as I stand up to head back the way I came, crunching noises float through the forest. *What now?* As the sounds grow closer, I realize what they are.

Footsteps.

Someone's walking. And it sounds like they are coming right for me.

I quickly scare off the little deer so he's safe and crouch behind a fallen tree. I draw my knife out again, half-expecting a few burly men dressed in camo-clothing to come charging towards me.

Instead a girl about my age cuts through the woods, not far from where I'm standing.

Luckily, she doesn't see me.

I'm immediately intrigued. What kind of girl hangs out in these remote woods? Especially a place that is miles from anywhere or anyone. I run my hands through my hair and rub the light scruff that's filled in my face.

Surely this girl isn't a trapper?

Only one way to find out.

I wait until she adds some distance between us and then quickly follow her to see where she's headed in such a hurry. As she bobs through the forest, her long, dark ponytail swings behind her, creating a nice rhythm to her walk. Every now and then, she stops to inspect

something on the ground. Sometimes, she pulls out a pink notebook and pencil to scribble some notes before moving on again. Though, she seems to spend more time staring off into the trees while chewing on the eraser than actually writing.

She's obviously experienced. In hiking, that is. Seems to know where she's going and, from what I can tell, doesn't check her compass the whole time. Her backpack's definitely not the school-type. I can tell by all the mesh pockets and thick, padded straps that it's made for long hikes. Maybe even overnights. The material is worn down with little patches sewn in certain places, holding it together. A fishing rod hanging off the back. The girl dresses the part too. Cargo pants, t-shirt, and well-used hiking boots clearly made for this kind of steep terrain.

This hike's definitely not her first.

I stay way back so she doesn't hear me. Can't help but feel like a total wanker for spying on her. But I want to know what she's doing here. Is she trapping? And, if not, why's she out here? Doesn't she know the kind of men that hang out in secluded forests, camping and hunting? They are usually drunk on beer and high on adrenaline from recent kills. I've seen what men that like can do to animals so I can't imagine what they'd do to a cute girl.

Out here. On her own.

I frown and shake my head. She may be cute, but she's certainly not very smart for traipsing out here with nothing but a smile and a fishing rod.

When she breaks through the tree line and makes her way down to the river, I remain hidden and prop myself against a tree to watch. She stops at a big boulder and unloads her stuff, carefully laying the contents in a row like she's about to operate. From where I am, I can see a small fishing tin, a spool of fishing wire, and a water canteen.

As she prepares her rod, it's obvious she's a fisher-person and not an animal trapper. I figured that much but you never know. Part of me wants to call out to her, maybe see if she wants company, but I don't really want to scare her.

I watch as she eases into the smooth river. She's very particular about how she fishes and how she moves. Like she's done this her whole life. The way she slides along the river in her waders, not making one single ripple in the water. It's almost like she's floating along on top of the glassy surface.

Even though she appears confident and obviously knows what she was doing, there's something about her. Something hidden. Maybe it's the way she stands still, waiting for a fish to bite. Maybe it's because every so often, I catch her wiping her cheeks as if she's erasing tears. Maybe it's because she reminds me of my mum who had the same dark hair, loved to fish, and loved to be out in the woods.

Or, maybe it's because in all my time hiking and camping in the woods, I've never come across a girl.

Especially one as beautiful as this one.

As she packs up her things, I decide it's time to leave her in peace. But just as I turn around, my foot catches on a branch, snapping it in two. Looking back over my shoulder, I spot her squat down behind the boulder and stare in my direction.

*Bloody hell. She heard that?* I slip behind an oak and wait. If she sees me now, it's going to look like I'm a crazy bloke stalking a pretty girl in the woods. She'll never think I followed her just because of an injured deer. I decide to leave quietly. Surely she can't see me way up here hidden in the thick foliage.

Keeping my eye on her, I slowly back towards the main path.



Her eyes jerk in my direction and to my surprise, she throws on her backpack and charges up the hill towards me.

I jog down the trail before cutting up the hill. As I slink through the thick trees, I stop every now and then to see if she's still following me. When I don't hear anything, I continue on.

After a few minutes, I stop behind a tree to take a sip of water, thinking I'm in the clear. Suddenly, she appears a few feet away. Hadn't even heard her coming up the hill. I freeze as she squats down and inspects the bushes. She scans the woods with a suspicious look on her face. If she turns around, she'll see me. I figured it's best to show myself on my terms. Makes me less creepy.

I step out from behind the tree. "Oi! What are you doing?"

The girl spins around so fast, it startles me. Before I can say anything else, she immediately moves into some kind of fighting stance with her fists up and her eyebrows furrowed.

I try not to smile. *Who is this girl?*

Then I focus in on her face for the first time. The girl looks a little like Pocahontas. Long ponytail, tanned skin, with the greenest eyes I've ever seen. Same color as the branches drooping above her head. The choppy bangs framing her face make them look that much brighter.

At first, I don't know what to say so I blurt out, "What are you doing here?"

She straightens up as if she's relaxing a bit, yet her small hands are still balled into solid fists hanging at her sides. "Saw you in the woods. I was curious. No one comes out here."

Her southern voice is lower than I expect. Slightly raspy, like a blues singer in a smoky club. I don't want to scare her so I keep my distance. "*You do.*"

I notice her body shift a little as if she's uncomfortable, though I would never guess that because she looks like she wants to take me out. She finally shrugs, "That's different."

I lean against the tree to try and look non-threatening. "Not to me." I mean it as a joke, but by the look on her face, she doesn't think it's funny. I never was great at telling jokes.

She speaks again, but this time her eyes dart around as if she's scoping the place out, looking for something. "You lost?"

I fire back. "Why? You a tour guide?"

She frowns. "Obviously not."

I attempt to be funny again. "Right. Well, first off, I wouldn't be lost. And, second, if I was," I hold up my wristwatch, "I have this handy little gadget called a ... compass."

She crosses her arms and raises her eyebrows as if challenging me. "Then I guess you know where you can go."

I pinch back a smirk. This girl - who can't be more than 5'7" and 130 pounds, is quite feisty for being stuck out in the woods, alone with some strange guy. She has no idea who I am or why I'm here. Could be a crazy person. I smile to lighten the mood between us. "You're a bit cheeky."

She doesn't cave though and her face remains stoic. "Thanks. Now why did you say you were here?" She cocks her head like a puppy.

Who does she think she is? "Actually, I didn't." I cross my arms, mimicking her. I've heard if you mirror someone, they feel more comfortable. Doesn't seem to be working in this case though.

She clears her throat, giving me the impression she isn't as calm as she's pretending to be. "You seen anyone else out here?"

I follow her gaze as she glances around again. Is she looking for someone? "No."

She eyes me up and down, checking me out. "So you're out here... alone? Why?"

I hold up my rod. "I was fishing."

She shakes her head as she stares at my rod. "You fish?"

I nod, "Abso-bloody-lutely." Then I make a point to smile, thinking this might be the topic to break the ice. She obviously loves to fish so maybe this will get her to relax a little.

Instead, she frowns and points at my fishing rod. "Haven't you ever heard that *size matters*?"

"No need to be rude." To be frank, I'm a bit shocked by her daggered response. Wasn't expecting it. When a girl questions your manhood, it's not exactly an ego booster. I think I see a twitch in the corner of her mouth, but she maintains a stern face. She's obviously on guard for some reason and I don't have time to find out why. Need to get moving. I've already wasted enough time and still have more ground to cover. "I'll leave you to your business then. This time, don't follow me."

Her face softens a little and her eyes appear sad all of a sudden. Like I hurt her feelings or something. "Wait. I'm rude, but *that* was polite?"

I could have started a conversation. But this is not the time to get involved with someone in any way. So I immediately cut off any chitchat. "Sorry. Let me try again. *Please* don't follow me. Much better I hope. Cheers."

Before she can say anything else, I head off into the woods. I can feel her staring me down from behind. Part of me wants to look back and smile so she knows I'm a nice guy or so she can have a chance to say something else. But I don't.

I have a feeling I will see her again anyway.

Soon.

When I reach the top of the hill, I stop and glance over my shoulder. The girl is already walking in the opposite direction along the trail. I can't help but wonder if those trappers are out there. So instead of turning back, I walk along the ridge above her and watch out for anyone else.

When she reaches the main trail, she walks over to a bush and wheels out a small motorcycle.

Now I'm even more curious.

*Who is this girl? Where did she come from? And, why am I so drawn to her?*

She doesn't see me and I wait in the tree line until she rides off on her bike.

It is only when she's out of sight that I relax.

Knowing she's safe.

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The next morning, I hike down to the river, hoping to see the girl again. All night I thought about her. Those eyes. This time, I'll introduce myself and be a little less cheeky. Surely I can get this girl to talk to me. And tell me why she's here.

I wait at the river as the sun beats down on me. I'm assuming she comes here a lot. Yesterday didn't appear to be her first time fishing this river, and I'm pretty sure it wasn't her last. To pass the time, I skip rocks in the river, whittle a stick into a spear with my knife, and catch two fish in the shallow water with my bare hands.

Eventually, I lie back on the warm boulder and stare at the treetops. Why am I here? I should be patrolling the forest or gathering samples for my geology study. So why am I out in the woods, wasting my time waiting on some girl I don't even know?

Then again, this doesn't seem like just *some girl*.

By late afternoon, the girl never shows so I decide to give up and hike back.

Can't blame a bloke for trying.

This time I take a different route to camp. One I haven't patrolled much before. The trail stops at a dirt road that parts the mountain in half. Off to one side, I spot a shiny brown truck sitting on the shoulder of the road. What's that doing here? Just as I'm about to cross the road to take a look, the girl rides up on her motorcycle.

I slip back into the tree line as she hides her bike further down the road. She creeps back along the road and slinks up the truck. I see her look around first before peering into the driver's window. *Bloody hell! Does she have any idea how dangerous these blokes could be?* The girl bends over and studies the ground for a few seconds, before charging off into the woods.

Without thinking, I sprint across the road and hide behind the truck. When a smell finds my nose, I peer in the back bed and find half of a deer carcass and some blood. *Crumbs.* I better go after the girl. She obviously has no clue what she's getting into. I hike in quietly and sweep in a wide circle, searching the bushes and trees for her. As soon as smoke finds my nose, I move in, assuming she's close by.

I slink in close to the camp and spot two guys sitting by a fire. They're talking and laughing while the big one is sharpening his huge hunting knife. What are these blokes doing here? I watch for a while but don't see the girl. Maybe I'm overreacting. Maybe she just went hiking.

Suddenly, a flock of birds explodes and cackles off into the trees. The girl's head appears over the top of the bushes. The two men jump up and point their shotguns in that direction. My only thought is that I have to get to her. And quick. I make my way towards the bush where she's hiding. As soon as one of the men moves in her direction, she drops to the ground. I stop as the men walk over and poke the bush next to her, probably thinking it's some kind of animal. Maybe hoping for a deer.

The big man yells and I see the girl rise slowly to her feet with both hands stretched high in the air.

I freeze in my spot, not sure of what to do.

The big guy bends over. I can tell from the look on his face that he's not happy about the intrusion. I can't tell what the girl is thinking because her face is stoic. No emotion. When the bloke takes his eyes off her for a split second, she doesn't hesitate to kick him in the jewels. I grimace as he doubles over, coughing and screaming. The girl takes off into the woods, running towards me. I stay hidden but head toward her. Closing the gap between us. If I can just reach her, maybe I can help.

Then the skinny guy cocks his gun and screams at her. She stops in her tracks only a few yards away and spins around to face him. I duck down, hoping they don't see me.

The small guy runs over and puts his gun in her back as the big bloke drags her back to their campsite. I can hear them all talking but can't make out what they're saying. I watch her face to try and gauge what is going on. She doesn't look upset. Actually looks pretty calm, considering.

I inch in closer, trying to decide what to do. There's a small part of me that wonders if I should just walk away. Mind my own business. Maybe this isn't as bad as it looks. I hope.

The girl says something and laughs.

At first, I'm so impressed by her; I don't register the severity of what's going on.

Until the guy slaps her across the face.

Rage boils inside of me when I see tears spring to her eyes. I clench my teeth as she rubs her cheek. Then, I see her lip quiver. I keep my eyes on her as I crawl closer, not sure what I'm

going to do. These guys are obviously heavily armed. And all I have is a hunting knife and a small pistol.

I stop just outside their camp and take the knife out of my bag. Then I tuck the pistol in the back of my pants. And wait in a half-crouched position.

Maybe they're just trying to scare her. Maybe they're bluffing.

The big bloke rifles through her bag and pulls out her fishing tin. He snaps up his head and glares at her. The sneer that wipes across his face sends a chill down my spine. This is bad.

I watch the girl cower as the skinny guy grabs some rope. Her holds her arms behind her back as the big guys picks up his knife and walks towards her.

My heart starts to race, *what can I do?*

On one hand, my brain tells me not to get involved. Half hoping they'll back down.

On another hand, I've run into blokes like this before and I know what they can do. The damage they can cause. But if I go charging in there, I could get us both killed. And what good would that do?

The girl, who's so strong and feisty, starts to cry and beg for them to let her go. The heart goes out to her.

I know if I don't do something quick, then I'll never forgive myself.

I hear her scream.

It might already be too late.

## THE END

If you want to find out what happens, you can purchase *Untraceable*, Book 1 in *The Nature of Grace* series.

*Grace grew up in the woods. When her forest ranger dad disappears on patrol, she fights town authorities, tribal officials, & nature to prove he's alive. Torn between a hot boy and cute ex, she heads into the wilderness to find her dad. Soon, Grace is caught in a web of conspiracy, deception, and murder. It will take more than a compass and motorcycle for this tough heroine to save all she loves.*

*Untraceable* is available in: [paperback](#) for \$9.99 and eBook for \$2.99 [Smashwords](#) and other booksellers.

### Other Books

*Uncontrollable*, Book 2 in *The Nature of Grace* series, is scheduled to be released in Summer 2012.

If you are interested in other books by this author, try the tween novel, *On The Bright Side*.

*Gabby is a disgruntled tween angel who has just been assigned to protect her school nemesis and ex-beffie. Problem is her ex-beffie is dating Gabby's longtime crush. Instead of protecting Angela, Gabby pranks her (since when is sticking toilet paper to her shoe or spinach in her teeth a sin?) Soon, Gabby gets out of control and is put on probation by her SKYAgent, who has anger management issues of his own. Determined to right her wrongs, Gabby steals an ancient artifact that allows her to return to Earth for just one day. Without knowing, she kicks*

*off a series of events and learns what can happen when you hate someone to death.*

The book is available on eBook at [Smashwords](#) and other booksellers. The paperback is coming in mid Feb.

### **Author Bio**

S.R. Johannes is the author of *Untraceable* (a teen wilderness thriller) and *On The Bright Side* (a tween paranormal). She lives in Atlanta Georgia with her dog, British-accented husband, and the huge imaginations of their little prince and princess, which she hopes- someday- will change the world. After earning an MBA and working in corporate America, S.R. Johannes traded in her expensive suits, high heels, and corporate lingo for a family, flip-flops, and her love of writing.

Email: [shelli@srjohannes.com](mailto:shelli@srjohannes.com)

Blog: <http://faeriality.blogspot.com/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/srjohannes>

Author Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/SRJohannes/249888602550>

Author Goodreads: [http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5235537.S\\_R\\_Johannes](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/5235537.S_R_Johannes)

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### **In the Beginning**

by

~Katie Klein~

The world is dark, shadowed in grays. There's a soft murmuring, a muted glow of light slivering beneath her bedroom door. I search the realm around me, just to be certain, but only Genesis and I remain. We're alone. And so I close my eyes and pull myself into her world. A world where everything is brighter. Clearer. A world that, for some reason, makes sense to me, though it shouldn't.

"I just don't understand why every time you have to do something at the club I can't go."

*Carter.*

I move closer to the door, listening as she speaks into the phone.

"It's not?" she counters. "You do stuff at the club all the time, and not once have I ever been invited. It doesn't matter if it's a...a dinner, or cocktails, or a cookout. It could be a freakin' charity event for God's sake, and you've never, not once, invited me."

I cringe at the waver in her voice, the ache resonating behind the words, each one brimming with a deep, unspoken injury. And I wonder what he's done this time. What did he choose over her?

"Then why can't I go? If you miss me so much, let me keep you company. Let *me* decide if it's boring and a waste of time."

I grasp the doorknob, turning it easily, pulled by an inexplicable urge to see her. It's not enough to hear her voice, to follow her shadow. Not anymore.

I ease the door open, the tiniest of slits. She's sprawled across the bed in her sparsely decorated room, fingering the plastic coils on her ancient telephone. My heart fumbles a beat at

the sight of her. It's strange, this world where everything is heightened. Magnified. The sounds and sights and smells. Every pang of envy. Worry. Each wave of curiosity. Swell of pleasure.

"No," she says, voice so low I can barely hear it. "It's fine. Maybe next time."

Beyond the murky, brackish waves, South Marshall is comatose. Row upon row of colorful beach houses are boarded up. Winterized. Plywood left on the windows from the last hurricane at the end of September. Parking lots are empty. Businesses are CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. This is my home.

*Our* home.

I'm a Guardian. Genesis is my responsibility. It's my job to look out for her. To keep her safe. She can't see me, but she can feel me. And sometimes...sometimes it's like she *knows*. The warm breeze brushing her skin. The sun on her face. The peace that washes over her after conversations like this one. . . .

She hangs up the phone, lets out a massive sigh, and reaches for a new pack of cigarettes. She rips off the plastic and beats the flimsy, cardboard package against her wrist. It takes several flicks of her lighter before the flame catches. One long exhale and she moves to the window, lifting the sash. An arctic draft rushes inside, picking up the smoke and hauling it away.

She sits on the floor beneath it. Inhales. Her sweatshirt is tattered, sleeves fraying at the edges. Her jeans are worn, faded at the knees. Her black nail polish is chipped, and there's a cheap, silver beach ring on each of her thin fingers. Her hair is both black and blonde. Blonde at the roots, midnight black from her chin to the tips, like she decided to grow it out but didn't care enough to re-dye it. And then there's the eyebrow piercing. The one she got to spite her mother for moving her to a new town. *Again*.

She drags her fingers through her hair, tucking it behind her ears, then closes her sad green eyes, shivering in the cold.

My jaw smarts, tightening, and I fight the impulse to take her in my arms. To hold her. It just about kills me.

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Carter moves through the house as a silhouette. James, his Guardian, is behind him, a faint glow radiating from him in waves. We all shine like this. In our world, it's the only real way to tell the good from the evil. And even then there are no guarantees.

Carter opens the door to Genesis's room, and I follow him inside.

"Leave them alone, Seth," James begs. His accent is thick. Something European, though I've never bothered to ask where he's from.

"I am."

"You're only making it worse, you know," he continues. "She has free will."

I ignore him, focusing instead on the other voices in the room.

"It's just a party," Carter says, sitting down on the edge of her bed.

"It's dinner with your parents, and *then* a party," she replies. "And trust me. The party is the last thing I'm worried about."

"My parents love you," he assures her.

"You're just saying that."

I concentrate on her shadow. Her movements. She's putting on more makeup. Mascara, maybe. I tip my head, trying to get a better view, fists tightening with frustration. I *hate* that she's veiled like this.

Carter falls back on her bed. "You know, one day you're going to stop worrying so much about what other people think."

She shakes her mascara wand at his reflection. "And that—right there—is how I know they don't like me. If they liked me you wouldn't be reminding me that I shouldn't care what anyone thinks."

"We aren't getting into this tonight, Gee," he says, sitting up. "Dinner. Party at Jason's. It'll be fun."

"Whatever," she mutters, fingering her eyebrow piercing.

Where there's usually a slow, simmering anger, there's now a deep concern.

"She thinks she should take it out," I whisper.

"It doesn't matter," James replies. "The Flemings like her with or without it."

"The Flemings," I mutter. The name feels like acid on my tongue. The Flemings are more than wealthy. They own this town. Vacations, cars—whatever Carter asks for, he receives. Like it's nothing. Like his own girlfriend isn't struggling to help her mom make rent every month. Somewhere along the way, that father of his made a deal with the devil. Carter is just like him.

"He really does love her," James says. "Despite what you may think or feel about him, he wants what's best for her."

"He's eighteen. He doesn't know what's best for anyone."

"Seth," he says, voice lower, "You must stop this."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're too close. She's your *charge*."

Genesis takes a deep breath, and the concern is replaced with resolve.

*No. The piercing stays.*

"I just need to find something to wear." She zips her plastic makeup bag and tosses it in the top drawer of her stolen from the dumpster dresser.

"What's wrong with what you have on?" Carter asks. He grabs her arm, pulling her onto his lap. "I think you look sexy." He kisses her softly just above the jaw line.

Her heart flutters.

A prickle of jealousy creeps across my skin. "You have no idea how he makes her feel."

"It's her own doing, then. He *loves* her. Let them be."

"She is so much better than he is," I whisper, watching them.

"Carter can give her anything she could ever want or need," James declares. "He's a good guy. She could do much worse."

"She would never have to pretend with me."

"Do you hear what you're saying?" he hisses. "It's irrelevant, Seth. Their relationship is none of our business."

"*She is my business.*"

"This is unacceptable. And *dangerous*. You're too involved. If The Council thinks . . ."

"I'm not worried about The Council," I interrupt, watching her move in the darkness. "I don't care what they think. I don't care what anyone thinks."

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Carter's house is Mediterranean style, with a circular driveway and palm trees lining the entrance. Everything is bright and lustrous, shining like midday.

She's nervous. I feel it as she climbs the steps leading to the massive wooden doors.

"We're here!" Carter calls. His voice reverberates, echoing through the foyer. Genesis follows, pausing long enough to take in her reflection in an oversized mirror at the entryway.

It washes over me again, consuming. That feeling. That she will never be enough for these people. For Carter. For anyone. That she's undeserving. Unworthy. Exposed.

I move closer, wanting to comfort her—to do *something*. I softly touch the shadow of her hair, imagining what it would feel like in her world. The real world.

*When will you realize you deserve beautiful things?*

"You coming?" Carter asks from the other end of the long hallway.

"Yeah. Yeah, I am." She quickly unhooks the bar in her eyebrow, then slips it inside the pocket of her jeans.

\*\*\*

"You didn't even try to stand up for me, Carter."

James slants a critical look my way, as if I'm to blame for the sudden switch in atmosphere.

Genesis flicks her spent cigarette out the window.

"There was nothing to stand up to," he argues. "If my parents didn't like you they wouldn't have invited you to dinner."

