



Knight Angels
Book of Love

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By Abra Ebner

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*Life is the only drug we need.
It is better to feel the intensity of emotion,
than nothing at all...*

It's the only life we've got.

...

Killing Truth

By Tessa Rei

*Your face blinds me from the truth that follows
That retched, annoying, nagging truth that swallows
Swallows me whole in its dark mouth as I fighting for air
Searching everywhere for the way out but finding it nowhere,
Blind in this colorless monster of guilt I see your face
Pulling myself closer to you as I pick up this shameful pace
I'm in this lonely pit with or without you, and there is no sound
Only this shit in my blasted head spinning all around
I call out to you; oh please can you hear me?
Echoes in this darkness are all I hear, nothing is what I see...
Placing my hands in front of me to brace my fall
Calling out to you again but hearing nothing at all
I scream as long as these lungs will hold this breath
Feeling something beneath me break, I'm falling closer to death
I will remain here dying until I find you
This truth is killing me, why? What will I— or can I do?
As my last breath escapes me there is a comforting voice
Hello... its you... now you have left me with no choice
I cry out quietly for you once more
Opening my eyes I can see you more colorful than before...*

...

When I think of death, I don't see what everyone else does. There's a soft whisper when you find it, and a voice telling us that it'll be okay.

We never die alone, because they are always there watching over us, protecting us, and guiding us. They are silent, like a simple gust of wind; but it is in this wind that our world can change.

Mine did.

When the accident happened, and my father died, I was there. I saw them. I can't remember their faces, but I knew they weren't human.

There were two—one was the murderer and one was my knight; I was spared. Ever since, the nightmares of death haunt me.

Somewhere deep inside, I know that I should be dead.

Max:

"Brother!" Erik's laugh was boisterous—a refreshing, admittedly lively, sound.

I laughed in return, leaning down to give him a hug.

"It's been ten years, Max. What brings you back?" Erik looked into my eyes, his face sallow, aged, and lined with concern.

"Ten years went by fast," I remarked.

He laughed. "Fast for you, perhaps." He lifted one brow, now dappled with grey. "So tell me, why come back now?" He had a knowing look on his face.

It was hard to see him like this, and soon he would be gone. Soon, I would have to take him. "Erik, I had to come back." I avoided his gaze, knowing he saw right through my attempts to evade my reasons.

Erik was my younger brother whom had survived the slaughter of my family. He survived because I'd given my life to do so. It was that day that changed my fate forever. It was the day I became what I am.

Erik laughed. "I always knew you would come back. You always do. No matter how hard you try, you cannot forget that little girl, can you?"

I sighed, thinking of her. "It's not that, Erik." I lied, hiding a smile. "And she's not a little girl anymore," I added.

He pointed at me, his hands wrinkled with age. "You cannot fool an old man, Max." He grunted as he pushed his wheelchair away from the large mahogany desk in the study. "You failed to hide that smile, though you think you did."

I let the smirk show. "I'm an old man too, Erik."

"Ha!" he hooted, followed by a cough. "But look at you! You're still seventeen and as handsome as ever. I always hated you for that."

"No matter how I look, Erik, I will always be your older brother." I plucked the picture of my sister-in-law from his desk and looked at it. "Besides, it was I that was jealous of you. You lived a normal life. You got to love, live, and soon..." My voice trailed off, jealous of his eventual death.

Erik, on the other hand, hated the idea of death. He changed the subject. "You know I hate it when we talk of such things. It makes me feel old." He rolled his eyes.

When I died, Erik had a hard time adjusting to the fact that he was aging, while I did not. The day he surpassed me was his worst, but it was one of my worst as well. I knew that one day he would be gone, and I would be alone, at least emotionally. He rolled over to me and took the picture from my hand.

"Meredith, my love," he whispered.

I watched him stare at her image, his eyes filled with an emotion I finally understood. "She was wonderful, Erik. Like a sister and a mother to me." Her laughter resonated in my head, warming my silent heart.

Erik laughed. "First a sister, and then a mother as she grew old, right?"

I smirked. "Something like that."

I felt the presence of our real mother enter the room then, like a breath of life. I smiled. I could always feel her, but I was never allowed to see or hear her. It was the cruel torture I was put through being as I was, stuck somewhere between the two worlds, shut out from the thrill of feeling their reach.

Erik's face sank. "Have you seen *him* at all?"

I frowned, losing the feeling of my mother as she slipped away at the mention of *him*. "No. Not for a very long time."

Erik smiled. "Do you ever think he'll come back?"

I placed the picture of Meredith on the desk. "I want to assume that he won't, but I don't think we're that lucky. We're never that lucky." *Him* was Greg. He was my fraternal twin brother, and in our state, we were bound together in thought and soul, both stuck in the in-between.

Erik said nothing as he rolled over to a window that looked out from the second story and onto the gardens below. "Well, I'm glad you're back. I just don't..." his voice cracked.

I shut my eyes, feeling his pain and hearing his thoughts. He was afraid of Greg—afraid that he would come for him in the end. "Erik, you know I would never let that happen. You belong with me. I will not let him take your soul. Not there." Greg's world was different than mine—*darker*.

Erik was again silent, but I could hear the whispers in his mind. "Is that why you came back? To take me?"

I exhaled slowly. "No, Erik. It's not your time." I lied, knowing it was within the coming months. No man should know when that time would come. I wanted him to enjoy what life he had left.

Erik turned then, a renewed sense of life in his eyes. "I do wish to be with Meredith again, but not yet." He smiled. "What will you do with your time here? For how long can I expect you'll stay?"

His questions were ones I was barely able to ask myself. I did not know how long it would take before I could no longer stand being here, but I needed to try—for her. "I'll go back to school, I suppose. See how that pans out."

Erik let one boisterous laugh leave his lips. "*School?* My dear brother, just the mention of that word brings chills to my heart. Didn't get enough before, did you?"

I laughed. "I realize that your academic experience was anything but enjoyable with all the deaths you endured. You were uprooted and scared—I understand. But trust me, Brother, I will be fine. I still have that senior year to finish, even if it is eighty years too late."

Erik lifted one brow. "I just hope you're right. Senior year can be horrid." His eyes were wide. "Especially these days. Things aren't like they were eighty years ago."

I laughed. "What do you know of high school these days?"

Erik shrugged. "Enough. Trust me."

I looked at my watch. "Speaking of... I'm going to be late."

Erik laughed with a cheery smile. "So soon! My, you don't wallow in the mud do you? I haven't seen you in decades, and here you are, back as though nothing has changed!"

I shrugged. "I have a long life ahead of me, Brother, and I don't want to waste it."

Sarah:

"Jane. Emily!" I slammed the cup of orange juice down on the counter. "Jane! Emily! *Hurry up!*" I looked at my watch. It was already 7:53 and I was late for my shift at the hotel. Being a single mother had never been easy, especially now with two teenage girls.

I walked across the kitchen and grabbed a dry piece of toast from the toaster and shoved it in my mouth. I never regretted having the girls, but I did regret having them at such a young age. If I'd waited, my husband's accident would have happened before they were as much as a glimmer in our eye, leaving me with more options. But that wasn't something to think of—not anymore. My girls were my whole world now, and I loved them no matter what the burden.

Jane was seventeen, but that's what made it hard on me. I'd been seventeen when I had her. I saw myself in her eyes. I understood that I was far too young to handle a child. I wished I'd known better.

"Jane! Get your sister. Let's get going!" I yelled, crumbs flying from my mouth and onto the tile floor. Since it was their first day, it was important for me to drive them to school. I know it was embarrassing for them, but I needed my few moments to be a mother, and this was one of them.

Their father, John, had loved them regardless of the age at which we'd had them. The world was fleeting and unpredictable when we were young, and things changed fast. After all, it was the seventies.

Jane was a surprise, and I remembered the look on John's face. He was so frightened to have her, but as she grew, she and John forged a bond so strong, it was seemingly unbreakable. Emily, on the other hand—John had distanced himself from her, and I never understood why. There was

always guilt in his eyes over the fact, as though the distance was painful to him.

I was jolted out of my daydreaming as the pounding of footsteps descended the stairs. My pain was replaced by relief. It was their first day, and I was excited to finally have them back at school. At least now I'd know where they were—

Especially Emily.

Jane:

I hated first days. I hated everything. I was tired of the same struggle to make friends, fit in, and make grades.

I didn't understand why I felt so lost, or why I felt as though I didn't belong here anymore. And when I say belong, I mean the fact that I couldn't shake the dreams of death I had every night, and the foreseen deaths of everyone around me. The nightmares followed me, and I knew it was because I should have died with my father.

"Jane, make sure your sister gets to all her classes, will you? I don't have time to worry about her today," my mother nagged, her hair falling from her loose ponytail. I knew how busy she was, and how hard she tried for us, but we were *her* choice.

I looked at my sister as she gave me a glare that reminded me to leave her alone. Today was Emily's first day in high school. She didn't need her big sister hanging over her like the overprotective freak that I was.

"Okay, everyone! Into the car!" My mother ushered us both out the door, handing us each a five dollar bill for lunch.

It was barely enough to buy a bagel and milk—not that Emily would buy anything anyway. Emily was your typical dark, troubled teen, and a handful at that. Since she was thirteen, I'd relentlessly watched her like a hawk, dragging her from one high school party after the next. She was smart, though, but because we had held her back in elementary school, her advanced sixteen years of age over her fellow fifteen year old peers had added to her unfortunate arrogance.

I couldn't help but worry about her. I'd seen the nightmares with her in them. The image of her lying dead like that haunted me—her eyes blank, her body cold. I watched her walk in front of me with the weight of anxiety in my heart. The scary thing was that now, she was in high school, making the task to protect her more of a challenge. The parties would be more accessible, the drugs like candy sold at a corner store, and the boys—

"*Want to give me your five?*" She had halted, leaning close to me as we lagged behind Mother. Her dark eyeliner smudged into her eyes, leaving them inked with grey.

I gave her a disgusted glare, knowing all she wanted to do with it was buy prescription drugs. I rolled my eyes away from her, disgusted that she'd even dare to ask.

Emily was gorgeous—at least she was under all the makeup. She was tall and thin with long, auburn tresses. She naturally walked like a model, attracting all sorts of attention, but mostly the negative kind.

"No. *You can't*," I hissed.

Emily glared, grabbing the handle of the car door and snapping it open.

I walked around to the other side, taking a deep breath before opening my own door and ruefully climbing in. I'd given up my life to play mother to Emily. My own mother was too overwhelmed with work to notice what really went on. I knew my mother meant well, but it was a burden that had destroyed my life.

I was tired of it.

Emily:

I slammed the car door for dramatic effect, showing Jane that I was pissed at her for refusing to lend me her five. She had plenty of money stashed up somewhere; I knew it. Jane was a goody two shoes, and it was starting to cramp my style. I pouted and looked out the window, hooking my palm under my chin. I saw the cute neighbor boy next door climb into his car, a mischievous thought entering my head.

I rolled the window down. "Hey, *We—es*." I said his name as seductively as I could, and then batted my eyes in my effort to irritate Jane.

"*Emily*," Jane hissed, as she always did.

She elbowed me, and I let out a low scream, glaring at her.

"Hi, *Wes*." She waved, leaning over my lap, hoping to cover up the embarrassment of what I'd just done.

Mother glanced at me in the rear view mirror with a look of concern on her face. She was sizing me up, probably wondering what *troubled-teen-symptom* I was displaying today. I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms against my chest. Jane was still lying across my lap, pressing the button on the window to bring it back up. I hated that she treated me like a child. I shut my eyes, trying to forget the headache that had now set in from the exasperated thoughts in Jane's head.

Mother spoke then, but not to me—she knew better than to do that. It was a known fact that I never listened, or at least I pretended not to. What she didn't know was that it didn't matter if she spoke to me or not, I still *knew* what she was thinking. "Jane, why didn't you ever date Wes? He's a nice boy."

I laughed to myself, finding hilarity in the fact that Jane would date anyone at all—her one exception being the fact that she had lost her virginity to Wes this summer, which I *knew* despite the fact she'd told no one.

I also *knew* that she did it out of pity, and now regretted it. She knew Wes loved her, and for what ever reason she'd given in, even if it hadn't exactly been what she wanted. That was her one and only romantic encounter to date—*pathetic*.

Jane was a history geek, and though she had good looks, she never put them to good use. She'd been this way ever since our father died—large grandma sweaters and baggy jeans, frazzled hair with a whole mess of split ends. Her skin was pale because she refused to go outside unless it was to snowboard, which she's unsure if she'll get the chance to do this year with me cramping her style. She thinks I'm too young to know what life is all about, but she doesn't know what I can *hear*. Besides, I'm only a year behind her in age, just not in school. There were two things I knew for certain:

Something about me is different, and freshman year is going to *suck*.

Jane:

I hated when Mother said that to me, as if I hadn't already told her why I hadn't dated Wes. I liked Wes, sure; *as a friend*. We had been friends since we were babies. He was practically a brother to me. Wes was the only person that seemed to understand all I'd gone through and the responsibilities of my burdens. Sure, we had tried to be together, but it was awkward. I'd lost my virginity to him after all, but it didn't feel right for me. There was no emotion, no great *ta da*. Besides, I didn't have the time for a boyfriend.

"She's afraid that if she dates him, he'll end up dead like father," Emily teased in a childish voice.

I felt the car rattle as she said it, my mother tapping the breaks in both shock and sadness. Emily often referenced my father's death that way, as though it wasn't her father at all. She was too young to remember, but not me. I remembered everything. He had been my best friend—my only friend.

"Emily, *please*." My mother's voice cracked as she said it, suggesting the comment had hurt.

Emily let an annoyed breath escape her dark crimson lips. "*Whatever*."

I tried to press back the images of my father as they welled up inside me like a nightmare. I wasn't sure exactly what had happened that night, but I remember what I saw—I saw the fire and the car. I even saw him take his last breath.

Blood. Emptiness. Horror.

All I knew was that something had saved me. Some force of luck had decided I was to live, and my father was to die. Emily wasn't there. She didn't know. She barely even recalls the outline of his face, but I remember. I see every wrinkle, every scratch as the blood pooled onto the pavement of the road, following the outline of his beard and staining the few grey hairs he had. I saw his eyes fade as the life left them, and I heard his last words, still echoing...

"*I love you, Jane.*"

That was ten years ago, but it still felt like yesterday. I was so young, but in that instant, all the youth was stolen from me and our lives changed forever. In that instant, I'd become the mother, and Mother had become lost. I was too young to grow up, too young to worry, and now, it was all I knew—seventeen going on thirty-four; my mother thirty-four going on dead.

That's how I saw it.

My mother was an empty shell, left broken on the beach.

Wes:

I waved as the car passed, rolling my eyes. Emily was a mess. Too young to realize exactly what she was doing. Jane, though, she was something else. When she waved, it was as though the whole world stopped. I sighed. To her, though, I was just a friend.

I got in my car, rubbing my hand that had begun to hurt. I looked down, my gaze tracing the bones and knuckles. They ached as though I'd been up all night playing video games. I flipped it over and looked at my palm, and then put it on the shifter of my 86 Camaro. I watched as my fingers shook. Shutting my eyes, I tried to stifle the pain.

For the last week, the pain had been acting up. I didn't know what it was from, but I had a hunch. I needed to lay off the hobbies. I suppose painting model cars had its dangers. I sighed. It wasn't just that, though. I hadn't felt at all spectacular, and the changes in my height and weight... that alone put me on edge. I no longer wanted to go outside. I was afraid someone would notice. I thought I was done growing two years ago, but this spurt had been the biggest yet. My stomach grumbled with nerves and a strawberry Pop Tart.

My parents gave me up for adoption when I was just a baby. Life in the orphanage had forced me to grow up fast, and when I was finally taken in, it still left me with a gaping hole in my heart. It was times like now that I wish I knew my parents. The pain inside me was something I hoped they could explain, but I'd never found them—no matter how hard I tried.

I started the car with shaking hands. I usually took Jane to school, but this year with her sister being there, I figured her mother wanted make sure Emily at least made it to the front door. From there, it was out of her hands.

I would try one more time to get Jane's attention this year—try at last to be the guy of her dreams. She was my only hope for happiness here.

I loved her.

With one last deep breath, I looked over my shoulder and backed out of the driveway. This was it: *senior year*. Things were bound to get better.

Jane:

We pulled up to the school in silence as Emily gave me one last glare. She snatched her black backpack off the seat beside me, rolling her eyes. She didn't even bother to say goodbye to Mother as she slammed the car door behind her, storming down the walkway and into school.

I sighed.

"Mother, I'm sorry. I'll try to watch her." I felt as though it were my fault she had misbehaved. I saw Wes walk by the car, glancing toward it but continuing on, understanding that my mother and I were talking about serious matters. My eyes followed him, inspecting his ever changing physique and spiked golden hair. I shuddered with guilt, training my eyes straight ahead.

My mother looked at me through the rearview with a gaunt expression. "Jane, it's not your fault. I just don't know what to do with her. I wish I knew what she was up to." She shifted the car into park. "She's not doing anything... *illegal*, right?"

"I..." I wanted to tell her, but the dark circles under her eyes reminded me that she had enough to deal with already.

She gave me a pained smile. "Just keep your eyes open, Jane. That's all I ask."

Her words wracked me with guilt. I knew I needed to tell her what was really going on, but what could she do? She didn't need to know, and that was my decision. Someone needed to protect my mother.

I unbuckled my seatbelt, grabbing my bag and sliding from the car.

"I'll watch out for her, Mom. I promise." I smiled and shut the door, lowering my head as I walked around the car and toward the steps.

I heard her drive off behind me, quickening my pace as I saw that all the students were already inside. When I reached the doors, the bell rang. I exhaled sharply—already late and it was only the first day.

I grabbed the handles of the doors and swung them open, walking briskly inside. My feet clapped against the linoleum floor, echoing off the lockers on either side. There was another echo in the hall as well, and with my head still down, I peeked up. I allowed my hair to shield me in case it was a rule-hungry teacher, bent on disciplining stray students on their first day.

My eyes landed on the back of a boy that was up ahead, walking with leisurely poise. I quickly looked back down at my feet, turning as I reached my homeroom and grabbed the handle of the door. The echoes in the hall ceased at the same time my own footsteps did. Startled, I looked up, my eyes finding the boy as he stood by a locker at the end of the hall. He didn't seem to notice me as he worked at the lock. He was new; that wasn't hard to tell. We didn't get many new kids in Glenwood Springs, Colorado; at least none that looked like him.

He had on a dark grey T-shirt, despite the fact that it was an unseasonably cool day. His jeans were a faded navy and unmarked, a far cry from the designer jeans I was used to seeing here. I looked at his feet, noticing he wore a pair of brown leather shoes—a fashion faux pas considering the grey T-shirt.

I examined his profile, noting the strong jaw line, a small freckle positioned near his ear. His lashes were long and thick, a dark brown that could almost be considered black; his hair matched. It was medium length and tossed expertly away from his face. His lips were pressed together in a

thin line, revealing a dimple on his cheek.

He lifted his arms, exhibiting a string of muscles linking from his shoulders to his wrists. He placed a stack of books inside his locker and shifted his stance to position them, allowing me a glimpse at the inside of his forearms. I squinted and saw he had tattoos inked from his elbow to his wrist, also something you didn't see much in Glenwood Springs—especially when most of us weren't even eighteen yet.

There was something aside from his looks that had attracted me, though. It wasn't as if he were dreamy as in *Zac Efron* dreamy, but actually typical despite the array of attractive features. My brows were drawn together as I stood frozen for a moment, my hand on the handle of the door. He was too far away from me to see his future death, but there was something. A familiar image flashed across my thoughts, like a bit of *déjà vu*. I tried to hold onto the image as my breath caught in my throat. The image slowly washed away before I could see what it was, and I was left struggling to make sense of it. The boy slammed the locker door and I snapped back to reality. He turned away from me and walked down the hall, unaware of my gawking existence.

I shook my head and opened the door to homeroom, walking in as everyone stared. Their eyes reflected the judgment I was sure was in their heads. My breathing stopped.

"You're late, Ms. Taylor." Mrs. West glared at me over her bifocals. She motioned me to sit. I scanned the room, finding Wes as I exhaled with relief. I quickly made my way toward him, sitting down at the desk he had saved for me.

"*You made it,*" he whispered. "And just in time for the prom committee to preach." He rolled his eyes. "Why do they insist on making us get involved? Besides, it's like, *months away.*"

I nodded, taking out a piece of paper and eyeing the list of less-than-essential prom notes on the board. I blew at a strand of hair that had obstructed my vision. I was already anxious for lunch.

Wes:

I threw my lunch down on the table, startling Jane out of a trance.

"Hey, Jane. I've been meaning to apologize about the other night."

I sat down, rummaging through the lunch my foster mother had packed. I'd fallen asleep on the couch while we were watching the movie *Constantine*. I felt like an idiot for sleeping on Jane's shoulder, but she didn't seem to care, which was a good sign. My bouts of exhaustion were part of this illness I seemed to have. Perhaps it was cancer, here to put me out of my misery.

Jane set a carton of milk on the table.

"I can't believe they're making us eat outside. It's *raining.*" She glanced at me and then looked to the sky.

Jane had changed the subject as she always did. I felt my heart sink.

"Seems strange for this time of year," I added, forgetting what I'd said before, knowing it was a failed attempt to find some significance in what we had done.

Jane refused to talk about us. After what had happened this summer, I figured I'd finally had her. The next day, though, Jane acted like it never happened. Even now, nothing was said.

"Yeah." Jane's voice was sad, like it always was. "It's been raining more and more every year, and earlier too."

I swallowed a bite of sandwich, staring at her long lashes as I chewed. Jane's eyes were locked on the table, her finger scratching at the wood.

"Are you still... you know... *having nightmares?*" I asked, afraid to bring up the subject.

Jane's gaze rose from the table and met mine. Her voice was low as she responded.

"Yeah. Everyday for the past ten years. Why stop now, right?" Her voice had an annoyed edge.

I took another bite of burger.

"Have you told your mother?" It was a dumb question. I knew Jane didn't tell her mother anything—she only told me.

Jane snorted. "No. She'll probably just blow me off like she always does."

I dropped the subject.

A loud giggle erupted from across the courtyard and we both looked in the direction of the sound, recognizing the tone. Jane shook her head as we watched Emily flirt with a senior by the basketball courts.

She snorted. “Great.”

I pressed my lips together, feeling sorry for Jane. “I can’t believe Emily’s talking to him. He’s probably the biggest druggie in school. *What is she thinking?*” I looked at Jane for affirmation.

Jane glared at me, probably disliking that I’d emphasized the druggie part. I’d said the wrong thing.

She picked up her milk, taking a sip through the straw. “Well, looks like I have my work cut out for me. So much for senior year.” Jane dropped her milk to the table as the carton slapped against the wood. “Hey, I have an idea.” Her eyes were suddenly wide, a smirk lighting across her rosy cheeks.

I groaned, knowing it involved me somehow.

“You should date her, Wes.” She began to nod. “Yeah. If you could get her to fall in love, I bet you could get her to snap out of this phase she’s in.” Her long brown hair got caught in the wind, exposing her face. Her skin was soft, her doe eyes filled with so much life. She was beautiful when she was happy.

I laughed. “Stop teasing, Jane.”

Jane wasn’t laughing.

“You were serious?” I felt my heart continue to crumble. That was a brush off I couldn’t deny, and for a moment, I stopped breathing.

“Yeah, Wes. Come on, you’re handsome. You could get any girl you wanted.”

“Yeah…” my voice trailed off but she didn’t notice.

Jane sensed my lack of enthusiasm. “Or maybe we could find someone else to do it.”

She began to scan the crowd for eligible boys with a desire to save a troubled mind—Emily’s mind—if there even was such a guy. Then again, I guess I was that sort of guy, but only when the troubled teen was Jane.

I watched her like a pathetic loser. There were a million cute girls at this school, but everyone paled in comparison to Jane. My hand began to hurt again, starting as a tingle and slowly growing into a deep burn. I rubbed it with an obvious grimace on my face.

It was then that Jane took my hand and began to massage it. I instantly forgot about the pain, now focusing on the way it felt to have her hand touching mine.

“Acting up again?” She had a concerned look on her face, and I allowed myself to pretend that it was linked to love.

I nodded, my heart beating so fast that words became hard to form.

She let go. “Do you think you’ll be okay for wrestling this year?”

I loved to wrestle, just about as much as I loved Jane. I liked that it kept me in shape. I always thought that if I looked hot enough, she would like me more, but it didn’t seem to work that way.

“Yeah,” I tried to act tough. “It’s nothing.” In truth, it began to hurt so bad that my hand finally went numb. I quickly tried to think of an excuse to leave, now feeling the burn creep up my arm. “I’m going to go get another carton of milk. Need anything?”

Jane shook her head, looking down at the table once more. “No, I may just go to the library. I don’t think I can handle watching my sister doing her deeds first hand.”

I glanced back to where Jane’s sister was still standing with the senior by the courts, just in time to see him hand Emily something in an orange bottle and grab her ass. “I see what you mean.” I winced as I said it, the pain now causing my head to spin.

We both stood, parting ways as she headed to the library and I headed to my car.

I needed to get out of here.

Max:

There she was.

If I had a heart beat, I’m pretty sure it would have stopped. I leaned against the wall, watching her as she sat at the table in the courtyard. I really didn’t know why I felt so drawn to her, but I knew it was something I couldn’t ignore. They had warned me of the danger in the connection between what I was and what she was, but I ignored them. With each passing year, my link to her only grew more apparent. I understand now why they say it’s bad to indulge in the feeling. It consumes you, becomes the only thing you can think of—*love*.

I knew I'd broken the rules with Jane, but something about her had been different. When I'd touched her soul, something happened inside my own. I had to spare her despite the shadows with which it left her.

She laughed, wind blowing through her brown hair as it did when she was in her dreams. There, she was confident, but here, I saw she was dwarfed and sad—a small spark of the person I knew. I could show her how to live again—she could show me.

My gaze skimmed across her form. She was tall, her brown eyes just as wide and curious as they were when she was a child, when they stared into mine. She had a constellation of freckles on either cheek, mixing with the natural rose of her glow. She always saw herself as a black swan, but to me, she was anything but.

I licked my lips and ran a hand through my hair. I knew it was dangerous to let her see me, but something told me it was the right thing to do—it was finally the right time to do it. She needed someone to comfort her. She needed to know that *I* was here to comfort her. Someday, she would come to remember me and what I'd done.

I focused on her chest, hearing her heart beat—her breathing like a gentle wind in my ear. I was attuned to her every movement, her every lungful of air, as though they were my own to protect. We were bound by the sacrifice I'd made to save her life. I relished the feeling of her existence inside me—a feeling I'd long forgotten.

Jane stood then, and left the table. Her friend left as well. He walked in my direction, his steps heavy and his face creased with pain. I looked from him and back to her.

I clenched my fists and took a step forward, wanting to follow her. I took one step before I froze. The sound of her heart was suddenly silenced by a deep ringing in my ears. I winced, hiding the pain as it made my head pound. The familiar metallic smell of blood wafted into my nostrils, making me want to cough.

I turned my attention back to her friend as he drew close. I hid the pain from him, watching him as our eyes locked. Both our paces slowed as we passed shoulder to shoulder, staring each other down, knowing what each other had felt. My arm began to ache as his soreness pulsed through me. I felt shame then, and suffering.

He finally passed, and as he got further away, the metallic smell faded along with the pain. I leaned against a wall to regroup. I hadn't expected that. It had been years since I'd come across it. I'd thought that they were gone from the area. It was then that I remembered what they had left behind. I should have known better than to forget them—forget *him*.

I turned and looked back as I rounded the corner, our eyes meeting one last time before he slid away. I took a deep breath, the bones in my back crackling as I stood straight. He was young, I could tell from the pain, possibly still unaware of the power inside him. I blinked a few times, already concerned.

I walked on, following Jane instead. As I drew closer, her heart began to beat in my chest once more. I kept my distance, though. Not yet.

Another friend was waiting for her.

Jane:

I walked across the lawn with the milk carton in hand when someone grabbed me from around the corner, yanking me into the hall. I knew who it was as soon as their hand touched my skin, their foreseen death flashing across my mind. I yelped, trying to hold my balance as the milk fell from my hand. It hit the ground, splashing what was left onto the soles of my Converse.

I looked up, a sour expression on my face.

“Hey, Jane!” Liz was staring at me, her perfectly coiffed blond hair cascading down her back. “Did you get that reading done?” She blinked. I watched her long dark lashes flutter. They were so long I feared she'd blow me away.

I tried to press the images of her laying dead at the bottom of a lake out of my head. The story changed every day, depending on what was happening in her life at the time. The lake was a new one. I took note of it.

I swallowed hard, regrouping and rolling my eyes. Liz was another friend I couldn't seem to brush off. “Yeah. I got it done.” I pulled my backpack from my back, rummaging through its contents.

Liz was quite literally the only other person I conversed with. A long time ago, we had been best friends. We grew up having the same teachers through elementary school, but come junior high, we had grown apart. She was a cheerleader, and dubbed to be one of the best looking girls in school. She wore Dior makeup, and tanned regularly, leaving me looking like a pale speck of dust in comparison.

We hung out on weekends in private. She never wanted to be seen with me at school anymore, but I didn't care. She made my weekend chores more invigorating as she followed me around spouting gossip. I always figured I was the only one that really listened to her. I knew it was the only reason we were still friends, other than the fact I did her homework. At least she paid me.

I handed her the pile of book reports she was supposed to read and write about over the summer for 20th Century Lit.

“Great! *Here*,” she shoved a wad of money toward me—college fund. “Jane, I don’t know what I would do if I didn’t have a friend like you,” she squealed.

“*Fail?*” I muttered.

She didn’t seem to hear me. “So, this Saturday... do you want to hang out?” She blinked, her blue eyes glittering.

I tried to remember what it was I’d had to do on Saturday. In fact, I began to hope that I had something, just to avoid hanging out with her. *Who was I kidding?* I was a loser. “Yeah, sure.”

“Great!” she hissed, jumping slightly. “I need your opinion on the new kid. I want to try and reel that one in.” She winked, bringing one finger to her chin in thought.

My thoughts then went back to the boy I saw in the hall. “The new kid?” My brows were creased together, suddenly interested.

“Though, he could use a *makeover*,” she added, ignoring my question. I looked at her strangely, wondering how it was she had already caught up on all the gossip by lunch.

“*The newkid?*” I repeated, this time louder.

She rolled her eyes and began to swoon. “Yeah, the tall dark and *mysterious* one.” She bent down for dramatic effect, as though suddenly weak in the knees. “Have you seen him? Such a text book *hotty*.”

So, he really was new. “Yeah, I think I’ve seen him.”

Her smile got bigger—if that was even possible. “Yes! Wasn’t he totally the *tall dark and handsome* type, or what?”

I shook my head. She was being pathetic. “Yeah, sure, I guess. I only saw a glimpse of him, so—”

“Well, *anyway*.” She cut me off. “Pay attention this week, so we can gossip about it Saturday!” she squealed some more, shaking her hands with apparent excitement. “He’s *mine* by next week.” Her face changed to one of extreme determination. With that, she skipped off into the courtyard where a group of girls surrounded her, all vying to be her newest best friend.

I blinked away the disbelief, fanning my hand in an attempt to clear the air of her perfume. Not much changed in our town, and most of my class had known each other since first grade. It was also that fact that made the news of a new kid spread like wildfire. He was fresh meat thrown into a circle of boy-starved girls. I gave him until the end of the week; by then, Liz would surely have her claws into him. He’d be a whole new person. The mysterious boy that tickled my senses in the hall would no longer exist, replaced by some unfortunate jock. That was Liz’s talent.

I shook away the images of him. I’d given myself a moment to dream, but let’s face it—that moment was over. I made my way to the library and slinked inside. The dusty smell of old books wafted into my nostrils, washing away all the stress and worry.

Emily:

I gave the unnamed senior a kiss on the cheek. It was no big deal. I liked men to stare. I turned then, walking away with the bottle in my hand, feeling as two pills jingled inside. He had given them to me for free. *I loved free*. Not a penny lost this time around. I was certain that here, there were many more dealers I could convince just as easily as him.

My hand shook as I popped the top off the bottle, fishing inside for a pill. With haste, I threw it in my mouth and swallowed, stashing the other away in my pocket for later. I let a breath release from my lungs, my shoulders dropping.

Alexis was leaning against the wall up ahead. I stopped, leaning beside her. “Scored once today already,” I remarked.

She pursed her lips with jealousy. “Lucky.”

I laughed, pulling the crimson lipstick from my pocket and applying a new layer. I prayed the pills would work fast so that I could drown out the thoughts in Alexis’ head—mostly nasty thoughts about how much she envied me.

I shut my eyes in pain, pressing my lips together. Opening my eyes, I saw my sister walk toward the library. I scanned for Wes, seeing him leave the courtyard and enter the lot. I watched him, curious about why he seemed to be in a rush. I wasn’t lying when I thought he was hot. *He was*. In truth, I was a little confused as to what was wrong with my sister.

It was my secret that I liked him. I always had. Growing up, he was the cute older kid, but he was too infatuated with Jane to ever notice me. I remember watching them as they played basketball, or sat in the yard. I even daydreamed about it as though it were me.

I told no one.

It was embarrassing.

The Vicoden started to seep into my blood like a rush of cold water. I exhaled, the tension in my muscles melting away, along with the tight feeling in my bones. The whispers in my head began to silence and I could no longer hear Alexis' thoughts. I looked to the ground, finally feeling relaxed for the first time today. Finally, I felt normal.

Alexis crooned beside me, and I looked up.

"*Look at him.* I bet he sells." She stood tall, perking her chest out and smacking her lips.

I didn't have to ask who she was speaking of as my eyes met her target. He was walking across the courtyard with his hands in his pockets, wearing a black T-shirt that accentuated his chest and muscles. There was a strange tattoo blazoned on both his forearms. I tried to concentrate on his thoughts, but they were faded and strange. I attributed it to the slowly seeping Vicoden.

"He doesn't look like he's from here," I remarked, admiring his bad boy image.

Most kids from around here came from rich families. Trouble to them was choosing in which room to watch their flat screen TV. It made for a good pool of prescription-drugged mothers and fathers that didn't seem to notice when their meds went missing. They likely assumed they forgot them somewhere—*yet again*. It was a flaw in society, an unspoken sin that it seemed everyone here was committing. There was no lack of medication, and no lack of people wanting them. It was sick—*but I was one of them*.

When my father died, he had left us with an insurance policy that kept our heads above water. We were one of the few exceptions to the wealthy gene pool of Glenwood High.

"Think he'll give me a freebie?" She smirked, brushing the hair from her face. Alexis had money, but she liked the thrill of the hunt and the challenge of getting drugs for free. She used it as her way to validate how beautiful she was.

I watched him disappear in the same direction my sister had—toward the library.

"Come on, *let's followhim*," she hissed, zeroing in on her newest prey.

Alexis grabbed my arm but my feet were planted. She spun around when I refused to move.

If I hadn't made it obvious already, I had a strange talent for hearing people's thoughts. I figured I was schizophrenic, but they were often so clear, that I couldn't deny hearing them. I didn't want to know what every student in school thought, especially when it came to the guys I hustled for drugs, but it didn't seem I had a choice.

I furrowed my brow, trying to concentrate on him. Though the ability to hear Alexis' thoughts had faded as the drugs did their job, his thoughts had suddenly come clear, like a dissipating fog. It wasn't as though he was any different than anyone else, at least not outwardly. What was different was the one thought that *had* made it through. He was thinking of *Jane*.

"Em, come on. What's wrong with you?"

I was frozen, the whispers repeating her name.

"Em-il-ly," Alexis sang. "What did you take? Tranquilizers or something? Come *on*." She yanked me once more. I finally gave in. "Geez. What's gotten into you?" She tossed her ink-black hair over her shoulder as she pulled my arm behind her. My feet were moving now, but I couldn't feel them.

Who was he?

Jane:

I found an empty table behind one of the library stacks and sat, putting my bag down beside me. I unzipped it and reached in, pulling a book from inside. Anxious to escape the day, I folded back the cover, bringing it to my nose as I breathed deeply. I loved the smell of books, and I loved the way they filled my head with images—images other than death.

Looking up, something caught my eye through the stack of books. I dropped the book into my lap, ducking down to see what it was. I narrowed my eyes, seeing the new kid enter the library as though looking for someone. I watched him, breathing quietly, afraid he could hear me.

I felt shameless as I stared. In truth, I was a little surprised to see him step foot in a library at all. The only boys I ever saw here had glasses thick enough to be considered bullet proof and GPA's fit for Harvard.

The images in my head began to surface and I shut my eyes, forcing them back. I saw a graveyard—*I sawhim there*. I didn't know *why* my mind always had to go to that place, but it was hard to prevent. With each person that got close enough, so followed a small glimpse of their death.

Everyone was different, and it changed frequently, like it had for Liz. Just this morning, when I saw her in my second period class, she had died from skin cancer, only to be replaced by the drowning incident at lunch. As I'd left the house, I saw my mother die of exhaustion and Emily die of a

drug addiction. It was hard to believe them to be omens when each was so fleeting. I always figured it was a result of my thoughts mixed with their actions at that particular moment.

My eyes shot open, not wanting to see any more of that scene. Instead, I shamelessly focused on the new kid's eyes, knowing that the stack hid me. They were dark blue, clear and deep, unlike anything I'd ever seen before. They reminded me of how death should feel—cold but releasing, like an ocean.

I shut my eyes again, envisioning this ocean and myself there. Opening my eyes again, I was disappointed to see he was gone. I glanced around, exhaling slowly before bringing the book up to my eyes, opening it to a random page and scrolling down. I tried my best to shrug it off, but I couldn't pay attention to the words as I read the same sentence at least five times, his outline still painted across my memory.

I heard the door to the library open once again, and I looked up, hoping it was him again. Emily and her stupid friend Alexis walked in instead. My heart sank. The pleasant images of the ocean in the new boy's eyes ceased as I became fixated on their unwelcomed presence. Alexis was looking around the room with a determined expression plastered on her face, clearly not here for the books.

What was it about this new boy that made every girl go so nuts? Surely there was no other valid explanation as to why she was here. I doubt she read, let alone turn a page.

I slammed the book shut and exhaled sharply. I grabbed my bag, stuffing the book inside as I shrugged my coat back on, finding my hopes for solidarity and peace destroyed. I stood and turned away from the stack of books, fuming. Why was everyone determined to spoil the only time I had to myself? Staring at my feet, I suddenly halted when a pair of brown leather shoes entered my line of vision. My eyes shot up, my mouth agape.

"Hi," he said.

Our eyes met—the ocean of blue washing over me. His voice was raspy, but in a seductive way that sent chills down my spine. The image of him in the graveyard rushed back, but what I found interesting was the noticeable fact that in my premonition, he still wasn't *dead*. My breathing stopped. He blinked, a smirk animating his face with the dimple I had noticed earlier.

"Er..." I stumbled over my words, though my head was eerily clear.

He said nothing.

"Uh..." I tried again, but no words came. As I stared, all I could think about was running away, but he was in my way. His long lean body blocked most of the aisle, one tattooed arm leaning against the stack. A lock of his hair came loose, sweeping into his face.

My eyes dropped, feeling my cheeks flush with dumbfounded embarrassment.

"Excuse me," I whispered, ducking my head and squeezing through the small space between him and the stacks. I walked away at a brisk pace, looking over my shoulder to see that he was following me with his eyes. Not watching where I was going—or caring, for that matter—I collided with another student.

"Ouch!" The person squealed, their death colliding with the other thoughts in my mind—*Alexis*.

I nearly screamed as I saw her dead face, repositioning my gaze to look at her alive one. Emily rolled her eyes, leaning against a nearby worktable. A boy with bulletproof glasses sat at the table, glaring at the three of us.

"*Alexis*," I hissed.

She shrugged me away from her as though I were a giant coodie.

"It's not my fault. You ran into *me*. You were the one not watching where you were going." Her voice was much louder than it needed to be.

My cheeks flushed a deeper shade of red. I didn't need this kind of attention. I looked to Emily, but she seemed distracted, almost disturbed by some thought brewing in her head. I watched her for a moment, wondering what was wrong with her. Her foot was shaking nervously, and I willed her to look at me so that I could determine if she was high.

I gave up, exhaling resignedly and grabbing her arm, although at first, she still refused to look at me. I shook her roughly, and our eyes finally met. Her pupils were dilated. My eyebrows pressed together with frustration. I pushed her away in disgust.

"*Emily*, it's the first day and already you're—" I stopped myself, realizing I was talking rather loudly.

Emily looked ashamed, but still nervous. She said nothing to me as she grabbed Alexis's arm. "*Let's go*," she murmured to her.

Alexis continued to glare, trying to intimidate me, which was laughable. She was so frail and thin, that there was no way she could ever win in a fight. I stood my ground, seeing her as nothing but a bad influence.

"Alexis, let's go." Emily pulled her away from me, causing Alexis to stumble backwards. They made their way to the door.

I turned and leaned against a nearby stack, placing my forehead against the spines of the books—trying to regroup—trying to calm down. I could feel the glares of every person in the room.

Why me?

Max:

I watched Jane as she stood with her sister, spying between the books with nervous energy.

Why didn't I say something more?

I felt her heart racing, her body heat rising. She looked around her, her brown eyes scanning the room. Her sister left her, and she leaned against a stack of books, looking so alone—*feeling* alone. She stayed there for a moment before adjusting the bag on her back and walking briskly toward the door.

I shook my head, angry with myself for acting so stupid, so juvenile. Almost one hundred years, and still I hadn't gotten past the awkward feeling that comes with being a teen—

"Nice try."

The voice forced an instant flash of anger into my heart. I shut my eyes. I'd been hoping he wouldn't come, but I was naïve to think he'd finally leave me alone. I turned to face him, my jaw clenched.

"I knew it wouldn't take you long," I seethed.

He smirked, his green eyes accompanied by a dark afterglow.

"I could never pass up a chance to play with my *dear* brother." He sneered, his eyes sharp and his black hair spiked accordingly. He looked over my shoulder. "So, who is *she*?"

"Gregory, it's nice to see you." I addressed him with a nod, hoping I could avoid the question he'd asked.

Greg laughed under his breath, leaning against a stack of books. "Nice to see me? *You're pathetic.*"

It had been ten years since I'd seen him last. When I'd left Glenwood Springs, I'd gone to a place he didn't care to follow. Naturally, he hadn't changed much, except for the new hairstyle that left his once wavy black locks spiked.

"What do you want, Greg?"

He looked amused. "So, you like my hair?" He touched it. "I think it's a nice way to change things up. Keep it fresh and interesting for the ladies."

I stared blankly at him. "*What do you want?*" I repeated.

"Like I said, Max—to play." Greg tilted his head. "Looks like you've come back for *her*." He sighed. "So have I. Mostly because whatever interests you, dear brother, interests me. Plus, she is a bit of *unfinished business*."

"I saved her, Greg. You can't touch her anymore. I made sure of that," I snapped.

He laughed, acting calm. "Max. You know I'll find a way. You can't toy with fate. She was meant to *die*."

"You caused the accident. How is that not toying with fate? I saved her; she is mine to protect. You can not touch her." I threatened him.

"She shouldn't be alive, Max. You know that's against the rules."

I felt my teeth grind together. "Your crusade is without just cause. You tried to murder them without a valid reason. It's because of that that she should be allowed to *live*."

Greg laughed quietly. "I have to kill all of those we leave behind, Max. That is the balance of the Earth."

"Then why didn't you ever come back for Erik?" I challenged. Erik had been the reason I was here, *like this*, in the first place.

Gregory's black eyes glimmered with evil. "He's different. He was never supposed to be there, so there's no need to do any clean up."

"*You murdered our parents*. You don't care about anyone but yourself."

Greg shrugged. "You're just upset that I didn't care about *you*. Erik just got in the way. He shouldn't have been there that day."

I was surprised by his remark. It was as though he was admitting that he cared about our little brother after all. Even if he had once almost killed him, he claims now that it was an accident that Erik was even there. I never figured he had the heart.

I watched the dark green afterglow of his eyes, a telltale sign of what he was—a Black Angel. Greg had defied the Heavens, turning to the side that wanted to drag every human soul to Hell. I, on the other hand, I wanted justice, peace and equality. There was no need for this separation of the

supernatural and the human. Regardless of what was right, Greg was evil now. His heart burned, and he no longer understood rationality. There was nothing left of the human for whom I once cared. There was nothing left of the brother that still shares my blood.

"She is not harming anyone," I spat, trying to remain quiet. "Her fate here will not affect the balance of the world. Jane has a simple soul."

Greg narrowed his eyes. "Doesn't matter." He toyed with the spine of a book on the shelf beside us.

I grumbled. "And what about the *magick*?"

I saw my brother looked confused.

"There is more here than you think," I continued.

I thought of the boy I'd seen with Jane. He was turning, growing into what his parents left for him to become. I knew that with him here, Greg would have a harder time getting to Jane. His magick was an ancient kind of magick, bred into his blood for generations.

"You can't deny that magick is coming back to the area, Greg, no matter what you do to try and stop it."

Greg looked defeated by my words. "In time, it too will be eradicated on Earth."

I shook my head. "This magick is dangerous, Greg. I've dealt with it before. This is not the kind you used to know when you were young. But, luckily for me, all the magick here is on my side." I lied, but I knew that if the boy understood, he would help me in the end. "Those touched by that kind of magick are strong, perhaps even stronger than you."

"And far stronger than *you*, Brother." He smirked.

I wasn't afraid of what was here. Glenwood had always been a place of magick. I shook my head, my anger growing tired of his games. "Stay away from her, Greg."

Greg pressed his lips together, seeming to conform to my wishes. "But nothing keeps me from her family, Max. Remember that."

A half smile crept across his face as he faded into the air like a cloud of smoke. As quickly as he came, he was gone, leaving nothing but a feather that lingered in the space before me, pitch black as it spiraled to the ground.

Emily:

I looked back as Alexis and I stormed away from Jane and the library, my grip on her arm tight. I hit the handle of the door with the butt of my palm, throwing it open. We exited into the hall, the fluorescent lights pouring down on us.

Alexis laughed. "You're sister is such a nerd. She's so easy to frighten." Her footsteps were sloppy as I continued to drag her.