They're on the verge of yelling, voices raised. We hear them clearly.

"Are you being serious right now? Your dad grilled me about college. Your mom hated my shirt..."

"Genesis, my dad grills everyone about college. And my mom never said she hated your shirt," he interrupts.

"She said I wore it too much!"

"She said that she thought you wore it the last time she saw you!" His voice echoes through the cab of the SUV, thick with anger.

"Exactly."

She's on the verge of tears. Wracked with embarrassment. The effort she made trying to impress them—for nothing. The tears make her angrier. They make *me* angrier.

"So what? I don't understand what your problem is!" He presses his foot deeper into the accelerator, focusing on the road as he passes the car ahead of him.

He shouldn't be this out of control. Not behind a wheel. Not with her in the car. "Calm him down!" I demand.

"He's fine," James assures me.

"It's what she *implied*." Genesis roots around the depths of her purse, digging for a new pack of cigarettes to satisfy a need. A craving. She lights it, inhales, but it doesn't have the desired effect. "Forget it. You wouldn't understand."

"You're right. I don't understand what you think my mom implied by saying she'd seen your shirt before. Whatever it is, I'm sure it's stupid."

"Because my feelings are stupid. I guess I'm not rich enough to *have* feelings. Maybe if I had a pool in my backyard you'd understand me better."

"Where do you get this shit from?"

"You can let your mom know that we just can pay our rent this month, so if she plans on having me over for dinner anytime soon, then she'll probably see this shirt again. She'll have to forgive me, because it's the nicest thing I own."

"That's not what she meant," Carter says. "She remembered that you liked it. That's all."



He stretches his arm across the cab, stroking the bare skin of her neck with his thumb. She shrugs away from him, recoiling at the touch. "None of you get it. I'm not like you. Every penny I make goes to help my mom pay the bills. I've got no money for college. I have one nice shirt to wear. Sucks to be me tonight, since everyone at this party probably remembers it from the last party we went to."

"I'm sorry," he says, voice softer. I struggle to make out the words. "You're right. Sometimes I forget."

"You forget what? That I'm not a trust fund brat like you and the rest of your friends?"

I flinch at the words, at this change in personality. That temper of hers. It's going to land her in so much trouble.

James frowns at me. "Maybe you should calm *her* down."

"She has every right to be angry," I say, defending her.

"Or maybe you *want* her to be angry."

"You don't understand. All she wants is to be like him. Like *them*. She can never be what he wants her to be."

"He doesn't want her to be anyone but who she is."

"She doesn't believe that."

"Then *make* her believe," he insists.

"She has free will, remember?" I remind him.

"Is *that* what this is about?" Carter and Genesis continue to argue. "You're still jealous over spring break?"

"I'm not jealous. I'm angry," Genesis replies. "I'm angry because no matter what I do I'm never going to be good enough, and you're never gonna understand."

My spine stiffens. Part of me can't believe she finally said it. Out loud. Of course she's good enough for him. I wait for him to utter the words. To reassure her.

But instead: "*So what* if I don't understand you all the time? You're not exactly the easiest person in the world to read. I shouldn't have to apologize for that."

Genesis turns up the volume on the radio, drowning him out with a guitar solo. Carter drives in silent anger, fuming, hands gripping the steering wheel. She gazes out the window, the flat scenery blurring past. After a few, tense moments, she leans forward again, turning the radio back down.

"I don't think we should see each other anymore," she finally says. "You should take me home."

My ears perk up at this.

*What?*

"Wait. What?"

She exhales a long sigh, and I let myself believe that this sigh is of relief. That she's finally found the courage to do what she should have done months ago. "Carter, we are two completely different people. It's not going to work. It can't. It's a miracle we held on this long, actually."

His voice softens. I can barely distinguish the words. "Yeah, we're different people, Gee, but that's what makes us so great. That's what makes *you* great."

*You have nothing in common.*

"We have nothing in common," she says.

"Stop it, Seth! You *cannot* interfere like this!" James says, voice accusing.

"I'm not interfering! It was her idea!"

*She couldn't have picked that up from me. Could she?*

"Okay. So maybe dinner with my parents was a bad idea," Carter says. "What if we bail on this party and rent a movie or something? We can do something else. Anything. Just name it."

*Don't do it, Genesis, I silently beg. Don't give in to him. Let this be the end.*

"She's not yours," James reminds me. "She doesn't belong to you. She breaks up with Carter, and she's just going to find someone else."

As I open my mouth to protest, a line of panic slices through my veins.

"Carter! Look out!"

A dark shadow crosses the beam of the headlights. The entire world stops turning. Frozen. Everything is silent except for the pounding of our hearts, in tandem, one suspended beat after another. Seconds pass as minutes, and we hold our collective breath as Carter slams on the brakes. He swerves, yanks the steering wheel in the opposite direction. The force sends Genesis crashing into the door.

A sickening crack as her head strikes the window.

*No! No! No!*

A flood of pain surges through my body as we begin to roll. I fasten my arms around her from behind, clasping my wrists, locking her in the seat while the SUV flips over and over and over again.

Everything spins wildly out of control. And then...

Nothing.

It takes a second for me to realize we're upside down. I feel her heart beating, hear her struggling, grappling for every breath. I release her and slip to the front, but, before I can free her, she unlatches the seatbelt and topples to the ceiling. A sharp pain shoots through my arm.

*Her wrist.*

She whimpers, drawing it close.

"Genesis?" It's Carter. "Shit. Genesis? Are you okay?"

She swallows back a sob, pushing against the door with her good hand. I push with her. It's jammed. She's trapped. Fear inches to my throat, suffocating me.

*Never show yourself unless you have to. One of the rules.*

James watches me closely, face grim, and I try not to imagine what he's thinking. But then he nods.

In a blink I'm outside—in *her* world—a cold chill rippling down my spine. The SUV is crushed. Totaled. And I stare at it for a moment, wondering how anyone could possibly walk away from this. The smell of oil and smoldering rubber assaults my nose. My eyes burn, watering. I wipe them clear with the cuff of my sleeve.

*It's okay. It'll be okay.*

But I don't know who I'm trying to convince more: me or her. I try to force a calm. To make the panic go away. I'm losing my edge, though, because it doesn't work, and I don't know if it's because her will is too strong or I'm too weak.

Genesis pushes and I pull as hard as I can, teeth clenching as I concentrate everything into getting her out of this mess.

When the door finally opens she crawls out, feeling her head. She struggles to breathe—these short, raspy breaths that make my own lungs flame. She inches toward the pavement while I search the world around us, chest heaving. The street. The woods. For anything hiding in the shadows.

She clutches her arm to her stomach, curling into a tiny ball, pressing her face against the asphalt, resigned.

*This is what it feels like to die.*

I hear the thought as if it's my own.

I rush toward her.

*No! Genesis? Don't give up on me!*

I kneel beside her, breath turning to smoke in the frigid, midnight air. And for the first time I can see her. I can really see her. The crinkle of her forehead. The curve of her eyebrows. Her pale face. Blood-streaked hair and flawless lips. The traces of a sleep-deprived violet shading the skin beneath her closed eyes. The tears lingering, beading along her lashes. Her haunting beauty.

I swallow hard.

*This is my fault. This is what James warned me about—getting too close. This is my punishment.*

My heart punches my ribs. I swipe away the wetness on my cheeks with the back of my hand, eyes stinging.

*I won't lose her like this. They won't take her away from me.*

Another blink and I'm back in my realm, searching the shadows. But there's no one else. James is with Carter—still inside the SUV—and there are no other Guardians around. No Messengers. No Angel of Death.

*She's safe.*

*We're safe.*

I exhale relief, and, in a moment, I'm with Genesis again, crouching beside her.

I know I should be gone by now. *Help, then leave.* Another rule I'm breaking.

"It's okay," I whisper, not wanting to startle her. "Help is coming."

I must imagine her mouth twitching, her lips pulling into a smile, but I feel her returning to me, as if drawn to the sound of my voice.

I brush the length of her jaw line, touching her soft skin, sweeping the tears away.

"Don't move, okay?"

Her eyes struggle to open.

I wrap her fingers in mine, holding her tightly, desperate to keep her with me.

"You're going to be fine, Genesis. I promise." My voice wavers, the words breaking in my throat.

Her features relax, smoothing, and a perfect stillness settles between us—a peace—as my hand clings to hers.

*She believes. She trusts me.*

I swallow back a surprised laugh, strung tight—high on what might be adrenaline. I'm not sure, because Guardians aren't allowed moments like these. It won't last, and it will never happen again. And so, knowing this, I carefully bring her hand to my mouth, breathe her in, and kiss her fingers, lips touching her for the first time. And it's this simple act—the vain hope of what *could be*—holding her hand as she sleeps quietly on the pavement, that stretches into eternity, stealing my soul.

It becomes my past. My present. My future.

And Genesis becomes my forever.

THE END

To purchase *The Guardian* go [here](#).

BIO:

Katie Klein failed as a YA writer once, changed her name, then tried again. After having REJECT stamped across her forehead 75 times, she decided to epub her YA Contemporary Romance, CROSS MY HEART, on her own. In the first year of release, it spent more than 140 days on the Amazon Teen Top 100 Bestseller list and sold more than 20k copies. It was also a 2011 Goodreads Finalist for Best YA Fiction. She lives on the East Coast with her husband, daughter, and two crazy dogs.

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## A Chance Encounter

by

Cheri Lasota

An eye was a shadowed, transient thing when glimpsed through the blur of glass on a moving train. Finnian Bell willed himself to turn away, but his reflection held him motionless, despite the clickity-bump of the railroad ties below him, and the cramp in his leg he'd had ever since the train left San Francisco. He hardened himself a moment, forcing his eye to take itself in, to reflect and reveal, to face what was soon to come. The deeper darkness that his right eye harbored was staring back at him, mocking his foolishness. *What made you think you could come back? What made you think that they would forgive? I alone tell the story of that day. I alone reveal what you would give anything to hide.*

Every day that damaged eye stared back at him, a reminder of what he had done to his family...what he was still doing to them. Why had he waited so long to come home? Three years had seen him through every kind of life imaginable, but it was not until the death of Joey Slade that he had even thought of returning.

He focused his memory on the brilliant blue of his mother and father's eyes. He saw them clearly, though the haze of memory had smudged the edges of their flaws and imperfections until he remembered little else but the light and life in their eyes. And that love of theirs, that love...he knew he had destroyed it forever.

What would they say when he walked up the lane? Would he see the horses in the field? Would his father be out in the training yard, breaking in another mare? Would his mother be reading one of her old books out on the porch?

He looked at his right eye again and saw the stained brown iris in a flash of sunlight glinting off the glass. It should be blue, like his other, like his mother's. Would it ever be again?

A deep ache hit him right in the chest. He had dreamt of his mother for days, dreamt of her accepting him back with open arms despite...He shook his head to banish the memory of the last time he had seen her, the accusation in her eyes turning to fury.

Suddenly, without warning, his gaze slipped to a spot behind him, toward a seat in the car further up. A young woman sat there, no more than twenty years old, and he saw even through the glass that she was crying.

Finnian did not turn, did not blink. He simply gazed at her. She was oblivious to everything, utterly silent, letting her tears flow unchecked down her cheeks, without even a sniffle to draw the attention of the other passengers who sat in random seats around her, talking, laughing, oblivious themselves in their own cares.

She held a letter in her hand, and she seemed not to care that her tears marred the deep ink of the words. Was it a love letter? News of a death? His curiosity turned him from his ill thoughts for the first time in many days. He found himself speculating, wondering, and somehow feeling her pain with her. He knew the suffering he saw in the bend of her shoulders, the downturned curve of her head, the tremble of her fingers on the letter before her. He understood, as perhaps the other passengers could not on this day. Surely they would suffer the same anguish at some point in their lives, but at this moment, in this instant, only Finnian was imprisoned in the glass with this girl, locked in her reflection of his pain.

A hulking blur blew through his reverie, blocking his view of the girl. Someone was walking past, but he did not move on.

He heard a snicker and a male voice saying, “Whoa, little lady! Where are you headin’?”

He turned at once, not for any other reason but to hear the sound of this girl’s voice, as if somehow it would prove that she was real, that she lived and breathed outside the glass world he had created.

She *was* real. He heard it in the mottled tone of her voice. “I am going home.”

Even though he knew she was still trying to master her grief and her voice, she did not sound hesitant. No, he distinctly heard bitterness in her voice. But why? In these war-ending days, homecomings—sometimes years in the making—were truly a rare gift. Some never even came home. He knew that firsthand.

“Where’s home, beautiful?” the man said, in the unmistakable accent of the Deep South.

Finnian finally gave the man notice. He was Army, probably shipped in with the same troop he had seen milling about at the train station. He waited weeks for train tickets. One of the rail lines had been damaged in a landslide, and it was only now that he’d been able to snag a ticket in the interminable log jam.

This man had the look of infantry; he couldn’t be an officer—didn’t have the air of command about him. He wore his uniform, stood leaning over the girl with a leer in his weak eyes. Finnian was used to sizing men up. *How much does he weigh? One hundred and eighty pounds. How tall? Tops me by a couple of inches. His build? Nothing doing—I can take him easy.*

And Finnian thought about it too. He didn’t know the girl from anybody, but this man looked like he’d tipped back a bottle of whiskey, and he didn’t appear to be looking for the exit sign anytime soon.

The girl had bitten her lip, sniffled a little, and slowly formulated a reply. “It doesn’t matter. I’m going home, and that’s not where you’re going.”

Finnian noticed a strange tint to her voice, a thinly veiled accent. It sounded familiar, but then again, his ears had been inundated with accents for years working in New York City and overseas in France.

Finnian was impressed by the defiance in her eyes. But the intruder wasn’t buying it.

“You never know. What’s your name, sweetheart? You getting off at the next stop?”

The man made to slip in beside her, but the sudden fear in her eyes pulled Finnian to his feet, and before he knew it he’d grabbed the man’s arm.

The man’s free hand flew up, as if to strike back at him out of reflex. In that instant, Finnian hesitated, as he never had before. Normally, his fists would fly and he wouldn’t give a damn about the consequences. But not now.

What was he doing? Had he forgotten his promise?

Finnian let go, stepped back, tried not to look at the girl. He felt her eyes on him, but he couldn't see her expression. He forced himself to look the drunk man in the eye. The man took a bar fight stance. But Finnian had recovered himself and tried for a different approach.

"Can you not see the girl is in mourning? She's just lost her mother and you would heckle her? Where is your honor, man?"

The man's weak eyes bugged out a bit, and a frown lit his face as the realization hit. Finnian supposed a white lie wouldn't hurt the girl, and if it were true, than his saying it aloud couldn't do any more harm than was already done. He peered down at her at last, just to make sure.

He didn't understand. Roiling in her eyes was the same grief as he had seen in the glass. Yet, it was as if, with his words, he had dammed up the grief that had flowed so freely moments before. Her eyes were stricken, yet steady as a wolf's on his own.

It was clear she was not expecting such a scene, but she did not glance around at the other passengers in shame. She stared only at Finnian. But she said nothing. And the man backed away slowly, embarrassed. Finnian himself grew uncomfortable under her gaze, and he realized what she was doing. She was trying to get her emotions under control, trying to make her face a mask. He knew the technique well, and he was a master at it.

She looked away at last, to smooth out her wrinkled shirt, to collect her thoughts, and Finnian was surprised to feel relief flood his tense shoulders and jaw. And still she said nothing. He knew he wouldn't see her again, but he couldn't seem to get the apology he wanted to say out of his mouth. He pressed his lips together instead and gave her a slow nod of goodbye.

She tilted up her chin in a defiance that didn't make much sense, reached down to grab her bag, and stalked toward the next train car without a backward glance.

Finnian blew out a breath and shook his head. That's what he got for butting in where he didn't belong.

I don't belong anywhere, he thought bitterly, I'm a ghost. A ghost in the glass.

THE END

This scene is excerpted from an upcoming novel, *Echoes in the Glass*. Learn more about Cheri's debut novel, *Artemis Rising*, at <http://www.cherilasota.com>. The book is available in all digital formats and can be purchased at [SpireHouseBooks.com](http://SpireHouseBooks.com) and other booksellers.

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## **Family Bonds**

by

Heather McCorkle

Despite his arms being loaded down with luggage, Fane managed to slip his shoes off as he stepped through the door. Before moving farther into the cabin, he pushed them out of the way. A great room accented with wood and leather stretched out before him. Though it was a fraction of the size of their home in Romania, it had an open floor plan that made it feel comfortable. His lips curving up into a huge smile, he spun around to get a better look at the place.

Jack-o-lanterns carved into frightening guises were placed throughout the house, on the coffee table, the loft stairs, even the kitchen counter. By the intricately carved designs, they were his mother's handiwork no doubt.

“How wonderfully American,” he said.

Behind him his father chuckled. “I suppose it is. I forgot that in all our clandestine visits, we’ve never brought you here,” he said.

A wistful sadness stole over Fane. “Because it was grandmother and grandfather Yaretz’s retreat, right?” he asked.

“That’s right,” his father said.

The familiar and comforting pressure of Fane’s mother’s energy poured into the room moments before she walked in. “Alin, Fane, is that you?” she called.

Fane didn’t bother answering. He knew she’d discover them by the feel of their energy. She skipped into the room a moment later, short black hair bouncing around her beaming face. Seeing her so happy made Fane smile. With complete abandon, she leapt into Alin’s arms and kicked her feet up as he spun her around. By the time he put her down they were both laughing.

Orange and white energy mixed around them in a glow that emanated from their very skin. It happened whenever they were re-united after being apart. Their power was as connected as they were. One day Fane hoped to be lucky enough to find such a connection with someone. At only fourteen, he knew it would probably be a while. But from growing up with his parents, he knew it was worth the wait.

As his mother rattled out questions faster than either of them could answer, she released Alin and drew Fane into a tight embrace. His father dropped one-word answers in between her sentences with practiced skill, choosing the moments when she drew a breath. Tone wistful, she plunged into a tirade about how much Fane had grown while she’d been in America.

Fane endured it with a smile, even when she held his face in her hands and kissed his forehead like she had when he was a toddler. Embarrassing though it was, he had missed her too. For appearance’ sake, he complained in his native Romanian tongue.

She laughed and kissed him again before letting go. “Remember, you’ll have to use English because Eren doesn’t speak Romanian,” she said.

Excitement coursed through Fane at the thought of finally getting to meet his cousin in person. Their family was small, to say the least. Aside from his cousin Eren, he was the only other child born into it in a very long time.

“Father says my English is spectacular, so you have nothing to worry about in that regard.

His mother’s dark eyebrows lifted and she turned to his father with a hand on her hip. “I’d say. He sounds like a college professor.”

Throwing an arm around her shoulders, Alin let out a hearty laugh. “You know our son, always over achieving,” he said.

The pride in his eyes made Fane’s chest swell. “Speaking of my wonderful cousin, where is she?” he asked.

“She’s gone to a Halloween party, so you’ll have to wait until she gets home tonight,” Sylvia said.

A heavy weight settled into the pit of his stomach. He’d been looking forward to meeting her for months.

“A party? Are you sure that’s safe considering all that’s going on?” Alin asked.

The pressure in the room increased as his father’s power rose, making his skin glow orange. A tingling sensation worked its way up Fane’s spine. His father’s slip of control on his power was unnerving. He had a feeling his parents weren’t telling him everything. His mother waved off Alin’s concern, grabbed his hand, and started for the door.

“Of course she’s safe. The adults are all at their Society meetings, which is exactly where I need to be going. And you, my dear, can walk me there. Most of the way at least,” she said.

Though Alin held tight to her hand, he stood his ground. “Kids can be dangerous.”

She tipped her head and looked at him from beneath her dark brows. “True. But she’s strong. I doubt any of them even come close to her power. Besides, she’s with Aiden. He’ll watch over her,” she said.

Power humming about him like a livewire, Alin stiffened. “You mean Aiden O’Reilly?”

Sylvia stood up straighter, flinging her short, dark hair from her eyes so she could fix Alin with her “don’t challenge me” glare. Even though he wasn’t the subject of that look, Fane flinched. He didn’t know how his father could stand it. There was no channeler power behind it, but there didn’t need to be, not from his formidable mother.

“I do. And don’t give me that look Alin. He’s a good boy and I’ve no doubt he’d move heaven and earth for Eren,” she said.

Shoulders sagging, Alin allowed her to pull him a step closer to the door. “Well, this complicates things,” he muttered.

Stopping beside Fane, Sylvia gave him a huge smile and tried to smooth his unruly black curls back from his forehead. If it hadn’t been months since he’d seen her, he might have sighed and pulled away, but he missed even her annoying motherly habits.

“I’m sorry we have to leave right away, sweetie, but this is an important meeting. You pop some popcorn, watch a good scary movie and we’ll be home before you know it,” she said.

“But what about Eren?”

“She’ll be home soon too. Don’t go out. You can’t chance someone seeing you,” she said as she opened the front door.

Fane let out a long sigh as he watched them walk into the darkness. Being confined indoors where no one would see him was one of the things that made visiting Spruce Knoll so terribly boring. But maybe, just maybe, his cousin’s arrival would change all that.

“Happy All Saints Eve, sweetie,” his mother called over her shoulder.

“Happy All Saints Eve to you too, mother,” he answered.

Switching from regular vision to his channeler’s vision, he watched the soft glow of their energy until even it faded into the darkness. Certain they were gone, he closed the door and dashed to his suitcase. Buried beneath his carefully folded shirts, he found his Halloween mask safely nestled. It was simple white and black, a replica of the current popular slasher movie bad guy. A lot of other kids would be wearing the same mask, but that was the point. Halloween was the only time he could walk freely around Spruce Knoll because he could remain hidden even when in public.

“Mother may not have any doubts about you, Aiden O’Reilly, but I’m not about to leave my cousin’s life in your hands,” he said aloud to the empty room.

There were very dangerous people in Spruce Knoll, and even if his parents didn’t, he knew better than to discount the teenagers. Tonight was the Halloween channeler’s party. Every year the parents had their own “meeting” and the kids snuck out to party and channel energy: blow things up, levitate stuff, and even spar. He’d never been invited; no one here knew he existed besides his parents and grandfather. If people here knew that his parents were married, let alone that they had a child, all their lives would be in danger.

Fane pulled on a black hooded sweatshirt, grabbed the mask, and dashed for the door. Out of habit, he eased the door closed behind him so that it didn’t even click when the knob turned. He put the mask on, pulled his hood over his head, and started down the gravel drive. The loud



crunch of rocks beneath his feet made him cringe but he resisted the urge to run, knowing it would only make his steps louder.