I glared at Alexis. "Leave her alone," I said in her defense. I squeezed my eyes shut and opened them. *What was I doing? Why was I defending her?*

Alexis shrugged away from me and we halted in the hall. She crossed her arms against her chest, discontented by the fact that I'd side with Jane. "Don't tell me you're going soft, Em."

I scratched my head as I pushed the hair from my face, annoyed. "I'm not *soft*," I retorted.

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes before her face changed completely. She grinned wide. "Did you see the new guy?" Alexis looked over her shoulder toward the library.

I was shocked by her ability to change the mood of a conversation so quickly.

"He was standing by your sister in that aisle." She laughed. "He may be cute, but he sure has bad taste." A snort passed her lips.

I was hearing her words, but none of it was registering. I was too confused, too clouded. The Vicoden I took earlier was numbing my ability to hear her thoughts, and I was thankful for that. I didn't need to hear about how big she thought his *stuff* was.

"Hello! *Earth. To. Emily!*" Alexis shook me.

I snapped out of it. "Yeah, bad taste." I wasn't sure exactly what I was agreeing to.

Alexis crooned once more. "Maybe we won't have to worry about him, though. *Check this one out.*"

I looked up, seeing a boy just like the other, though not identical, walking toward us down the hall from the library. His green eyes were gazing beyond us, as though we didn't exist. He had an identical dark grey T-shirt on, but his jeans were a noticeable upgrade. He, too, had tattoos on both forearms, much like the other boy. They had to be brothers. There was no other explanation.

Another sickening wash of fear drowned my heart. I stopped breathing. The whispers that filled my head were screaming in agony, this new boy's mind a mess of pain. He glanced at me and smirked. I gasped, seeing danger in his eyes as he drew close.

"*What—*" My voice echoed in my head, as though my ears had been stuffed with cotton.

"Wow, he's way *cuter* than the other one. Better dressed, too. *They must be related.*" She was whispering, or at least that's what it sounded like over the screams in the boy's head. He was about to pass us, the thoughts growing louder. I saw Alexis strike a pose beside me, attempting to attract his attention.

The boy smirked then, his expression nonchalant. He winked.

I felt disgusted and intrigued at the same time, completely confused by the mess of emotion that was balling up inside my chest.

He passed us as though in slow motion. Sweat gathered on my brow, the pain of the screams resonating through my very core. I shivered, refusing to turn and watch as he walked away. When the whispers finally faded, and he was gone from view, my shoulders sank. I was able to relax. Ambient sound rushed back to me, leaving my ears numbed.

What was that?

Wes:

I was gripping the steering wheel, my knuckles white. Sweat dripped down my brow and hit my arm. The splash of it was magnified in my ears. A sharp pain pulsed through my chest, my heart racing. *What was wrong with me?* I tried to move my arm but it was frozen on the wheel. I took another moment to try and relax, but the feeling only seemed to expand.

Attempting to distract myself, I thought about the new kid I'd passed on my way out. For a split second, the pain inside me had been relieved, as though he'd absorbed it. My head had become clear, but there was another feeling that had replaced the pain—undeniable and overwhelming *hate*. I'd never felt so much hate. And the way he smelled—*like ash*. I felt him. I felt his soul, but there was nothing but... *ash*. The chill that had pulsed through me was hard to ignore.

Who was he?

My grip on the wheel released. I felt my forehead; it was still burning. I wasn't out of the woods yet. I pulled the visor down, flipping up the mirror to look at myself. My pupils were dilated, their shape wavering. A metallic flavor filled my mouth. I wiped it with the back of my hand, seeing blood stain my shirt. I looked back in the mirror, seeing blood now drip from my nose. I needed to get away from the school, and fast.

I wiped my nose on my sleeve, struggling to put the keys into the ignition as my hands trembled. The engine turned over as it roared to life, silencing the painful cry that escaped from my mouth. My bones felt like rusted steel as I moved them. I slammed my hand down on the shifter, throwing it in reverse as I pressed down on the gas. My tires burned against the pavement, releasing a plume of smoke that engulfed my car. I shifted once more, emerging from the cloud and speeding down the aisle of cars.

Once out of the lot, I turned toward home, not knowing where else to go. I could feel the warm blood dripping from my nose, my attempts to blot it on my sleeve useless. I looked down, mesmerized by the deep crimson. I forced my gaze away, keeping my eyes on the road as my vision began to blur.

Finding I could go no further, I turned onto the shoulder. I quickly scanned my surroundings. There was an old forest road just to my right that led back to an abandoned steam cave where students would escape to make-out. I drove on the shoulder until I reached it, hoping it would help hide me. I turned in, driving a few yards further before stopping the car all together. As the trees surrounded me, I felt safe. I shut the car off, leaning back against the seat.

I took a deep breath, feeling things begin to cool. My eyelids drifted shut. There was something about the forest that brought relief, the branches like open arms. I heard a hawk cry out, the sound muffled by the walls of the car. I opened my eyes, peering through the windshield. The hawk sat in a nearby tree, watching me. It tilted its head from one side to the other. Its feathers were a dark brown, its eyes like solid amber. It stayed there with me until I fell asleep, watching me like a friend.

Even in my dreams, the hawk remained.

Jane:

By Wednesday afternoon, I was wishing that summer wasn't over and I could go back to sleeping in and spending my whole day holed up in my room. The events of Monday seemed to bleed into Tuesday, and then today. The rumors of my *spazstic* act in the library had spread, and if I thought it was bad enough being a no-name loser, it was worse being a *known* loser.

I sat on a ledge by the parking lot, waiting for my mother to pick us up. Wes's car wasn't in the lot or at his house. I was growing concerned. I hadn't seen him since lunch on Monday, and I began to wonder if he was finally fed up with me.

Emily stood by the fence to the football field fifty yards away. She was alone. I observed her, still concerned about her behavior in the library. Her arms were crossed against her chest in a standoffish pose, her ears plugged with headphones. Since then, Emily had seemed no worse than normal, which was a relief, but still, she worried me. Her death omen had recently changed from the drug overdose I'd seen all week, to a scene of murder that seemed to be a result of a jealous lover.

I shivered, looking away. The clouds in the sky shrouded us in a wet chill, leaving me hugging my arms to my chest.

Mother was late, as she always was. I heard the doors behind me open and close with a familiar whine. I didn't bother to look, afraid the chill would reach my skin. Footsteps walked down the path to the parking lot, long and heavy. I heard them turn and walk toward me, but still I did not bother to lift my gaze, not willing to deal with yet another vision of death. A dark figure arrived at my side, coming to a halt and flooding my peripherals as it sat on the wall beside me. My thoughts transformed, showing me the same graveyard, with the same *undead* new boy.

I looked up at him with a shocked expression, seeing he was now invading my personal space. His gaze was fixed straight ahead of him.

"Sorry about before. I didn't mean to scare you off." His voice was as low and raspy as it had been in the library, but also strained. "I didn't mean to act so..." his words trailed.

Creepy? I thought.

He adjusted himself on the wall. "Uh... *creepy*."

I raised my brows, his answer a perfect match to my own. I took a moment to gather my emotions, not wanting a wordless repeat of what had happened in the library.

"It's alright," I murmured.

A confident smirk lifted the corners of his mouth, revealing the dimple on his left cheek. I looked down into my lap, still watching him from the corner of my eye. His jeans today were the same no-name brand, faded grey from too much washing. There was a blue stain on one leg, something resembling paint. His hands were propped at his sides against the cement of the wall, the pale olive color of his skin contrasting with the ocean in his eyes.

He cleared his throat. "I didn't mean to be that way. I think we got off on the wrong foot." He paused, as though discouraged by his own words. He exhaled and reformed his angle of approach, his hands gripping the wall we sat on. "I'm Max," he said simply.

His eyes met mine, a wave of emotion washing over me. I struggled to comprehend them, but in our present position beside each other—*close* beside each other—it was impossible to make sense of anything.

Max's lips were still curled. I noticed small flecks of silver in his irises that I hadn't before. Only in his current proximity could they ever be seen. They were like white caps on a tormented sea. He ran a hand through his hair, exposing his tattoo with the movement. I licked my lips, afraid to say anything.

I glanced beyond him toward Emily; she was watching us, her arms draped at her sides and her posture stiff. Her face was showing some of the same frustration it had in the library. I blinked away from her and looked back at Max, wondering what was going on in her head.

I studied his face for a moment, trying to read his expression. He was handsome, and I began to wonder why he was talking to me at all. His brown hair looked effortless, and though his clothes were nameless, it didn't steal from his admittedly edgy image. He watched me, as though entertained, though I'd said nothing at all.

Max took a deep breath and glanced toward the lot.

"People here are a little bit different, aren't they?" He chuckled. I could tell he was attempting to get me to talk. "They sure aren't ashamed of staring." He lifted one brow.

I felt my cheeks flush, wondering if he meant that to be aimed at me.

He shook his head, his piercing eyes catching mine as my stomach tugged. "At least you seem to have your head on straight."

I couldn't help but allow my mouth to curl at the corners. So it wasn't directed at me at all—he was confiding.

"You're normal," he added, his gaze steady.

I finally let one laugh escape my lips—if he only knew. I pressed my lips together. "I hardly consider myself normal." My voice came out slow and measured. I felt strange beside him, almost protected, though his image conveyed anything but.

His face became thoughtful, seemingly engrossed by my response. We sat in silence for a moment, and I wondered where he came up with the notion that I was normal when I was anything but—everybody knew that.

I shivered as a breeze passed by us, rubbing my hands together in an attempt to keep warm.

“So, you’re new?” I regretted the words the minute they came out of my mouth.

He nodded. “Um—*yeah*.”

I cursed to myself. Of course he was new. That was a stupid question. I swallowed back my nerves. The problem was—I’d never had anyone like him talk to me before. The best experience I’d ever gotten was Wes, and though he was cute, he had a face I knew as well as Emily’s.

“Where are you from?” I pressed another, better question.

Max shrugged. “Denver,” he said rather vaguely. Denver was a large place. I waited, wondering if he’d divulge more information, but nothing was forthcoming.

“Oh.” I paused. “So, what brings you here?” I couldn’t see why anyone would want to be here. Glenwood Springs was isolated from the rest of the world. It was a town that teemed with one annoying tourist after another, all vying to dip their toes in our natural hot springs.

He looked at me, his eyes scanning mine as though fascinated by my very existence. “Family,” he added, another one word answer. He looked away, his brows suddenly dipping in frustration.

An awkward silence fell over us. My eyes followed the line of his jaw to his ear where the freckle I’d noticed on Monday lived. I slid my gaze down his neck to his chest. He was wearing a black T-shirt, and I began to wonder how in the world he wasn’t cold. I looked at his hands and his flawless skin. My eyes trailed back up his arms. His tattoos were different than any I’d seen before, written in a language I didn’t recognize. On each forearm was a long, feathery, singular wing stretched from his wrist to the crease of his elbow. If he held his two arms together, I deduced that they formed a set. I squinted, looking closer; they seemed to resemble a burn rather than a tattoo.

I could just imagine what my mother would think if I brought him home. She wasn’t a fan of desecrating your body with ink. I was supposed to be the good kid, the steady thinker. Spending my time with someone like Max was something my sister would do—certainly not me.

“I take that back—maybe you *do* stare.” Max looked sideways at me, humor lacing his voice.

If my cheeks weren’t red already, I was certain their color had deepened five shades. I quickly dropped my gaze.

“Oh... uh... *sorry*.” I began fidgeting with my hands.

“I guess it’s only fair,” he continued. “I’ve been staring, too.”

Another brisk wind blew across us and my teeth chattered. *Staring at me?* Is that what he meant? I changed the subject, uncomfortable with how personal it had become. “Aren’t you cold?”

Max looked surprised. “Uh, yeah—a *little*.” He rubbed his arms then, though he had no visible goose bumps.

I looked back toward the empty lot. “Are you waiting for a ride?”

He shook his head. “No.”

I creased my brow. He was sitting here for the soul purpose of talking to me, wasn’t he? But then why wasn’t he really saying anything?

“Oh.” I didn’t know what to say. I was a wreck, nervous and beside myself. What was it about him that reverberated through my every sense, my every ounce of being?

Max shrugged, meeting my eyes. They conveyed a sense of comfort. “Staring isn’t *always* a bad thing. Sometimes it’s just about enjoying the view—as you are.” He flashed me a challenging look.

My stomach tugged once more, fluttering with butterflies. “I’m not *staring*,” I protested, knowing that was a lie.

He nodded in a way that told me he also knew that was a lie. “It’s alright. You can stare. I just don’t like it when anyone else does.”

I pouted.

His face was filled with the delight of torturing me. “You’re cute when you’re angry.”

I laughed.

He smirked. “But you’re cuter when you’re happy.”

I wiped the smile off my face and shook my head, finding him, if anything, refreshingly different, not to mention mysterious. He was a man of few words, yet it didn’t make me think he lacked confidence. His outward body language and quick, witty comments had squashed that notion. But even with all that, it still wasn’t what I found so attractive about him—there was something *else*. I thought for a moment, feeling the way his very presence felt detached from the world, yet attached to me.

I saw my mother driving down the road then. I quit dwelling on details and made a move to stand, thinking that the best thing I could do for myself was stay away from him. He conjured a feeling inside me that I didn’t want to have toward someone like him. He stood as well.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Max.” My hands fluttered nervously at my sides. I didn’t know whether I should try to shake his hand or not, so I shoved them into the pocket of my sweater instead. It was best to come across as someone that didn’t want trouble, or whatever he spelled-out, in my life.

“You, too, Jane. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow.” He rocked back on his heels, giving me one last smile before he turned and walked away, leaving me teeming with shock in his wake. I watched him—or rather *gawked* at him—taking in his long stride and slender back. Emily silhouetted his outline, her mouth agape.

I finally pulled my gaze away and stepped off the curb. My brows were sewn together in disbelief. I tilted my head, my mother driving up in front of me. I grasped the door handle and clicked it open.

Had I told him my name?

Emily:

I was tired of waiting for mother after school. *Where was Wes?* He was supposed to drive us, but he’d disappeared from the face of the Earth for the last few days.

I leaned back against the fence, my eyes fixed on an ant that was running through the grass. It was then that I felt my heart begin to burn with a familiar twang. My whole face contorted as voices began to whisper in my head—*soft* voices.

I finally looked up, knowing what had been triggering those particular whispers all week. As I suspected, *he* was there. My attention narrowed, inspecting this brother, the first one I had seen and the one that always seemed to be thinking of *Jane*.

The whispers that surrounded him were nothing like what I heard around the other new kid—much calmer, and a far cry from the shrill screaming that left me paralyzed every time the other walked by. Something was definitely different about this blue-eyed brother, but I couldn’t decide what. It didn’t make him any less terrifying, but at least it was bearable when he brushed past me in the halls.

He walked down the path from the school toward Jane, determination marking his every step. His thoughts grew louder as he approached, and they really were all about Jane.

I narrowed my eyes and analyzed him, feeling protective of my sister. I know it seemed as though I didn’t give a *rat’s ass* what happened to Jane, but in truth, I did. I wasn’t as cold-hearted as she thought, just distracted by the simple fact that I’d always heard her thoughts.

Since he was clearly unconcerned by me, I shamelessly took note of his every feature, sizing him up in case I’d have to explain him to the cops one day. He had blackish-brown hair, just like his brother, but something was a lot less sinister in the blue of his eyes.

No one had yet confirmed the fact that they were brothers at all, but I’d heard enough in the workings of their minds to suspect it. They were just so outwardly different from each other. This brother wore boring clothes, seeming to display the fact he came from a less than wealthy family, but then his alleged brother wore expensive designer duds. It didn’t add up.

Then there was the fact of their cars. As far as I knew, the other brother had no car at all. In fact, I had no idea how he got around, and it perplexed me. This brother, though, had a car. He drove a black Land Rover Defender 90. Now, this is where I really get hung up. I know for a fact that those cars are rather rare, and that they’re not exactly *cheap*, no matter how banged up they seem.

This is where I come up with my theory: Perhaps the one brother chose to spend his allowance on clothes, while this brother decided to blow it all on a hunk of steel.

I dropped my hands to my sides and clenched my fists. No matter what the difference between the two, I still didn’t trust him. There was something dark that surrounded them both, an air of violence and death. He sat next to Jane, and I tried as hard as I could to remain calm. Jane held a similar darkness, and her thoughts were always filled with pain, but that didn’t mean she should confide in this *creep*.

I watched her eyes move to his face, the pain she endured every moment she lived clearly reflected in them. Her suffering was because of the accident, and my somewhat unconventional attempts to make her get past it hadn’t worked. I could see what she did, and admittedly it was strange, but when compared with the fact that I could see them to begin with, made us both strange. I hadn’t bothered to tell her I knew. I didn’t want her knowing about *me*. I knew she worried enough as it was.

I thought back to the remark I’d made this morning in the car. I knew it was cruel to comment about our father’s death as though it hadn’t affected me, but I thought that if I made it seem like no big deal, she would snap out of this dreary trance and be happy. I narrowed my eyes, watching him as he spoke to her. Jane’s head was facing forward now, her eyes fixed on the ground. Her cheeks began to flush then, and she laughed.

The laughter echoed in my head like a far away and forgotten sound. I rarely saw her laugh, even with Wes. I stared at her beauty in that moment, and it was as though I was seeing her for the first time. My curiosity grew. *Who was this stranger?* And how was it he could make her laugh? The dark air around her seemed to change to a lighter shade of grey. Confused, I tried to decide whether to rush over there and scare him off, or wait here and allow the happiness in her to grow. God knows she deserved it.

I grumbled, finding myself torn. I looked away from them, seeing Mother’s car crest the hill. I pushed away from the fence, planning to storm up to

Jane and pull her away. As I thought this, the boy stood, walking away from her before I even got the chance.

He walked in my direction but my eyes remained focused on Jane. Her face was filled with excitement, like a girl falling in love for the first time. I gawked at her, wondering why she would allow him to be in her company when she knew so little about him. Besides, I knew our mother would never approve, especially when it came to the tattoos.

He was close to me now, and just as he passed, I finally allowed myself to look. He glanced down at me, giving me a polite nod, followed by a confident yet friendly wink. I glared at him, my mouth pursed with anger. Was that supposed to make me trust him? Because it sure wasn't working...

When he was safely out of earshot, I crouched low.

"Jane," I hissed. My attention turned to her as she opened the car door. "*What are you doing?*"

She rolled her eyes at me. "What are you on, Em?" She demanded.

I was just trying to be nice, but she had to hit me with that. I clammed up.

Jane snorted. "You're pathetic."

I felt my jaw grind. I was just trying to protect her. "Nothing is more pathetic than *you*." I spat bitterly, the words forming on my lips before I could stop them. "You're hopeless. He just pities you. That's the only reason he even talked to you in the first place."

My mouth continued to spew things I didn't want to say. I couldn't help it. I didn't want to hate her, but she didn't understand what I went through, what I *heard*.

Nobody did.

Wes:

The light in her room flicked on, beaming through the blinds and onto the wall of my room. I sat up in bed, feeling better after lying in the dark for close to three hours. I looked at the clock, seeing it was just past midnight. I'd been sneaking around for the past few days, hiding out of fear that someone would notice how sick I was. I left the house before the sun came up—retreating back to the woods where I simply slept in my car—and came home well after dark. My foster parents hadn't cared, but seeing they were elderly, they weren't really all there as it was.

I rolled over, looking across the room and through the blinds. I saw movement in Jane's room. I sat up, squinting through the slender openings as Jane looked into a mirror on the back of her door.

I winced, trying to stretch my aching muscles. I grabbed the almost-empty bottle of Aspirin off the side table, wishing it were something stronger. I popped the top, rolling the last four from inside. There was a stale glass of water I'd gotten yesterday sitting beside it. I popped the remaining pills in my mouth, drinking the musty water with my nose plugged. I let out a contented sigh, placing the glass back on the side table as water dripped from my chin. I looked back toward Jane.

Our rooms were across the alley from each other, and since we were little, we would write notes and tape them to the window. It had been a while since she'd left me anything, and I attributed it to the dent in our now failing friendship—or whatever it was. I watched her eyes, seeing her look through the mirror toward my window, but she couldn't see me through the blinds. I often observed her, feeling drawn to her every move.

In this part of Glenwood Springs, each townhouse was lined close to the other, trees and plants engulfing most of the yards. The neighborhood was meant to house recreational skiers during the winter months, but being that Jane and I didn't come from wealthy families, we lived here too. The upside was that during summer, no one was around except those that also liked to hike and explore the steam caves.

I slowly moved out of bed, hearing as every joint in my body cracked. The owl outside chortled, the same owl I'd heard for the past week. I shuddered. Owls were an omen of death, and I couldn't help but think it was warning me.

The shirt I was wearing fit tighter than it ever had. I tried to pull the hem over the length of my stomach, but it wouldn't go. My body was growing at an alarming rate, like a second growth spurt, though I really didn't need one.

I looked sideways at myself in the mirror that was tilted against the wall. Despite what was happening, I enjoyed the way I was changing. I'd always been the runt throughout middle school, though it was handy when it came to wrestling. Being short had given me a bulked up advantage, as well as speed.

I stood as tall as my muscles would allow. I had to be close to six feet now. I ducked to see my height in the mirror. My stomach grumbled as I did. I was starving again, like I hadn't eaten in days though it seemed like it was all I was doing.

I shuffled closer to the window, grabbing the chair from my desk. I pulled it toward me and sat, hooking my fist under my chin.

Jane pulled her long brown hair from her face, her skin pale and her eyes drawn. She looked tired, like she'd slept about as well as I had. She

moved and sat on her bed, staring into her hands. I watched as her chest rose and fell, breathing steadily. I groaned with pain as another wave of soreness pulsed through my muscles. I rubbed my arm, massaging the bruised tissue beneath.

I looked down at a particularly tender spot near my elbow, seeing the mauve of the bruise peaking through the skin. Whatever was happening to me was getting worse. My foster mother thought I was just growing, but at this point, I began to wonder if it wasn't something chronic, something I'd gotten from my parents that I wouldn't know about. I was due to see the doctor next week, but I was beginning to question if I'd even make it that long.

I saw Jane once again move from the corner of my eye. I diverted my attention back to her, squinting through the blinds. She grabbed something off the floor and brought it into her lap. It was her drawing book. She had books and books of drawings that she hid under her bed. Only I knew because I watched her. She pushed herself against the headboard and began to sketch. Her brows were fraught, her energy seeping through her hands and onto the page.

I wanted to know what it was that she drew, and what it was she saw. Though we were best friends, it was something she'd never shared with me. It hurt to know that, but I respected her privacy.

At least *sometimes*.

Jane:

The nightmare—I had to get it out. I sat up in bed and turned on the light. I looked out my window and across the alley toward Wes's room. The blinds were shut. I slid from under the covers, my feet touching the cold wood floor. I inspected my skin out of habit. The blood I'd seen coating my face in the dream was now gone. I relished the breath in my lungs, my heart racing to force oxygen to my limbs.

I was alive.

It was just a dream.

I leaned my weight onto my feet and stood as my sleep shirt fell around me. I walked to the mirror, inspecting my hollow reflection. Max had been in the dream tonight. I'd never seen him there before, but for some reason, having him there made the horror of the whole scene easier to digest. I attributed his presence to the fact that my mind was still buzzing from earlier, his blue eyes like a beacon guiding me home.

I looked in the mirror and back at Wes's window. Sometimes at night he would notice my light on and we'd pass notes for a while until I could fall asleep. But we hadn't done that in a long time. I wanted desperately to talk to someone, but perhaps Wes wasn't the right person anymore. I shut my eyes, regretting the choices I'd made. I had no one. All that could console me now was my drawing.

I went back to my bed and sat down, staring for a moment before reaching for my drawing book and pencil. I pulled it out from under the bed and sat back, pulling my legs to my chest. I drew Max's face as it remained in my mind like a shadow, every feature clear as day, and every silver fleck of his eyes as sharp as they were when we were sitting on the curb.

I drew the death around us, the bodies and the blood. The only thing that brought me any comfort within that world was his face—his *undead* face.

These were things I should not see, but for whatever reason, I did.

Max:

I saw Jane through the trees in the forest of her dream. She wore a blue spring dress that contrasted sharply with the blood on her hands. My gaze fell to the nape of her neck, following the gentle arch of her back and down the long luxurious locks of her perfectly tousled brown hair. I felt a tightening in my chest at the sight, every inch of my being aching to be near her.

Though I'd always remained in the shadows, I wanted her to see me. I wanted her to know who I was. She needed to understand that she wasn't alone—that she never had been. I walked into the clearing, exposing myself for the first time. I placed one foot before the other, my hands clasped behind my back and my wings hidden. She saw me immediately, stunned to see another living face.

At first her brown eyes glittered with fear, but after a while the fear began to subside. The freckles on her cheek stood out against the pale rose of her skin, and it was here that I noticed how much she resembled her father. I stopped, watching her casually, the gentlest smile touching my lips. She watched me in return, her features relaxing as time passed. The bodies lay around us, the bodies of lost souls she didn't know. They were not dead as she expected, but rather dying, as they would here for all eternity—lost in the in-between.

I knew that when I saved her, I'd made a mistake. She was stuck on Earth, but her heart was here in the in-between. I cheated the rules of death to save her, but if she had gone, I would have never seen her again. I couldn't risk losing what I'd longed to find. After all, *I* was stuck in the in-between, and now she was too.

She stepped toward me, and I stood tall. The grass in the field filled the air with a soft rustle. She drew close, drawn by curiosity and her own insatiable need to be near me. Now standing a foot apart, she stopped. I tilted my head slightly, my eyes scanning her face. She reached up to touch my cheek, but her hand halted as she saw her fingers drip with blood. Looking away from me, I saw the sting of shame in her eyes. I tried to grab her hand before she began to disappear, but there was little I could do to stop her from running.

I'd lost her.

Emily:

I lay awake in the dark. A light came on outside my window, the light from my sister's room. I stood, walking to the window, looking at the light as it hit Wes's house across the alley. I drew in a slow breath, sensing Jane. She was as restless as I was.

I bit my lip, the burden of my secret weighing on my shoulders. I wanted to tell her about the things I'd heard today, but I couldn't. I never told Jane anything. I saw movement behind Wes's blinds. He was watching her, like he always did. He thought no one could see him—that no one knew how in love he was. But I could—I could *hear* him.

I sighed. I liked Wes, and it pained me to see Jane treat him the way she did when his thoughts were so full of love for her. The truth was that I was angry. I was jealous that she had people look upon her with adoration the way they did. People respected Jane, but she seemed oblivious to their affections, instead thinking that the whole world was against her.

I crept away from the window and fished through my coat pocket from earlier today, finding the bottle of pills I'd gotten from yet another willing senior. I went back to bed, climbing under the covers where I dug a book from beneath. I opened to a page that was blank and stared at it. They were all blank.

The book was old, a family heirloom I'd found in the attic long ago. I wanted to use it as a journal, but when a pen was placed on the page, it wouldn't allow it to write. The book was magick, I was convinced of that. How it got here was a whole other question.

I hugged the book to my chest. I was afraid of the things I saw when I fell asleep, this world of life, destruction, and the creatures there. This book linked me to it somehow, but I could never figure out why. I shut it, pushing it back under my pillow. I knew I was different, but I was afraid no one would believe me. They'd tell me I'm schizophrenic and put me in a hospital, drug me as I'd already done on my own.

They wouldn't understand. To me, this was *real*.

Sarah:

"Jane!"

I heard thumping coming down the stairs. "Mom, quit yelling. I got it."

Jane approached the kitchen. Her face was tired and drawn. "Jane, are you alright?"

She glanced at me. "Yeah, mom. I'm fine." She grabbed the garbage and opened the patio door, taking it outside.

I heard more thumping as Emily came down the stairs. She entered the kitchen, her face as equally drawn. I furrowed my brow. Emily refused to look at me, she never did. *Where had I gone wrong with her?* Asking that made it obvious. All I'd put them through, all they'd dealt with after John's death was enough to give me the answers I sought. Emily grabbed a glass of juice from the fridge and sat on a stool.

"Are you alright?" I ventured carefully.

Emily said nothing as she took a sip, placing the glass onto the counter lightly. "Fine," she mumbled.

I refrained from continuing the conversation, sensing the twinge of hostility in her voice.

Jane came back in, taking one look at Emily and looking away with disgust. I bit my tongue. What was happening to us? Where had our family gone? Initially, after their father's death, we had become a tight unit, but as they grew out of the sorrow and into themselves, it seemed that all we did was fight. I had lost them, and I'd failed as a mother.

There was a knock on the door, and I looked away from them in time to hide the tear that was forming in my eye. I left the kitchen, taking a deep breath to calm myself. I shook the frustration from my hands before grabbing the handle. I opened the door, seeing Wes standing on the porch.

He smiled politely. "Hi, Mrs. Taylor. I was just wondering if you wanted me to take the girls to school today." He had grown over the summer, a *lot*.

I nodded, a little shocked by the monster of a man I now saw, only a glimmer of the boy underneath. "Sure, Wes. That would be very helpful." I

invited him in.

He removed his hat as he entered, nearly finding the need to duck as he walked through the door. Jane and Emily came in from the kitchen, Jane wearing a mask of shock when she saw Wes's massive size. Hadn't she seen him plenty enough to know?

Though I was confused by Jane's expression, other issues immediately grabbed my attention. I took note of Emily's outfit, now finally able to view it as she was no longer hidden behind the counter. I let out a sharp exhale of disapproval. I disliked the whole thing—bare midsection, black tube top, tall plaid socks, and of course the short black skirt. I could see she was going for a school girl look, but *not* the good Catholic kind. I looked away, too exhausted to start a fight with her, especially in front of Wes. I swallowed down my comments, feigning ignorance.

Just let it go. It's Friday.

Jane:

"Hey, Wes." I gave him a small wave as I entered the hall. I'd heard him from the kitchen, and knew he was here to take us to school.

"Hey, Jane." He grinned. "Emily." He nodded toward her with respect, his eyes not bothering to wander to her style choice. He was always a gentleman.

I stared at him in shock for a moment, noticing his suddenly massive size. *Had he always been that big?*

Emily didn't bother to acknowledge him as she grabbed her plaid coat and bag off the floor and walked through the door. She bounded down the front porch steps, standing in the yard and waiting with a look of annoyance. I grabbed my bag and followed her.

"Bye, girls. Have a good day!" Mother yelled. She had one hand on the door frame as she waved with the other. She was pretending that we were okay, though I knew she knew better.

Wes shut the door behind us, waving arbitrarily over his shoulder. We got into Wes's car, Emily squeezing in the back seat. She put her coat on and flipped the fur hood up to shield her eyes. She rummaged in her pocket and found her headphones, shoving them in her ears. Music began to play, so loud, that it rippled toward the front seat.

"Where have you been the last few days, Wes? I haven't seen you at school." I buckled in, tucking my bag between my legs.

Wes turned his music on low—*Breaking Benjamin*. "Wasn't feeling well." His answer was short.

I sat in silence for a moment as we backed out of the driveway. "Hey, Wes?"

"Hmm."

"Are you mad at me, for... *you know...*" It was the first time I'd addressed it. This summer was a mistake. At the time, my nightmares had taken a turn for the worse. I thought that by being close with Wes, I could forget about the horrors I saw. It didn't work like that, though. If anything, it had forced me further away from him out of shame.

He looked at me, his eyes watching mine. "*Um...*" He moved his hand across the wheel, shifting into gear. "No. I'm not mad. I just—"

I cut him off. "I value our friendship, Wes. I don't want to harm that. I'm sorry for leading you on. I..." I knew it was going to hurt him. "I want to go back to the way it was—*before*. Can we just forget the whole thing?" I winced as I said it, the words thick on my tongue.

His jaw clenched. "Sure," he murmured, answering rather fast.

There was nothing more I could say.

Wes's face was solemn. "How are the dreams?" He changed the subject.

My heart ached. I wanted to love Wes, but I couldn't. I took a deep breath as I looked back to be sure Emily was still listening to her music. "I had more last night." I replied.

Wes nodded. "What do you think it means?"

I shrugged. "I'm not sure. It's something I've wondered for ten years now. I don't know what it is. I don't know *where* it is that I go." I wanted to tell him about Max, and how he had been there, but considering our connection, it didn't seem right. Wes was the only soul I'd confided in over this, and the only person I could talk to, but now that our friendship had been compromised, it was difficult.

Wes's grip on the wheel was tight. "Jane, I..." He swallowed as though in pain. "The pain on Monday—I think it's getting worse. Every day this week I've felt it. That's why I haven't been at school."

I touched his arm, but he shied away. "Well, maybe it's time you see a doctor."

He winced at the mention of doctors. "I'm seeing one next week, though I'm not too excited about it." He grumbled, sounding angered.

I watched as the veins on his arms grew thick, as though the anger was affecting him in a way it hadn't before. I narrowed my eyes and analyzed his foreseen death, seeing he was lying in a hospital bed, attached to machines that had flat-lined. There was no other visual explanation.

"Do you ever think that perhaps it's—you know. *Cancer?*"

I watched Wes swallow. "Of course I worry it's *that*, but how am I to know if I don't have parents to ask? Usually that stuff can be hereditary. Maybe that's why I'm an orphan." His voice was understandably bitter.

"Sorry," I whispered. I could sense the whole subject was sensitive. I shouldn't have brought it up.

He glared at me. "Let's just drop it, okay?"

I slunk down in my seat. I'd managed to turn every attempt at conversation into something sour.

"Why are you guys so serious?" Emily's voice erupted from the back seat. She pulled the headphones from her ears and stuffed them into the front pocket of her pink JanSport bag. She leaned forward with a sly look on her face. "Wes, when are you going to take me out?"

A sharp exhale passed my lips. "Em, quit that."

Wes smirked.

I rolled my eyes. At least something could make him smile, even if it was my screw-up of a sister.

Emily laughed. "He knows I'm only joking, Jane. Chill out."

Yeah sure, I thought. *I'll just chill out*. Like that's possible...

Emily:

I wasn't joking when I asked Wes to take me out, but he laughed and that's all that mattered. I heard whispering in his head as I sat back in my seat. I frowned; the pills were wearing off faster than normal.

I saw the school up ahead as I tugged on my socks and sat up. We pulled into the lot, parking near the front. Jane got out of the car without saying a word to Wes or me. Clearly she was still angry with me, and for whatever reason, angry with Wes as well. The lingering drugs and loud music had blocked out their conversation. I didn't really care that I'd missed it, but a part of me sometimes liked hearing about their demise. I brought my hands to my head and rubbed my temples. I had a hangover at this point, and I needed another fix of something strong.

I climbed out as Wes held the door for me. The whispers increased in volume when I stood close to him. I listened in, surprised when I learned he was thinking of me. My stomach fluttered. That had never happened before. I smoothed my skirt around my thighs in a suggestive manner, knowing that he noticed. At times I couldn't control my actions, and sure, yeah, I did it for attention. So what? For the first time in my life, he was thinking of *me!*

Wes shut his door and trailed after Jane like a lost puppy, his thoughts of me quickly forgotten. I rolled my eyes, thinking about how fickle the mind of a boy was. *Who was I kidding?* He was never going to love *me*. I walked toward the school alone, a hard expression on my face as some boys gawked at me—*thought* about me. It felt good to be noticed by someone, even if it wasn't the person I wanted.

"Hello."

I halted, feeling a chill fill my heart at the voice that erupted from behind me. The undeniable screams followed, rippling down my spine and rendering me speechless. My feet froze to the ground, my head the only thing I could move. I twisted my gaze to meet his green one. His dark figure walked around me, taking a place in my path. My brow creased as I worked to stifle the pain, but my efforts were futile. The brother with the green eyes stared down on me.

I glanced over his shoulder at Jane and Wes, hoping they could help, but they had disappeared into the courtyard. I turned my attention back to the boy, trying as hard as I could to feign composure. I wanted to speak—to *scream*—but my lips felt like they had been sewn shut.

"I'm Greg." He didn't bother to offer me his hand, keeping them tucked in the pockets of his black leather coat. "Hear you're looking for a fix." He rattled something in his pocket.

I exhaled hard, the sound of it like velvet in my ringing ears. I no longer cared about the screams, or the sinister green glow of his eyes—I just wanted the drugs. I just wanted it all to *stop*.

Greg watched me with a stony stare.

"Are you alright, Emily?" He smirked, as though he knew what he was doing to me.

I blinked a few times, the sound of my name on his tongue sending chills down my spine. I felt the invisible strings holding my mouth shut begin to unravel. I licked my lips. "Yeah... *fine*." My voice was raspy. "*H—How much?*" The words were a struggle.

A half smile crept across his face. "You're really *pretty*, you know that?"

I slowly shook my head. My thoughts were teeming. It was hard to understand his words, impossible to decode the screams that were cascading through his mind. I brought my hand to my forehead. "O—Okay... *yeah*." I didn't care about what he was saying; it hurt too much.

He took his hand out of his pocket and touched my arm. I lurched away from him as I felt a surge of something cold ripple across my skin. Goose bumps prickled across my entire body and the screaming pain suddenly stopped, as though he'd triggered an off switch.

I gasped, finally able to breath. I looked up at him, finding his eyes were darker than before, the green afterglow a calm shimmery black. The fear I'd felt left almost instantly, and I found I couldn't look away—his face was... *beautiful*.

"Again, I'm Greg." His voice sounded muffled, as though my ears had been stuffed with cotton. This time he offered me his hand for a shake. *Why was he introducing himself a second time?*

I licked my lips, smiling slightly in an attempt to hide my issues. I took his hand and shook it. As I let go, I felt a strange attraction wash over me. "My name is Em—*Em*," I stuttered. "I'm Emily." I felt dazed. *Hadn't he already known my name?* I was a idiot.

Greg smiled, tilting his head back. "Alright, *Emily*. Here, have these. They're on the house this time." He pulled the bottle from his pocket and took my hand. His grasp was cold and strange, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. He pressed the pills into my palm, curling my fingers over the smooth, orange plastic.

I never stopped watching his eyes, mesmerized by the black, shimmery glow.

"My treat." He let go of my hand and it dropped idly to my side.

"Thanks," I managed to squeak.

His smile was compelling. He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. "See you later, Emily." He winked and brushed past me, the hold over me released like a weight had been lifted.

I took a deep breath, exhaling as I once again found myself able to breathe freely. *What was that?* The feeling I'd been left with was one of admiration, but it didn't seem right. I turned around to look for Greg, but he was already gone. I looked down into my hand, curling open my fingers and seeing the orange bottle of pills. I felt my head, feeling as though I'd just woken up from an all night bender, which I had; but this was worse. I opened the bottle and took one of the small red pills that were inside.

Did I even know what it was?

Did I really care?

Wes:

No, not again.

My hand began throbbing as I sat in third period Math. The prickling began at the fingertips, and then crept up my arm. I dropped my pencil, unable to grip it any longer. I wriggled in my seat, the movement giving me little comfort. Sweat slowly began to seep from my pores, my shirt clinging to my skin. I felt trapped behind my desk as the teacher droned, the anxiety spiraling out of control. My jaw began to hurt and I tried to massage it. I leaned back as far as I could as the bones in my back ached and cracked. I looked up at the clock with blurring vision, afraid that there was too much time left—afraid that something would happen to me in front of everyone.

How could I get out of here?

I looked down the line of desks, seeing Emily at the end. I was a year behind in math, but I was horrible at it so it made sense. Emily, on the other hand, was smarter than she led on and was actually ahead, placing us together. Her eyes were half open in a dopey daze.

She had taken something.

Looking back at my hands, I clenched my jaw, grinding my teeth. The roots of every tooth hurt as though infected, sending spikes of pain through my head. In desperation, I looked toward Emily once more, and this time, I found she was looking at me. She quickly looked away when our eyes met, shocked that I'd caught her staring.

No. Turn back, I thought.

As I silently begged, her gaze returned, her eyes narrowed as though hearing my cries, her lips forming a question.

I didn't know exactly what she was thinking, but I supposed she understood because she stood immediately, disrupting the whole class. A group of girls giggled from the back of the room, but she didn't seem to care. Neither did I. The teacher stopped talking, glaring at her.

"Emily, please sit." The teacher pointed at her, his face beginning to turn red as his blood pressure rose. He liked Emily. Otherwise, he would have immediately sent her to the principal's office, no questions asked. He was a zero tolerance kind of man.

She frowned at him, and then at the girls that were laughing. They laughed harder now. She looked at me one last time as I watched her eyes flutter. She fell to the ground then, her eyes closed as though she'd fainted. The whole class stared, the giggles silenced by a wave of gasps.

The teacher dropped his pen and rushed to her side, the whole group now craning their necks in order to see what was happening. Shocked, I shot from my chair, but instead of rushing toward her, I grabbed my bag and rushed to the door. Wiping the sweat from my brow, no one noticed as I slipped out and into the hall. I let a low cry of agony pass my lips as I leaned against the lockers. Recovering, I forced my body to move.

How had she known what to do?

Emily:

I was on the ground, the musty smell of dirty carpet filling my nostrils. I opened my eyes, feeling as everyone watched me. I pretended to breathe hard, grabbing my head and faking a wince. I wasn't sure just why I did it, but the look on Wes's face seemed to tell me. And his thoughts, they wanted me to do it—to help him somehow.

"Emily, are you alright?" The teacher was shaking me. I blinked, nodding. I looked at the faces of the students that had surrounded me, their mouths hanging open and their eyes agape.

"Sorry I—" I tried to come up with some sort of an excuse, but then figured saying nothing was just as good.

The teacher grabbed the arm of the student standing next to him. "Jake, take her to the nurse, will you?" He was the teacher's pet after all—other than me, of course.

I tried to hide the disdain as I discreetly rolled my eyes—*anyone but him*. Jake grabbed my arm and I cringed. This was embarrassing enough as it was. I began to wonder what people thought, but then again, everyone expected this from me. I was a freak.

I leaned against Jake despite all my body's cries not to. I had to play the part. He led me out the door, his mind relishing every moment his sweaty hands touched me. It was definitely going to be his last. In the hall I shrugged him away. He looked at me, stunned.

I straightened my clothes. "Listen, Jake. I'm fine. Don't tell anyone." I reached in my pocket and fished for the five dollar bill I knew was there. "Here. Just go walk around for a bit and then go back." I shoved the bill into Jake's palm. He pushed his glasses up his nose with his other hand. "Say anything and I'll *ruin* you," I added, jabbing my finger in his face with warning.

Jake look terrified as I glared at him, my face close to his. His braces dripped with nervous saliva. I felt bad for him. It wasn't his fault that he was such a nerd, but I needed him to pull through for me. This was his chance to shine. He nodded, his asthma kicking in as he reached in his pocket for his inhaler. I patted him on the arm as he coughed. Despite the way I'd treated him, his thoughts still obsessed over how hot he thought I was.

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks, Jake."

He tried to smile as he inhaled his medicine.

I shook my head, giving him one last nod before I turned and ran in the opposite direction of the nurse's office. I glanced back to see Jake nervously bustling down the hall and away from the classroom, following my directions. I slid on my heel as I turned the corner, making my way out and into the parking lot where I saw Wes's car still parked in the spot he had left it in this morning. I walked briskly across the pavement, nearly running. As I drew close, I saw that Wes was inside. Grabbing the handle of the car door, I opened it and ducked in as the old leather of the seats squealed in protest.

"Wes," I said his name, urging him to look at me. He was breathing hard, gripping the wheel with both hands. The look on his face frightened me. The whispers in my head returned, chanting something I couldn't understand. I blinked hard and tried to press them to the back of my thoughts. "Wes, what's going on?" I gasped. I touched his arms but he shied away, as though it had hurt.

He looked in my direction, his eyes reddened. "*Em—I...*"

"*Shh...* Wes, it's alright." I wanted to comfort him, but I knew he didn't want that. I looked at the wheel of his car, then him. "Here..."

I carefully lifted myself off the seat, moving over the shifter, and into his lap, thereby forcing him to switch seats with me. He didn't seem to care, his pain too great to resist. He grabbed my hips as he moved out from under me, and I couldn't help but take pleasure in the brief contact.

I sat in his seat, left very warm from his clearly feverish body. I turned and reached across him, fishing into his coat pocket for the keys. I pulled them out with a shaking hand, forced them into the ignition, and started the car. I looked at the foreign dash, biting my lip and trying to acclimate myself. I fought with the shifter and clutch as the car whined, but so did Wes. I clumsily made my way out of the lot and down the street, praying that I

could figure this out fast enough to get him away.

I'd saved him. I was his hero.

Jane:

At lunch, Wes was nowhere in sight. I looked around for Emily but didn't see her, either. I took my milk and sandwich to a table outside, sitting alone. I kept my head down, trying to eat as fast as I could. Looking up, I saw Liz approach, along with her new future death: lying in a park, her body gorged with ice cream. I couldn't help but snicker just a little.

Liz glanced at me and smiled discreetly, but didn't bother to stop and say hello. It was too public for her to acknowledge knowing me here, and I wasn't considered the type you'd want to be seen talking to while recruiting new freshman minions, especially after this week.

I watched her and her friends walk across the courtyard before looking back to the bagel in my hands. Walking was an art form for them, and every boy in school, even the druggies, stared hopelessly. Each one of her friends' deaths involved dying from some sort of unpopularity. I laughed some more at the irony.

I opened my milk, taking a sip and feeling increasingly embarrassed to be alone as the humor of what I'd just seen faded. Anxiety gripped my stomach, and I rose to leave, despite my unfinished food.

I grabbed my bag, lifting it off the ground. It was then that I glanced up in time to see Max enter the courtyard. I froze, my bag sliding back unnoticed onto the grass. An image appeared in my mind. I saw him in the graveyard again, the wind in his hair, smiling at me as though mocking the fact that he was still *undead*. A basketball player stopped to talk with him, looking slightly intimidated by Max's lean muscle and height. The player handed him a flyer, but Max looked less than interested. He nodded absently.

My heart began to beat a little harder, the anxiety replaced with a happier sort of butterfly feeling. I saw Liz take notice of Max, turning her body to face him as she perked her chest in the air, standing straighter. All I could see when she did that was her dead face covered with rainbow sprinkles.