Soon there was soft grass to walk upon and trees towering over him, wrapping him in their sweet scent and cloaking darkness. Traveling familiar paths, he cut through the woods. At his beckon, his power rose up from his core and fed his legs, making him faster than any normal person could ever hope to be.

With practiced skill, he ducked beneath feathery spruce boughs, leapt over ferns and bushes, and dodged around tree trunks. To his channeler eyes the night was alive with the glowing energy of every living thing. Most plants emitted soft variations of yellow, green, or blue light. In many ways, traveling at night using his channeler's sight was easier than walking around in broad daylight. Using his power to propel him, it took only minutes to cover miles.

The energy of the earth changed beneath him and he knew he had passed from Mayan territory—his mother's people—into neutral territory. There was no visible difference in the trees or underbrush, but he could feel it as surely as a change in air pressure. A sense of urgency began to tug at him and he picked up his pace to a full run. It was more than a desire to meet his cousin. Something felt wrong. Glowing plants flew by in a blur, limbs and boughs grabbing at him, stinging as they whipped at the exposed skin of his arms. His breathing deepened and the cloying scents of fertile earth and greenery filtered through the Halloween mask to coat his throat.

Both urgency and the love of running made him go faster. Running like this—with his power raised—was something he acquainted with the time his mother had taken him hang gliding. The energy of all the living things around him was a lot like the air currents, pushing and pulling, guiding him.

The air ahead changed, thickening with the press of multiple power signatures. He slowed to a walk as the trees began to thin. Soon he could see the glow of a massive bonfire. Over the crackling he could hear voices of teenagers raised in anger. There were dozens of them gathered around a bonfire, their power glowing so brightly with fear and agitation that Fane had to switch back to regular vision. Everyone was surrounding a group of boys who had a girl backed up to the bonfire. The contrast of the orange and yellow light of the fire cast against the dark night made it impossible for him to tell who anyone was.

In the wake of a sickening sensation of wrongness, Fane shuddered. One of the boys grabbed the girl by the neck and lifted her off her feet. Her long, dark hair swung down dangerously close to the flames. Fane switched back to his channeler vision and saw the boy's hand that was wrapped tight around the girl's neck glowed with a reddish-orange power. By channeling power into his hand like that he could snap the girl's neck, or hurl her into the bonfire.

Adjusting his mask, Fane moved forward into the group of kids surrounding the spectacle. No one else wore costumes or masks and he could only hope the fact that he did wouldn't draw attention to him. So much for blending in. Regardless, he couldn't stand by and allow someone to get hurt.

If no one else did anything, he would. Family secret be damned. As he wove through the crowd, getting closer to the confrontation, the girl's power pulled at his own in a way nothing else ever had. It wasn't attraction exactly, more like a connection on a deeper level. Though he had never seen her in person before and had never felt her power, he knew without a doubt it was his cousin Eren. There was a lure to her power that was deeper than even a family bond, more like what he heard a Society bond felt like.

And that bastard had her by the throat. A protective instinct seized him with an iron grip, causing him to shake with the effort it took to hold his power back.

“Put her down or I’ll put you down,” a male voice called out above the snap and pop of the fire.

There was so much power in that voice it sent a chill all the way to Fane’s core. It was a voice that could launch fleets and motivate soldiers to go up against insurmountable odds. And yet, it belonged to someone who appeared only old enough to lead no more than a high school team to victory. Brown/black hair hung down into a face contorted with fury. At barely under six feet tall, the boy was built like one who frequented the gym. A green glow speckled through with gold surrounded him and it pulled at Fane like the sun pulled at the planets.

Desperate to help Eren, Fane shrugged off the effects of the boy’s power and tried to push to the front of the crowd. Fists started flying everywhere around him and so did power. Streaks of every imaginable color blew past him like strobe lights in the dark. They came from the hands of kids and when they struck something they either shoved it back, or in the case of trees and rocks, made it explode. Dodging left and right, Fane wove his way through the battle zone.

The boy who’d been choking Eren and the one who’d called him out—Aiden, Fane assumed—were fighting now. It was an impressive display of skill with both fists and power that Fane would have loved to watch any other time. But right now he had to get to Eren, and he had lost sight of her. There was another way to find her. Of all the power shooting through the night, hers was brightest. It pulled at him as if he were the needle of a compass.

Off to his left blue-green energy flashed, spotlighting a breathtaking face framed by blond curls. For a moment Fane couldn’t look away from the girl. She was a healer channeler, he could feel it in her energy, and yet she fought fearlessly against a girl who was clearly a warrior channeler. Pain seared through his left arm and he looked down in time to see the faint purplish glow of someone’s power fade as it blistered his skin. The discipline of a trained fighter stopped him from crying out and kept him focused enough to spin and dodge the next bolt of purple energy.

It came from a Romanian boy who looked like he couldn’t be much older than Fane—fifteen at the most.

“Who the hell are you?” the boy demanded. He had an American accent, which threw Fane off for a split second. Purple glowed around the boy’s right hand right before it flew at Fane.

He dodged but the strike connected with his shoulder—not power, just fist. Well, not quite. Instead of hitting Fane with his power, the boy had used it to heighten the strength and speed of his strike, which was almost as bad as the power itself. Apparently the people of Spruce Knoll didn’t fight fair.

“I have no quarrel with you,” Fane said.

The boy straightened, screwed up one side of his mouth, and raised an eyebrow.

“You *what*?”

Behind him a powerful blue energy flared: Eren’s energy. She was in trouble. Feinting to the right, Fane dodged to the left and tried to go around the boy. A hand snagged on his collar, choking him with his own shirt and nearly yanking him to a stop. He spun around just as the boy was rearing his glowing fist back to strike. At his beckon, Fane’s power flowed up from his core and into his hands, making them glow orange. As easy as exhaling, he shoved his power out his palms and into the other boy, careful not to use too much. The boy flew back, slamming into another and sending them both tumbling to the ground.

Cool air whipped curls back from Fane's face, sending dread through him. The mask that had kept him hidden was still clutched in the boy's hand. His gaze flicked in the direction he had seen the blond girl, but she was gone. It tortured him to leave that lovely creature to the mercy of this mob, but she had been holding her own.

"No time to worry about such things now," he mumbled beneath his breath as he spun and ran.

The pull of Eren's energy was like a beacon in the night, drawing him through the chaos of kids fighting. Concern threatened to override his years of training and control. She was new to being a channeler, had no training, and knew nothing about their ways or how to fight with her power. He had to get to her.

Pushing power down into his legs, Fane sped up, dodging and weaving through the fighters before they even knew he was there. The chaos was centered around his cousin, which made it extremely hard to get to her. It was no wonder they caused such a ruckus considering how her power lit up the night. Fane had never seen anything like it, and he had grown up around some of the most powerful channelers alive.

By the time he reached her, she was struggling to fight off two boys. Power shot out from one of the boy's hands and raked deep gashes down Eren's back. She spun toward the threat. For a moment her brilliant blue eyes met Fane's and recognition dawned within them. Her brow creased with worry and she opened her mouth to speak. Fane didn't hear what she said because both boys attacked her at once, knocking her to the ground.

Letting out a cry of rage, Fane leaped upon the back of one of the boys and sent bolts of his power shooting into him. The boy convulsed from the force of it and went limp long enough for Fane to pull him off Eren. Despite the blood that soaked the back of her tattered shirt, making her long black hair stick to it, she jumped up and kept fighting. Pride surged through him, inspiring Fane. Smiling, he turned to deal with the boy who was picking himself up off the ground.

Voices shouted above the roar of the bonfire and the din of the fighting. They were the kind of voices that were impossible to ignore, the voices of not only adults but Rectors—the leaders and strongest of channelers. The fighting slowly died off as several figures strode into the midst of it. Kids fell at the feet of these figures, their power withdrawing in an obedience that wasn't quite voluntary in most cases. In only moments all fighting ceased and kids were scattering. Aiden and the boy who'd been choking Eren stood facing each other, fists clenched, chests heaving. Two Rectors approached them.

Maroon-hued power flowed out from the Rectors and pushed against that of the two boys. Both resisted, standing tall, their power glowing around them. Finally, the reddish power of the boy who had choked Eren caved under the pressure and faded away. He sank to his knees. Aiden continued to resist though, the green and gold glow of his power strong and unwavering. He locked eyes with the Rector who challenged him and glared right through him.

Everyone around Fane went to their knees as a pair of Rectors approached. He crouched low and backed away into the darkness before he could be trapped and discovered. From the cover of the trees, he watched as Aiden approached Eren and wrapped a coat around her shoulders. The way he held her and shielded her with both his body and power made Fane instantly like him. Anyone who protected his family like that couldn't be all bad.

Convinced Eren was safe, Fane stole away into the darkness. Spruce Knoll had just become much more interesting.

THE END

Family Bonds is a short based on the Channeler series. Also available in this series:

[The Secret Of Spruce Knoll](#)

[Channeler's Choice](#)

Born Of Fire (Novella)

Heather is currently working on the third book in the series. Please visit her website for more information: <http://heathermccorkle.blogspot.com/>

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## Getting Closer

by

Lisa Nowak

*Cody Everett, who's been shipped off to live with his uncle Race and Race's girlfriend, Kasey, has somehow landed the girl of his dreams. Smart, hot, and an upperclassman, Megan seems to be way out of his league. But she chose him. And now they're about to embark on their best date yet.*

\* \* \*

Friday night, Megan picked me up in the Honda Civic she'd inherited from her sister. I showed her my Galaxie and lamented the fact that I wouldn't be able to drive it on my own until I got my license in two months.

"That's okay, Cody," she said, slipping her hand into my back pocket as she directed me to her car. "I don't mind chauffeuring you."

We went to a movie—some sappy romance that bored me to tears but kept Megan giggling and swooning. All through it, I tried to work up the nerve to hold her hand or put my arm around her shoulders. It was our third date. When was I gonna grow a pair and make a move already?

"So..." I said as we were leaving the theater, and my twitchy fingers still couldn't find a way to brave the gap between us. "You wanna—like—grab a pizza?" Stopping at her car, I pivoted to face her, my hands jammed into my front pockets.

Megan gave me her quirky little smile, the one that starts at one corner of her mouth, as if she isn't quite sure she wants to admit she's amused. "Sure."

We went to Track Town, this awesome pizza place across from the University. Megan picked at a single slice while I plowed through half the pie.

"So you're going to the U of O after you graduate," I said. "But then what?"

She tucked a few wayward strands of that beautiful blond hair behind her ear. "I'd like to get into broadcast journalism, maybe become a foreign correspondent. Talking to Remigio has made me realize how much I'd like to see the rest of the world."

Remigio, an exchange student from Brazil, was one of the kids I'd interviewed for my first article. He was a senior in our journalism class.

"What about you?" Megan asked.

"I haven't figured that out yet. I've still got a couple of years to decide."

"Oh yeah, I keep forgetting you're just a baby." She flashed me a teasing smile.

"You gonna eat that?" I asked, motioning toward her half of the pizza. She was still working on her first slice.

“No, go ahead.”

I tore into another piece as Megan started telling me about her ambitions. Savoring the cheese and pepperoni, I sat back and listened.

“You know, you’re different than the other boys I’ve dated,” Megan said half an hour later, when she’d finished detailing her dreams and I’d downed the rest of the pizza. “Most of them don’t really listen to me, they just talk about sports.”

I scanned through my memories, trying to recall if I’d ever rambled on about karate or racing. Nope. I was in the clear. “Maybe you should stop going out with jocks,” I suggested.

Megan melted me with another smile. “That’s a good point. Anyway, some of those football players have a hard time squeezing into my car.”

I laughed. “No problem for me there. I guess there’s an advantage to being short and scrawny.”

“You may not be tall,” Megan said, reaching across the table to squeeze my forearm, “but you aren’t scrawny.”

I looked at her slim fingers where they rested on my arm, sending an electric heat through my skin. She was right. I’d put on some muscle since I’d taken up karate. Maybe I wasn’t as physically pathetic as I thought.

We hung out in the booth for another hour, talking about school and getting to know each other in a way we hadn’t on our previous dates. Megan told me how much she liked to read, and I confessed my own guilty pleasure. It was the first time I’d ever talked about my favorite books with someone my age. Up till then, Kasey had been the only one I dared discuss that interest with.

“So why are you living with Kasey and Race, anyway?” Megan asked.

I slurped the rest of my second Coke and pushed the red plastic cup aside. “Aw, I got into some trouble and my dad gave me the boot.”

“Didn’t your mom have anything to say about that?”

“Yeah. ‘Don’t let the door hit you in the ass.’” I shot a grin at Megan, but instead of smiling back, her forehead wrinkled in this cute little look of concern. “Actually,” I said, focusing on my empty plate, “she’s the one who set it up so I could come down here. Dad wanted to send me to military school.”

“So she must care at least a little.”

I snorted. Kasey had tried to sell me on the same idea until she’d seen first-hand how ruthless Mom could be. “If she cared, she wouldn’t have cut me off last summer when I called her on her crap. I haven’t heard from her in two months.”

Megan’s eyes went wide. “Wow. I can’t imagine that. My mom, sister, and I are so close. We do stuff together all the time.”

I reached for my cup, swirling the last of the ice around. A video played in my head—an old commercial for some board game, where two kids and their parents were sitting at the kitchen table, spending a happy evening rolling dice and moving plastic pieces from square to square. Our family had never been like that. But back before I started kindergarten, when I was little enough to be cute instead of a pain in the ass, Mom was cool. I guess it was that memory that kept my hopes up—kept me wishing she would change—even though I knew it would never happen.

“Does your mom live here in town?” Megan asked, her voice soft.

“Nah, Phoenix. My parents split up last spring.” I kept my eyes on the whirling ice. I wasn’t used to telling my friends about my problems. Back in Portland, Mike would’ve used anything

remotely personal as an opportunity to give me a hard time, and even though Tim might've been sympathetic, how could I take a chance? "One day I came home from school and all Mom's stuff was by the door. She said, 'I can't take any more of you or your dad or this damned Oregon rain.' Then she walked out."

"That's so harsh," Megan said. Maybe it was something in her voice, but suddenly I wanted to tell her all about it.

"Maybe, but I figured I was better off without her. I didn't hear from her again until I'd been living with Race for a while, and I really didn't care. Then one day she called up and told me I had to move to Phoenix. I said I wasn't going, but she pulled her usual manipulation crap and convinced me to come for a visit."

"Maybe she missed you."

"Ha! She had a helluva way of showing it. First thing she did when she came to pick me up was start in with the lies. Then she called me a crybaby in front of Race and Kasey and told me I was as pathetic as my dad." The memory was so humiliating I almost choked on the words. I rubbed my thumb back and forth across the textured red plastic of my cup. "She was probably trying to get child support or something. All I know is, I was happy staying with Race. He actually wanted me. There was no way I was giving that up, you know?"

I forced myself to glance at Megan, and when I did, the cup squeezed out of my grip, sending ice shooting across the table.

"Shit!" I said, and immediately felt like a dumbass for cussing in front of such a classy girl. "I'm sorry. I'm a total klutz. I—"

Her hand caught mine as I reached to scoop up the ice. "Cody, stop. It's okay."

I froze, her fingers warm and calm on top of mine.

"Look at me."

Slowly, I lifted my eyes. She must think I was the biggest idiot in Lane County, maybe the entire state. But no. There wasn't any mocking in her expression—just compassion.

"The important thing is that you found someone who cares about you, right?"

"Yeah. I guess. It's just—I feel like an idiot telling you this. You must think I'm a complete wimp, getting upset about something so stupid. I mean, other people have it a lot worse, right?"

Megan's fingers closed around mine, her grip both tender and reassuring. "There's nothing wimpy about you. I'm glad you told me. Guys are always so worried about being macho, and it gets old, you know? I happen to like sensitive men." Her lips melted into that special smile, only this time it wasn't at all teasing.

\* \* \*

It was almost midnight when Megan drove me home. She pulled into the driveway and shut off the ignition. Taking her hand from the steering wheel, she curled it around mine. Her touch sent a current zinging through my fingers and up my arm.

"I had a really good time," she said.

"Me too." I wondered if I was supposed to kiss her now. I wanted to, but she was the first girl I'd ever dated, and I felt awkward about planting one on her. Especially after how nice she'd been about my Chernobyl impression at Track Town. Maybe the "sensitive men" she liked wouldn't be that forward. They'd probably buy her flowers first, or write a love poem, or—

Smiling with her eyes, Megan leaned across the seat. Oh wow. Was she going to...? Her face pressed close, her lips moist, inviting. They met mine in a gentle, sensual caress that set my

whole body crackling with electricity. Fortunately, my mouth knew what to do, because if it was up to my stunned brain, I would've been in trouble.

Who'd have thought a simple kiss could be so exciting? So stimulating? So totally hot? I could've kept going all night, but Megan finally pulled away.

"See ya Monday," she said lightly, giving me a smile that now had a thousand layers of deeper meaning.

I don't know how I got up the stairs and into the house, but suddenly I was standing inside the front door, feeling fire surge through me and wearing a big, stupid grin.

Race looked up from the couch where he sprawled, watching TV with Winston stretched out purring in his lap. He took one look at me and a crafty smile slid over his face.

"Well, whaddaya know. I think somebody just got his first kiss."

\* \* \*

In addition to being a YA author, Lisa Nowak is a retired amateur stock car racer, an accomplished cat whisperer, and a professional smartass. You can learn more about her and her books at <http://lisanowak.wordpress.com/>.

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**Precalculus**  
by  
Cory Putman Oakes

On her seventeenth birthday, Addison Russell sees something in her first period precalculus class that changes her life. THE VEIL is the story of that day, and the days that follow, from Addy's perspective. But what about Luc, who was sitting in precalculus too, and who was one of the few people who knew exactly what she saw?

Here is the story of that day, through Luc's eyes...

The damn light bulb was driving me crazy.

I glared up at the sputtering bulb, the one that was directly above my locker. To its credit, it hadn't burned out yet—not completely. It was valiantly clinging to life, in spite of my presence, but it had been mocking me with its death thralls for almost a month now, each and every time I visited my locker. The shuddering blinks of light spelled out a message that was clear to me, if not to anyone else:

*You don't (BLINK!) belong here. You don't (BLINK!) belong here.*

Didn't I know it.

I had been in and out of the human world for almost my entire life, so actually I was better around electricity than most Annorasi. I wasn't sure if it had just gotten used to me, or if I had somehow gotten used to it. But I could drive a car no problem, use a computer, even shave with an electric razor.

But light bulbs were still a challenge. And the one above my locker seemed to have a particular issue with me.

“Hi!”

Emily swung around the side of my locker and kissed me squarely on the lips, leaving behind a thick layer of her raspberry lip-gloss. I tried to erase the frown from my face—it wasn’t her fault I was having a bad morning. Even if she *was* the reason I was here, masquerading as a student at Marin County High School, forced to deal with things like light bulbs and chemistry labs and precalculus homework...

Precalculus. First period.

“We’re going to be late,” I told her, shutting my locker door. Actually, I had no idea what time it was. Like light bulbs, watches never lasted very long around me. But I was impatient to get to first period.

Emily held up her phone, displaying the time—8:05. Class didn’t start until 8:15.

“We’re fine, Luc. And I still have to get my books.”

I followed her dutifully down the hallway towards her locker. Other guys followed her with their eyes as she walked. They always did. Emily was blond, beautiful and knew exactly how to attract male attention. She had a harder time making friends with girls, but she had a fair number of female devotees who hung around her constantly—the other popular girls, as well as the girls who aspired to be one of them. Emily was their unrivaled leader, and she took her position quite seriously.

She stopped to talk to several clusters of people on the way to her locker, and with each passing minute, I felt my bad mood taking a turn for the worse. Usually, I was able to avoid Emily in the mornings and get to precalculus early, by myself. I wondered what had prompted her to seek me out that particular morning.

*You are her boyfriend*, I reminded myself. *She doesn’t need a reason to want to be around you. Stop acting like such a jerk.*

“So, what’s the plan this weekend?” I asked, as we finally arrived at her locker. There was a lot of stuff inside: pictures (some of me), pens with plastic flowers attached to them, several changes of clothes and at least one hair straightener. Her books and notebooks were shoved to one side, behind a cosmetics bag and an armload of magazines. Academics were not exactly the focus of Emily’s life.

“Well, there’s the game tomorrow night,” she answered. “And I heard there is going to be a rally beforehand.”

“A rally?”

“Yeah, you know—cheerleaders, football players, school spirit. That kind of thing.”

“Oh. So we’re going?”

She reached up and tweaked my nose.

“*Everybody’s* going. So, yes, we’re going too. Unless...maybe you have other plans for us that night?”

She raised her eyebrows suggestively, and I tried not to groan in frustration. Instead, I gave her a look that I hoped was regretful.

“I know,” she said quickly, before I had to say anything. “I didn’t mean *that*. I was just thinking that if you wanted it to be only the two of us, that would be okay.”

My deep, devout—and entirely fictitious—religious views were the only thing preventing Emily from insisting that we explore that side of our relationship. There was a lot more preventing me from taking things any further than they had already gone. It wasn’t that I didn’t



appreciate her looks—I did. Trust me. But I had been sent here to protect her, not kiss her. And the fact that we were dating was already enough of a complication.

Dating had not been part of my plan. But Emily had made it clear from the start that she did not see our relationship as platonic. And I couldn't afford to alienate her. She was too important. Even if she didn't know it.

Really, it would be better if she never knew it.

I had no idea how my new plan—and really, calling it a “plan” was being generous, considering that I was pretty much making it up as I went along—was going to work out in the long-run. I had my doubts about it. If she ever dumped me, it would all fall to pieces. Keeping her happy was of utmost importance, but how long could I really expect to maintain this...this pretense? How long would dating the “mysterious new kid” continue to have social value to her?

I had no choice but to wait and find out. I was completely on my own with this; no one was giving me help, least of all my father. Which was really unfair, considering that this whole situation was largely his fault to begin with. Not that he would ever admit that.

*Seriously, Lucas?* he had said to me, when I had come to him for advice on the “dating” issue. *A beautiful girl has a crush on you? Come back and see me when you've got real problems.*

Well, I guess he had a point. Sort of.

Emily was looking up at me now, and those striking blue eyes of hers were worried around the edges. She could sense my bad mood, and she thought it was something she had done. She thought she had gone too far and offended me.