I leaned against the table, figuring I'd stick around to see what happened. Her entourage began to giggle and point, but Max didn't seem to notice, or care. Liz trotted over to him, her blonde hair waving behind her. She delicately nibbled on one nail, twisting her foot in the grass and batting her lashes. I grumbled to myself as he smiled at her. My heart sank as I continued to stare, unable to draw my eyes away from them.

What had I really hoped? That he *liked* me? Just because he had spoken to me meant nothing—just because I happened to dream of him also meant nothing. I was a bumbling geek playing out an imaginary relationship in my head.

I looked at Liz's perfect clothes, made from the most expensive fabric, and shoes that looked brand new. I looked down at my own outfit, inspecting the jeans I'd had for two years now, dotted with charcoal smudges I couldn't seem to get out. The plaid shirt I was wearing once belonged to my father, and as such, it hung shapelessly over my frame. My skin was pale, and not the cute, fair pale, but the gaunt, sickly type.

Feeling a bout of desperation wash over me, I pulled a hair band from my wrist and grasped the extra fabric of the flannel behind my back. I balled it into a knot, fastening it with the band. I then rolled the sleeves up, hoping that it could help make me appear less frumpy—though it regretfully revealed more pale skin. I blew the loose bits of hair from my face, telling myself that this was as good as it was going to get. At least I was wearing blue today, just as I had in the dream. Maybe if he had really been there, then he'd notice my play on color—the same color of his eyes.

I brushed the rest of my hair away from my face and sat up tall, hoping it made me more appealing. Glancing up, I saw that Liz was draping herself across his shoulders, her hand caressing his chest. I watched shamelessly, forgetting that I was gawking. Max laughed as his head fell back, but when it tilted forward, his gaze locked on me.

My heart leapt and I quickly looked away, grabbing my milk and taking another sip. I continued to force myself to sit straight and appear unfazed, pretending that I hadn't been watching. The fact that I was sitting alone was a downside, but I ignored how it appeared and tried my best to look as though sitting alone was a confidence thing, and not due to my lack of friends.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him break away from Liz. I looked up, his oceanic eyes on me as he walked across the yard. I licked my lips, the butterflies returning with a vengeance as the smirk on his face grew. Liz looked hurt as she pouted behind him, her ego deflated. I looked at his clothes, admiring his rugged new outfit. He too wore a flannel, with the sleeves rolled past his tattoos and his jeans another no-name pair. For a moment, I felt mildly awkward, seeing that we were practically matching.

Liz flicked her hair over her shoulder, looking embarrassed, but she seemed to shrug it off rather quickly and turn back to her friends.

Max was close now, just a few feet away.

"Staring again, Jane?" he said as he approached. My name lingered on his tongue, my eyes unable to part from his mouth—his beautiful face.

"I—uh... No." I frowned, looking away. I was trying to pretend I didn't care about Liz, though I did.

Max sat, leaning his elbows on the table, his arms so long, that they reached onto my half. He clasped his fingers around the carton of milk I was

still holding, causing the skin on my hand to tingle.

“Sure you weren’t.” He winked, flashing his teeth as his lip remained curled. “Having a good day?”

I shifted on the bench, my back was beginning to ache from my unnatural posture. I wasn’t used to sitting up this straight. I played with the spout of the milk carton with my thumb, not willing to move my hand and admit defeat. I considered his question and shrugged in response.

“I saw you were alone. Someone like you should never be alone.” His head tilted down, his blue eyes trying to catch my gaze, urging me to look up at him.

His words warmed me, and the little silver flecks in his eyes that I found so intriguing entranced me. I tried to hide a smile, but my slowly blushing cheeks said it all. His hand lifted from the carton, touching my chin and tilting it up. I blinked, his eyes searching mine as he held my gaze. He smiled, and then brushed a piece of hair from my face. His touch was cold. I figured it was from the chilly fall air. I felt so vulnerable, my heart racing in my chest.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” His hand dropped from my chin.

I glanced over his shoulder. Liz was still watching from far across the yard, her cheeks reddened with jealousy and her ice cream death still a factor. I looked back into Max’s eyes, feeling smug. I knew I needed to say something, but it was hard to discern if this was real or just a dream.

I bit my lip nervously. “Thanks.”

I didn’t know how to accept a compliment, and my singular response came across as bashful. I rarely received such comments, except from Wes, but those didn’t count.

“Jane.” His tone of voice was suddenly forceful. “You are.”

I couldn’t look away this time, my body heat suddenly soaring. I felt too close to him, uncomfortably close, but I wanted it to happen.

The bell for the end of lunch rang sooner than I’d expected. I cursed to myself. *They never gave us enough time.* Just another five minutes, *please.* My jaw clenched in annoyance. I didn’t want him to leave. I no longer wanted to push him away. He grinned, as though he knew what I was thinking—as though he were thinking the same thing.

“Will you meet me after school?” he asked as he stood. “And, can I drive you home? Do you think Wes will be okay with that?”

I hung on his words, rolling the invite over and over in my head. *Howdid he knowso much about me?* I looked around, seeing that Wes was still nowhere in sight.

“Oh, uh... *Sure.* He won’t mind.” I paused. “He’s just a *friend,*” I added with a nod.

Max was still smiling. “I know.” His reply was filled with confidence, an idea strange to me. He pressed his hands into the pockets of his faded jeans. “Well, Jane, I’ll see you then.”

I was still sitting on the bench, staring up at him like a girl in love for the first time. The courtyard was nearly empty, but I was afraid that if I stood, my knees would buckle. I grabbed my bag off the grass as I watched him leave. Placing it on the bench next to me, I leaned my elbow on the table and put my head in my hand. I exhaled, smiling to myself.

Life had never felt this good.

Wes:

I watched Emily drive, my car edging along. The gears were all wrong, but I didn’t care. All I wanted was for the pain to stop. I struggled to breathe as every little movement felt like a hundred swords being plunged into my soul. I looked at the speedometer, seeing we were reaching speeds of close to eighty. I saw why Jane and her mother never let her drive. The rubber of the tires gripped the rough cement, echoing in my ears.

“I’m taking you to a place I often go,” Emily spoke—looking at me with a concern I never knew she could possess.

This girl beside me was suddenly so different than the girl I’d always seen her to be. In class, she had *known* me. It was as though I’d felt her inside my head, there to help me when no one else could. I watched her as she drove, finding it the only thing that could ease some of the pain. Emily’s face was not unlike her sister’s, though shrouded in a layer of makeup that covered her flawless, milky skin.

Emily eyed me with a reproving look. She reached into her purse that still draped across her body, handling the wheel with one hand. I heard something jangle inside as she kept her eyes locked on the road. She pulled out an orange bottle—her bottle of drugs. At first I thought it was for her, but as she tossed the bottle to me, I looked at her with surprise.

“Take one,” she demanded. I did as she said, opening the bottle and tilting a few pills into my hand. There were red ones and white ones. I looked at her with questioning eyes.

“*Just take one,*” she snapped.

I grabbed a white one, pressing it onto my tongue and forcing it down. I put the rest of the pills back into the bottle, fastening the top before gripping it in my hand with pain. I sat back against the seat and shut my eyes.

“Wes, I—” Emily adjusted her grip on the wheel, stopping her words.

She slowed and turned off the main road. My car began to rattle. We were on a secluded side road, the woods surrounding us and gravel below. This wasn’t the same road where I’d been running off to hide, but it offered me the same comfort and I wondered how she knew that it would. I looked up at the trees looming overhead.

“Wes, this may sound crazy but—whatever is happening to you, I can sort of *hear* it happening.” She took one hand off the wheel and touched her head.

I looked at her, and she looked at me. She began to shift down, her gaze breaking from mine.

“I don’t know why, Wes, but I hear your pain. More now than ever before.”

I wanted to ask her how, and what she heard, but I couldn’t bring myself to speak.

She pulled onto another adjoining gravel road, older and even more overgrown than the last. We rattled over the ground for another half mile before the trees parted. I saw the makings of a very old and long forgotten house up ahead, something I never imagined could exist in Glenwood Springs. The windows were broken out, and vines had engulfed it. The front stoop was broken apart, the roof damaged and collapsed in many spots, showing the charred signs of a long ago fire.

“I don’t know how old this house is, or who it belonged to, but it’s why I love it.”

She was right. Houses didn’t look like this anymore, and I could see the draw. A few black birds shot from inside the structure and through the roof. I watched them as though in slow motion. Something about them stole the very breath from my lungs, and all the pain I’d felt suddenly clotted into my chest. It grew in intensity until I felt it was about to burst open. I doubled over, letting out a painful yell of agony. Emily slammed on the breaks and the car skidded through the dirt and gravel.

“Wes!” she screamed.

My bones rattled, the cry of the ravens screaming overhead. I gripped my ears, trying to silence the pain, but it was no use. I heard Emily gasp as the dust settled around the car.

Then the pain stopped.

Erik:

“*Ahhh...* Erik.” Greg’s voice hissed as he entered the ancient room.

I turned in alarm, gripping the edge of my wheelchair.

“Look at you! So hideously *old*,” he added.

My heart stung. “I knew you’d be back, Gregory. I warned Max that it was only a matter of time. You two are connected by a force he will never be able to outrun.” My voice crackled with age.

“You *warned* Max, did you? Like that does any good anymore.” Greg rolled his eyes. “Brother, tell me. Why do you hate me so much?” He sneered, knowing the answer that swam in my head. He leaned against the nearby bookshelf, tracing his fingers across the ancient books.

I felt the hatred inside me rise the way it had that day. “You killed our family, Gregory. What more reason do I need?” I hissed. I tried to seem fierce, but I was still human. There was no way I could ever win against him.

Greg’s attention fell away from the books as his hands dropped to his sides. He approached me and grabbed my neck, applying pressure. “I killed them because they were *worthless*. How could you not see that they were horrible parents?” He let go of my neck and turned toward the center of the room, his hands in the air. “They spent their days hosting lavish parties, entertaining every patron in town as though they were *saints*. And Mother, running off to sleep with that—that *alchemist!*” He turned back toward me, crossing the space between us and again gripping my neck with his cold hand. “They didn’t care about *us*.” His eyes glowed with hatred.

“They did, Greg. They loved us.” My words were forced.

“But not me, dear Erik. They did not love *me*.” Greg tilted his head, grasping my neck harder.

“They... d—*did*... *love*... *you*.” I was wincing through labored breaths.

Greg exhaled, examining the nails on his other hand with leisure. "You know, I didn't mean for you to be there that day, but you were anyway. Too bad you didn't die along with the rest." He paused, clicking his tongue. "I see now that I really wished you would *all* die."

"But... *I didn't*. I'm alive... thanks to... M—Max," I added.

Greg clenched his teeth and growled at me. "Max, the saint!" He laughed. "I died killing our family, Max died trying to save it. Really, I don't see the difference. We both became angels in the end." He let go of my neck as I fell back into my chair, gasping for air. "I did you a favor by killing them. But what favors did you do me? *None!* After I was gone, you did me the ultimate injustice. You allowed that *slime* of an alchemist to take you in!"

Gregory's massive black wings stretched across the room, bursting from thin air like a cloud of smoke. "Our parents were naïve to think that I loved them, but now, I will drag them all to Hell. They will suffer for the way they rubbed elbows with the rich, with the *magickal*." Drops of blood thudded as they hit the wood floor, oozing from his wings.

"You're *magickal*," I contended bravely.

Greg narrowed his gaze—a last warning. It didn't matter.

I snorted. "You work with evil beings, Gregory. You have been corrupted by the demons of their world. What do you know of happiness besides that which lies under the deceit you've so fondly coveted?"

I could almost feel the jealousy in Greg grow. "Just because Max denies the power he feels, and the purity of our magickal race, that does not make him so *holy*." He paused to pace the room. "He is an angel, but also a demon, Erik, built for carrying dead souls to the other side." He shook his head with disgust. "Such a waste of power! And above all, I can't believe he thinks he can re-acclimate himself and act *human* again!" Laughter erupted from Greg's throat. "Love is for the *weak*."

I spoke bravely. "He protects *her*, Gregory. Guardian angels were built to protect, not kill. It doesn't have to be about death for him as it is for you. It is a choice he can choose to make. The side effect that girl has is something he can help her to understand."

"Everyone dies eventually, Erik. All of this is about death. All life is but a march to the end." Greg laughed. "And to think, people hope to find meaning while they're still alive, but there is *none*."

I raised one brow, rolling toward Greg in my chair. "It doesn't have to be that way. We can all co-exist, the magickal and the non-magickal. That's the way it's always been. I believe it's the way it's supposed to *be*."

Greg crossed his arms against his chest, his wings melting behind him. "I'll get Max to turn one way or another, Erik, even if that means taking *her* away from him."

"Max will protect her," I warned one last time. "There is nothing you can do to break her away from him. Max made sure of that ten years ago." I was furious with Greg now. I did not yet understand Max's fascination with this girl, but to me, she was already family.

Greg laughed. "Just another game for me, Erik. And just as I told Max, her family can be a strong bargaining tool in destroying their connection. If this girl is so special, perhaps she can be useful to our war."

"*Your war*," I corrected him.

Greg growled at me for interrupting, pacing the room and leaving a trail of blood. "All I need to do is awaken her lust for death on the dark side. I know she has the potential. If she is united on my side, Max will find the reason to join as well—for *her*."

"There is more than just Max to stop you, Gregory. Even if you do succeed in destroying your brother's virtue, magick will rise again and stop you. There are armies in place on our side, much as you have on yours. You cannot stop it," I contended smugly.

I saw the anger boil inside Gregory's green eyes. He slammed his hand down onto the surface of my desk, breaking it in half as splinters crashed to the floor. "Like that could stop *me!*" he yelled, his arrogance getting the better of him.

"You don't know this new magick, Gregory. The world of the supernatural has evolved in the time since it last appeared on Earth, growing strength inside those that carry it in their genes, passed down through the many *Nephilim* Pandora left here long ago. The beings that have been touched by it are immune to your power." I knew I was pushing my luck, and Gregory's patience, but what did it matter in my old age?

He lifted his hand to silence me. I felt my mouth sew shut with his power. "No matter, dear brother. They will all one day meet their maker. Those beings that chose to consort with humans in the beginning of time made a grave mistake. The two worlds should have never mixed, and the mixed-breed children—or *Nephilim*, as you so methodically refer to them—left behind were nothing but bastard *monsters*, spreading their dirty magick."

Emily:

I heard Wes screaming in my head, his whispers clear though the shape of his body was all wrong. I backed against the car door, my hands frantically searching for the handle.

"Wes!" I screamed again, my hand finally finding the door handle. I yanked it open, falling backwards out of the car. Lying on the ground, I was quick to kick the door shut with my foot. I was breathing heavily, watching the window above me in terror.

I saw the glass fog and the bird appeared. I screamed, pushing my body away from the car as I dragged myself through the dirt. I tried to prop myself up and stand, but a voice in my head made me freeze.

Em, don't. Stop.

I whipped my head back toward the car window, staring at the raven. I heard the whispers repeat again and again, as though this bird had somehow taken Wes hostage inside its mind. I stared for a moment, standing tall with my hands readied at my sides. The bird watched me from inside the car, its beak tapping against the window.

I clenched my fists. "Where is Wes?" I demanded, feeling insane for talking to a bird.

Em, it's me. Em!

The crow blinked repeatedly, tapping the window. I took one step forward, my back now aching from the fall. Dirt clung to my bare knees, mixed with sweat. I drew closer to the car, inspecting the crow.

"Wes?" My voice shook.

The crow let out a sharp 'caw!'

I jumped, hearing Wes's voice echo in the sound, but I still couldn't trust it. Its feathers fluffed then, its body beginning to shake. I felt my heart begin to race once more, and I grabbed the door handle, finding it locked.

"Wes!" I yelled. The bird began to change as the feathers shed from its growing body. I gasped, unable to reach him.

What was going on?

Wes:

I kept yelling to her but she couldn't understand. I looked down at myself, seeing nothing but black feathers. Emily grabbed the car door and fell out, slamming it behind her. I yelled after her, but again, she didn't understand. I made my way to the window, navigating clumsily across the slick leather seat. My hands were of little use, now clothed in a layer of feathers.

I looked down at Emily as she lay on the ground outside. I yelled again, and this time she noticed me—she had *heard* me. I kept yelling over and over, and at last, a strange sound erupted from my mouth. Emily stood, running back toward the car and grabbing the handle, but it was locked.

Pain racked my body in a second wave. I winced. As quickly as it happened before, I felt my limbs change back. It was over. Sweat coated my skin as I lay across the front seats of my Camaro, completely naked.

I heard Emily gasp from outside. I looked up at her through the fogged window. I was quick to cover myself with the clothes that had been discarded around me, embarrassed.

“Wes! Unlock the door!” She screamed, frantically rattling the handle.

I reached over and unlocked the door. There was a blanket in the back seat and I grabbed it, pulling it over me as I discarded the clothes to the floor, figuring that unless I was going to attempt to put them back on, they offered me little cover.

“Wes, *what was that?* What happened?” Emily was breathing as hard as I was. She leaned down and looked into the car. Her brown eyes were frantic and wide, looking just like her sister’s.

“Emily—I *don’t know*” I shrugged, finding it no longer hurt to move. “The pain, and then the bird. It’s like I *saw* it, and something inside me wanted to *be* it, and—” I couldn’t continue. I felt tired and afraid.

Emily climbed back into the driver’s seat and shut the door. “How do you feel?” She maintained a distance between us, clearly still frightened that it might happen again.

I looked down at my arms and the black feathers that were now all over the car. Surprisingly, my limbs felt much better than ever before, as though I’d experienced some sort of release that had been building for seventeen years.

“I feel better. . . . *Much better.*”

Max:

After school, I waited for Jane, scanning the nearby buildings and trees. I waiting to see Greg lurking somewhere nearby—he was never far. I could always feel his darkness, and I knew I could never leave Jane unprotected. Greg wanted to destroy everything in my life, in his hope to convert me to his side.

That would never happen.

Jane would be safe from most of his advances, but not safe from all of them. He could still harm her irrevocably. Worst of all, he could drag her to Hell. Her connection with death had toughened her. Because of this, I was sure she could smell what lay beneath his stony exterior—*murder*.

I heard her footsteps approaching, her thoughts racing with anticipation. I smirked to myself and turned, looking to the doors of the school. She was still a ways down the hall, but I began to feel her all the same. Our hearts were connected in a way that I’d never connected with another human. She was different than all the other souls—different because I’d saved hers. I touched my hand to my chest. The beating of her heart reminded me of what it was like to be alive, and I relished the feeling.

I turned back toward the lot, pretending I hadn’t known she was coming just seconds before she reached the door. I looked into my hands, trying to wash the smile from my face.

Jane:

I opened the door to the school and walked out of the hall. The cool air hit my face as my cheeks burned with emotion. I saw Max’s broad back facing me. He sat on the edge of the short cement wall where he had approached me yesterday, hunched casually with his head down. I swallowed hard, walking down the path. As I turned to face him, he saw me and smiled.

“Hello, Jane.” His blue eyes swept over me.

I couldn’t help but smile back. “Hi.”

Max stood, walking toward me. “Are you ready?”

I looked around the lot for Emily but didn’t see her. I adjusted my bag on my shoulder. Wes’s car was also gone, again.

“Your sister is not here anymore,” he said plainly.

Alarmed, I looked at him. “She isn’t? Do you know where she is?” My brow creased, wondering how he knew.

Max looked at me strangely, but shook his head. “I saw her leave earlier. That’s all.”

I was confused. “When?” I was supposed to keep track of her, and already I’d failed.

Max frowned. “Around third period. She left with Wes.”

I smiled to myself, hoping that perhaps Wes was taking my suggestion from lunch on Monday seriously. I felt better knowing she was with him than anyone else, even if it did seem she was skipping classes. My thoughts turned to concern as I began to wonder if Emily had talked Wes into it, but I knew Wes knew better than to give into something like that. He was aware of Emily’s tricks.

“That’s good.” I nodded.

Max looked pleased by my answer. “Shall we, then?” He urged me forward with his hand, like a gentleman.

I stepped off the curb, wondering where his car was and what kind. My heart was alive. It had been a long time since anything unpredictable or new had happened to me. I never took time to pay attention to my own life, seeing that Emily was difficult, and my mother a wreck.

I looked at his profile as we walked across the lot. In my dream last night, he had initially scared me, but as I watched him now, I saw something different. It was as though he was really there in my dreams. He had to have been. My mind couldn’t manipulate his movements with such expert likeness, not when I barely knew him. Max had been his own being there, separate from what I wanted or thought. I shook the image of it away. He eyed me as I followed next to him.

We approached a rugged looking SUV, a style I didn’t see much, but recognized as a type I often saw when watching National Geographic. He clicked something in his hand. The lights on the car flickered and the doors unlocked. I was startled when I noticed him reach toward me. He smirked at my guarded display, ignoring me as he lifted the bag off my back. I let my hands fall through the straps, his eyes never leaving my form.

His car didn’t fit in with every other car in the lot. Most were gloriously shiny—an expensive gift from their parents, complete with no lack of couture accessories and fancy German symbols. Wes was one of the only other exceptions to the mold, though he still owned a coveted vintage Camaro.

Max walked me around to the passenger side and opened the door. I got in, following his lead. He placed my bag between my legs, his arm grazing my knee and causing my skin to tingle. My heart surged forward, threatening to make me faint. He glanced at me before shutting the door, walking around the back of the car as I watched in the rearview. When he was finally inside, he let out a contented sigh.

I was frozen and nervous, sitting tall and rigid in my seat. Max sat there for a moment, the keys in his hands jingling as he fished for the right one. Finding it, he put it in the ignition and started the car, but didn’t shift into gear. He sat back, watching me.

I wondered what he was waiting for. “What?” The way he stared made me uncomfortable—another deep, personal stare.

Max smirked and leaned toward me, our faces so close, I could feel his breath on my cheek. “Here...”

My body tightened as he reached one arm across my chest. I stopped breathing. Max fumbled with something, and I realized what he was looking for. Grabbing the slackened seatbelt beside me, he paused to look me in the eyes. With his body across mine, and his lips so close, I knew my heart was about to explode. He lingered there for a moment, the blue of his eyes making me forget where and who I was. He lifted one brow, finally leaning back and pulling the belt across my chest. He clicked it into the clasp, locking me against the seat as his hand pressed against my hip.

“You should buckle.” His breath fell across my face, smelling like sugar and mint. He leaned back, one hand on the wheel. The car lurched as he shifted into reverse.

I cleared my throat, my face hot with emotion. “Thanks.” I swallowed, my hands gripping either side of the seat, my nails digging into the leather.

“I just like my passengers to be safe.” He winked.

My whole body was trembling. I needed to distract myself and calm down. “So, you said you were from Denver?” We drove out of the lot and turned left.

Max nodded.

“That’s not too far.”

He shook his head. “No, it’s not. I like it here, though. It’s colder. Besides, the snowboarding is good.”

I perked up. “You snowboard?”

He smiled. “This is Colorado; of course I snowboard.”

“*I love snowboarding,*” I said quietly. Wes and I usually went together, but perhaps things would change—perhaps Max would take me for a romantically blissful day. I was daydreaming again. I quickly washed it away in my attempt to remain attentive. I looked at him instead.

Max was smiling as though thinking of something great, perhaps thinking the same thing as me.

“You said you have family here?” I ventured. I knew most of the families through my mother and her work at the historical Hotel Colorado.

“Yes... the Gordon family?” He seemed nervous to say it, as though it would scare me.

“*The Gordon family?* You mean, Erik Gordon? The historian? The man whose parents *founded* this place?” I knew who he was all too well. His books were legends in the world of magickal history, not to mention America’s West. I read every paper he’d ever written, hungered for his every word, hoping it could tell me anything about what had happened to me, and why I dreamed of death. His particular attention to the Fairy Caves was my favorite.

“Yes. He’s my... *grandfather.*”

“Really?” I was ecstatic, likely showing more excitement than I should. Max didn’t fit the mold, and I would have never guessed. The sudden void of knowledge I once had for Max filled immediately. “So you’re a Gordon?” Since I loved history, I found this fact almost too intriguing to contain my excitement. “Do you believe in his writings?” I blurted.

Max laughed. “Yeah, sure. Don’t we all want to believe it?”

He had no idea how much I *did* believe it, whether I wanted to or not. “Yeah.”

Max looked at me with a spark of intrigue, but I pretended not to notice. “I’ll take you to meet him sometime, if you like?”

I nodded with enthusiasm. “Yes, I would!”

He laughed. “Most girls don’t care who my family is. Apparently you seem like an expert.”

“I am,” I gave him a sly glance, finally finding an edge on him, though his reference to other girls sparked a hint of jealousy. I was giddy at this point.

Max lifted one brow. “See, now you’re starting to take that whole staring thing to a whole new level—*Stalker.*”

My mouth playfully fell open. “I’m not a *stalker.*” I shook my head.

He shrugged. “Whatever, *Stalker.* You said so yourself. You’re an expert when it comes to my family.”

I laughed. “Don’t call me that!” I gave him a teasing nudge on the arm.

He grinned, running a hand through his hair. “Alright then... I’ll call you, *Beautiful.*”

I pressed my lips together and blushed, hiding the smile that wanted to creep across my face. *How had I gotten so lucky?* I tried to get back on subject. “Has your Grandfather ever seen magick?”

Max turned the car onto my street. “I couldn’t say.”

His answer seemed vague. What was he hiding? Perhaps he had been sworn to secrecy—*oh, this was so great!*

His grandfather had been the real world version of Indiana Jones. Erik Gordon had traveled all over the globe in search of artifacts that held magickal power and biblical importance. I glared at Max, hoping that if I looked hard enough, perhaps his head would pop open and I could learn what he knew.

He shook his head, his hand sliding casually across the wheel.

I frowned. “What’s so funny?”

He stopped laughing. “You’re still staring at me, *Beautiful.*”

I let an annoyed sound escape my mouth. “Could you quit with that! I’m not your *stalker*, trust me.” I thought of Liz. “And I’m not *beautiful.*”

Max pursed his lips, refusing to listen.

“I was just staring at you because I was thinking of your grandfather,” I added, finding it a good excuse.

“Why are you so curious?” His eyes narrowed as though accusing me again, but his face was amused. He kept his gaze forward, not once looking in my direction.

“—” I stumbled over my words, not wanting to reveal that I cared as much as I did. “I just think it’s interesting, and risky. Your grandfather stirs a lot of controversy, is all. The Vatican likely has him on their hit list—if there is such a thing.”

“He does have enemies, but the Vatican isn’t one of them.”

I tilted my head. “Really? I would figure they’d be the first.”

Max was still amused by my confusion. “Not if they’re the one sending him a paycheck.”

I gasped. “They hired him?”

Max eyed me as though to say that it was a secret. I grinned, enthralled to learn something so covert. He turned into my driveway, and I realized I hadn’t even told him where I lived.

“Um... how did you—”

“It’s a small town,” he cut me off.

I nodded. My mother opened the door, noticing the unfamiliar car. I exhaled and bowed my head, wondering if she had been standing there behind the door for the sole purpose of embarrassing me. “Great.”

Max shut off the engine. “What’s wrong?”

I grumbled. “Emily. She’s not with me, so my mother is going to wonder where she is, who you are, and why I’m not riding with Wes.” I glanced at his tattoos, knowing that was an added factor, but saying it out loud was rude.

Max laughed lightly, looking at his arms as I was. “Then introduce me. I’ll explain it to her myself.” His comment sounded like a challenge, as though he were used to the disapproval of a mother.

I looked at him with alarm, knowing that it wasn’t the disapproval I was particularly scared of. What scared me most was that if I introduced a boy to my mother, I’d never hear the end of it. She wanted me to date, and at this point, I don’t think she cared *who*. I know his tattoos made me nervous, but after learning about his family, he was a literal *shoo-in*. Part of the reason why I’d avoided boys was in order to avoid hearing from her. You’d think that considering my mother’s past, and the age at which she’d had me, that she would lock me in a closet and tell me that boys were a product of the devil, but that was hardly the case.

“Come on, introduce me,” he urged.

His blue eyes searched mine, his face turned to reveal the dimple on his left cheek. I couldn’t resist him.

Emily:

“Wes. *You*—I think you just...” I couldn’t say it. I reached toward one of the feathers on the seat beside me, picking it up and holding it in my hand. It was still warm, still a part of Wes.

He exhaled, his hands shaking as they rested on the blanket covering his lap. “Em, I know what you’re going to say and—”

“How long has this been going on?” I pressed him for answers.

“This has never happened before. I’ll tell you that.” His expression was so earnest, that I had to believe him.

Wes rubbed his hands in his lap, the blanket barely covering his legs. His clothes were in a pile on the floor, but he hadn’t yet bothered to put them back on. I couldn’t help but stare at his chest. He was much stronger than he used to be, and it only made me like him more.

“It has to be magick, Wes.”

There—I said it. I’d listened to my sister drone on and on about magick and mythology. It was her obsession, and it was part of what added to Jane’s nerdy personality. At the same time, though, the book I’d found in the attic made me believe it myself—not to mention my own talent.

Wes stared at me for a moment, and then nodded. “Yeah. *Magick*. Whatever, Em. You’re starting to sound like your sister.” He laughed.

My eyes rolled impulsively. “What else can it be, Wes?” I leaned forward, feeling the passion in my voice.

His smile faded and I knew he was considering it. What proof did he need? He had just turned into a raven!

“Well...” Wes didn’t want to say it. He paused, his face changing to one of fear. “Don’t tell Jane.”

I laughed, but soon the mood changed as the thoughts in his head grew frantic. “Does she know about what’s been going on?” I asked.

Wes continued to play with his hands in his lap, the answer reaching his thoughts before it reached his lips. “Only about the pain, but clearly, Jane doesn’t know about this part. I don’t think I *want* her to know.” There was battle ensuing in his mind, wondering if telling Jane was worth it. My sister took him for granted. Wes had tried to confide in her, to find comfort where Jane didn’t grant him any. He looked up at me. “Thank you, Emily. I never thought that—”

“That I could be normal?” I finished his thought for him. No one ever saw me as a real person, but underneath it all, I was. I needed to be loved just like anyone else.

Wes laughed. “Yeah. I guess you could say that. I always thought that you were just—”

“Well, you were always right. I’m not normal, but I am a *real person*.” I smiled. “But like I said before, when I saved you from class. I *heard* you... Correction...” I searched for the right words. “I *hear* you.” I tapped my head. “Wes, I hear voices all the time, thoughts and images. Like right this moment—I know you’re worried that I’d heard the things you thought when remarking about me earlier.” I blushed, unable to look him in the eye. It was one thing to secretly know what Wes thought of me, it was another to admit that I’d heard them.

“*You could hear me?*” We were both blushing now, and the red that was dotting his cheek bones gave him a vulnerable hue that contrasted with his admittedly beefy physique. “You heard me even when I was—*that thing?*”

I nodded gravely.

“Is that why you always finish people’s sentences?”

I laughed, noticing the intrigued look on his face. “I suppose, though I don’t always realize I’m doing that.”

Wes leaned back against the seat and we sat for a moment, saying nothing. I looked at the old house, tracing the rails and lavish design. The ravens had gone now, and the forest was silent.

Wes laughed suddenly, breaking the silence. “We’re all a bit screwed up, aren’t we?”

I laughed in return, finding there was no other way to accept what was happening. “But why? What is it?”

Wes shrugged. I settled in my seat, finally feeling comfortable and no longer fearing another strange occurrence—he seemed to be over it. I searched for the keys, finding them on the floor and placing them in the ignition. I started the engine and placed my hand on the shifter. Wes placed his hand on mine, stopping me.

I froze and looked up at him. His hand was warm, his fingers resting over my own. I swallowed, the immediate connection to his thoughts too personal. I pulled my hand out from under his. Wes was frightened and I could also see it in his eyes. I searched his face, my body screaming to be near him, but I knew it wasn’t right. He loved Jane, but inside his thoughts, it wasn’t Jane he had been thinking of; *it was me*.

“Our secret, okay?” He said, his eyes locked on mine. The fear in his face had lightened. “I like that idea,” he added.

His golden eyes gave away his emotion, despite my ability to hear his thoughts. He also knew what he had forced me to see in those eyes—fear, vulnerability, and uncertainty—but his outward appearance remained confident.

Wes’s hand remained on the shifter, preventing me from changing gears. I was having a hard time looking him in the eyes, but he didn’t stop staring. I was afraid what would happen if I let someone in, if I let them see me. *But this was Wes!* He was the one person I’d always wanted to know who I was. I bit back my fears and allowed myself to look at him, despite how hard it was for me to absorb the fact that his thoughts were still consumed with me—my face, my hair, my eyes, and best of all, my *lips*.

I heard his breathing quicken. He leaned toward me, but I stayed frozen, listening to the leather squeak under his shifting weight. He touched my face with a warm, shaking hand, brushing a strand of my auburn hair from my eyes.

“You shouldn’t hide yourself, Em.” His thumb smudged across my lower lip, removing some of my lipstick. “I want to know who you really are. You’re always hiding, and I don’t understand why.”

I shut my eyes, my breathing shallow. “I’m afraid, Wes. Afraid of the things that are happening to me, and I’m afraid that no one will understand.”

“I understand,” he protested.

I felt tears forming. “It’s hard to be me, especially when my older sister is the perfect child. Jane’s smart, and—”

“You *are* smart, Em. Why else would you be in that math class with me? You have to let yourself see that you are beautiful, and different from your sister. It’s good to be unique.” His hand grazed down my neck, resting on my collar bone.

I was only smart because I knew the answers. All I had to do was listen in on someone else’s thoughts, stealing their explanations. “But you like Jane. *Everybody* likes Jane,” I remarked. I knew in this moment that was a lie, but I couldn’t get past the fact that he’d think of her eventually.

His eyes looked frustrated. “That’s not true.”

He hooked his hand behind my neck and pulled me close. He pressed his lips to mine and my chest rose in shock. His kiss was soft at first, but as the emotion grew, and his lips wrapped around mine, things became more intense. His other hand went to my side, pulling me closer, though the shifter got in the way. We pressed together, heat rising between us. The intensity grew until I was nearly lost inside his erotic thoughts. I lifted my hand and rested it on his chest, urging him to slow down. He stopped, our foreheads touching as we stared into each other’s eyes, breathing hard.

My vision was flooded with the gold of his irises—a color I’d dreamed about almost every night. Years I’d spent pretending that the thoughts he’d had for Jane were actually thoughts of me. Now, they really were.

Wes leaned back against the seat. “Sorry,” he whispered, bowing his head.

I was too shocked to move as I tried to assemble the pieces of what had just happened.

“Sorry, I just...” He apologized again.

I tried to smile away the embarrassment, hearing his thoughts on the same matter. “You don’t need to explain, Wes.” I sat back against my seat, gripping the wheel. “I won’t say anything to Jane.”

He looked at me then, his eyes guilty and his thoughts fearing he’d upset me. “No, that’s not it, Em.”

I licked my lips, recuperating as I grabbed the shifter once more. I was used to men that only saw me as easy, but Wes was different—he had stopped. I knew, however, that a small part of him had stopped because of Jane. Jealously pulsed through my blood. Why was it she could destroy him as she did, lure him in and ruin him for anyone else to love? The car was still rumbling with life, and I threw the gear into reverse with a pitch of resentment.

Jane would always be in my way. It was a fact of life.

Max:

What Jane didn’t know was that I’d been to her house before—many times. Since the day I saved her from the wreck, I’d visited at least once a year. I felt like I knew Jane so well, but I needed to remember that she didn’t know me at all.

I’d been there for every dream, and because of this, I knew every corner of her imagination, and every one of her fears. It was this world of hers that made me love her only more. I could be there for her, though she’d never known that. Since I’d saved her, I was her angel. We were connected, and there was nothing that could separate that. I would never lose her again. I heard her thoughts and hers alone. I felt her heart, and I knew every emotion, especially her trepidation.

Naturally, feeling all this had its downside, chiefly pertaining to her friend Wes. I knew the nature of their friendship, and the level to which they had taken the relationship to this summer. It would be a lie to say that it hadn’t bothered me, but what could I do? In part, this was the main reason why I was here. I was jealous of the emotion Jane had shared with him, because I wanted to be that man for her. At the very least, I wanted the chance.

We walked up onto the porch as Jane’s mom stood with the door ajar. She had a light smile on her face—one I could tell was subduing enthusiasm.

“Mom, this is Max Gordon. He’s new at school.” Jane kept her head down, as though afraid and embarrassed at the same time.

“Hi, Max *Gordon*. I’m Sarah.” She looked impressed by me—impressed by my *last name*.

I bowed my head and offered my hand for a shake. “Sarah, good to meet you.”

Sarah quickly turned her attention back to Jane, giving her a less than discreet wink, her mouth silently forming the syllables of my last name. Sarah then looked toward the driveway. Her grin faded quickly, replaced with a look of confusion. “Where’s your sister?”

I felt Jane’s heart begin to race.

I stepped in and answered for her. “She’s with Wes, ma’am.”

Sarah began to laugh. “Oh, please, Max...” she spoke between breaths. “Don’t call me *ma’am*. It makes me feel old.”

I grinned, nodding in agreement. “Alright, Sarah.”

Sarah nodded, and then changed the subject back to Emily. “With Wes?” She had wide eyes, looking to Jane for an explanation.

Jane shrugged. “Yeah, so?”

I felt a strange sense of jealousy from Jane, and I looked at her, feeling a ping of jealousy myself. Initially she had seemed delighted by the fact that Emily was with Wes, but her thoughts on the drive home had slowly grown sour. My smile faded.

What if Jane didn’t like me?

I’d thought about it, but figured since Jane didn’t truly seem to love Wes, then it would be easy for me to step in. I was certain of the fact that our souls were connected, but what if Jane didn’t understand it yet? I’d had close to a century to figure it, dwelling alone with the empty feeling in my soul, a gaping hole that Jane’s love could soon fill. Jane, on the other hand, she’s only had a few stolen moments with me, only a small inkling of what our connection could be.

Jane smiled at me with bashful eyes. I watched her lashes flutter, my own heart begging to beat, though it couldn’t.

“Oh, Jane, don’t look so demure! I’m relieved to see Emily engaging with some healthy company for once.” She patted Jane on the arm. Jane looked annoyed. “Well, Max. Won’t you come in?” Sarah opened the door for me, ushering me in with her hand.

Jane's frustration changed, and her thoughts returned to thoughts of me.

"Sure," I agreed politely.

I heard the distant rumble of a familiar car, and looked in the direction of the sound. Wes's Camaro was nearing, but still about a mile away. He was bound to get in my way.

"Max, what is it?" Jane noticed my attention falter.

I looked back at her. "Oh, nothing." I walked into the house.

Wes:

I hadn't said another word to Emily. I was too shocked by everything that had unraveled in the past hour. *Why had I kissed her?* Was it the adrenaline of what had happened? Or the fact that Emily seemed to understand? Surely I'd just ruined any chance I would ever have with Jane. Emily would tell her. I knew it.

I watched her from the corner of my eye, her hands tight on the wheel. She was tense, and I wondered what exactly she could be thinking about. Then I realized that she was probably thinking about what I was, and hearing every bit of my confusion.

I cursed to myself. *She can hear you, idiot!*

I stopped thinking all together, listening instead. Her heart was beating hard, the sound echoing in my head as though my senses had been heightened by what had happened. I could feel the breath passing her lips, the hair on my arms alert and standing on end.

A part of me wanted to deny the sudden comfort I felt with Emily, and the fact that in the end, she understood, but at the same time, I had to admit that it felt good. If Jane had been with me in this moment, it would have all gone wrong. Jane is used to being the victim, and as such, she has no room in her heart to understand my troubles. It was always about Jane and her father's death, as though no one else in history had ever suffered the same loss. It was always about her, and never me.

Emily, though, she had room. She seemed to care despite the way I'd always viewed her. Regardless of the fact that it seemed Emily had her own issues, she was also making room for mine. There was something about the way she wanted to share the burden that made all the difference. There was a feeling of *us* here, and I liked it.

I swallowed, suddenly afraid of what I was and what I felt. It was so sudden, and yet, it was as though I'd known it would happen. As soon as I saw the bird, I'd felt its heart, its whole body, and then I was *in it*—just like that. Somehow, the thing had become me, its presence enough to affect my every muscle, but it felt so right.

All the pain I'd suffered had been like an itch I couldn't scratch. A part of me wanted to ignore what had happened, but I hadn't felt this good in a long time. I began to wonder if this power was something I could control, or if it was something that would come at anytime.

What was I? And why was it happening? Clearly I couldn't try to hide it away. Questions began to surface inside me, questions about my parents, my past, and my future.

I leaned my head into my hand, exhaling hard. I heard Emily adjust in her seat, her heart still racing. I lifted my head from my hands, looking at Emily. *Her heart beating?* I knew she saw me staring, but she refused to look at me. I heard her heart beat faster, the blood in her veins pulsing. *Why could I hear this?* I tried to shake the sound away but I couldn't.

Emily glanced at me then. "Are you alright?" Her voice cracked. I'd never heard her sound that way—afraid.

"Yeah..." I thought to lie, but who was I kidding? She knew regardless, and was only asking me because that's what you're supposed to do. "I mean, well, *no*."

She furrowed her brows. "No? Is it happening again?"

I shook my head. "It's nothing bad, no. It's just, my hearing is so intense. Your heart beat... it's..."

Emily looked aghast. "My *heart*?"

"Yeah, Em. It's just... *so loud*." It felt strange to say her name now, as though it had new meaning—*Fear. Friendship. Love*.

"Oh." She brought her hand to her chest, and her cheeks flushed.

I laughed, hearing it race even harder now.

She gave me annoyed look. "Wes, stop laughing!"

I couldn't stop.

"Stop *thinking!*" she squealed.

I continued to chuckle. "Sorry, it's just that, you're so—"

"*Shut up, Wes,*" she snapped.

Emily skidded onto our street. I grabbed the car door for support. "Hey," I growled, hearing the rubber of my tires scuff across the cement.

Emily glared at me, her lips tight and her eyes glowing. I smiled. *Why did I smile?* We turned into my driveway and she threw the car in park, throwing the weight of the vehicle forward. She ripped the keys from the ignition, and tossed them at me without saying a word. She snatched her bag from the backseat and stormed from the car. I felt bad, grabbing the door handle and getting out as she stormed across the lawn toward her front door.

"Hey, Em. *Wait.*" I ran after her, slamming the car door behind me. I grabbed her arm and she stopped, spinning on her heel.

"*What?*" She was pouting, her cheeks red with anger. *Sexy anger.* "Stop that!" She squealed.

The corner of my lip turned up. "Em, calm down."

She huffed dramatically.

"I'm sorry, Em." I dropped my hand from her arm. "Come on, you've got to let me have a little fun. After all, you can hear my thoughts. I think in retrospect, I have the worst end of this."

The front door opened then, and I saw Jane look out into the yard. *Shit,* I'd forgotten about driving her home. I stepped away from Emily. Emily looked instantly hurt.

"Wes!" Jane yelled. "Where have you guys been?" Her face was demanding. I could hear her heart, too, her blood pumping as fast as Emily's.

Emily scanned my face for excuses, knowing that though she was mad at me, the number one priority was hiding what had just happened, as we'd agreed.

"*Er...* we were getting something we needed for Math class," I quickly replied.

I saw the door open more and a figure came out behind Jane. I felt my heart break as I recognized his face. *What was he doing here?* I hadn't heard his heart as I had with Jane and Emily, and I wondered what that meant. I tilted my head, scanning his face. His expression seemed smug but also polite, which only angered me more. I narrowed my eyes, looking back at Emily and seeing she was gawking at the same thing I had. I wanted to know what she heard. Jane stood on the porch with her arms crossed against her chest.

Emily blinked a few times, in shock. I felt something else from her, a sour feeling, something like disappointment. I grumbled and turned away from all of them, walking across my own lawn and storming into the house. I couldn't handle all the changes, the *sounds.* I slammed the door behind me, rushing upstairs where I went to my room and slammed that door as well. I threw myself on my bed, humming in an attempt to make the beating stop. A lump rose in my throat.

I hated him. *I hated him.*

Jane:

I watched Wes storming away, knowing that what he'd seen angered him. I exhaled, bowing my head. I'd made a mess of my life, and I knew nothing would ever be the same.

"You're a real *bitch,* you know that, Jane?" Emily screamed from the lawn, storming toward me. She brushed past me, pausing and glaring over her shoulder before entering the house.

I turned, my eyes meeting Max's. "I'm sorry." I wanted to apologize for the fact that he had to see any of this.

Max smiled bleakly in return. "Maybe I should go."

Perhaps he had picked up on the subtle jealousy I'd felt when I saw Emily and Wes so obviously engaged in some sort of intimate exchange. I knew that it was my idea to get them together, but I never expected to feel so confused about it. In truth, I was just hoping that it would make my guilt disappear, but that was hardly the result.

I nodded, making a fool of myself. *Who was I kidding?* Max was never going to like me after this. No one would. Why had I gotten things so tangled up with Wes? Why was everything falling apart? I was looking at my feet when I felt two strong hands grip either arm. A tingling sensation rushed through me.

“Don’t worry, Jane.”

Shocked, I looked up at Max. His eyes searched mine. He smiled—a smile so reassuring, so deep, that all my negative thoughts ceased. I felt overwhelmed by him, his beauty unlike anything I’d seen before. He let go of me, leaving my skin tingling.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Max turned then, bounding down the steps and to his car. I watched as a shiver ran down my spine, warming inside my stomach. I was coveting his body in a way I’d never coveted anyone’s body before.

I thought about the night with Wes and the way it had felt. It was awkward, as though the proper connection wasn’t there. I was crazy about Wes in a different way. It was unfair to lie to myself and try to feel something romantic when I didn’t. When I looked at Max, however, I felt tingles all over. I was drawn to him, as though I could never be close enough. I needed to learn that this feeling toward Max was real, and the one for Wes was based on nothing but history—a mere connection of time, not love.

Max got in the car, looking at me once more before backing out of the drive. He had a half smile on his lips, one dimple cutting into his left cheek where that simple little freckle lived.

I wouldn’t ruin this.