I suddenly regretted thinking such harsh thoughts about her. Emily was actually quite good about respecting my feigned piety. She wasn't a bad person. By now, I knew her well enough to understand that most of her “Queen Bee” attitude was a carefully orchestrated front. Like everybody else, she was just trying to make it through high school unscathed.

*It's not her fault,* I repeated to myself, for the second time that morning. *She has no idea who she is. Or what I am. Or what our being together—really being together—would mean. I couldn't blame her for that.*

“Tell you what,” I said, shutting her locker and putting an arm around her shoulders. “Let's go to the rally and the game. Then maybe we can get dessert somewhere afterwards. Just us, all right?”

“Sounds good.”

She gave me a peck on the cheek and let me steer her towards precalculus.

\*\*\*

The lights in precalculus flickered as soon as Emily and I walked through the door, and I started to wonder if that was something I needed to worry about. Generally speaking, the more Annorasi in the area, the more wonky the electricity. But I could sense only one other Annorasi nearby—Principal Chatsworth—and he was in his office, in the administration wing. Too far away to have any effect on the lights. It had to be just me. Maybe the lights could sense my bad mood too.

Unless...

I looked at Emily out of the corner of my eye, watching her carefully as she slid into her assigned seat, next to mine, in the second row.

Nothing.

As always, everything about her screamed “human.” And only human.

“What?” Emily asked.

“Nothing,” I replied, sitting down in my seat and putting my notebook on the desk in front of me.

Emily shrugged, then turned to talk with Beverly Martin, another junior, who sat to Emily’s immediate right.

It was only a minute or two until the start of class. Other students were filing in, loudly greeting one another and banging their book bags around as they got settled in for first period.

Under the cover of the clamor, and Emily’s chatter with Beverly, I risked a glance behind me.

She was there. My Redhead. Just as she always was.

I turned back to the front of the room. I didn’t need to stare at her. I had a perfect image of her in my mind’s eye; she would be sitting at her desk with her math book and notebook neatly stacked in front of her, drinking her ever-present cup of coffee. Her black schoolbag, the kind with the strap made to go across her body, would be sitting at her feet.

Addison Russell was her name—Addy, to her friends. But we weren’t friends, and we probably never will be. I had to be careful talking to other girls around Emily, so I never said a word to Addison, not even when we were alone together before the start of precalculus. Too risky.

I called her “my Redhead,” just to myself, even though her hair is really more coppery-blonde than straight red. It’s a pretty color, different from any girl I’d ever seen.

She was always early to precalculus, although I didn’t have the least idea why. It didn’t really fit with the other things I knew about her. She didn’t seem like the type to really like math, although she got A’s in it. She generally got A’s in everything. I knew this because her transcript was one of the few I had read all the way through the night I broke into the administration wing. That was the night I was supposed to have decided who I had been sent here to protect. I hadn’t been able to tell from the transcripts, but over the course of subsequent days it had become clear to me that it was Emily. Not my Redhead.

I had been both disappointed and relieved.

“Settle down, please,” Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore commanded from the front of the room, opening her book and beginning a discussion of last night’s homework.

I tuned her out immediately. I could do precalculus in my sleep.

My thoughts drifted back to my Redhead. Maybe she left for school early everyday because she had a bad home life? But no, her transcript said she lived with her grandmother—that didn’t sound like a situation she’d need to escape from. And she had friends—not a legion of devoted followers, like Emily, but at least two very close friends she was almost always with. Why didn’t she hang out with them in the mornings? Why come and sit in an empty precalculus room?

Well, empty except for me. Other than today, I always arrived early to first period too. It had started one morning near the beginning of the semester, back when Emily had been pursuing me and before I had made up my mind about her. Dodging her without pissing her off had been exhausting, and the classroom had been quiet. My Redhead had been the only other person there.

I had taken my seat without speaking to her, and she hadn’t said anything to me. Her desk was a few rows behind mine and slightly to the left, so I couldn’t really see her. But I already knew what she looked like. I had noticed her before, enough that I had already started privately calling her “my Redhead.” Her presence was comforting and I could smell her coffee from where I was sitting. I didn’t like to drink coffee, but I had always enjoyed the smell. Her small noises

were endearing. I could hear her take sips from her cardboard cup, and I could hear the rustling of a paper bag as she took out a pastry to eat.

And that became our ritual, every morning. We would sit quietly in our respective seats and just be. Together. She didn't always bring a pastry, but she was never without her coffee. I looked forward to the aroma of it, so much so that it was now impossible for me to enter a coffee shop or a restaurant that served coffee without thinking of her.

We never spoke. There was something so companionable about our silence that it almost seemed a shame to ruin it. But I sometimes hoped she would talk to me. If she spoke first, I would have to answer her, just out of politeness. Emily couldn't possibly get mad about that, even if she were to walk into precalculus at her usual time, right before the bell, and catch us.

But my Redhead never said a word to me.

I felt cheated for having missed our time together this morning. It was the first day in nearly two months I hadn't arrived early to class. Tomorrow, I would have to be more careful to steer clear of Emily before school.

I wondered if my Redhead had noticed my absence.

"Excuse me, Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore? Can we have just a moment of the class' time?"

I extracted myself from my thoughts as three cheerleaders entered the room, holding Hula-Hoops, pom-poms, and elaborately decorated signs.

Emily leaned over towards me and whispered, "This must be about the rally."

I nodded, pretending to be engrossed by the cheerleaders and their announcement, but my attention had shifted to the enormous silver cat that wandered through the door behind them.

The cat—a cougar, actually—slinked into the room and promptly sat down on her haunches, just beside the front row of desks. Her tail flicked over her front paws and she watched the cheerleaders with rapt attention, pointedly ignoring me.

I tried not to smile. Sonya, as I had named her, was invisible to the rest of the room, so it wouldn't do for me to be seen grinning into thin air. Not that it would have been better if my fellow classmates could see her. It wasn't every day that an Annorasi jungle cat, with razor sharp fangs and five-inch retractable claws, wandered into a suburban math class. To put it mildly, Sonya would cause a stir. And she would probably enjoy doing it.

She had sure scared the hell out of me, the first time I saw her.

On my very first day at Marin Catholic High School, Sonya had greeted me in the parking lot, claws unsheathed and fur bristled, making it very clear that I was not welcome. This had taken me by surprise and I had been at a loss for what to do about this unexpected impediment, until Principal Chatsworth had come running from the administration building with a can of tuna.

Chatsworth had explained that Sonya was a regular on campus and viewed the students rather like her cubs. She was fiercely protective of them and had a zero tolerance policy when it came to Annorasi wandering among them. But she was not immune to bribes. The tuna bought me a day on campus, and after five more days of similar offerings, she stopped cutting me off in the parking lot. She was accepting of my presence now, but I always tried to have something with me to tempt her.

Just in case.

I pulled a bag of cat treats from my pocket, trying to be nonchalant about it, so my neighbors would think I was just sneaking a snack for myself. They weren't as good as tuna. At least, I could only imagine they didn't taste as great. But they smelled a lot less fishy.

Sonya saw the treats out of the corner of her eye, or so I surmised from the fact that she began to purr loudly—the floor beneath my feet rumbled, but nobody else seemed to notice.

The cheerleaders were still talking.

“Be sure to come early for the rally! Principal Chatsworth has given us special permission to have a bonfire—yes! a real, honest-to-goodness bonfire!—on the empty lot next to the football field!”

“In the middle of the day?” Terrance Seaver, a junior who sat in the back row, cut in.

“At five,” one of the cheerleaders told him.

“It won’t be dark then,” Terrance informed them. “It’s kind of weird to have a bonfire when it’s still light out, don’t you think?”

The cheerleaders didn’t know what to say to that. I bit back a grin; I’d always liked Terrance.

Sonya, evidently realizing that I was not about to get up and hand her the treats, started making her way over to me. The cheerleaders, prompted by Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore, launched into a cheer, bouncing around and swinging their Hula-Hoops.

*We’re the mighty Cougars  
And we’re here to say  
We’re the ones to kick your butts,  
Any day!*

Just behind them, Sonya paused. She followed the moving Hula-Hoops greedily with her eyes, in that intense way that cats do. Then she settled back into a crouch, preparing to pounce.

*We’ll kick ‘em on the field  
We’ll kick ‘em in the pool  
We’ll kick the butts of anyone  
Who dares takes on our school!*

I cleared my throat.

The cheerleaders continued, without paying me any mind. But Sonya looked over at me.

I shook my head slightly at her. I had never actually seen Sonya interfere in the human world, but there was a first time for everything and it would be unfortunate if she accidentally brained a cheerleader while trying to bat a Hula-Hoop.

*‘Cause we’re the Cougars  
C-C-C-Cougars  
Give it up for  
The Cougars!*

Sonya hissed at me; I glared at her in return and shook my head again.

Emily hit me on the shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you?” she mouthed, motioning to Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore. The teacher was eyeing me with a very displeased look on her face.

I ignored them both and continued to watch Sonya who, thankfully, seemed to have gotten my message. She glanced longingly at the swinging Hula-Hoops one last time before resuming the short walk to my desk.

*C-C-C-Cougars*  
*Let me hear you say,*  
*The Cougars!*

Suddenly, Sonya froze; her gaze was now focused on the back wall of the classroom. I turned to see what she was looking at. The back of the classroom was made up of windows, overlooking a clump of trees. On the branch that came closest to the classroom sat a red bird, singing at the top of its lungs.

A very plump, red bird.

This was not the type of thing that a little head shaking was going to distract Sonya from. I sighed, resigned, as she dropped down and wiggled her hindquarters, never taking her eyes off of the bird. I had seen Sonya jump through classroom windows before—she wasn't one to let a human building get in her way. It always made a mess on the Annorasi side of the veil, but not the human side. Sonya was smart enough to get to the other side before she jumped. This was her school, and she wasn't about to damage it.

*C-C-C Cougars!*  
*Number one!*

Having reached the end of their number, the cheerleaders lifted their Hula-Hoops over their heads. Sonya took that opportunity to leap right through the center hoop and bound down the center aisle, towards the back of the classroom.

I was prepared for a loud crash when Sonya hit the window. Instead, there was an ear-splitting scream, then the expected crash, and then a second ear-splitting scream.

My first thought went to Emily. I looked over at her, warily. If this was her first glimpse of the Annorasi world, it was a memorable one. And this was going to change everything. If she could see Sonya, that meant she could see the Annorasi world and that meant—

But Emily was calm. Totally unlike someone who had just been screaming. She was turned backwards in her seat, but she wasn't looking at the window the cat had just jumped through. She was staring, in a rather puzzled way, at something a few rows ahead of the window. The same thing the rest of the class was staring at.

My Redhead. The screams had come from her.

Addison sat hunched forward in her seat, her face buried in her arms. She slowly raised her head, saw everyone staring, and immediately turned to look at the window behind her.

I closed my eyes.

*No. Not her. Please.*

What had Addison seen? Sonya? The window breaking? What was she seeing now?

I reopened my eyes. From an Annorasi point of view, the scene before me was a mess. The back wall of the building had a large, gaping hole in it, through which I could see a large cat chewing contentedly on the limp body of a red bird.

But from a human point of view, everything was as it should be; there had been no cat, no crash, and the back wall of the classroom was intact. The only thing that was slightly out of place in the human world—and, consequently, the thing that every human in the room was now staring at—was the terrified girl, with coffee dripping down her back, who had just screamed bloody murder for no apparent reason. Twice.

My poor Redhead. Her eyes were wide and her whole body was tense. I could tell by her forced, deep breaths that she was trying to calm herself down, trying to make rational sense of what had just happened. Her fear was slowly being overcome by embarrassment, as she looked around the room and saw all of the faces turned towards her.

The overhead lights flickered like crazy. I half expected them all to go out, but after one final burst of light and an ominous hum, they returned to normal.

“Sorry,” Addison said finally. “I, uh...spilled my coffee.”

She held up her cup, dripping coffee into her lap.

She clearly *had* spilled her coffee, although probably not one person in class believed that had been the cause of her screams. But no one seemed very concerned about the actual reason for her terror. They were all staring at her in warped fascination, like she was some kind of freak. Most of them were probably half-hoping she’d scream again, just to liven up the rest of first period. The cheerleaders were glaring daggers at her, furious that she had stolen their thunder.

Terrance broke the silence by giggling loudly. I narrowed my eyes in his direction, instantly revising my earlier opinion of him.

“Sorry,” Addison said again.

“That’s why we don’t allow food or drinks in class, Ms. Russell,” Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore said briskly.

At this, Emily scoffed. Not loud enough for anyone but me to hear, but I shot her an impatient look all the same. She had been friends with Addison once, when they were both much younger. How could she be so unfeeling towards her now?

Emily saw my face, shrugged, and turned back around to the front of the room.

All of a sudden, it hit me. Emily had not seen Sonya, not even when the cat had caused a huge, unmistakable scene. But Addison had.

Every muscle in my body clenched at once.

Addison could see Sonya.

I had made a huge mistake.

“Lucas?” Ms. Fetterly-Dinsmore warned.

I was still staring at Addison. By then, the rest of the class had turned around. I followed suit, my thoughts going a million miles a minute.

How could I have been so wrong? Had there been signs? Had I missed them? Had I wanted to miss them?

I felt like punching something. And not just out of anger at the tremendous, unforgivable mistake I had made, but because of what it meant for her.

My Redhead was almost certainly doomed.

THE END

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Cory Putman Oakes was born in Basel, Switzerland, but grew up in Novato, California and attended Marin Catholic High School. She then spent three fantastic years at the University of California at Los Angeles before graduating in 2001 with a B.A. in Psychology. In 2004, Cory graduated from Cornell Law School with a Juris Doctorate Degree and her husband, Mark (the first was the intended consequence of attending the school, the second was a bonus). Since then, she has been an associate at a big law firm, taught business law to undergraduates at Texas State University and written several books for young people.

Cory now lives in Austin, Texas with Mark and their beautiful daughter, Sophia. In addition to writing, Cory enjoys reading, cooking, running, and hanging out with her family and pets.

THE VEIL is Cory's first published work.

[Website](#)

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## **The Almost Assassin**

by  
Laura Pauling

Malcolm shoved the last cream puff in his mouth and pushed back his chair. He couldn't stand the waiting. Behind him was a small closet that contained all specialty items. Disguises. Night vision goggles. Special pens with hidden cameras. Everything he'd need to be the next 007, the handsome teen spy, the boy who slipped in and out of the shadows, escaped prison, and defused bombs.

Or whatever his family really did.

He pulled on a ratty wig. Slipped a god awful dress over his head and stuffed a couch pillow up it so he looked like a frumpy old woman. He hunched over. It took several times to get the voice just right. With shaky steps he crossed the room and picked up his umbrella.

"So you think you can pull one over on the old lady, do you?" He shook his foldable weapon at his pretend nemesis. His voice crackled. "You've got it wrong, sonny boy."

Malcolm dove into a series of well-trained, well-practiced Kung Fu moves and high-pitched screams meant to intimidate and cause soul crushing fear. His legs kicked. His arms sliced the air. Well, the best he could with a lumpy pillow up his shirt.

After a sheen of sweat appeared on his forehead, Malcolm gave up. The umbrella clattered to the floor. An old lady wielding her umbrella as an instrument of death?

Not quite believable. Laughable really.

He ripped it off and threw on another disguise.

Dreadlocks hung around his face. Sunglasses kept his eyes hidden. Turning his iPod on – or pretending to – Malcolm sauntered through his tiny living room with the walk, the talk, the look of a Rastafarian teen. Perfect.

He might have actually been sputtering out a few beat box noises, which sounded more like an unhappy baby, when a voice cut through the air.

"Little brother, I thought you'd tire of dress up. Eventually."

Malcolm didn't have to turn around to know his brother stood in the doorway. The dry mocking tone of his voice ripped apart Malcolm's charade, which fell around him in pieces. After wiping spit from his mouth, he pulled the dreadlocks from his head and turned. "Hello, Will. By the way, I'm fine. How are you?" The sarcasm felt sweet on his lips.

Will strode into the room, his ego taking over the small space. With one suave jump, he sat on the kitchen table. "Sure you're up for this? You can always call it quits and go back to Mommy's side."

Home. Malcolm briefly closed his eyes. Gingersnaps. Warm fires. His Great Danes he missed like crazy. His friends.

“I can easily take your place. I’ve seen your assignment.”

Will’s mockery lay over Malcolm like a blanket of porcupine quills. Each word jabbed and poked into the façade he was barely holding onto. His brother always interfered, assuming Malcolm couldn’t do anything right. He had to prove he could do this to his dad and himself. Words drove up his throat and shot out his mouth. “This is my mission. Stay. Away.”

Will wiggled his fingers and puckered his lips. “Ooh. Sensitive.”

Deep breaths. In and out. Malcolm regained control. “Tell me what you came to tell me, then leave.”

Will threw a file folder onto the table along with a flash drive. “You’re on a need to know basis. And what you need to know is in there. Try not to screw up.” He cracked his knuckles. “Though I’ll have no problem coming in and cleaning up your mess.”

The dreadlocks dangling from Malcolm’s hand tickled his feet but he didn’t take his eyes off his brother. Surges of violent ideas pulsed through his mind: his hands wrapped around Will’s neck; or even better, ropes tied around his brother’s wrists and his body dangling over a pit of hungry sewer rats.

A couple light slaps on the cheek from his brother snapped Malcolm out of his vengeful thoughts.

“Good luck.” Will winked. “You’ll need it.”

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That evening just after dark, Malcolm slipped on his night vision goggles. A recon mission. That’s what this was. Nothing else. An apartment stood across the street, a regular apartment. It certainly didn’t look like the dwelling of an evil mastermind. Or someone who deserved death. He’d opened the file and caught the address. Not much to go by. He’d popped in the flash drive but his father hadn’t included a lot of info. Just the bare minimum. Breadcrumbs. A street address. A name. And the cryptic comment: suspicious activity.

Their home he could find. Stephen and Savvy Bent – what kind of name was Savvy? Must be a couple working together. But what did suspicious activity mean? They shot cans off the fence in their backyard? Or something more criminal?

And that’s the way it would be all year. Just enough intel for Malcolm to proceed but not enough to fully understand what was really going on, why he was spying, and what these people did wrong.

Malcolm crossed the street with purpose in his step. The darkened windows and closed blinds told him no one was home. He stopped and shook off the nerves that caused his shaky fingers and tense shoulders. He puffed out his chest and sucked in his breath. “I am the man.” Then he crept up to the windows.

He couldn’t see. He couldn’t hear a peep. No television. No radio. No idle conversation.

With a shimmy and a shake he had the front door unlocked and he slipped in with the breeze. He pressed a tiny button and a camera in his goggles started recording. On light feet, he prowled, watching, spying, taking note of every dirty dish, open magazine, and ticket stub.

Nothing suspicious. Clearly he was dealing with pros who knew how to hide their tracks and live their cover.



The bedroom. That's where people hid stuff they wanted no one to see, like guns, secret info, or encrypted codes. He poked his head into an office possibly filled with files but most likely holding info that only showed what they wanted people to see. Not the real incriminating illegal juicy stuff.

A door at the end of the hall was open a crack. He approached with the stealth of a ninja. He nudged the door open with his toe. Ah, yes. A bedroom. A smell of lilac perfume or lotion enveloped him, tickling his senses.

Somehow lilac didn't say mad killer.

He turned slowly in the room, absorbing everything: the flowery rug on the floor, the collection of cheap necklaces, the fluffy pillow and stuffed animals. A girl? The file didn't say anything about a daughter.

A door slammed. Voices.

Malcolm jumped on the bed and tried to push the window open. It wouldn't budge. Oh hell. He'd be imprisoned for invading the room of a girl before he even started his mission.

Footsteps thudded in the hall. "I'll be right out, Dad!"

Malcolm dove into the closet and shut the door. His body trembled. Thank God Will or his dad weren't outside monitoring his every move. He had no doubt they'd keep an eye on him the whole year but no tracking device could reveal he was in a girl's closet. He hoped.

"I just have to change out of my spy clothes!" she called out louder.

Spy clothes? Malcolm peeked. A girl. But not a young girl. An older teen. Long dark hair. Legs like a goddess. Was this Savvy?

She shed her dark clothes and they dropped to the floor. The smell of lilac washed over him. He tried his hardest not to look but what if she was wearing a wire under her clothes? Or had a gun strapped to her leg? He had to know these things. Write them up in his file he hadn't started yet.

He pressed his eye to the crack where the door hung open a tiny bit. The shadows in the low-lit room hugged her body, showing off her curves. He gulped. No wire. No gun.

After getting dressed, she rummaged through her bag. "Lock picking device? Check. Taser? Check. Secret camera? Check. Skittles? Check. Phone in case Mom ever calls me but yeah, right like that's ever going to happen? Check."

Malcolm stood straight. Both eyes open. So this girl was Savvy, and her father must be Stephen. Maybe they were a team and worked a Paris underground operation. Maybe he should get the hell out of there. Fast. As soon as they left, he'd slip out and melt into the night shadows.

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Malcolm liked this costume the least but it was a favorite of his family's and one of the first personas he'd learned. But here he was in the Jardin de Tuileries, dressed like a mime. The dried paint itched constantly. The baggy pants and suspenders made him feel like an idiot. And the white face with contrasting black triangles above and below the eyes and the black lipstick crept him out.

He'd spent the past several mornings tracking the girl, watching her every move, learning her routines. That was his mission so far: data collecting, otherwise known as spying. In a span of a few days, she'd been all over Paris. The Eiffel Tower, the Louvre, a bookstore, a warehouse. He couldn't quite figure out what she was up to. Unless she was scoping and casing out joints for a future crime! That had to be it! He slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. A cluster of

Asian tourists stopped admiring the naked butt of a statue and stared at him. More of a glare actually.

Immediately he jumped into a common mime routine of walking backward, or what he called the Michael Jackson move. Soon they lost interest and walked over to the next statue. He glanced at Savvy just in time to see her look away and go back to her journal. What was she so busy writing? Maybe the beginnings of a master plan to rob the Louvre. If only he could get close enough.

Malcolm spent the next several minutes trying to build up the courage to sneak up behind her. He studied a couple statues, stroked an angel's wing, performed for a group of children. Sweat tickled his armpits, which made him feel very cowardly indeed. What would Will say about that?

He hated to admit it but there was something mystifying about watching this girl in this beautiful park, her long dark hair teasing him. She seemed sad. Yet she was in Paris, the city of romance and light. He wanted to comfort her, to put an arm around, to play with her hair and bring a smile to her face.

Before he knew it, Malcolm was five feet behind her, then three feet. His breath hitched. He could almost reach out and touch her. So close. He peered over her shoulder, hoping to catch sight of her scribblings.