Emily:

I stormed to my room, slamming the door. *Calm down*, I told myself. *You can’t suddenly become so territorial!*

Wes and Jane had a complicated history, and I knew this from every thought in their heads. In the yard, it was overwhelming, but now that I’d had the chance to consider it, I knew that his confused thoughts were a necessary means to an end. Wes had some major transitioning to do, and I needed to understand that. This was only his first day dealing with this gift of his, or whatever it was. I’d been dealing with mine for as long as I could remember.

Hearing what everyone thought was a burden, and so this feeling of disorder wasn’t foreign to me. Things happened a lot faster in my world because I always *knew* everything. I lived in a place where secrets simply did not exist, unless I was keeping them. In fact, I envied secrets, and especially surprises. They keep us blissfully ignorant to the truths that hurt us. Is it better to know? Or is it better to wonder?

I thought about the way I used to understand what the dog was thinking. It certainly made caring for him a piece of cake, and being able to communicate across a boundary otherwise found impossible, was huge. It wasn’t like the dog’s thoughts were in English, but rather a series of urges and ambient noise. That was when I knew that the things I heard weren’t because I was crazy, but because they were *real*.

I went to the window, looking through the blinds. Wes’s room was diagonal to mine, but I would give anything to have it directly across, as Jane’s was. Wes’s blinds were shut. I released a spout of air, reaching for the journal under my pillow. I sighed dejectedly, touching the pages.

Shutting my eyes, I lifted my hand to my face, tracing my lips and feeling where Wes had kissed me. It was a passionate kiss, a kiss like I’d never experienced before. Most boys kissed me in a way that felt as though I could be anyone, that I was just another girl looking to get free drugs—a nobody.

It was obvious why I’d never had a real boyfriend. I was afraid of how it would feel to know what they were thinking. I was afraid that my jealousy would get the best of me, as it was threatening to do now. I began to wonder if I’d ever be able to love someone, especially when knowing their every critical thought made loving or feeling loved, hard.

I thought about Max then, wondering what it was I saw behind his eyes that felt so familiar to me. His thoughts were strange, the whispers unlike anyone else’s. They were organized and guarded, as though he knew someone might be out there listening. It was unsettling. No one had ever had thoughts that were so perfectly structured.

Then, there were the other thoughts I heard in his head. It was as though they weren’t his at all. Max kept them separated from his own, in their own special corner. Their noticeable lack of structure told me that he had no control over them, but still, they were there.

But why?

I did not understand what it was about the two new boys, but there was something. It was clear that Max’s whispers were different than Greg’s, because they did not cripple me with their mere sound. Greg’s were screaming, whereas Max’s just whispered, as though at peace.

What did it mean?

I was afraid for my sister. I did not want her to be near Max. No matter if he was good or bad, the bottom line was that his general existence crept me out. Anything that made my skin crawl wasn’t a good sign. No matter how calm those whispers may be, they still weren’t right.

I heard a noise outside and went to the window to look. The blinds to Wes’s room were open, and I saw his face. He was looking toward my room, his breath fogging the glass. I grabbed the cord to my blinds, tugging gently as I lifted them.

We locked eyes. He smiled. I gave him a little wave, and he waved back. I looked back to my room, trying to find a piece of paper. I rummaged through my desk, finding a torn portion from a spiral notebook and a red marker. I wrote 'sorry' in large messy print on the page.

When I went back to the window, Wes was still there, but he'd already had a piece of paper held there.

It read, 'Come over.'

Max:

I was driving down the road away from Jane's house when a dark figure was suddenly in the seat beside me.

"You're so *pathetic*, Max." Greg clicked his tongue.

"So are you." I didn't even bother to look at him.

Greg laughed. "I guess that's what makes us brothers, then." He began to play with the car, pushing buttons and adjusting the heat. "Why even drive, Max? To fit in? It's much easier to simply appear, and disappear." He snapped his fingers for effect.

I didn't entertain him with an answer.

"Emily sure is a nice girl. Don't you think?" He changed the subject, not that I liked the new one any better than the last. "I don't think she likes you much, though. That's too bad." He was tugging on the seatbelt, his voice smug.

I glared at him. "Stay away from Emily, Greg."

He gave me a dramatic pouty face that made my anger boil.

"Oh, why? She's so *cute*. I don't think I can resist." He licked his lips in an inappropriate manner. "Her soul would align *perfectly* with mine."

I slammed on the breaks as Greg's body flew through the windshield and onto the hood of my car. His blood streaked the hood as he rolled onto the road. He lay there for a moment before moving, his bones cracking back into place. He groaned and stood with a humored expression.

"*Ouch*, Max." He tilted his head as his neck cracked back into place. His cuts quickly stitched back together, the blood absorbing into his skin. Greg laughed, brushing off his clothes.

The door of a house nearby opened and a woman came running toward us, *screaming*. I narrowed my eyes at her and she stopped. I entered her mind, telling her lies, a thing I hated to do, but in this instance, it was necessary. She turned and walked back into the house as though nothing had happened. Greg laughed at me, walking back toward the passenger door and climbing inside. I continued forward, the windshield ruined as the air blew against our faces.

"Now look what you did." Greg said it as though I'd simply broken a water glass. "At least I know you still have a talent for mind control, though you barely use it."

"Stay away from Emily, Greg."

He shook his head. "Afraid I can't do that, Brother. Why—I think I'm in *love* with her." He was being sarcastic, playing on my emotions for Jane.

"Why are you so *Hell-bent* on ruining me? No pun intended." I turned onto Grand Avenue. People were staring at the blood stained car, but I didn't care. Out here it wasn't uncommon to hit a deer.

"Because, *Brother*," he sounded annoyed. "I enjoy being powerful, don't you? And with you on my side, I can bring Hell on Earth, literally." He snorted. "Oh, but wait. You just want to fall in *love*. That's right. With a human, no less." He fell back against the seat, chuckling. The windshield was suddenly returned to its original glory, the blood gone. Greg was showing off.

I rolled my eyes. "I will never let you do that, and you know it's true. There have been plenty before you that have tried the same thing. Far more powerful than you, might I add? They failed. You'll fail. *Everyone always fails*."

Greg snorted again. "So? They had it all wrong! They tried to do it alone, but see, you and I have a special connection, and together, our power is far stronger than any of those demons that failed before." He laughed. "Just think—long ago, when Pandora left Heaven to cavort with the beautiful and weak men of Earth, do you think she ever expected that she was quite literally opening Pandora's Box? She released these evils, *our* evil."

I glared at him.

"It's her fault that I want to kill every human here. It was her infidelities against the Heavens. You may as well join now, before you're swept away in the aftermath."

"I will never turn to the demonic side like you have. Don't you get it?" I was tired of his games.

Greg was still smiling, as though he hadn't heard a thing I'd said.

"I'll find a way, Max. Someday you will see that this world does nothing but cause pain. One day, when Jane turns against you, then you will come crawling back to me, because you will see that you have nothing. You will see that humans are weak, that we are not meant to mix with them. And besides, do you really think she's going to want to be with you once she figures out what you are? What do you think she's going to say? 'Oh, Max, I don't mind that you're *dead*. It's sexy.' That, my dear brother, will *never* happen." Greg was mimicking a female voice rather poorly. "She is sexy, though. Isn't she?" He growled like a cat. "I don't blame you one bit!"

I clenched my jaw, disliking the way he was mocking me and Jane.

"You have it all wrong, Greg. You're just afraid to admit that you wish you had someone to love, but you refuse to allow it into your heart. You're afraid because you know your enemies outweigh your allies. People will be lined up down the block, just waiting to stab your dead heart out—if your heart still exists."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, *Brother*. You're so dramatic."

"You still forget that you were human once," I challenged, as I often did.

Greg snorted. "A tragic part of my life I chose to put behind me."

I tilted my head. "Magick has mixed to the point that angels will always co-exist within this world—one foot in the magickal realm, the other in the human." My eyes narrowed. "I'll kill you if that's what it takes to remind you of your human roots."

We were climbing up the mountain on the gravel road toward Erik's house.

Greg smiled. "You would never *kill* me." He leaned close to my ear. "You love me, you have to love me. If I die, you die. Remember?" He raised his eyebrows and let out a satisfied breath.

I mirrored his words. "And if I die, *you die*. Remember? I don't fear crossing over as you do."

The car rolled to a stop outside the house. The tall trees were blowing in the wind, making it seem ominous. The house was over one-hundred years old, passed down through the family of the alchemist that took Erik in.

I thought about our old house, and my own family, suddenly missing the way it was. My parents were well known in town, and a major influence in political circles. We were wealthy, one of the wealthiest families in Colorado. My mother and father founded the town of Glenwood Springs in 1886. But after a few years of happiness within the family, things began to fall apart as the truth about magick began to surface. It was no secret that my mother was involved with the alchemist, the thing that drove Greg to insanity. He thought it was horrid to see Mother cavorting with magickal beings, and though my father chose to ignore it, it tore Greg apart.

Even before that, though, I always knew something was different about Greg. I never paid it much mind because I was too swallowed by my own popularity and vanity to notice. Greg didn't have the same friends as I did, if any at all—even if we were fraternal twins. When I finally did begin to notice his solidarity, I tried to include him, but by then, he no longer wanted any part of it.

I blame myself for what happened—I should have seen it. It is this guilt that has changed me from the self-centered seventeen year old I once was into the humanitarian I am in death. I have learned from my mistakes, but Greg still hasn't.

"*Ahhh...*" Greg sighed, breaking my thought. "Eternal life is wonderful, isn't it?"

I clenched my jaw, swallowing down my anger.

Eternal life was Hell.

My Hell.

Wes:

I quickly took my note for Emily down from the window, seeing Jane storm into her room, afraid she would notice. I glanced at Emily one more time before ducking back. While I waited for Emily, I watched Jane from a distance—at an angle where she wouldn't see me. I splayed my hands against the wall behind me as I leaned forward and exhaled. Our whole friendship was crumbling, but for whatever reason, it wasn't bothering me the way I thought it should.

All my young adult life I thought she was it, that all I ever wanted was her. Now though, seeing *him* with her, I am finally beginning to realize she's not. I couldn't trust Jane while she was with him. Something about that Max kid was all wrong.

I lifted my hand from the wall and felt my head. The pill Emily had given me was admittedly making things bearable. My muscles felt soft and relaxed, and the thoughts in my head were clear and concise.

I got her now, and I understood why it was Emily took the drugs. I never expected that she would have issues as I had, as Jane had. She acted okay with it, though, more adult than Jane ever could. It was almost as though my whole issue wasn't a big deal to her, but it made sense. Emily had dealt with her own problems all her life. She knew how to keep it a secret—she knew how to conceal.

It was clear that Emily and Jane had yet to share the existence of their gifts with each other. I knew it wasn't my place to tell either of them, though conceivably Emily already knew about Jane's if reading thoughts was indeed what she could do. All I knew was that I could never tell Jane my secret. How do I explain it to her? And if I did, would she even bother to understand, or dwell selfishly on her own problems?

In the course of one day, everything I once thought to be real no longer was. Every notion I once had about the things and people I thought I could depend on, I no longer could. I was lost.

I moved from the wall to the ground, crawling on hands and knees to the window. I peeked over the ledge. Jane sat on her bed, her hand resting on her chest and her eyes looking at the ceiling. I felt a lump in my throat rise, watching her hand as it touched her skin. She was still beautiful, but an empty shell. How could I justify my new feelings for Emily without hurting Jane? But then again, would she even care? This was what Jane wanted, after all.

My eyes hurt just watching her. She did not love me, and she never would. I reached up and grabbed the cord to the blinds, carefully tugging. I lowered them as I tried to remain inconspicuous, hoping she didn't notice.

There was a knock on my bedroom door then, and I jumped. I leaned against the wall under the window, bracing myself as the pity I felt for Jane changed to excitement toward Emily's presence.

"Come in." My voice was rough in my throat.

The door squeaked open and Emily stuck her head in. A sweet smile filled her lips, and the tension in my chest subsided. The confusion over Jane changed to an obvious decision. Emily was who I really wanted.

"Hi." She stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her. I noticed a stack of thin but large books in her hand.

"What are those?" I pushed myself away from the wall, my knees dragging across the floor.

Emily knelt and sat cross legged on the floor, tossing the books into my lap. I picked one up, twisting it in my hand to read it. My upper lip pursed with interest.

"Animals of the Amazon?" The cover was illustrated for children. I ran my fingers over the waxy image of an exotic bird.

She nodded, grabbing her ankles with her hands and leaning forward. She grasped the cover and opened to a random page. "See. I thought that..."

There was an image of a large python. I swallowed, feeling my body begin to tingle and ache. I forced the book from under her hand and slammed it shut.

"Em, what are you *doing*?" Sweat began to seep from my pores as a wave of heat trickled from my head to the tips of my fingers.

Emily was watching me as though I were some sort of experiment. She tilted her head curiously, rocking back onto her tailbone. I glanced at her stomach as she stretched. She was wearing a short shirt, her skirt ruffling around her thighs. Dirt from where she fell out of the car still stained her knees. I looked away, cursing to myself as I wished she'd sit differently.

Emily smirked, knowing what I'd thought.

I tilted my head, curious. "Just what can you hear exactly?"

She smiled and shrugged.

"Come on, Em. I've practically spilled my heart out here. I mean look at me, I'm sweating like a fool over a picture of a python. Give a little."

Emily looked me in the eyes, my thoughts screaming to know. "I know just about everything you think I know."

My amusement faded. "*Everything*? Even..."

Emily narrowed her eyes, my thoughts pouring over every thought I'd had toward Jane today. I cursed under my breath. I then thought about every thought I'd had of her, feeling a warm tingle pulse through my blood.

She smiled, despite the previously hurt look from my initial thoughts. "Listen, Wes. I get it, I do. Its human nature to be confused and I'm alright with that. I'm prepared to go along with whatever is ahead. Right now I'm just excited to have someone who knows. Someone I can talk to about issues I've never shared with anyone. And I'm okay with knowing what you think. In a way, it's nice."

I shook my head. "But, it's horrible! I feel horrible that—"

Emily put her hand up to stop me. "I know, Wes, but because I can hear what you're thinking, I can also hear your confusion. You don't need to try and explain it to me."

I stared at her, afraid of my thoughts.

“Don’t be, Wes. Think what you want. I’ve dealt with the fact that there is no such thing as a secret for all my life. I know my mother thinks I’m a horrible daughter, but I also know that despite all that, she does love me. I know Jane thinks I’m a lost cause and will end up a poll dancer one day,” I laughed. “But I’m okay with that, too. I’m okay because I know who I am, and I’m none of those things. It’s always been that way.”

I nodded, understanding what she meant. It was something she was born with, so to her, dealing with thoughts was common place.

“Besides, it’s not like I hear *every* thought, especially when I take something. I know it’s horrible, and it’s seriously messing with my health but... drugs make it all go away. So, you see my reasons for taking them.”

“You really shouldn’t take them, Em. There must be a better way,” I know it sounded like I was trying to be the hypocritical parent, but perhaps she would listen to me.

Shame glimmered in her eyes as she fidgeted with her hands.

I felt her despair and isolation. “How can you handle it? I mean, I’ve seen how some of the boys you buy drugs from look at you. I could only imagine what it would be like to also know what they *think*.” Just realizing what I thought about her made it worse.

Emily rolled her eyes and laughed. “It’s a necessary means to an end, and after a while, it just becomes humorous. I mean, they’ll play out whole *scenes*—”

I squirmed, and she caught onto my discomfort.

She shrugged. “Well, I mean, you get the picture.”

My eyes were wide as I nodded. “*Yeah*.” I changed the subject. “Make me a deal, though. No more drugs, for either of us. We have each other. Let’s just be real for once, not numb.”

Emily smiled. “I guess I can do that.”

I smiled back. “Good.”

She picked up the book between us, tracing the cover with her finger. I’d almost forgotten about it.

“I brought these because I was curious. That’s all. I know you became that bird, but what if it were a fox that we’d seen in the woods, or a snake?” She removed her Converse and adjusted her plaid knee socks. “What if you can be anything you want?”

I couldn’t stop watching her, but she didn’t seem to mind the attention, either. My ears were alive as I listened to her hand graze the soft skin on her legs. “*I—I don’t know*” I stuttered, unable to stop my lecherous thoughts.

Emily smiled, knowing.

I tried to concentrate on something else, finding that when I pushed the thoughts of her away, the image of the snake in the book was now slithering across my mind. The image began to mix with the emotion I felt toward Emily. I was over-stimulated, and Emily’s presence was making the urges and pain in my muscles hard to subdue. I heard her heart beating—it was even and soft like a drum.

Emily grabbed one of the other books, flipping it open and scanning the page. She had a dangerous look on her face, her crimson lips curled with amusement. I was scared. She turned the book to face me, a picture of a small monkey on the page. I let out a painful laugh.

“Em, *stop*.”

Emily pushed the book closer to my face. “Wes, look at it,” she urged.

I refused and shook my head, squeezing my eyes shut. She did not budge, and I couldn’t help but slowly draw my attention back. I looked at her eyes as she peered over the top of the book, seeing they were now deeper than they had ever been. I listened to her breathing, the ache in my body seeping into my bones.

I looked down at the monkey, gazing into its eyes. I felt as though I could feel its heart beating, though it was just a picture. It began to come alive in my own heart, the rate of it unlike anything I’d felt before. I gave up and let go of the pain as I felt my muscles give in. Hair sprouted from my skin, my body shrinking closer to the ground.

Here we go again.

Jane:

I was a horrible person, and now I really was left with no one. Who could I call? Who could I talk to? I’d destroyed my only friendship, and my efforts to save my sister had failed. She still hated me, if not more than before. My whole world had stopped because of my infatuation with Max—

my head crowded with images of him.

I looked out the window, seeing that Wes's blinds were now shut. He hated me. I knew this because his foreseen death had changed, showing him lying in a field of grass, me standing over him with a bloody knife. I didn't need much more proof than that, and it didn't take a genius to see why he hated me.

I lay back against the pillow as my body went weak. Every inch of my skin tingled. I needed to sleep, I needed to dream. There I felt something more than I did while I was awake. Though the death I saw would strike fear into the hearts of most, it was something that brought me a terrifyingly strange sense of comfort. My father's death had changed me, giving me a lust for the horrible images in my dreams. I felt like a freak, but it didn't mean that I was a murderer, or an evil being. At least that's what I hoped.

I forced my eyes shut, listening to the silence of the house. My thoughts became blurred, and soon I fell asleep.

In my dream, the mists surrounded me. The familiar smell of crisp cold air, tinged with the metallic scent of blood, sent shivers down my spine, but not the shivers you'd expect. I filled my chest with the sweet air, exhaling away my anxieties and finding that for a moment, I felt I belonged.

When I opened my eyes, I wasn't surprised to see that Max was standing beside me. I looked up at him, watching his neck tighten and relax as he breathed deep, enjoying the smell of this place in the same way I did. His hand grazed mine as it sat limp at my side. I looked down, watching as his fingers traced the ridge of my knuckles. Tonight, there was no blood on my hands.

Feeling confident, I grasped his hand and turned toward him. "*Max...*"

His head turned toward me, his blue eyes illuminated by the misty dream. He lifted his finger to my lips, silencing me. "Just listen," was all he said.

I turned my head and looked forward into the mist. I listened, hearing silence, hearing nothing at all. My skin prickled, sensing another's presence beside me. I felt someone grab my other hand, the grip firmer than Max's had been. It was filled with a similar feeling of attachment to this place. Shocked, I turned to look at this new visitor. Another boy stood beside me, his features dark but his grasp sweet. He had similar features to those of Max, but sharper, and more defined by frustration.

I knew from the rumors at school that Max had a brother, a twin brother, though they were not identical. I'd not yet seen him, but I knew that this was him.

I turned back to Max, seeing that his face was suddenly angry. Max tried to pull me away from his brother, but his brother's grasp on my hand was too intoxicating. I couldn't let go. I turned back to face the brother, drawn by a stronger power that pulsed through my hand. I let go of Max, hearing the brother's name speak softly in my head.

"*Gregory*," I whispered it back, suddenly knowing his name and wanting to say it out loud. Gregory smiled and pulled me toward him as though we were dancing, his hand cupping my cheek. I leaned into his touch, unable to control myself. He knelt toward me as his lips parted. I did not move. I couldn't resist him. Gregory kissed me, his lips cold but sweet, as though dusted with sugar. I kissed the flavor from them, but it quickly turned sour.

I furrowed my brow and stepped away, wiping the bitter taste from my lips. Gregory smiled slyly. I felt tricked. I turned to find Max, seeing he was backing away from us, his eyes furious. My heart began to race, the pain of what I'd done shaking my bones.

"Max!" I yelled, but he continued to back away. "Max, I didn't mean to!"

Gregory began to laugh behind me. I stumbled and fell to the ground as Max disappeared into the mist. I felt my hands sink into the Earth, and as I lifted them, they were covered in blood. My heart began to pound, and I felt the pain in me rise, drowning my lungs. I took a deep breath and tried to hold it, but it began to burn. I no longer cared. The scream released into the silent air, filling my dream with a harsh ring of agony.

The scream was quickly silenced, and I looked back to where Max had been. He had returned through the mist, watching me with a pained expression. I looked back at Gregory, thankful to find that he was gone. Relief washed over me, and I struggled to stand. I ran toward Max, my hands stained. I halted before him, as everything else in this place did. He stood frozen, waiting, his features toward me cold and distant. I grabbed his hand, but he refused to respond to my touch. His eyes were blank. He was no longer there.

"Max, come back, please." I reached up, touching his face as I smeared his cheek with blood.

His eyes flickered with life and he looked down at me, his jaw fixed. I touched the tips of my fingers to his lips, and then touched them to mine. He, too, tasted sweet like sugar, but the flavor lingered with the hint of mint, layered with a metallic flavor I'd grown used to. Max came back to me as he tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear, his other hand locking behind my back possessively.

"You're mine," he whispered.

Emily:

I laughed as Wes crawled toward me and into my arms. His coarse monkey hair was rough against my skin, his eyes darting about the room. He looked up at me with pursed lips, letting out a spurt of air that mimicked a laugh. His little hand reached up and touched my cheek, his tiny paw warm against my skin.

I giggled. “Wes! Stop!”

I continued to laugh. Finding I could barely breathe, I grasped Wes around the stomach and set him back on the ground. I took a moment to catch my breath and stop laughing. He watched me curiously, his eyes blinking rapidly.

Regrouping, I flipped through the book, finding another animal for him to try. I felt my rebellious side surface, the image too intriguing to pass by. I tilted the page toward him, and his small hand grasped the paper. Wes tapped the image, letting out a diminutive noise as I heard his thoughts whisper in my head. He jumped up and down, shaking his head with his tail bobbing.

The image was that of a lion, and though I knew he'd object, there wasn't much he could control at the moment. Wes looked at me with fright in his tiny eyes, but I refused to allow his small monkey hand to turn the page. A low growl began to grow in his throat then, echoing off the walls of his room. I watched with delight as his body shifted and grew, the fur around his neck changing from a cool grey to a golden brown. The whole room shook as he let out a loud snarl, finishing the transformation.

The floorboards creaked under his weight, his back close to four feet tall. He licked his lips as his tongue traced over his fangs. He nudged me and I fell over, falling on my tail bone, letting out a small cry of pain. He stepped toward me, looming above as my heart raced with fear. His hot breath fell across my face, his teeth bared. I tried not to be frightened, but it was hard to forget the lethality of this creature. I gazed into his golden eyes, my chest tight. Beneath it all, Wes was still there—and he was laughing.