Hair whipped his cheek as she turned around, her face trapped between rage and fear. "What's your problem?"

Malcolm froze, every bone and muscle refusing to cooperate. All his training drained from his mind and body. Her eyes, deep and blue, pulled him in and wouldn't let go. His heart raced.

She stood and cast a shrewd glare at Malcolm. "I said, what's your problem. Oh wait," she lifted her hands in the air, "you probably don't speak English just like everyone else in this stupid city so why would I expect any answers, why would I think you could talk to me, person to person, why would I expect anything? You're just a clown."

Her words jolted Malcolm into action. Using jerky movements he pretended he was trapped inside a box and pressed his hands flat against invisible glass walls. He put everything he had into his act, trying not to steal glances at her.

She didn't lose steam. "I've been stuck in this city for almost six months. Yes I love the pastries, the macaroons and the tarts drizzled with fruit and chocolate. They're incredible. But what was my dad thinking? I miss my friends. I miss my old town. And trust me, I never thought I'd miss a small podunk town with nothing in it but a few farms and the local store. But I do. I miss it all." She plopped down on the bench, apparently spent for the time being.

Malcolm crossed his legs, scratched his head, and looked toward the sky, like he was thinking of a solution to get out of the box.

But she wasn't done. "Forget it. You're stuck. You'll never get out of the box. You're a clown. You're supposed to look creepy and entertain people. But I hate to tell you. Most people just watch and laugh to be polite when really they wonder why someone would paint their face and pretend not to talk. Haven't you noticed when moms hold their kids a tad bit closer when you come near? Or they slowly inch away while praying for you to leave?"

Her words, full of despair and a bit of anger, settled on him. In the space of a few minutes she'd torn apart his life and cut down to the marrow of his existence. He missed home too. He was stuck in this city too. And he was in a box, with no way out. Not if he wanted to be a part of his family.

Her voice softened. “But I understand. We're all forced to go along with it, accept certain things.” She laughed, a dry and brittle laugh. “Thank God you can't understand me.”

Malcolm felt the urge to hold her hand, to smooth down her hair, and paint a smile on her face. Instead, he stuck a finger up in the air, opened his eyes wide and his mouth.

“What?”

Guilt tugged at his heartstrings. What if she or her family were involved in something criminal? That couldn't mean anything good as far as their future relationship. Why was he even thinking that? Of course he couldn't have any kind of relationship with her. Maybe he could warn her somehow, let her know she and her family were in danger. He pretended to open a smaller box and pull out a gun.

“What's that? A key? Ooh, what about a croissant? Do you have any croissants in that magic box? You know, the kind with the chocolate strips inside?” A smile pulled at the corner of her lips, a real smile.

With much regret, he formed his hands into the gun and pointed it at her.

Her smile disappeared and her face paled.

He hated to do this but maybe she'd take the not so subtle warning, maybe later when she was scaling the walls of the Louvre or about to do whatever she does, she'd remember and stop. Maybe she'd completely freak out and her family would disappear off his family's grid. He pulled the trigger, threw his body back, and covered his head from the invisible shattering glass.

She gripped the sides of the bench and stared.

He sauntered away with his hands in his pocket and didn't look back.

He thought it was over.

He thought she'd run home.

He thought she might scream.

He never expected it when he felt the electricity zap through his body, his legs and arms clenching and pulsing. The ground rushed up to meet him. He tried to blabber a few words but she wouldn't give him time.

Her foot landed in his stomach more than once. She leaned close, her breath on his face. “Creep!” Then she ran.

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Malcolm smoothed any wrinkles in his white shirt but his fingers shook. If anyone took note they'd see he wasn't quite as put together as usual. His hair was a bit mussed. His black apron, always tied expertly in the back, was inside out and the strings dangled unevenly in the back.

Savvy was sitting out on the café's patio, with a friend, her long dark hair dancing in the breeze, her mouth laughing and smiling, but the same sad aura surrounded her.

He shouldn't care.

He shouldn't be attracted to her.

He shouldn't be the one to possibly end her life in the future.

Maybe that wasn't the plan. Maybe all he'd do is collect information. He could do that. All he'd wanted to do since he turned thirteen was earn his father's approval and have him slap his shoulder and say, “Good job, son.”

A tray slammed against the counter in front of him. Malcolm jerked to attention. The boss's right hand man scolded him. There were tables to wait. Customers to make happy. Croissants to sell.

Malcolm nodded and muttered an apology in French. He wiped the sweat off his hands and gripped his pencil and ordering pad. Then he headed out the doors. The laughter of happy couples, the chatter of businessmen, and the sound of cars from the main road greeted him. A motorcycle buzzed off in the distance.

But all he could see was the girl. Savvy Bent. That was her name. That's what the files said. Five foot ten. Black hair. Blue eyes. Loves pastries. That was all he knew. What did she do for fun in her spare time? Learn how to break open safes? How to stalk high profile politicians and then take them down in broad daylight?

He stopped, table by table, taking orders, smiling, playing the role of the charming waiter without a care in the world. Slowly, he circled closer to her table. Would she recognize him somehow from the day in the park? His skin tingled just thinking about it.

He approached their table, zeroing in on the flush in her cheeks, the speckles of gray in her blue eyes, and the way she absent-mindedly drummed her fingernails against the tables.

He straightened up. "*Bonjour.*" His voice cracked and the girls looked at him with silent smirks. He cleared his throat. "*Bonjour!*"

Savvy's friend ordered for them while Savvy took him in with her eyes. But he couldn't read her face. Did the white and black waiter's uniform remind her of the black and white stripes of his mime shirt?

He finished writing the order down, but hesitated, swaying closer to her. The smell of lilacs tempted him to pull up a chair and chat. What he knew of her so far made him want to get to know Savvy.

Not snuff her out.

He should say something, anything! Like how's the weather? Or, what a nice day. Or, are you really a spy and do you come from a family of criminals?

What was he doing? Heat spread across his cheeks and he whipped around and strode inside. Will would've handled that like a pro, not a bumbling, awkward middle schooler trying to ask a girl to dance.

His phone vibrated against his leg. No one called him except the family. It would be a text. And it would tell him the next step of the mission. He stacked plates across his arms and made his way into the kitchen, depositing them in the sink. They landed with a crash and several kitchen staff cast him dirty looks.

Hands up, he backed away with a cheesy grin. Out of the kitchen, he slipped his hand into his pocket and wrapped it around his phone. What would they want him to do, right here, right now? In a café. With hundreds of witnesses.

Slip a drug into her coffee?

Poison her pastry?

Or lure her away into a solitary place, like an alley? And then, and then. He couldn't think it. After imagining Will and his father watching with their arms folded and their faces frowning, Malcolm finally pulled out the phone and read the text.

Oh hell.

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Minutes later, after taking a short break and splashing water on his face, Malcolm headed outside, a pistol in the pocket of his apron. He couldn't believe they wanted him to assassinate her. Today.

What happened to collecting data?  
To easing into his mission slowly?  
To waiting until he knew of her guilt?

What was he supposed to say? 'Hey, would you walk across the street with me to a dark alley so I can kill you?' Or 'Please follow me back to my apartment where I can help you into the afterlife.'

What if this was a test? Maybe his family didn't really want him to use the gun but wanted to see if he could make independent decisions. They certainly didn't need some wishy washy teen working for them.

But what if this wasn't a test? Maybe the instructions were the real deal and for some unknown reason he had to act fast? What was so special about Savvy Bent?

With his eyes on her, he bumped into a table, which nudged the arm of an older lady. Her glass tipped and cold water spilled down the front of her shirt. She gasped. He spit out apologies. She waved him away, face red, eyes twitching.

His shoe caught and he stumbled. After regaining his footing, he stepped up to Savvy's table. They were almost done. A smudge of chocolate covered the tip of her nose. He whipped out the bill.

They stopped chatting. Savvy smiled at him in amusement.

Malcolm looked over his shoulder, afraid Will hovered in the dark corners or behind the hedge, watching him, writing notes to report back to Father.

"Are you okay?" Savvy asked.

"Um, you've got," he pointed to her nose but didn't want to touch her, "a bit of something."

She stared at her friend who nodded yes and discretely touched her nose. Savvy grabbed a napkin and wiped off the chocolate.

Malcolm took the moment to get his body and his mind under control. It would only take seconds. Cakes fell flat in the same amount of time. He could do this. He had to. No choice.

"Are you okay?" Savvy asked again, with a clean nose, but a surprisingly sexy flush to her cheeks.

A breeze blew the bill from the table. He chased it down and put it under her plate. "I'm fine." But his words came out a little bit too breathless.

Her friend nodded toward the street. Savvy pulled out money and left it on top of the bill but under the plate.

Their chairs scraped against the cement and they stood.

They turned to leave.

Savvy glanced back and waved, innocent and breathtaking.

Oh hell. He couldn't stall any longer. But what would this simple mission put in motion? Probably something he couldn't stop or control. He wanted to complete his assignment but he didn't want to be a chump, a mindless puppet. He would not, could not kill, without knowing why.

"Wait!" His voice came out a whisper.

Savvy walked away.

"Wait!" He called out louder.

She turned back. He made up the ground between them. They stood inches apart. Her friend, the chatter, the city of Paris faded. His brother, father, whispered in his ear, guiltting him, pushing him.

"Did you want something?" Her melodic voice awakened his senses.

He opened his mouth but the words stuck in his throat. He could let her go. End the mission. Save her life.

And be shunned from the family. Forever.

Her friend tugged at her arm and pulled her away, widening the gap.

Or he could figure this out on his own, do it his way. The words flooded his mouth and tumbled out. "Would you go out with me sometime? Like a date?"

She narrowed her eyes and took in his appearance.

He tried to smooth down his hair. "I promise I don't bite."

"Okay." She smiled and wrote down her number. Then she and her friend walked away, arms hooked, heads together, whispering and laughing.

Elation ran through his limbs, sending a burst of adrenaline to his already wired body. He'd put off her untimely death. But for how long? How long would his family put up with his blatant ignoring of orders?

Hopefully, he and Savvy would make it through their first date.

Alive.

###

Find out what happens on Savvy and Malcolm's first date in *A SPY LIKE ME* to be released in the spring of 2012. What secrets hide beneath the surface of their lives? Learn Savvy's side of the story.

Laura Pauling writes YA and MG fiction. She lives the cover of suburban mom/author perfectly, from the minivan to the home-baked snickerdoodles, while hiding her secret missions and covert operations. But shh. Don't tell anyone.

Connect with Laura at her blog: <http://www.laurapauling.com/>

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## **Mind Games**

by

Susan Kaye Quinn

Every time I see her, she surprises me.

Not in a charming or tantalizing way, although there's no question she captivates me. She surprises me because there's no whisper warning of her presence like with everyone else in Warren Township High, where the dull roar of thoughts from the throng of students in the hallway practically drowns out my own. Sometimes she'll appear by my side without warning. Or like today, I catch a glimpse of her retreating down the hall. But I never hear her thoughts first. Even if she and I were the only two people in the entire school, I still wouldn't be able to read her mind. And she can't read mine either.

And that's exactly the problem.

Her chocolate brown hair sweeps along her back as she darts between students hurrying to first period. She hesitates as she moves between them, pulling her arms close to her side and

trying not to touch anyone. She's walking away from me, so I tilt my head and let my eyes linger as she clutches her backpack and weaves through the crowd, head down, not looking back. She's wearing shorts today, and I thank the fickle gods of spring weather for making it unseasonably warm.

*Man, you have got to stop thinking about that zero.* Tony's thoughts break through the background din, and I don't have to glance behind me to know he's coming up fast.

*Her name is Kira.* I stab the grimy buttons for my locker code and the door springs open. I shove my gym bag inside, burying the muddy soccer cleats I forgot from the day before.

Tony leans against the paint-chipped locker next to mine, wearing his Blue Devils jersey. *Yeah, well, people are starting to think you're a praver.*

Now that I'm paying attention, I catch the sideways thoughts from a trio of girls gliding past with their synchronized steps and identical band shirts. *Praver. Ew. Get a real girlfriend, sicko.*

Tony throws a glare at the girls. *Raf's not a praver, freaks. What are you? Triplets gone bad?*

Their thoughts slither over each other and mix together. *In your dreams, Tony ... Stop hanging with boys that prey on little girls ... And maybe you'll find out.* Then their thoughts synchronize for greater mental volume. *Praver. Praver. Praver.* The chant keeps up until they drift out of range.

*Man, it's getting worse.* Tony scrubs his short-cropped hair with one hand. *I know you practically grew up with the girl, but that really doesn't make it any better.*

*Thanks for the reminder.* I crane to look down the hallway again, but Kira is gone. *Next time you need a punch in the face, let me know.*

Tony shakes his head. He's my teammate and co-captain and we spend a lot of time in each other's thoughts, running plays and devising new psych strategies. He's always got my back.

*Sorry.* I quietly shut the cool metal door of my locker so it won't crash through the cacophony of thoughts filling the hall. *I know you're only looking out for me. I just wish...* My mind flits over the things I wish for Kira and me, a rapid slideshow of kisses, my hands skimming her back, and an image of her in a slinky formal dress after the mindware Games. I quickly shut it down, not wanting that private longing made public, but it's too late. Mental snickers click from two guys in tight collar jackets across the hall as they echo back an exaggerated picture of Kira in an even more revealing dress. Then they shuffle along, more concerned about making plans for the weekend than harassing me.

Tony lets out a long, low breath. *Man, you've got it bad. I know. I get it. She's seriously hot.* His sympathy is a shallow pool. *But you've got to get a grip. Mentally, she's just a kid, not to mention that you'll never know what she's thinking. How can you trust someone like that?*

*Kira could still go through the change. She's not even sixteen yet. There've been others that have changed late ...* But my thoughts drift past Tony as he eyes a blonde with mile long legs and short shorts skittering down the hall. She's barely in range and her name pops into my head.

*Jessica.* She's a cheerleader from last year's championship games.

*There are plenty of other girls.* Tony's thoughts grab her attention and she tosses her long hair back to get a look at us. *Proper ones that have gone through the change and that would be happy to share more than thoughts with you.*

Jessica pictures herself in my arms, fingers tangled in my hair. *Anytime, Raf. Anytime.* Then she bounces out of range.

Tony sends me a smile, and I shiver.

I don't know this girl, but that doesn't stop her from wanting to entwine emotions with me in the way that only touching brings. If it were just the physical part, that would be ... acceptable. But the idea of sharing emotions with a girl I barely know: it chills a spot deep inside me. While the possibility of doing that with Kira makes my skin feel like it's scorching the air.

Tony whacks the back of my head, careful to avoid any skin-on-skin contact. *Man, I mean it!* His thoughts are cut with frustration. *It's not mesh to think about her that way. If you keep it up, people will think you're actually doing those things, not just fantasizing. The rumor mill is already whispering.* He points at me as he backs down the hall. *You've got a good thing going, Raf. Don't ruin it.*

He's talking about the popularity that follows me around like a stray I can't shake, still lingering from last year's championship win. Girls like Jessica think openly about me and they're not shy about the things they'd like to do. The first few times I stumbled across their blatant fantasies, I was flattered, and not a little intrigued. But that was before I knew what touching really meant; how deep the sharing went inside my head; the hollow feeling it left behind with girls I didn't care for. Now I do my best to ignore the offers. If having a reputation as a praver would keep that at bay, it might be worth considering.

I sigh and lumber toward first period. No matter what the mindreaders of Warren Township High think of me, it still won't change the fact that Kira considers me her best friend. And she would never cross the line to something more unless—*until*, I tell myself—she changes.

~\*~

Mr. Friedman's booming recitation of the opening line of *The Iliad* crashes over the thought chaos of my first period class. His words are Latin, but his thoughts, which aren't a language at all, beam the buried meaning of the ancient language directly to our minds. The students' minds quickly synchronize with Mr. Friedman's and beat a perfect mental cadence of the poem. Next year, they'll only mind-teach, but for now, I'm glad for the verbal drumbeat that helps train our minds. It draws my thoughts to Achilles' anger and away from Kira.

At least until Latin zooms by and the class breaks apart into disparate thoughts again. Then I realize that English is next, my one class of the day with her. I sweep my scribe pad off my desk and shove it into my pack. Coach's dexterity drills do double duty as I zip through the halls, ignoring stray thoughts.

I reach English early and pause in the doorway. The bustle of minds in the hall gives way to scattered thought conversations around the room and Mr. Hampton mind-talking to students up front. Kira scribbles on her scribe pad, hair hanging down and hiding her face. A buffer zone surrounds her, an empty seat in every direction. The other students don't want to partner with the only girl in class—in the whole school, actually—who doesn't read minds. It's been going on all year, but it still makes me cringe. She doesn't have to read thoughts to notice the ring of space around her.

I think of them all as saved seats for me.

I sail down the aisle, ignoring the gaze of two girls in the next row and willing Kira to look up. The metal chair creaks when I drop into the seat behind her, and Kira peeks over her shoulder, giving me a wide smile that sends my heart soaring.

The stocky guy behind me mentally chuckles and his name—Dennis—pops into my head along with his mocking thoughts. I focus on Kira's clear blue eyes and the tiny freckle on the side of her cheek, like a morning star that only shows up at certain times of the day. The familiar



scent of soap and lavender hangs in the air near her, beating back the over baked sneaker smell coming from Dennis.

“Hi.” I hope my whispered voice won’t attract more attention than my thoughts already have. I stow my gear under my seat.

“Hey,” she says, not quite softly enough. The two girls in the next row start thinking about her.

*I can’t wait until school is over.*

*It’s so creepy having her around all the time.*

*I know, right? You never know what evil things she’s thinking.*

*I hear she runs through the neighborhoods and peeps in people’s windows. Snooping.*

I resist the urge to glare at them, but they hear even that. One scowls at me. *Loser.*

*Prayer, thinks the other. Maybe you help her snoop.*

*Shut up.* I focus on Kira, hoping the girls’ thoughts don’t show on my face, where Kira can see them. “Just two more days,” I say. “Then a whole summer of freedom.”

She sighs and glances at the two girls. For a wild moment, I’m afraid she can actually hear their thoughts, but her face settles into a mask of patience. “Yeah,” she says. “I’m in serious need of a break from all the *fun*, you know? The weekend can’t get here soon enough.”

“Do you have any plans?” I ask. “For the summer, I mean.”

She lifts an eyebrow. I spend a lot of weekends at Kira’s house, when the team isn’t travelling or competing in tournaments, but this Saturday everyone’s going to the Fuse Games. Everyone except Kira, because she wouldn’t exactly fit in at a mindware tournament. Although I would love to see her in one of the Game suits that the girls wear, all skin-tight silver interface cloth and not much else. I squelch that image and focus on Kira’s lips.

They’re moving—she’s said something and I missed it. “Sorry?” I ask.

“You okay, there, soccer stud?” She pretends to inspect my head. “One too many headers in practice yesterday?”

Mental laughter from Dennis rings in my head and I’m glad Kira can’t hear it. “Sorry, just ... a lot on my mind.” Which is true. Because I want to ask her to the Gamesdance, but I can’t imagine any way of asking without bringing a look of horror to her face. “So, what are you doing this summer?”

“Hanging out at home, most likely,” she says. “Trying to keep Seamus out of trouble and taking care of Gram.” She traces the non-slip pattern of her desk. “I have a lot of reading to catch up on. How about you? I’ve got some old sim-casts I want to watch. Maybe you can help me get through the backlog?”

She smiles up at me, and I’d like nothing more than to spend the summer with Kira watching old sim-casts. Or pretty much anything else she’d like to do. But I’m leaving, which makes my chest pull tight. “Actually, I’m going away to a camp in Indiana for the summer. I’ll have a chance to practice with the Twisters, and...” I swallow. The fading smile on Kira’s face is ripping me up inside.

“Oh,” she says. “Um, wow. That’s ... great. The Twisters, huh? Is that one of your new synchrony bands?”

I laugh, a strangled release of breath. The Twisters are World Cup champions three years in a row. She knows this. “Yeah, they’re an amazing band and they’re letting me play. They heard what a great guitar player I am.”

“Right,” she says. “Like you could actually play a musical instrument.”

Her slim fingers are well-practiced in playing the saxophone, nothing like my clumsy mitts. “Hey, I’m not bad at the Sync Rock Games.” I regret it as soon as her face shadows. I had to mention the Games. What is wrong with me?

She puts on a fake smile, the kind I can see right through. “Wow,” she says, grinning. “Rock hero *and* soccer champion. Must be hard being you. I bet you have to beat the fans off with a stick these days.”

Before I can say anything, Mr. Hampton’s voice reaches over the mind-noise of the room and yanks everyone’s attention to the front. “Take out your e-slates, class. I’m casting the instructions for your final. Remember, you’ll need your parents to sign off on your isolation while taking the test. No mindreading partners, no friends, no cheating.”

He starts to review the final, talking loudly to focus our mental chatter while drawing notes on the wireless board. The class synchronizes to his voice, and with everyone focusing on him, my stray thoughts aren’t noticed as much.

I study the sliver of Kira’s face that I can still see. Small lines radiate from the corners of her eyes as she studies the sheet Mr. Hampton has cast to our e-slates. Her shoulders cave in, making her slender frame take up even less space in her chair. Her legs pull forward, hiding her bare knees under the desk.

She’s drawing in on herself, as if hiding from the world inside her own skin.

Learning how to read Kira Moore has become a full time occupation for me. I want to know her thoughts, even if they are still trapped inside her head, hidden from the rest of the world. It started last fall when I realized that the girl I’d been friends with since Kindergarten made my heart beat like a crazed monkey whenever she came near. She started to disappear inside herself about the same time, after a pack of girls cornered her in the bathroom and inked a red zero on her cheek with a synth tattoo that took two months to wear off. A sour taste rises up in my throat at the memory. She laughed it off, but I couldn’t miss the red blotches on her face and the tear streaks down it. The need to hug her then was a crazy ache inside me, but I didn’t have the nerve to try.

I run my hands over my face and try to focus on my e-slate.

Of all the girls in school, why did *she* have to be the one who didn’t change? There’s usually a kid every other year who never changes, whose brain never flips the switch from childhood to adolescence. But why did it have to be *her*? Every once in a while, Kira lashes out and slices someone to ribbons with that wicked wit of hers. But mostly it’s wearing her down, bit by bit, like a glittering stone made dull by an endless flow of water.

Suddenly, my reasons for spending the entire summer in Indiana sound hollow in my head. A chance to run around a field, kicking a ball? Even with the best kickers in the world, it pales next to watching old sim-casts with Kira and convincing her that she’s important. That she has a place in the world.

A sharp thought from Mr. Hampton pulls me out of my day-dreaming. He doesn’t speak aloud, thank god. *Are you so familiar with Lord of the Flies, Mr. Lobos Santos, that you don’t need to review it?* It pulls mental twitters from the rest of the class.

My face heats up and I focus on his voice. He doesn’t miss a beat and continues to outline the contents of the final. We spend the rest of the period locked in a point by point review of Othello, which was torturous the first time I read it, as well as several poems I’m certain we never covered in class. Mental muttering around the room tells me I’m not the only one.

Why did we still read stories that predated the mindreading world, anyway? Othello is completely implausible. Everything in that story is built on lies and deception, something that

wouldn't last two minutes now. I can hardly keep my own thoughts private in a high school hallway, much less orchestrate the fall of an important leader. Besides, everyone knows politicians are the most trusted people on the planet—how could they possibly hide anything, being in constant contact with so many people?

While I mull the serious possibility that I will fail my English final, the soft tone of the bell breaks into Mr. Hampton's review. As I dig my backpack out from under my chair, Kira is up and fleeing the classroom before I can say a word to her. By the time I manage to get my e-slate stuffed in my pack, she's gone.

I search for her at lunch, but the swirling thoughts in the cafeteria make it difficult to concentrate. Veering between mind-numbing banality and heart-wrenching angst, it's a rugby scrum of thoughts all tangled with one another, dancing through my head. I decide she's skipped lunch to take a run, like she often does.

I grit my way through the rest of school, waiting for the final bell. Sprinting through the hall, I inadvertently bump a gangly kid with my bare arm, receiving a nasty mental curse in return. I think an apology, but don't slow down, determined to reach Kira's locker before she does. When I turn the corner, she's there, digging around and pulling out her gym bag.

I stop to take a breath and try to calm my heart, not wanting to look like I sprinted across the school to see her. A cluster of students stand on the opposite side of the hall from her, and a couple of rich kids stroll past, holding hands through their Second Skin gloves. I have a flash of envy that draws a smirk from the boy. I wonder what it would be like to hold hands with Kira like that. I could, even without the Second Skin, since she's not a mindreader yet. There wouldn't be any rush of intimate emotion sharing, no mingling of hearts. Kira doesn't have that emotional suit of armor to protect her from the prayers of the world who might want to take advantage of her. She won't have it unless—*until*—she changes. Until then, she's vulnerable to anyone who might want to run their hands over her. Suddenly, I'm rooted to the carpet, realizing that's exactly what I want to do.

Maybe I'm a praver after all.

I second guess everything and sourness climbs up my throat. Maybe Tony is right. Maybe I shouldn't think that way about her. Then Kira peers up from her locker. Her small smile unlocks my legs and I stumble forward, looking like an idiot. I wish more than ever that she could hear my thoughts, so I wouldn't have to find the right words to say out loud. So she would just *know* what I think and how I feel. That I want more than anything for her to forget about what other people think. That I want her to come to the Gamesdance with me, my last night in town before I leave for Indiana.

"Hey," I say. Wow, I'm incredibly brilliant and witty.

She sighs and examines her locker again before answering. "Hey."

"Look, I was wondering if ..."

*Raf, Raf, Raf! There you are!* The sound of my name pulls my attention behind me. It's Jessica, the girl from the hall who wanted to run her hands through my hair. *Tony said you would be here.*

*Tony's not here.* I move closer to the locker wall to let her pass, but she comes to a stop next to me. Her perfume is like a toxic cloud that makes my eyes water.

"And you must be Kira," Jessica says out loud. Kira arches her eyebrows, mirroring the shock that must be on my face. Why is Jessica talking out loud? And to Kira? Are they friends? By Kira's pinched look, I doubt it.

“Um, that would be me,” Kira says. I’m struggling to figure out what’s going on, glancing between them. Jessica’s thoughts are meant for me, even though she’s smiling at Kira. *Tony says you need a date for the Gamesdance and that I would be the perfect girl for you.*

*Tony’s wrong. I’m not looking for a date. I don’t even know you.*

*We can certainly change that.* Jessica beams a fake smile. “Kira, you’re so cute!” she says. “I could just pinch your cheeks if I had some Second Skin!” *Tony says you need a real girl for the dance. Everyone knows you’re making a mistake with this zero, Raf. Just say yes, and I promise you’ll be glad you did.*

My mouth drops open as I stare at her. I’m startled by the metallic bang of Kira slamming her locker shut. “I’ll take a pass on the cheek pinching,” Kira says, her voice dripping with ice. “Thanks for the offer, though. See ya around, Raf.” She turns to leave.

“Kira, wait!” I say, barely recovering from the crazy images in Jessica’s mind of me and her at the Gamesdance, slow dancing in formal wear. “I… I wanted to talk to you. About going to the Gamesdance.” I flash a look at Jessica. *I don’t know what game you’re playing, but why don’t you go play it with Tony?*

*Well, that would defeat the purpose. Tony’s not the one who needs help, Raf, you are.* Out loud, she says to Kira, “Oh! The Gamesdance! Are you going?”

“I wasn’t planning to.” Kira examines Jessica like she’s not sure if she’s crazy or just stupid. Then she looks at me. “Not quite my scene.”

“Oh, but it could be!” Jessica says. “You don’t need a guy to have fun. You don’t even have to play, you can just watch. There’s a group of us girls going together, to cheer the Gamers on. You should come with us!” Her voice is chipper and light, but her thoughts are filled with dark amusement. She’s enjoying this deception thing she’s doing with Kira, like it’s a shiny new toy, being able to lie. The bottom drops out of my stomach as she pictures her gang of friends tricking Kira into a darkened alley behind the Games. *Come with me to the Gamesdance, Raf, or I’ll have Kira as my date.*

“Wow,” Kira says, slightly bemused. “That’s really, um, great of you. What was your name again?”

Her smile is a hideous mask over the thoughts beneath. “Jessica!”

“Ok, Jessica.” Kira gives me a look that says, *What in the world, Raf?* “I guess that could be fun. Not sure what I’ll do, but I could give it a try.”

“No!” My outburst garners a frown from Kira. “I mean, I don’t think you’d enjoy it.” It sounds lame, but I don’t want to validate everything she’s been thinking about the world. How she doesn’t fit in. How she should assume everyone is out to get her—even though they are.

“Wait,” Kira says. “Didn’t you just say something about going to the Gamesdance?”

“No, Raf’s right.” Jessica schemes for a more devastating way to hurt Kira. My stomach churns. “The Gamesdance isn’t the place for you. You’ve never been, have you, poor thing? It’s not all that great. But we should do something girly and fun, just the two of us. How about shopping? Do you like to shop?”

“Not really.” Kira’s brows pull together.

“Not even for clothes?” Jessica gives a muted shriek. “I know! Makeovers!”

Kira looks uncertain, and my stomach starts to chew a hole in itself. Jessica glances at me. *Take me to the Gamesdance, Raf, or I’ll make sure she has a good time with me and my friends.*

My mouth goes dry. Jessica and her friends targeting Kira. All summer. While I’m gone. I won’t be here to ward them off or threaten them with retribution. Her brother Seamus will keep

an eye on her, but he leaves for WestPoint soon. My mind spins. When is he leaving? Is it the beginning of summer or the end? I can't remember ...

Jessica smiles as she hears my doubts. My fears.

*No.* I drill into her eyes with mine. *Leave her alone.* "I don't think Kira likes makeovers."

Jessica's smile grows. *You know what I want.* "Don't be such a spoiler, Raf."

The image of a bright red zero on Kira's cheek swims up in my mind. Jessica sees it and smirks. I can't tell whether she did it herself or if she's echoing the images that circulated through the rumor mill for weeks afterwards.

I clench my fist, take a breath and let it out slow. *Okay. Fine. I'll go with you, if you promise to leave her alone.* Belatedly, I tinge it with a threat of my own. *If you hurt her, I'll make sure you regret it.*

"Hello?" Kira snaps her fingers in my face. "Still right here..." She looks annoyed. "And I can arrange my own playdates, Raf. Thanks for the help, though."

Jessica has a cat-eats-bird smile of satisfaction. *You won't be sorry, Raf, I promise.* She tosses a smile at Kira, like an afterthought. "See you later, Kira." She says it brightly, but I hear the threat underneath it.

Jessica saunters down the hall, throwing extra sway in her walk. I glare at her back. *You won't be fooling anyone, Jessica. Everyone will know you blackmailed me into this. I'll make sure of it.*

*Everyone will think I'm brilliant,* she thinks without glancing back. *I'll be the girl that finally got you back on track, saved you from making a desperately tragic mistake with that zero.*

My teeth clench and I think several nasty curse words that would horrify my mother, but Jessica's out of range. When she finally disappears around a corner, Kira folds her arms and fixes a stare on me. "So, you want to tell me what *that* was all about?" she says. "I swear your girlfriends are getting stranger all the time."

My head whips back to her. "She's not my girlfriend!"

"Really?" Kira says. "With the way she was looking at you, and you checking her out all the way to the corner?" She shrugs. "You could do worse, Raf. She seems nice and she's cute in a trying-way-too-hard kind of way."

My shoulders drop. "She's not my girlfriend." My voice is low, weak. Of course, that's precisely the rumor Jessica will stir up after the Gamesdance. If I'm lucky, Kira won't hear it. I grit my teeth. Tony is behind all of this, helping me out by stabbing me in the back.

"Whatever, Santos," Kira says. "So, are you going to come over this Saturday to help me get through some of those sim-casts?"

Saturday? That's the Gamesdance. The one I'm apparently going to with Jessica. "Um, no. I can't, I'm ... busy."

Kira glances down the hall. "Right," she says. "How about Sunday? No school on Monday. We can stay up late and eat that awesome popcorn my mom likes to buy from the Boy Scouts."

"I'm..." I swallow. "I'm leaving on Sunday."

"Oh." Kira frowns and picks up her gym bag from the floor. "Well, I'm doing Mr. Hampton's take home test tonight, along with my other finals. Finishing up early. Don't really see the point in sticking around here, you know? With nothing to do but study, this zero's getting some A's and getting out."

I grimace at her use of the word *zero*.

"I guess..." She pauses. "I guess this is goodbye then." She puts on a million watt smile, the one she brings out when things are bleak and getting worse. "Well, have a nice summer, Raf."

Have fun with the Twisters, and, you know, don't break too many hearts in Indiana." She turns to walk away down the hall.

I should say goodbye. I should tell her to stop, explain what really happened with Jessica. But I don't say anything, just watch her go.

Maybe Tony is right. Maybe I need to stop waiting for Kira to go through the change. Maybe I need to forget about the fact that I know everything about her: the way she likes her hot cocoa lukewarm and her ice tea ice cold; that she likes her music classical and her runs long and strenuous. Maybe a summer in Indiana is just what I need to forget the way she makes my skin prickle and my heart pound. Maybe I should date someone like Jessica—only less horrible—to help me forget. Even if I doubt it would work.

But I'm certain of one thing: the next time I see Tony, I'm going to punch him in the face.

~\*~

*Mind Games* is a prequel short story to the novel *Open Minds* (Book One of the Mindjack Trilogy) by [Susan Kaye Quinn](#).

**When everyone reads minds, a secret is a dangerous thing to keep.**

Sixteen-year-old Kira Moore is a zero, someone who can't read thoughts or be read by others. Zeros are outcasts who can't be trusted, leaving her no chance with Raf, a regular mindreader and the best friend she secretly loves. When she accidentally controls Raf's mind and nearly kills him, Kira tries to hide her frightening new ability from her family and an increasingly suspicious Raf. But lies tangle around her, and she's dragged deep into a hidden world of mindjackers, where being forced to mind control everyone she loves is just the beginning of the deadly choices before her.

*Open Minds* is available for \$2.99 on [Smashwords](#), and other booksellers, as well as available in paperback.

~

**By The Firelight**

by

Elle Strauss

A Story by Nate from CLOCKWISE.

When Nate McKenzie asks an unpopular girl to dance on a dare, he's in for the *time* of his life.

MY GIRLFRIEND went all loopy about the idea of buying a new dress for the Fall Dance and somehow she talked me into going into Boston to dress shop with her. I should've gotten the boyfriend of the year award for that. And truth be told, now that we were at the dance, she looked hot. The green dress she *finally* picked out made my heart stop, so the agony was totally worth it.

Someone went to a lot of trouble to deck out the gym. Streamers and a strobe light in the dark cavernous room gave off a cheap eighties, disco, rip-off vibe. Not really my scene. If I had to be here, I just wanted to hang with the guys by the punch bowl. Tyson, Dylan and Josh were

all dressed like me, uncomfortably in a suit and tie. We're definitely more at home in sneakers and sweat pants. Tyson's white teeth practically glowed against his dark skin, his smile wide like he was enjoying the view. All the guys had that happy look. Could be something they put in the punch. Could be all the pretty girls hanging around, flirting.

I felt a tug on my suit jacket sleeve.

"There you are, handsome," Jessica said, grabbing my hand. "Let's dance." She batted her eyelashes, her full, lipstick-laden lips smiling over straight, white teeth. I smiled back and followed her onto the dance floor.

I'm not the best dancer in the world, but really, dancing is just another kind of sport and I was pretty good at a lot of those. I managed okay. Jessica was hyper touchy-feely, even though it wasn't a slow dance. My arms, my waist. Not that I was complaining.

I'm not exactly sure just how we ended up becoming a couple. My family moved to Cambridge half way through the year. Apparently Jessica had a boyfriend when I arrived, but I didn't find out about that until later. She came on pretty strong. In fact the female populace at Cambridge high acted like they'd never seen a guy before. I was what you'd call "new meat."

Jessica had staked a claim and I'd just gone along with it. She was cute, if not a little possessive, but she did the job of holding the female tide back until the novelty of my arrival wore off. I didn't see us staying together past my upcoming graduation. She was more of a place holder, but at least she was easy on the eyes.

Jessica spun around me and giggled, and though I'd rather be at home watching a football game on my flat screen, I was glad she was having a good time. Or, at least she was until something caught her attention across the room. Her lips zipped together and her green eyes narrowed into slits. I'd seen that look before. That was the "you've crossed Jessica Fuller and now you're going to pay" look.

I shot a glance in the direction of her glare. Jessica's target seemed to be that tall girl standing with another shorter girl against the wall. She had long dark curly hair pulled back off her face and a yellow dress that stopped at her knees. When I looked closer, I remembered she was the girl from football practice. She and her friend had come to watch but then something weird had happened to my Tom Brady football when she suddenly jumped up and caught it. It still lay flattened on the shelf in my room beside my trophies and ribbons.

What did Jessica have against her, anyway?

The song ended and I started back to the guys by the punch bowl.

"Where ya going?" Jessica said holding tightly to my hand. "I want to keep dancing."

I gave into her pout and pulled her in close for the slow song that started. She was a lot shorter than me, and her "strawberry blond" (her words not mine) head pressed against my chest, too low for me to rest mine against hers. After awhile I got tired of staring at all the other awkward couples and let out a breath of relief when the song finally ended. She held on tight when I tried to pull away.

"Jess." I was starting to feel suffocated by her already and we'd only been here for half an hour.

"Well, if you don't want to dance with me, Nate," Jessica huffed as I left her on the dance floor, "I'll just find someone who does."

Unfortunately the guys overheard that little temper tantrum.

"Nate, dance with me," Tyson mimicked. I punched him in the arm and he feigned deep hurt.

Josh signed. “Now why didn’t she ask *me* to dance? I would totally let her press her hot bod next to mine.”

I flashed him a look of warning.

“Just kidding, bro,” he said, looking behind me. All the guys were.

I turned in the direction of his gaze and saw what the guys stared at. Jessica had that sophomore, what was his name? Craig? In a body hold. She ran her hands up and down his arms. The boy’s face was cherry red but had a look of immense glee. It bugged me how she liked to tease the poor guy.

“You gonna let her get away with that?” Dylan said, laughing. “We know who wears the pants in your relationship.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really, man,” Josh said running a hand through his red curls. “She’s got me blushing.”

“You know what you need to do, man,” Tyson said. “Dance it up with another girl.”

“Nah,” I said tucking my fists into my jacket pockets. “Let her have her fun.”

Tyson persisted. “You’re letting your girl walk all over you.”

I scoffed. “No I’m not.”

“You are, man,” Tyson said. He jutted out his clean shaven chin. “I dare you to ask another girl to dance.”

For some reason my eyes darted to the tall girl with the curly hair, still standing by the wall, which was a really dumb thing to do, since they latched onto that slip up like vicious dogs.

“Isn’t that the girl who killed Tom Brady?” Josh said.

“Casey Something, right?” Dylan added.

“I guess,” I said.

“Ask her,” Tyson said. “Jessica doesn’t like her. It’ll drive her crazy.”

How did he know Jessica didn’t like the tall girl? She must be working her mean-girl schtick on her when I wasn’t looking.

Yeah, maybe I *would* ask her. Serve Jessica right. “Okay, I’ll do it.” The guys hooted and Tyson patted me on the back.

I started toward Casey and in two seconds, her friend was giving her the elbow nudge. At first Casey didn’t see me coming, but when she did, I thought her eyes were going to pop out of her head. It was all I could do to keep from breaking out in laughter.

I kept my cool though and when I reached her I asked, “Would you like to dance?”

She took so long to respond, I had a fleeting thought that she might actually say no. I’d never hear the end of it from the guys if she’d turned me down.

I hadn’t considered what the next song might be and as luck would have it, it was another slow one. I couldn’t help but steal a quick look at Jessica as I pulled this much taller girl in close. The expression on Jessica’s face could start a house on fire and for some reason her displeasure made me chuckle.

I could feel Casey quivering with nerves as we swayed to the beat and I wondered if she’d ever danced with anyone before. I leaned back a little to get a better look at her. She actually had a really attractive face, pretty eyes. I’m not sure why I hadn’t noticed.

I heard myself say, “You look nice, tonight.”

She almost gasped, like she’d never heard a compliment before. Well, she did a good job of hiding her looks with the plain way she dressed when I saw her last.

She squeaked, “Thanks,” with a broad smile and then her expression suddenly changed. Her mouth opened and closed like a fish. Her eyes widened with horror like she’d just witnessed a



murder. I was about to ask her what was wrong, when suddenly I felt a blast of light and dizziness that almost dropped me to my knees. I squeezed my eyes shut against the pressure, wondering if I was having a stroke or something. That sometimes happens to athletes. When the vertigo passed, I opened my eyes.

And found myself standing in the middle of a forest, overwhelmed by the freshness of air compared to the stuffy gym I was in just a second ago. Wait, how did I get here?

I felt frozen to the spot but Casey was spinning around on the grass and shouting to the sky, “You’ve got to be kidding! As if things aren’t bad enough, you have to let *him* come along?”

“What just happened?” I said. “Is this some kind of practical joke?”

Casey stopped pacing and stared at me like she couldn’t believe it was me with her here. I couldn’t believe it either.

“Okay, guys, come out now.” I peered through the trees, searching for signs of Tyson or Josh, expecting one of them to jump out of the shadows in a laughing fit.

But nothing. Just silence. I felt a bit panicked but kept it cool because I didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of Casey. She was obviously as freaked out by this as I was.

Either that or she was a fantastic actor.

“Did they put something in my punch?”

Instead of answering me she moaned, “Oh, no.”

“What’s the matter?”

“Nothing,” Casey said. “It’s my shoes.”

What was wrong with her shoes? And maybe it was just me but I thought we had bigger problems than her shoes. She took off one sandal. Maybe her feet hurt?

But then she started smacking it against a large rock. Had she lost her mind?

“Casey! What are you doing?”

“I’m (bang) knocking (bang) off (bang) my heels.”

I really hoped I wasn’t stuck in the forest with a mental case. “Why?”

“Because,” she said, her voice pitched higher like she was addressing a child, “these are totally inappropriate for what we have to do next.”

I was so confused.

Just then I heard the faint clop of hooves and the din of voices. Casey surprised me by grabbing my hand and pulling me to the ground.

I tugged my hand away. “What’s going on? This isn’t funny anymore.”

She put a finger to my lips and shushed me. Two men with top hats and cloaks with coat tails rode by on a trail behind our hiding spot.

“Mark my words,” one of them said, “Abraham Lincoln will be the next president, and then there will be hell to pay in the south.”

“Role players?” I said. Casey returned my question with a stern look to keep quiet.

When the riders were out of sight, Casey stood up and then motioned with her finger to follow her.

I didn’t know what else to do. “Casey,” I said. “What’s happening? How did we get here?”

She pushed branches out of the way and let out a long breath. “Okay, it’s just, I don’t think you’re going to believe it.”

“Try me.”

“We’ve gone back in time.”

Did I hear her right? “Whoa, say again?”

She stopped and stared at me intently like she was memorizing my face.

“Casey!”

“Oh, sorry. Um, I said we went back in time.”

I was expecting a story, but one with a chance of me believing it, not a fairy tale. “We went back in time. Really?”

I waited for her to say, *Just kidding*, but instead she turned around and kept walking. She reached up and pulled pins out of her hair letting it fall to her shoulders, an action I found enticing.

“Okay, say I believe you. But why should I? There could be a perfectly good explanation for this.”

“It’s mid afternoon,” she said.

“I see that.”

“So, a short while ago, it was dark. Night time.”

Good point. “Okay, so as a joke the guys drugged me and I passed out and it lasted several hours.”

“Not a very funny joke.”

Also a good point.

“I woke up in the middle of the woods somewhere in Massachusetts. We’re still in Massachusetts, aren’t we?”

To my relief, Casey nodded.

“The guys didn’t feel like waiting for me to wake up.”

“The guys?” Casey said.

“Yeah, Tyson and Josh. I should’ve known they were up to no good when they dar...” Oh man, what was I doing? Casey stopped and stared at me. I could tell by the look of abhorrence on her face that she understood.

“They dared you? You asked me to dance on a dare?”

She spun around and stomped through the forest.

“No, Casey, I meant...”

“Oh, just drop it.”

We turned a corner and came to a thatch of lilac bushes. She pushed through to an opening in the center and I stayed on her heels.

“If you don’t believe me,” she said, “then why are you following me?”

“I don’t know. You look like you know where you’re going.”

“I do.” She pushed a twig hatch off of a hole in the ground. To my surprise, she started pulling stuff out of it.

A strange thought occurred to me. “If this was a practical joke, then you’d have to be in on it.”

“How realistic is that?”

Hmm. “Not very.”

Casey took a swig of water from a jar she’d pulled out of the hole. She made a sour face then handed it to me. I was thirsty enough to give it a try, but it was nasty. I spat it out. “Ew.”

“Hey,” she said sharply, “don’t waste that. You don’t know when we’ll be able to get more.”

Man, she was serious. “Fine. I’ll play along. What’s next in the game?”

Casey sat on an old, half rotted log and threw off her shoes. The way she scrunched up her face as she rubbed them, I’d guess they hurt. I sat on the grass across from her, wondering how it was that I’d never really noticed this girl before.

“So, is there any food,” I asked, needing the distraction. “Did the guys at least pack me a lunch?”

She threw a burlap bag at my feet and said, “Help yourself.”

I found a piece of beef jerky inside. Not the kind you find in a convenience store. This chunk of dried meat was thick and not uniform like the factory spits out. I took a bite. Not bad.

Casey lay down flat on the grass and closed her eyes. The way her eyeballs moved under her lids, I could tell she was in major thought mode and not falling asleep. I decided to lie down too.

I heard Casey reach for the burlap bag and dig inside

“You ate it all?”

“Wasn’t I supposed to?”

“No!”

“Hey, chill out. This can’t last much longer.”

I didn’t think she agreed with me. She covered her eyes with her palms and sighed.

The orange glow of the setting sun filtered through the bushes surrounding us. Soon it would be dark. Again, for the second time that day? No, we must be on the next day. Everything that had happened since the dance was just so weird, I wasn’t sure.

I heard Casey’s stomach growl. Now I felt bad that I’d eaten all the beef jerky. I couldn’t believe the guys hadn’t packed us more food for this prank.

Casey didn’t complain though. Instead she took the hatchet she’d had buried with her stash of goodies and started digging a small hole. She scoped around for dry leaves and twigs, and after piling them in the hole, used the flint to create a spark. The way the moon glowed through the pinkness of dusk, she looked like a fairy creature prancing around in her bare feet and shimmering yellow dress. When she brushed her curls behind her ears, my heart skipped a beat. She was breathtaking.

“You’re a girl scout?” I said like a moron.

She ignored me like I deserved. She pulled an archaic looking slingshot from her stash and then gathered a small amount of smooth stones. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. She squatted down and waited until a quail scurried by. She closed an eye, aimed and let the stone go.

No. Way. She actually hit the speedy bird, killing it. I breathed out a low, “Wow,” completely impressed.

The show didn’t end there. She picked up the bird by the feet, laid it carefully on the ground, and, get this, *chopped its head off with the hatchet*. I felt my eyes bug out at this mini horror show.

She proceeded to pick off all the feathers, then cut down the middle of its gut, dumping all the innards into the fire where they shrank and sizzled to ashes. It was gross, but so compelling, I couldn’t peel my eyes away. Wasps instantly came out of nowhere, buzzing around her hands, but all she did was flick them away.

She was so enthralled with her kill, I think she’d forgotten I was there. She caught sight of me as she waved another wasp away. She paused and then said, “They like the smell of blood.”

I thought I might be in love.

“All the girls I know would be freaking right now,” I said. Her eyes glimmered a little at the admiration that came through in my voice, but she didn’t respond.

Next she found a stick and chiseled a point on the end with the hatchet. She examined it and finding it suitably sharp, punched it through the torso of the butchered bird.

“Where’d you learn to do all this stuff?”

She crouched before the fire, holding the bird over the low flames. The coals cast a warm, sensuous glow over her face. "Here, in the past," she said.

"Oh right, time travel." For some reason, I couldn't keep the snark out of my voice.

She turned the bird over and the roasted meat started giving off a succulent aroma.

Suddenly, I was starving.

"Smells good. Kind of like a big marshmallow roast," I said. "Good idea."

Her lips upturned slightly and one eyebrow inched up. "Where's yours? You don't expect me to share, do you?"

"Um, well." Yeah, I was hoping. No such luck. She pointed to the sling shot.

"Go for it."

Oh. Okay, then. I picked up the sling shot and examined it. "You didn't get this from Walmart, did you?"

I picked up a small stone and mimicked Casey's hunting technique. A quail ran across my path and I let the stone fly.

Miss.

"I'm rusty," I said in way of explanation.

She shot me a smug look. "Rusty implies you've had previous experience."

"Okay, I suck. Is that better?"

"Marginally."

She licked her fingers as she watched me miss twice more. She was making me nervous.

"Now that you can feel the speed at which the stone moves," she said, finally having pity on me, "aim a fraction in front of the bird. They're fast."

I did like she said, and bam, I hit the next one. "Yes!"

Again, I repeated Casey's earlier performance and prepped the bird for roasting. The procedure turned my stomach, but I was hungry enough to keep going. Plus I had my pride to protect.

Soon my bird was roasting nicely over the fire.

"Good job," Casey said.

Had I impressed her in the same way she'd blown my socks off? "Thanks."

It was well beyond dusk and the orange hue had faded into blackness. Casey threw a few more sticks on the fire. Then she laid out the burlap bag, and using an old dress she'd removed from it as a blanket, lay down as if she was really planning to sleep here.

"You look serious," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"You look like you intend to stay here over night."

"It's a good possibility."

Well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. I lay down on the opposite side of the fire, since we really didn't know each other, and I didn't think Casey would appreciate me getting too close.

Though I wouldn't have minded.

"Well, at least it's a beautiful night," I said. "Look at all those stars. I don't remember a night so bright with stars like this."

"That's because there's no light pollution."

This girl was like a dog with a bone. She wasn't going to let this story go. "Right," I said, rubbing my chin, noting the stubble that had grown since I'd shaved earlier. "Say I go along with your story. Where are we?"

"Just outside of Cambridge."

“And, uh, *when* are we?”

Without a beat she said, “1860.”

“How do you know?”

“Because that’s when it was the last time I was here.”

“Which was?”

“A couple weeks ago.”

I sat up straight. “A couple weeks?”

“That’s what I said.”

“Uh huh, okay. So what’s happening in America in 1860?”

Casey took a deep breath in and rolled over slightly to face me. I watched her face through the warm transparency of the fire, still feeling like this whole exchange was some kind of lucid dream.

Her voice carried over to me. “Abolition is a big issue. It’s hard for many to imagine a functioning economy without slave labor. The women wear these humongous hoop slips under their dresses, totally inefficient, just another example of fashion restricting woman in the name of beauty. And of course, Abraham Lincoln gets elected president on November sixth.”

She was so earnest and so cute I couldn’t help but grin. “You know your history.”

She fell onto her back. “Wouldn’t you if you were me?”

I rolled onto my back as well, suddenly feeling aggravated. I was alone in the woods with a pretty girl I barely knew who was feeding me a line of bull as I waited for the guys to say “boo” and bring an end to the nonsense.

I sat up. “Anyway, it’s been fun and all that. Haven’t been punk’d like this before, but time’s up.” I sprung to my feet. “Let’s go.”

She stared at me, the flickering light of the flames reflecting in her hazel eyes. “Go where?”

“Back to the dance, home, wherever. We’re not really going to spend the night here are we?”

Casey huffed. “Well, if you want to go *home*, feel free. You know where to find me when you change your mind.” She rolled over turning her back to me. This girl was serious. Seriously crazy.

I had two choices. Leave her alone, as she obviously wasn’t going to come voluntarily, or wait it out.

I ran a hand through my hair and lay down in defeat. Since I couldn’t leave a girl, even one as stubborn and nutty as this one, alone in the woods, “wait it out” it would be. I couldn’t imagine a crazier day. I was sure things would be sorted out by tomorrow.

I was wrong.

THE END

Elle Strauss writes Young Adult and Middle Grade fiction. She’s a married mom of four, and lives in the beautiful Okanagan Valley, famous for beaches and vineyards. She’s fond of Lindt’s sea salt dark chocolate, traveling, and hiking in good weather.

CLOCKWISE

A teen time traveler accidently takes her secret crush back in time. It’s awkward.

*ClockwiseR*, the sequel, coming May 2012

*Like Clockwise*, a companion book, coming June 2012

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**A Very Alien Valentine's Day**  
by  
Magan Vernon

"You finally have a girlfriend for the human holiday of Valentine's. Any big plans, Ace?" Monte looked at me over his vampire novel. He had a new obsession with studying teenage vampire lore and I couldn't stop him from ordering book after book.

"Do humans even celebrate that anymore? Seems archaic to me." I fumbled in my chair. Ever since last summer when I met Alex, my human half, nothing had been the same. Aliens and humans weren't supposed to date, but we'd broken the rules of Circe and now I was trying to learn the rules of a human and alien relationship.

"Ace, this is a big deal in the human world. You are supposed to send a girl flowers and paper that costs five dollars just because it says some pretty words." Monte set the book down on his lap.

I shook my head, "No, Alex definitely wouldn't be into something like that. She is much too smart for holidays made up to sell paper."

"But how do you know?" Monte raised his eyebrows. "Have you ever asked her?"

I stood up from my chair, heading for the library doorway. "You have been reading way too many of those vampire novels, my friend. I'm not an Edwin Colon or a Steven Smolderholden or whoever those people are. Alex doesn't expect that."

"Suit yourself my friend, but these vampires sure do get the girls."

\*\*\*

Of all the nerve, Monte trying to tell me about girls. He hasn't had anything close to a date since Earth's Dark Ages. I strode through the long white hallways of Circe until I was back in my room. Finally I could take off the temperature control suit and relish in the comfort of 32 degrees.

*Buzzzzzzzzzzzz. Buzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz. Buzzzzzzzzzzzz.*

My cell phone vibrated against the dresser. I slipped the suit down to my ankles and stepped out of it before sliding the phone on and up to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey."

I'd recognize her voice anywhere. Loud and a little deeper than most girls, like an old Hollywood movie star. Alex's voice was one of her best features.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Nothing, just had some downtime before work and thought I would call. You?"

"Just got done at the library with Monte. You'll never guess what he said." I let out a short laugh. "He thinks that we should have big Valentine's Day plans. Can you believe that?"

"Oh, ha." Her voice fell flat. Dang it, not a good sign.

I swallowed, "Are you trying to hint at something?"

"What? No, it's nothing."

I let out a deep breath, "Spit it out, you know I'll find out sooner or later."

"Well, Valentine's Day is a bit overrated. Flowers, candy, every restaurant over crowded."

"Yeah." I nodded, she couldn't see it, but I was relieved. Christmas was hard enough for me to figure out how the mall worked and buying gifts for people. Not to mention how much the old guy in a red suit scared the basnoogles out of me.

"But, it's not like I've ever really had a boyfriend or done anything for Valentine's Day."

*Dangit.*

"Well then I guess this will be both of our first times celebrating Valentine's Day."

Last time I'll ever repeat anything that Monte says.

\*\*\*

Jen was the one human girl I trusted to help me find a Valentine's Day gift for Alex. They were best friends, both humans, and Jen was the type of girl that could figure out the molecular relationship between Martian and Caltians cells, yet still explain the importance of designer shoes.

Caltians had perfected the art of beaming years ago, so I was able to beam right into the mall near UCLA's campus. As long as I knew where I was going, did it discreetly, and hoped no crazy alien hunters were hanging around to spot me.

"Alright, so what are you thinking for Alex?"

Jen didn't even pay attention to me as her eyes scanned the line of stores.

I shrugged, I hated the thought of shopping almost as much as I hated layering on human clothes over my temperature controlled suit. How humans can move in jeans is beyond me. And the mall sold tons of them!

"You have to have some idea. Did you watch any of the movies I suggested?"

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, because chick flicks are so helpful."

Jen had me watch just about every chick flick with Valentine's Day that she could find. Never had I seen so many humans and paper hearts in my entire life.

"Do you want my help or not?" She stopped and tried her best to glare, but she looked like a real-life Malibu Barbie. I had no idea how anyone took her seriously.

I sighed. "Fine, I guess I have no other choice."

She nodded, swinging her blonde hair around and going off toward some random store with a hot pink sign. Back on Calta I'd always craved girls like Jen. Blonde hair, tanned skin. The opposite of us Caltians with our pale skin and dark hair and eyes. Then I met Alex and my whole idea of the perfect human changed.

The first moment I laid eyes on her, I was intrigued. Alex wasn't like any human I'd ever seen, from her glasses to her olive complexion and everything in-between. She may not have been like the supermodels that Monte drooled over when we watched television, but to me it was her differences that made me fall for her.

"How about perfume?" Jen stopped in front of a store with different colored bottles decorating each shelf. Two Indian men approached us before we even stepped through the door, grabbing each one of Jen's wrist and spraying them with an overwhelming stream of fruity liquid.

"Uh, I kind of like the way Alex smells." Like coffee and coconut. As far as I was concerned it was better than any perfume in the world.

"Okay, then let's move on." Jen didn't even look back at the oogling men as she freed her arms. I followed her out of the store.

Maybe this was useless. Alex wasn't the type of girl that hung out at perfume stores. She wouldn't make me go into random department stores in which overpowering sales women hounded me at every corner. Maybe that was why I loved her so much. Actually, it was why I loved her, because she wasn't like any human girl I'd ever met.

"Are we just going to walk around all day while you mope about how much you hate the mall?" Jen asked, her hands full of bags from different stores. I may not have found anything for Alex's Valentine's gift, but Jen found enough shoes to fit a small army.

I sighed, "I don't know. Maybe I'll just send her flowers or something."

\*\*\*

Two days until Valentine's Day and I had nothing. I tried to figure out what Alex's favorite flower was and she told me flowers remind her of funerals. There went that idea.

I took Jen's advice and watched some more movies. Alex has a thing for older movies, so I dipped into the 1980's classics. I didn't want to stand outside her window with a boom box over my head and I wasn't sure if they actually even made boom boxes anymore. I was stuck, so I went to the place that all of the commercials suggested. *The jewelry store.*

The dark blue carpet glittered like a cheap disco ball, playing off of the dozens of glass cases filled with gems. Worn out women in blue suits and too much lipstick stood behind each glass case, while terrified men approached them, nodding, sweating, and eventually walking out with something in a small black box.

Diamonds were nothing to Caltians. I could walk anywhere on the streets of Calta and find a diamond laying on the ground. They were as common as Earth's rocks. Going into a store and actually paying for one seemed preposterous.

"Can I help you?"

I tried not to scream. The woman looked like a leather handbag in a blonde wig.

"Yes." I tried my best to gain my composure and not cringe at the woman's appearance. "I'm here to get something for my girlfriend for Valentine's Day."

She laughed. It sounded like a dying duck. "Join the club. You're at least the fiftieth schlub who's coming in here singing that same tune."

There was no singing. I was afraid the woman was crazy and I should probably run, but her giant pink claws clung to my sweater before I could move.

"Dun worry honey. Gigi will take good care of you."

I gulped, but reluctantly followed the woman over to one of the glass cases.

"Now what are ya looking' for? Rings? Earrings? Necklace? Is she a princess cut girl or maybe pear shaped?" Her giant cracked lips smacked with each word, spit flying out onto the case.

"I'm not exactly sure." I rubbed the back of my neck, staring over the array of glittering jewels.

"Okay, well how about a price point?" She stared at me with those giant dilated pupils.

"I actually don't really have one. Can I try not to go over ten thousand?"

Her eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. Maybe that wasn't enough?



"Well, if we are going that high..." She swung around the counter and pulled me to the back of the store. A smaller case stood behind the others with fewer jewels, but they were at least twice the size of the others.

"Now this is a great piece." She stepped behind the counter, unlocked the case and pulled out a stand. Around a headless bust hung a small silver colored chain and dangling a square pendant of black diamonds with a clear diamond glistening in the center. As soon as I saw it, it reminded me of why I fell in love with Alex in the first place and with a few tweaks, I knew it would be perfect.

\*\*\*

"You know we really didn't have to do anything for Valentine's Day. It really is a stupid holiday." Alex may have been saying the words, but I knew she didn't mean them. She was wearing one of her sweaters that dipped into a low V in the front. She only wore those when she was trying to look nice. This wasn't just a stupid holiday to her.

"It may be, but we should try all of these Earthly traditions," I answered.

Alex's mother still had no idea that we saw each other way more than just on video chat, so I had to take her somewhere that we wouldn't be noticed. Her dad was the reason we met, being a Colonel at Circe, but I wasn't sure about trying to beam Alex back to Circe with me. For one, the technology wasn't perfected for a Caltian to take someone along for the ride and for another, I didn't want her dad following our every move.

"I know you like the cold weather and all, but it is kind of freezing out here for a human."

I removed my glove and took her hand in mine, letting my heat sensors travel through her body. We padded through nearly a foot of snow as I led Alex to where I needed to take her to give her the gift.

"You know, most guys just take girls to dinner, maybe a movie. Not out in the middle of a park," she whined. I was used to her complaining, I actually enjoyed getting a rise out of her. Every time she got annoyed she would scrunch her face and curl her upper lip while raising her voice just an octave. It was probably one of the cutest things I'd ever seen and heard, so I made sure to annoy her as much as I could. I think she secretly liked it.

"Since when have we been a normal couple?" I stopped and turned toward her. The cold air had turned her cheeks a shade of pink and her eyes began to water from the wind. But with the moonlight shining off her face, she looked more beautiful than any Caltian sunrise.

"Touché." She stood on her tippy toes and leaned up until our lips met. Even through her giant puffy jacket I could feel her warm-blooded body against mine. Every touch sent a heated pulsation through me and made me never want to let go.

"So this is your big Valentine's Day surprise?" She pulled back and looked up. In the dead center of the park, we walked to the middle of a group of trees that created a big enough opening between their naked branches to allow the night sky to act as a ceiling above us.

I pulled out a small black box from my pocket.

"This isn't an engagement ring is it?" She stared down at the box.

"And if it was?" I thumbed the small box back and forth in my palm.

She shrugged, "I don't know, I guess we already sort of are engaged according to the alien world, so it wouldn't really be that big of a deal."

I shook my head. "Sometimes I think you just say whatever is in your head without actually thinking."

"Sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, but you are avoiding the real subject at hand." She took the box from my palm, holding it in hers and lifting it up and down.

"What are you doing? Open it."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Slowly she pried open the box and a bright stream of white light poured out before disappearing back into the box.

"Whoa!"

I smiled. "Do you like it?"

She carefully pulled the necklace out of the box and dangled the chain in front of her face.

"What is it?"

"These stones," I said, thumbing around the edges, "are black diamonds, bought from a store on Earth."

"And this," I said, unclasping the fastener and placing the necklace around Alex's neck, "is a Caltian star."

She held the pendant in her hand, staring down at the shining, clear object in the center. When she turned it one way it looked like a diamond, another sapphire. No matter which way she turned it, it glowed brighter than any other gem on Earth.

"There is a thin line between the dark side and the light side. The dark diamonds of Earth keep the Caltian star from shining too brightly and burning in your hands. It will still glow, but it is the perfect balance of dark and light."

She looked up, her beautiful honey colored eyes meeting mine. "Like us, the perfect balance." She delicately clutched the pendant in her palm.

"Exactly."

"It's wonderful, Ace."

I leaned down, looking at her face. After everything we had survived in our star-crossed relationship, I knew there would never be a greater love for me, human or alien.

"Happy Valentine's Day, Alex."

"Happy Valentine's Day, Ace."

And with Earth's stars shining above us and the Caltian star glowing on her neck, I knew everything was perfect.

First Earthly Valentine's Day accomplished.

THE END

Magan is a self-proclaimed geek-to-glam poster child who channels her inner geek by writing science fiction for teens even though she slept with a night light until she was in middle school for fear of alien attacks. She now lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in central Illinois where she still sleeps with a night light...just in case.

You can find her online at [www.maganvernon.com](http://www.maganvernon.com)

Or read more about Ace in The My Alien Romance series, the first book - How to Date an Alien- is available on [Smashwords](http://Smashwords), and other booksellers.

~

**Aligned: Ith and Aetha**  
An Immortal Essence Short Story

by  
RaShelle Workman

I am someone.

But, I have no idea who.

There is a planet called Earth, with one sun and one moon. That isn't where I live. How am I sure? *Two* suns and *two* moons rotate across my sky. The name of this planet is Kelari.

My home is in a cave at the base of a mountain peak. From its entrance I can peer further down the mountain, over the tops of lush green trees, and dense foliage, all the way to the cerulean waters of the sea. It's always warm here, and humid. Sometimes stiflingly so.

On Earth, I know there are forests, deserts, high mountains and deep bodies of water. There are animals, insects, and birds. The name of every species, every creature, is somehow known to me, as is all of Earth's history. Every color, every shade, every hue—from robin's egg blue to periwinkle—can be pulled from my mind. How I know these things, where I was born, and who my parents are, remain unknown.

I've never seen anyone on this planet similar to me, but I'd recognize a human if I saw one. My memories are chock-full of them. I think I am one. Or at least I used to be.

When it comes to me, this is what I know for sure: I look like a human male. When I first arrived, I grew a lot. My face and body changed almost daily. So did my skin, which started out an amber brown, like maple syrup. Currently, it's closer to cinnamon, probably from the suns. My eyes are spring grass green. The color of my blood was a reddish-orange. Now, no matter how hard I try, the surface of my skin can't be punctured. I don't even know my name.

My first day here I opened my eyes, and screamed like a girl (no offence to girls, it's just I'm a guy). The reason was that a gigantic black cat-looking thing had her face right in front of mine. She licked me with a large sand-papery tongue. I hate to admit to another girly-scream as I rose on my elbows and tried to back away. She roared, shaking her long mane. Then I cried. She roared again. I cried some more (this is embarrassingly sad, but give me a break; I was only seven or eight).

Her voice entered my mind. *Hush, child. Stop making all that racket. My head is going to burst.*

I cried louder. She snorted, turned away and lay down at the entrance of our cave. Enormous black wings pounded the air as she settled in. Her giant body blocked the entrance, and my only escape. Whimpering, I huddled against a wall.

Much later, my curiosity got the better of me, especially since she hadn't made a move to eat me. At least not yet. I decided to try and reason with her. "Hey! Hey, you."

She turned around and her voice spoke inside my head again. *Can you understand my thoughts?*

I nodded. "I think so."

She shook her head. *Use your thoughts so I can comprehend what you're saying. Your verbal noises are incredibly grating.*

Concentrating, I asked, *Are . . . you going to eat me?"*

*No, young one. My name is Mithrith. I am an irrihunter. And you are?*

I thought and thought, realizing I must have been given a name, but I couldn't remember. *I don't know.* I stood and took tentative steps toward her. She was massive. All black with short fur, the same as a panthers. Face like a saber-toothed tiger. The ears, mane and tail of a horse.

And then there were her wings. Not the same as a bird's, but a bat. *You sort of remind me of a dragon.*

She roared. *Ever met a dragon? That is insulting. Take it back.*

*Sorry.* I stepped back, wary, but asked, *You met a dragon?*

*Once. She looked nothing like me.*

*Sorry,* I repeated, disregarding my urge to bombard her with further dragon questions. *So, um, where are we? How did I get here?*

*This planet is called Kelari. You were dropped in front of my cave by a great bird. He spoke to me in my own language and asked me to watch over you. A good thing he said something, otherwise you'd be digesting in my stomach.*

I fled to my corner (a mighty warrior).

She made a noise in the back of her throat that sounded like laughter. *Come back. Don't be silly, child. I won't eat you, you're too small. Your tiny carcass would get stuck in my teeth.*

*Promise?* I asked, though I knew she wouldn't.

*Promise. Now . . .* She lay down and began licking one of her paws, her midnight-blue eyes focused on me, thoughtful. *What shall I call you? Mmmmmm.* She closed her eyes and I thought she'd drifted to sleep. I'd about decided to do the same when she said, *Sticks.*

*Sticks? Why sticks?* Braver, I reached up to touch the side of her face. She was soft as chinchilla fur.

*Because child, you're so small I could use you to pick my teeth.*

From then on, we were inseparable, Mithrith and I. She'd explained she was the last of her kind, so I did my best to keep her from getting lonely. She took care of me; taught me her language, and told me about her life (Mithrith was old). She even let me fly with her a few times so I could search for others. She said she'd never seen creatures that resembled me. Still, she helped me explore.

It's been seven hundred and eighty-seven days since Mithrith died. I burned her remains, as she requested. The fire devoured her body. Pain consumed my heart. I miss her terribly. No, "miss" isn't fitting. When she died, a part of me died with her. The ache has lessened some since my visions of a girl.

*The girl.*

When I'm awake, she's there, a comforting phantom. Her presence is stronger while I sleep though. I don't know who she is or how my mind has imagined her. But I'm grateful. I'd be lost to loneliness without my dreams. The girl has become the thread that holds my life together.

Her body is fashioned after a human's (probably because that's all I know). Her hair is downy white. Sometimes she wears it in a long braid, the blunt ends reaching her waist. Other times her hair isn't confined, but flowing, and it shines like a thousand stars. Her skin is metallic white, and smooth as glass. And her eyes, by the Heaven's, each a blazing silver flame.

She is the light to my dark. When our fingers entwine, everything is exactly right. A part of me doubts she's real, but my heart, my soul, tells me otherwise. So I hang on.

*Waiting...*

I don't know what else to do.

\*\*\*

Near my cave is a pool of fresh water. It's part of a river that rushes down the mountain and over a cliff, into the sea. I've been here almost eight years and a trail has been worn through the

lush vegetation to the pool. A canopy of branches, heavy with shiny leaves and wild orchid flowers dangle over the water. I use the pool for a variety of purposes. One of which is bathing. And that's what I'm doing when I see *the girl*, the one from my visions.

One second I'm washing important guy parts, scrubbing good, and thinking about her. The next I hear a branch snap, so I whip around, prepared to wrestle a creature I've name Fluffy (a cross between an irritated grizzly-bear and a gray elephant—that's Fluffy—and he thinks this pool is his) and the next *she's* there. Only not as a ghostly apparition, but solid.

Do I act cool, or nonchalant? No. I gasp in surprise, drop my homemade soap, and plunge under the water.

"Hello? Hello. Are you coming up?"

Her voice is melodious. Sweet. I wonder if I've gone mad, if my years alone caused my brain to crack.

I poke my head out of the water, just to verify she hasn't disappeared. Nope! Still there, and with hardly any clothes on either. She's wearing a gauzy . . . dress, which is shorter than her hair. It has a strap that goes over one shoulder. Another one binds her slim waist. On her feet are black boots that come to just under her knees. Her hair is down, a slight breeze lifting the ends.

The dress is very, very tiny. *She* is very, very gorgeous. And it's the first time I've seen a girl—with womanly parts (or any parts, for that matter)—up close. My body knows it and reacts. I take a deep breath to calm my heart, working to acknowledge she's real. But, *whatever*, if I've gone crazy, then I'll blissfully stay in crazy-town.

"Hi." I attempt a wave, but splash water in my eyes.

A smile lifts the corners of her mouth, sending it to her cheeks, her eyes, and over to me. Its warmth scorches through my chest, burning away my loneliness.

"Are you finished in the water?"

"Yes, I'd like to get out, but—" I'm about to explain I'm naked when I hear Fluffy. "Don't move," I holler, *trying* to run in the water toward shore. No way am I going to lose her to some overgrown elephant-bear.

"What's wrong?"

Fluffy is close now, his mouth wide open, flashing all one hundred of his razor sharp teeth. The edge of the pool is too far away. He'll reach her first. So I yell, "No, Fluffy! No! She's mine!" (I know, this sounds very selfish, even chauvinistic, but I'm under pressure.)

"Fluffy," she asks and turns around.

At this point I don't care that I'm naked. Nothing will matter if she gets hurt, or killed. I burst out of the water waving my arms. "Fluffy, stop!"

The ele-bear has already stopped though. Fluffy is sitting on his haunches, whining like a little puppy, as though he wants her to pet him. Scratch behind his long, floppy ears.

"Is this Fluffy," she asks, rubbing his tummy. "He's very sweet."

I try to pet him and he growls. "Yeah, and loveable," I grumble.

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I've put on a pair of trousers, and brought the girl back to my cave. She's meandering around the room while I start a fire. It isn't for warmth, but protection. I glance over at her every once in a while, when she makes a noise. She's picked up my make-shift broom, one of my shirts, and some herbs set out to dry.

I still can't believe she's here.

Finished stoking the fire, I watch as she picks up a purple Linastar feather and runs it along her cheek. “You are even more beautiful in person,” I say, my voice catching as I realize I shouldn’t have said that. Technically, this is the first time I’ve met her. She might not appreciate I’ve been dreaming about her for five hundred and twenty-three days.

She places the feather in a basket already full of them, turns to me and smiles. “As are you.”

I feel my face get warm; my heart starts to beat like a herd of thundering horses. “Who are you?” I want to touch her, to feel for myself that she’s real, to stroke her hair, and...kiss her.

A spark of excitement flashes in her eyes. She moves forward, so we’re toe to toe. “I am Aetha, Mother of light. I hold sway over all that is day.” She takes one of my hands in hers and presses my palm against her chest. Then she places her other hand over my heart. “You are Ith, Father of all things which delight the night.”

I’m not sure what to be more surprised about—the fact that we’re touching or that she seems to know my name and says I’m a father. “Delight the night? What...”

“Ith, together, we will save this planet and hold dominion over it for as long as we are needed.”

“I still don’t understand. Are you human?” The answer is obvious, even though I don’t want it to be. Our forms are similar, but I detect differences. Her movements are gentler.

“I am an eternal. My essence comes from the planet Stiel as does yours.”

“Wait, I’m from there, too? Is Stiel another word for Earth?”

“No, it’s in an entirely different solar system.” She shifts closer to the fire. “Should we sit?”

“Sure.” I take out a hand-woven mat and place it on the ground.

She shakes her head. “Why don’t we sit on chairs?” As she says the words, she moves her hands in the motion of a wave. Instantly, two high-backed, plush, velvet chairs appear.

I stagger. “What the—”

She winks and then the most beautiful noise imaginable escapes her throat. Laughter. It’s soft, like the tinkling of tiny bells, and a choir of angels. “Ith, there is much you need to remember.” Grabbing my hand, she pulls me over to a chair and playfully pushes me into it.

“It’s spongy, almost like sitting on air.” Unable to stop myself I bounce up and down a few times.

Mischievousness in her voice, she adds, “Or angel food cake.” With the grace of a tiger, she situates her lithe body in the chair, tucking her legs under her.

“Tell me everything,” I say, thrilled she seems to have all the answers.

She pushes a long strand of hair behind her ears. I resist the urge to take her hair between my fingers, to see if it’s soft as kitten fur, the way I imagined. She says, “You were born on Earth to a mother who was half human. You’re father is from Stiel, a large, white planet many, many galaxies away. As I said before, the inhabitants of Stiel are called eternals.”

I hold up a hand. “Wait, my mother wasn’t totally human? Was she part eternal as well?”

“No, she was half vapiria and half human. Her name was Isabel and she was stunning. Most important, she radiated kindness. As soon as your father saw her, he had to have her. He created a human form and wooed her. I believe he loved her, in his way. After several months, they were married.” Aetha clears her throat. “Not too many days after their marriage, he left, returning to Stiel.” She sighs, heavy. “Nine months later, you were born, a beautiful, bouncing baby boy.”

A long, lost sadness creeps from my gut and trickles into my heart. As does anger.

“Your mother wasn’t the same after he left. Her inner light went out. After you were born, she tried to love you, to care for you, but when she looked at you she experienced hatred. Your

father returned to her several years later and saw the state she was in, that you were in. Furious, he took you from her and brought you here, to Kelari, and to Mithrith.”

“My mother—Isabel—she’s dead?” My words sound hollow. I want to know, but I don’t.

“Yes. She died a couple of years after Elian, your father, took you away. I’m sorry.” She leans toward me and touches my arm, her delicate fingers leaving a trail of goose bumps in their wake.

I rack my brain, trying to find a memory. “I can’t remember her.”

“Elian, took them from you. He thought it would be less confusing, until I was able to find you.”

The rage inside cannot be contained any longer. “My father is a monster,” I say, slamming my fist against the armrest.

She sighs again. “He has been called a lot of things, including monster. You must understand that on our planet, we are created all knowing. We do not age. We cannot die. Though you and I appear human, we can manipulate into any form we choose. We are an essence, able to do all things. And your father was the first of us to be created.”

I stand, my body itching to move. Rubbing both hands along the top of my head, something I do when frustrated, I pace. Back and forth. Back and forth. “Does that matter? My father still hurt my mother, broke her heart.” I pick up a large log and toss it on the roaring fire. It crackles and shifts, sending embers in all directions. A glowing ash touches my skin and turns gray.

I hear her move up next to me, but I keep my gaze on the fire. In all the years I’d fantasized about where I came from, what’d happened to me, Aetha’s version never occurred to me. I figured an alien from this planet abducted me. Turns out, I’m an alien—at least that’s the word human’s use for beings from other planets. But I look exactly as they do.

She wipes the ash from my arm. “I know. He hurt her. When Elian first told me what’d happened, and his plan, I was outraged, furious he could be so cruel. But, he explained what the future held for you, for us. Once I understood what needed to be done, I agreed to play my part.”

“Play a part?” I feel like I’m going to explode. Too much information is coming at me. I need some time to clear my head. “I’ve got to get out of here,” I say and dart from the cave.

*Alright. But if you have a question, think of me and ask.*

Her voice in my head slows me down, as does the melancholy. I sense she’s sad I’m leaving. With a grunt, I say, *Telepathy with our kind, too?*

*Thought transference is a great form of communication.*

*And you can hear my thoughts as well?* I wonder how much she’s “seen” and “heard” since her arrival.

*Yes, but if you’d rather I don’t...Try this. Imagine a key and put it into the lock that is your brain and turn. It’s a great way to psychologically block others out. You are welcome to my thoughts though.*

She sounds miserable, and I feel bad, but I need some time to think. *Thank you.* It’s dark out, hunting time for many predators, so I continue on the path. I’ve never had a problem seeing at night and wonder if the trait is eternal or vapiria. I debate asking Aetha, but change my mind.

The smell of cloves and honeysuckle permeate the air. I breathe it in allowing the scent to loosen up my nerves. At the pool, I stop, watching the bits of light from the stars and moons, dance on the water. From every direction the sounds of life can be heard—chirping, slithering, crunching of underbrush—the sounds of my home.

A home that in no way belongs to me, nor I to it. The full burden of what it means to be abandoned, weighs on me, pressing me down on a large rock. I lean over to swirl my fingers in the water, turning the stars blurry.

It hurts to realize no one wanted me. My mother chose not to love me and my father left me here, instead of taking me home with him. Maybe there's something wrong with me. Or, perhaps, like Mithrith, I'm the only one of my kind. A rush of love for the creature that cared for me fills my heart. Without her, I don't know what would've happened.

*I'm really sorry, Ith.*

My body stiffens. I hadn't heard her following. "I said I needed some time." The words come out sounding cruel.

"I know, it's just, well, I can still read your thoughts, and wanted to make sure you understood how to block me." She places a hand on my shoulder.

Her kindness sends me into a rage. I knock her hand away. "Why don't you just stay the hell out of my mind!"

She stumbles back, tears fill her eyes.

Guilt softens my anger. I'm not mad at her. She hasn't done anything wrong. I take a step toward her. Reach out a hand to comfort her. "Hey, I'm—"

Aetha cuts me off. Moving more quickly than I thought possible, she jumps up, and spins around in the air, bringing the side of her booted foot square into my jaw. Pain explodes through my face, into my eyes and ears. I can hear a ringing as I fall into the harsh, rocky sand. And then there's something else—clarity.

Where my mind had been jumbled, disorganized, and cluttered, now everything has a place. The pain gone, I stand slowly, feeling my muscles respond to my newfound lucidity.

Flashes of images snap through my mind: Aetha's body created from the dust, air, and the water of Kelari. The wonder on her face as she sees, for the first time, through her new eyes. Aetha swimming across a large body of water, fighting what looks like a sea monster. Her crying out in frustration when she can't find me. A man descending from the sky in front of her and speaking.

Then I hear her thoughts: She's been with me, in spirit, since Mithrith died. How she loves me. I also hear the conversation with... my father. I was created for a purpose, placed here for a purpose. He left me with Mithrith so I could learn, and love this planet. Aetha has come to help me. Her essence and body created for me. We are here to serve and heal Kelari. This planet was once filled with higher beings, but they all died. And their spirits are trapped in a place called Helker, by an evil creature that tortures them to feed on their pain. My father wants us to release the spirits and create bodies for them. These spirits need us, need me. But my father had to wait until I became of age, so that my eternal heritage would kick in (apparently Aetha's boot in my face was all I needed), to fulfill my destiny.

I stagger back, falling again to my knees, as the memories, the thoughts, all the feelings, the *all knowing* whoosh in, faster and faster. I clutch my head, not in agony, but in awe . . . *I have so much to do.*

She kneels next to me. Her hands caress my face, lifting so I can see her eyes. *Yes, we do. I'm here to help. And, you'll never be alone again.*

Her lips find mine, gentle but urgent. Savory juices from the red berries she's eaten linger on them. Her body smells of jasmine. I respond to her with fervor, the kisses soft and wet. Mutually, we pull away, our eyes searching. We laugh and then we're kissing again, hungry. Passionate.



Perfect. She wraps her hands around my neck, and I sense her need to be closer. My arms encircle her waist, tugging her to me so we're chest to chest, hip to hip, thigh to thigh...

*I'm yours forever.*

*Just as I'm yours, Aetha. Thank you for finding me.*

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We are going into Helker. Ramien's domain. He isn't from Kelari either, but is a ferether. They are scavengers who prey upon war, death, and pain. They delight in capturing the souls of the dead and torturing them. Ramien was drawn to Kelari during a war that happened long, long ago. And, like a fisherman casting his net into the ocean. Ramien has flung an enchanted net over this planet. It won't allow the souls of higher beings to return to their creator. Instead, the net entices them, drawing them closer, until their essence is ensnared. The soul remains there until Ramien retrieves it. Then with traps that look like glass jars, he places them inside. They are his play things.

It is our duty to liberate them. But the malicious magic surrounding the planet can only be undone by Ramien. Aetha and I have a plan, though. As we release each spirit, we will create a body for them (yes, I can do that). We've decided they'll look like us—look human, though their organs will be different, so that on their sixteenth birthday, the gift of immortality will be bestowed upon them. We will also create bodies for irrihunters, whaletins... whichever body the higher soul began in. Once we've released all of the souls, and after they've had time to adjust, we will teach them our ways.

With the gift of the *all knowing*, we are able to acquire everything we need. Dressed in a sleek red jumpsuit, Aetha looks stunning. I am in black. Across her back as well as mine are swords, fashioned from derenth, the strongest existing metal in all of the Universes. They will easily break through the "jars" Ramien is using to possess the souls.

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The entrance to Helker lies in the sea. No, not under the sea, but *in* it. It's difficult to explain, but let me try. Aetha and I float out over the water until no land can be seen from any direction. We come to a stop and say two words together: Incana. Thretum. Instantly, the salty green and blue water, parts. The door appears and opens. Hot air explodes around us, turning the air misty. I expect sulfuric odor or even the reek of brine, but am stunned by the aromatic mixture of burning wood, like a camp fire, and carnations. Within is a long set of stairs going down.

I move to the first step, knowing the carnation smell comes from the tortured souls and steel myself, I look back at Aetha. "You ready?"

She nods, determination so strong, it rolls off her and over me. "As I'll ever be."

The steps are steep. And they go on and on. Hard, dirt walls press upon us from both sides. We are quiet, listening. The only sound comes from our boots. The further we go, the stronger the scent, until I almost wish for the rotten egg stench of sulfur. I begin to hear what sounds like waves crashing against rocks. As the steps curve, the walls slowly give way until I'm in a magnificent room. Behind me, Aetha sucks in a breath.

The room is bright and dressed in heavy drapes, their colors shifting in shades of reds, gold, and oranges. Tables gilded in gold are overflowing with food. A dozen glittering chandeliers

hang from the ceiling. But what holds the attention of Aetha and I? The chairs are filled with an array of perverse...creatures.

Hundreds of them. Beasts, the likes of which I've never seen before. One has the head of an alligator, only without any teeth, his body is a deep green and covered in scales, but in the shape of a howler monkey. Another has the head of an elephant, ears of a giraffe, and the spotted body of a leopard. There are those that look human-ish. Their bodies are an assortment of colors, like canary yellow, lavender, and pickle green, and their skin ranges from cat fur to feathers.

*Where are the jars?* Smashing a container to free a soul is one thing, but this...I hadn't planned on slaughter.

*Ramien must've sensed we were coming. He's placed them in these grotesque bodies to elicit our humanity and their increased pain. We must free them!*

Abruptly, the noise I thought to be waves, stops. All eyes face us, their demeanor less than civil. Wary, I move in front of Aetha. From the crowd, a figure dressed in a black tuxedo, top-hat and shiny black shoes, stands. A superior smile sits on his face. He walks toward us, arms spread wide, like we've just arrived for a party. "Welcome. Welcome. So good of you to join us. Won't you sit down?"

"Ramien, we've come for the souls." Aetha speaks softly, but with conviction.

Ramien's hair moves as though it's made of shadowy smoke. There isn't any skin on his body, or it's iridescent, making the inner workings, the veins, bones, and muscles, visible. His face has many eyes, more than I care to count; his nose is that of an ape, his mouth a circle of sharp teeth. And though his body is shaped like a human's, his hands are octopus tentacles covered in suction cups oozing a yellow substance. *Disgusting.* Out loud, I say, "That's right. Let them go. They've been subjected to your torment long enough."

I anticipate anger, and keep glancing over at his unhappy dinner guests. But Ramien surprises me by clapping. His hands transformed into those of a human. He does it slowly first, then he turns to the beasts. "Wasn't that little speech divine? Show the young half-breed some love."

In methodic rhythm, they follow his lead. The noise ascends to a deafening level. Then they rise.

*Be ready. He's going to make these poor souls fight so he can feed upon their agony. Let's destroy the bodies as quickly and painlessly as possible.* There's aggravation in her tone, sadness as well. I want to comfort her, but now is not the time.

The battle begins quickly. Ramien vanishes, and the creature with the alligator head rushes me. With one hand I reach for the sword strapped to my back and drive it through his stomach. His hands clutch the blade as he screams in pain. Yanking it from his bleeding belly, I shove a footed foot into his chest, launching him backward, into two other creatures. His eyes fill with anguish. As they hit the ground, a gleeful laugh fills the room.

*Damn it!* I'd reacted without thinking and given Ramien exactly what he wanted. Annoyed, I right myself.

*Ith, focus on their eyes. Use your power to fill their minds with peace.*

Behind me I hear Aetha's sword slice through what sounds like a juicy cantaloupe. I turn and witness the top half of a beast with an elephant head separate at the waist from the orangutan lower half. Its knees hit the floor before it plummets forward, spilling out pea green blood. Swallowing the sick ache in my throat, I notice a silver vapor leave the body and rise into the air. It quivers, like a nervous hummingbird, near Aetha's head.

Aetha and I will create their new bodies once we get back to our cave.

*She is free, Ith. We must be quick. This soul has agreed to help us find the others.*

I nod. I know what must be done. Turning toward the oncoming creatures, I charge. One after the other, I find their eyes and force a single word into their minds. *Freedom!* Right before I carve them in two. After I've destroyed a rhinoceros-dragon, its soul quivers near me. A familiar voice fills my mind.

*Hello, my child. Thank you for freeing me of that horrendous carcass.*

*Mithrith!*

Not too many minutes later, I slaughter the last body. Hundreds of souls buzz around the room with excited energy. Now that their pain is gone, the carnation smell isn't as strong, and a putrid decay takes over. Blood in ten different shades is spattered on the walls, the floor, and my beautiful Aetha.

She has her wrist over her mouth and nose. *Ugh, this place reeks. Let's get the rest of the souls and get out of here.*

*You read my mind, love.* I give her a smirky smile. More seriously, I add, *I'll follow you anywhere.*

THE END

ALIGNED takes place before EXILED, the first novel in the Immortal Essence series.

**Exiled summary:** World's divided them. Chance brought them together. Only love will save them.

For more information on RaShelle Workman, or to find out more about her books and coming events, visit her website at <http://www.rashelleworkman.com>

Twitter: @RaShelleWorkman

**Author bio:** As well as being a toffee-maker extraordinaire, a cupcake baker, and Mom Of The Year (it's true, ask her kids), RASHELLE WORKMAN writes YA sci-fi romance and adult romantic suspense. She's also the wife to a math-genius-of-a-husband. Together they share their home with three children and three dogs. When she gets a quiet moment alone, she loves to read about far away places. She has two books out. EXILED, a YA sci-fi romance. It's book 1 in the Immortal Essence Series, and SLEEPING ROSES, an adult romantic suspense. Book 1 in the Dead Roses Series.

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