“Wes,” I whispered. His paw landed on my shoulder, pushing me against the floor. His lion face was beautiful, the fur layered against his skin in an array of golds. His eyes were the only thing that linked him to the person he once was, filled with overwhelming kindness and depth of emotion. I ran my hand across his fur as my fingers trembled. He licked my nose and I laughed, smiling at him. “Wes, *stop*.”

I felt his body changing once more, and his massive mane began to shed. I was still pinned under his weight, and the licking changed to something else entirely. I felt his warm bare hand on my shoulder, still pushing me against the floor. He kissed my cheek, then my lips, his bare chest leaning against me. “I don't want to stop,” he whispered.

I pushed my body against him, my hands trailing down his now smooth back as I let myself enjoy the moment. I listened to the whispers in his head, hearing things I'd longed to hear. He kissed my neck, my hand, my cheek.

What was Jane thinking?

How could she not find Wes irresistible? I knew coming over here that triggering his talent also triggered his emotions, but I didn't care. The sooner he could understand who I really was beyond what he'd previously thought, the sooner he would see that it was me he should have loved all along.

“Wes,” I said his name one last time, but he silenced me with his mouth, refusing to let me stop him.

His body against mine was luxurious, his hands covering every inch of my skin. I took a sharp intake of breath as his hand grazed across my stomach, reaching for my skirt. I froze as my innocence overcame me. Gripping his arm, and mustering all the strength I could, I rolled him over and pinned him to the ground—a feat not easily executed.

“Wes, stop.”

He was breathing hard, the fact of his near nudity a guiltless turn on. His hand rested on my upper thigh, inching up. My hand went quickly to his, stopping him.

“Slow down, okay?” I'd lived the lie long enough.

Wes stopped, smiling as he grabbed a nearby blanket, wrapping us both in it. He pulled the wool around me, pulling my head against his chest. My stomach lay against his, my arms shaking.

His chin was resting on my head. “Sorry,” he apologized, but I knew he wasn't all that sorry.

“I just—” I bit my lip, my hand on his chest. For all I'd portrayed about my image, this lie was the worst. I wished he could hear what I thought. “I've never...” My words trailed, hoping he could fill in the blanks.

Wes laughed, as though he didn't believe me. “What?”

“No, I'm serious.” I pushed away from him, looking into his golden eyes.

He sat up, and I slid to his side. “Really? But you...”

I felt ashamed, but it was my M.O. to make people think I was someone other than who I was. Then again, who in their right mind would want to lie about being a corrupted freak like me? But I did. It had kept people away from me. Besides, I'd wanted to stand out, especially to Wes, but no matter how hard I tried to get his attention, nothing had worked—until now. Though I feared this new boy Jane was hanging out with, at the same time, I loved that it had made Wes finally see that she would never love him the way he wanted, the way I could.

“I'm barely sixteen, Wes. And I know that's young. So what I'm saying is that I'm not stupid.” I knew that when I was fourteen, Jane was convinced I'd already lost my virginity. She hated me because of this, but in truth, she didn't understand the fact that I could look the way I did and still have morals. It was the accusation on her part that had finally turned me against her. I stopped confiding in her like a sister, because no matter what I

said or did, she just expected the worst from me based on appearances alone. It was a lost cause, and I'd given up. "Besides, Wes, like we discussed earlier—when you know what all those boys are thinking, it sort of takes the romance out of it."

Wes ran his hand through my hair. "I always thought that—I *mean*—you're sister always told me..."

I shook my head. "She doesn't know anything about me," I mumbled with a hint of self pity.

Wes snorted. "But *my* thoughts aren't a turn off, are they?" He looked a little worried.

I laughed. "You're different, Wes. You were the only person I ever wished I *would* hear those thoughts from."

He leaned up and kissed my forehead. "You know, Em, you really are something else."

I smiled to myself. Finally, he did see me for who I was, and he'd liked it.

"Do you want something to eat?" he asked, one arm resting behind his head, the other hooked around the small of my waist.

I didn't want to move away from him, afraid that when he stood, the moment would be over and his guilty thoughts toward Jane would return.

"Sure." I agreed in order to seem agreeable. When we stood, though, Jane's name was never whispered in his thoughts.

I grinned, hoping the beginning of their end was here.

Max:

"What the Hell was that?" I demanded, grabbing Greg off the couch and holding him in the air. My wings hung from my back. I was undeniably angry.

Greg laughed, enjoying my rage. "It was just a little fun, Brother. I walked in here, saw you dozing, and figured you were there with *her*. You left yourself open, so I just followed the trail."

I threw him across the room and he slammed into the wall. "I hate you."

Greg stood, brushing himself off, not bothering to reciprocate my desire to fight.

"Come on, fight!" I yelled, but Greg just stood there, mocking me.

He shook his head. "No."

I grumbled and walked from the room, slamming the door behind me, splintering the frame as a result. I'd felt Jane's emotions as he kissed her. Even if they were fake feelings that had been planted by Greg, it still hurt. My own brother was betraying my every chance at happiness.

I stretched my arm. My shoulder hurt, feeling the pain that my brother now felt from the way I'd thrown him across the room. I heard the door open, falling off the failing hinges.

Greg followed behind me. "She tastes *good*," he crooned. "But you wouldn't know that, *would you?* And you're right. Her brush with death gives her a certain *pizzazz*, doesn't it?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, my hands clenched. I punched the wall in the hallway, leaving a gaping hole. My wings scraped against the walls, causing strips of wallpaper to flutter to the floor.

I couldn't be angry with Jane because it wasn't her fault. All I was left with was anger for Greg. He had a way of brainwashing anyone he wanted, intoxicating them into doing terrible things. I needed a way to stop him. But what could I do that wouldn't also harm me?

"She is *mine*," I hissed. My wings fluffed as I said it, staking my claim.

"Someone that easily persuaded can't possibly love you. Pathetic dreaming is what it is." His steps behind me were confident. "The sooner you see this, the sooner you can move on, and I can kill her, like I meant to long ago."

I spun, thrusting my finger at him. "If you kill her, I'll kill myself, and you know what that means." I slid my finger across my throat.

"Oh, won't that be *lovely?* Then we can all be truly *dead* together." He laughed.

I knew he would say that. I considered it for a moment. If I did finally die, and she did as well, it is true that we would be together forever in the afterlife, but she did not deserve to die. It was for that very reason that I'd saved her to begin with. Jane needed to live. She deserved to have what was taken from me—*life*.

"Leave me alone," I grumbled. I walked to my room, slamming the door behind me. It did little to stop him from appearing in front of me, a cloud of

smoke dissipating into the air around him.

"I hate our fighting, Brother. We've been like this our whole lives. Can't we just get along?" Greg was pouting, but I knew it was all for show.

"That's not true, Greg, and you know it. I tried to be your friend and your brother long ago, when we were *alive*. Remember? So, don't tell me I didn't try. You never wanted to be happy, that was the real problem. You enjoyed the pain, even then." I grabbed a flask from the table and poured a drink. I shot the liquid down my throat and it burned with a delightful release of anxiety. I winced, enjoying the feeling of heat, no matter what the cost.

I threw the glass in the fireplace and flames came to life, filling the room with subtle warmth. I turned back to Greg, but he was gone. Exhaling, I walked to the large bed and sat, putting my head in my hands. I tried to calm my pounding head. I was tired of this, tired of the fight. I wished there was a way to be rid of Greg for good. I rubbed my eyes and reached in my pocket, finding the ring. How could I give this to her? How could I make Jane wear it when she barely knew me? It would seem like I was coming on too strong.

I let it sit on my palm. This would keep her thoughts safe beyond the existing power that keeps him from killing her. As long as I stay with her, protecting her, he cannot harm her, but he can still torment her thoughts as he had in her dream. I know he means to drive me mad that way. He wants to force me to stop watching her so he can get his claws in, but I never will. No matter what emotional pain I have to endure, I will always be her angel.

I put the ring back into my pocket, afraid that Greg would re-appear and see that I had it. Once it's on her person, there is nothing he can do to get it back. It was an ancient heirloom that had been passed down through the alchemist's family, from a time when magick was volatile, as it was now. The alchemist knew that his potions were never safe from prying minds, and he had to find a way to protect his most precious thoughts.

It held a sense of peace inside it, something Greg couldn't understand. It was warm to the touch, and in my pocket it radiated against my leg. Her head needed to be clear. I needed to know that if she could love me, it was for real.

Jane:

After the whirlwind first week of school, where Max and his illusive brother made a larger impression on the student body than I ever could have expected, the week that followed paled in comparison. Wes and Emily continued to give me the silent treatment that had started last Friday in the front yard, and Max had been absent from school with no explanation. Though I'd wanted nothing more than to meet his brother Greg after that dream I'd had, he too seemed to be absent. I knew that when I did finally meet Greg, and if he looked exactly like the Greg I'd seen in my dream, then my dreams were more than just my imagination, but fact. I shivered, because if that happened, it meant that all the other dying people I saw there were also real, adding a whole new twist to what I thought was only fantasy.

I pulled the seat back in Wes's car, glancing at Emily as she climbed in the backseat. She was different somehow, but I couldn't quite decide what it was. As she sat, her eyes avoided mine, hiding something from me as they had all week. I looked at Wes, but he also looked away from me. I knew he was upset with me. His continued foreseen death involving me as the murderer hadn't faded, but it wasn't just that. His obvious avoidance harbored another sort of emotion than hate.

I sat back against the seat and looked out the window, watching the fog of my breath film the glass. It was another sweet Friday, and I was at least thankful to have two weeks of my senior year under my belt. My fears that Max knew about the dream pressed my mind. I blamed it for his disappearance from my life. What other explanation could there be for his absence from school, especially in the second week? I'd thought we'd hit it off, but the silence said otherwise. Maybe it was all a dream and I would eventually wake up. Then, things could go back to the way they were last year. I mean, I get it. Perhaps there was a Gordon family crisis of some kind, but still, you at least call a girl to inform her of that.

I heard Emily sit back, pulling the headphones from her bag and placing the buds into her ears. The music blared despite their snug home. I looked at Wes, seeing he had a slight smirk on his face, clearly amused by Emily's actions. I began to wonder what had transpired between them. I would be blind not to notice it. There was a sense of calm since the day Wes had disappeared with Emily. His blinds hadn't opened for days, and though I tried to keep track of where Emily was, I couldn't watch her all the time. They were hanging out, and I knew it.

I cleared my throat as he backed out of the driveway. "How are you, Wes?" I was hoping to finally break the ice.

Wes glanced at me, his face now blank. "Fine." He shifted the car into drive and the engine roared. His smirk faded, and the color in his cheeks faded.

I nodded, sensing it was going to be difficult to get him to talk. "Wes, I don't want you to hate me." I dove right in, knowing I had a limited amount of time alone with him before we arrived at school—the only time he could manage to be near me.

I put my hand on his as it sat on the shifter. He jerked away and looked in the rearview mirror at Emily. Clearly, there was something between them. A flash of jealousy washed down my spine.

"She's not *looking*. She can't even hear over all that noise," I reminded him, sounding mildly annoyed. Wes always relished my attention, but now he seemed to scorn it.

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "Yeah, I know." His answer was vague.

I tilted my head. "What about the pain? How is it?"

Wes leaned against the door slightly. "What pain?"

I let out a sharp breath, pursing my lips. "Wes, don't pretend it didn't happen." He was shutting me out. "What did the doctor say this week?"

"It's gone," he snapped. "So, I didn't go."

I felt hurt by his sudden bitterness. I looked away from him, eyeing Emily. She gave me a sassy smile and rolled her eyes. I glared at her, and it was then that I noticed what was different about her. Her makeup was lighter than normal, and her typical black cherry lipstick was replaced by something with a hint of pink. Her clothes had not changed, and her short skirt was shorter than ever, but the visual difference of her face was change enough. At least she had a coat on, even if it was lined with tacky fake fur. The eyeliner around her eyes was half the thickness, and for the first time since she was thirteen, I felt I could distinguish the color of them. And the clarity—she was drug free.

I found myself gawking as Emily gave me another annoyed look. I was quick to turn back forward, feeling out of the loop and insulted. The rest of the ride was rather uncomfortable, and the tension never faltered. When we arrived at school, I saw that Liz was waiting in the shadows of the corridor, hiding in her bright yellow rain coat and designer jeans. She gave me an eager look, followed by a little wave. I rolled my eyes, waving back as we parked. Today I was hardly in the mood to listen to her woes about life as a popular girl. More than likely, she was still bitter about the fact that Max had passed her up last week, and I knew she just wanted to spout off some excuse to why it happened.

I got out of the car. Wes barely looked at me as our doors slammed in unison. He pretended to fumble with the lock as I stared at him over the top of the car. I finally gave up and turned toward the school, releasing a surrendering breath. Emily did not bother to remove her headphones, walking on ahead of the both of us. Whatever her issues were, it at least seemed harmless in comparison to the many other things it could have been.

Liz waved at me a second time, her gestures flagrant considering her habit of pretending I didn't exist. I grumbled, knowing there was no way I could avoid her at this point. I broke away from the wet pavement of the lot, joining her in the shelter of the corridor. She touched my arm, smiling in a fake manner.

"Are we still on for tomorrow?" Her eyes were large, like a full moon. When she grinned, I saw that her teeth were in a perfect white row.

I had a hard time reading her expression, barely able to look past her new foreseen death—*dying alone*. "Sure." Didn't we always get together on Saturday? Perhaps after last Saturday's tenuous talks over Max, she had feared I'd finally grown sick of her games.

Liz laughed, giving me a playful nudge. "What's wrong with you? Do you think I'm mad?"

I shrugged.

She continued to giggle awkwardly. "I'm not angry with you over Max! Is that what you thought? Life is not *always* about boys." I waited for the line that would inevitably justify that fact, and also insult me somehow. "He's not really my type, *anyway*." She looked dismayed. "Too dark for my taste. Not to mention a totally *unstylish* dresser." She turned up her nose. "But he's perfect for you."

It was so kind of her to regard me as dark and unfashionable. I could hardly contain my excitement. I nodded, figuring it was easier to agree.

"But I still want to gossip about him, don't you?" She winked at me.

I considered my options for Saturday once more. I had no foreseen plans, and considering the fact that Max had seemed to forget about me, and everything else since last Friday, I didn't see the harm in some form of social interaction. Especially being that my only other friend hated me.

"Sure," I mumbled.

Liz jumped. "Oh, great! Then how about two o'clock?"

I nodded as someone leisurely leaned against the wall at the end of the otherwise empty corridor. I glanced at the person, my heart leaping when I saw it was Max. He grinned at me, crossing his arms. "*—/...uh...*" I'd forgotten what Liz had asked me, too shocked by his sudden appearance.

"Jane? He—*lo?*" She sang, noticing that I was distracted. She looked in the direction I had, and let out a low whistle. "Speaking of the devil," she whispered. "Where's he been?" She stared shamelessly, indicating that though she claimed he wasn't her type, he really was. "I'll leave you be, then. Two o'clock, remember that," she stated. I felt her pat me on the back as she left, her footsteps echoing away in a blur.

I forgot about Liz altogether. I swallowed hard, thinking of my dream. My feet were sewn to the pavement of the corridor, unwilling to move despite my need to talk with him. Max spared me, walking toward me instead. I watched him, as though it were in slow-motion—like an old romance movie. His gait was the same gait he had in my dream, right down to the slight pause he took when putting weight on his left foot. It was as though my mind knew every tick, though I hadn't known him all that long.

Max reached me. "Hey." His voice was cool. Clearly he wasn't experiencing the same horrible anxiety that I was.

"*H—Hi.*" I bit my lip, my eyes trying all they could to avoid his. My cheeks flushed as guilt and embarrassment stirred my stomach. What if it was true? What if he really did know about my dreams?

I heard him breath softly. "Excuse my absence over the past few days. I was a bit distracted with some things at home." He lifted one brow. "Moving can be difficult at times. It can really put a lot of stress on the family."

So my notions were right. It was a family thing. I blinked a few times. My head ached with the thought of his family. I was hoping he wasn't

referencing the fact that his brother had kissed me, implying it to be the reason for the unrest. I forced myself to nod, my eyes dancing across his.

“How have you been, Beautiful?” he pressed. “Did you forget about me? Perhaps find yourself a new person to *stalk* in my absence?”

I giggled, his comment easing my burden. I hated that he was leading our conversation. I was usually so well spoken, but whenever he was around my words became a mess in my head. At least he had bloomed a little, speaking more than one word questions and answers.

I was fidgeting. I needed to remember that my dreams were just that: dreams. *Just. A. Dream.* It was absurd to think that he could know them. It was as though I believed someone could get into my head, which, with all respect to the world of psychics, just wasn't possible, *especially*—

Max cleared his throat. I stopped thinking.

“Sorry, I...” I moved my weight to my other foot, trying to concentrate. “I'm fine.”

He ran a hand through his hair—his other hand behind his back as he leaned against the lockers. “Fine? Just fine?”

I felt the corners of my mouth curl, but I forced them down. “Well, yes.” I wanted to say it was because he had left with no explanation, leaving me falling into an eternal hole of anxiety and regret. Not to mention the fact that I really did feel like a stalker for roving the whole school every day this week, just in the hopes of finding him. I'd been left with no way to call him, no way to know what last week had meant.

Max leaned back on his heels, his stance amused. He wore a black sweater, the wool furled ever so slightly as though washed the wrong way. The sleeves were casually pressed back to his elbows, exposing the ever present tattoos.

His hand moved to my chin, lifting it. He forced me to look into his eyes, the exact same eyes in my dream. “What are you doing tonight?” He was calm and confident, his lips shaping around the words in a way that made my heart flutter.

His breath was intoxicating, laced with the sugary mint smell I'd tasted in the dream. I exhaled through my nose until the breath was void from my lungs, not wanting to give in so easily. I calmed myself. “Nothing.” I thought of the Jane Austen book I was planning to read.

“Would you like to come meet my grandfather?”

I felt a surge of excitement as the hope exploded, my feet feeling as though they had left the ground. I smiled wide, unable to contain it. “Yes!” My attempts to remain cool had failed—Jane Austen was dead.

Max chuckled. “I figured you would.”

I couldn't stop smiling, and for a moment, I was no longer nervous.

“I thought you would enjoy seeing where I live, since I've seen where you do.” He paused for a moment, his eyes locked with mine, once again exposing my vulnerabilities. “If I haven't made it clear, Beautiful, I want to know you better.”

I didn't know what to say in return. His address seemed so formal, as though he was trying to make his intentions known. I lifted one brow, laughing to ease my nerves.

“You think I'm joking?” He didn't laugh in return, staring determinedly. The corners of his lips curled just enough to appear pleasant.

I brushed my foot across the ground, my laugh fading. I cleared my throat. “Sorry, I—yeah, I want to know you, too.” I nodded.

His smile returned. “I feel a connection with you.” His dimple made an appearance. “It's no surprise that I find you very... *striking*.”

My stomach tugged, filling my limbs with a wash of adrenaline. I looked down at my baggy jeans and oversized long sleeved shirt that poked out from under my father's old jacket. I didn't understand what he found *striking* about me. I knew that once upon a time—before my father's death—I'd had a lot of potential. If I'd kept up with my looks, I would have surpassed Liz in popularity for sure. It would be me that all her minions would be falling over to impress—only a brunette version.

Max looked to the ceiling of the corridor. “I just have a feeling, you know? You do something to me.” He looked back at me, his blue eyes narrow.

I could relate with that feeling.

I heard the bell ring, my anxieties to get to class on time tickling my mind. He turned and stood beside me. “Come on, *Stalker*. I'll walk you to class.”

I laughed.

“Oh, I almost forgot...” He had his hands in his pocket and was rummaging for something. “I told my grandfather about your interests in his work. He gave me something that he wanted you to have. He's an old man, but he never gets tired of meeting a fan of history.” He pulled his hand out of his pocket and laughed. “So, this was *his* idea, not mine. Though, I don't mind being the one to give it to you.”

Max held his fist toward me, slowly unrolling his fingers. A ring lay in his palm, tarnished with age. My heart stopped. It was so beautiful, made of a white stone that seemed to glow despite the tarnish.

“What is it?” It was a dumb question, but what else was there to say? I'd never been given a gift quite like it.

With his other hand he grabbed mine, bringing it up and holding it flat as he rolled the ring into my palm. At first I didn't know what to think as I held it. The ring felt so strange against my skin, and it took a moment for the feeling to register. It was—*warm*.

He rolled my fingers over it. His firm touch cold in contrast with the ring. "It's a magick ring," he whispered. "Or so my grandfather says it is. It's made of an ancient stone, a very *rare* stone that's meant for protection."

I felt a lump rise in my throat. "A magick ring?" I couldn't get past his initial explanation. As I felt the ring in my grasp, I nearly forgot about how beautiful he was.

I rolled my fingers open as he released my grip. I stared at it, unable to deny the fact that it had to be magick. How else could it be so warm when his grasp was so cold? I'd read about the tales of magick that his grandfather spoke of, and I always wondered if something could be offered as proof. To me, this was all the proof I would ever need.

I thought about all the things his grandfather had written pertaining to the ancient claims of magick, and the sorcerers that were not unlike those we read about in everyday fairytales. I didn't remember reading about the ring in his grandfather's writings, but perhaps it was meant to be a secret. Modern claims at magickal rings were not uncommon, but one like this was anything but. It was said that they once found a whole grouping of true magickal rings in the Fairy Caves, but when the rings were proven to be no more than mere silver—containing no trace of anything out of the ordinary—it was then believed to be nothing but a hoax.

"Is it safe to wear?" I finally spoke.

He nodded. "Yes, of course. I think that's what my grandfather intended."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You're grandfather's intentions, right?"

He laughed. "I told you, Beautiful, it's not from me," he claimed.

I was only teasing, but the way he continued to react made me question him. I raised my eyebrows, giving him a speculative nod. Max grinned, enjoying our banter. I was finally gaining an edge on the conversation, and was now able to gain my typical confidence back.

We reached my home-room as I slid the ring on the middle finger of my right hand. It fit perfectly, as though molding to the shape of my finger to create an ideal fit. The warmth of it felt protective and safe, as its purpose would imply. "Well, tell your grandfather thank you for me."

Max had his hands in his pockets once more. "You can say so yourself, tonight. Pick you up around six?"

I twisted the ring on my finger. "Okay." I smiled, lost in adoration, completely forgetting the fact that he had practically abandoned me for the past six days.

He touched my face, tucking a chunk of my hair behind my ear. When he pulled his hand away, there was a white origami dove tucked between his fingers. The delicate bird contrasted with his edgy aura. He held it there, waiting for me to take it. I lifted my hand, plucking it from his grasp, amazed by the delicate perfection of it. He turned and walked away; I watched him, the smile on my face seemingly permanent. I grabbed the handle of the door for balance, taking a moment to compose myself before walking in. I took a seat, my fingers shaking as I unfolded the small bird.

My stomach tugged.

BEAUTIFUL

It was written in small, perfect capital letters. My stomach fluttered, sending my heart into overdrive.

Wes:

I leaned back in my seat in math class, feeling rather smug. Emily was down the aisle from me. She slid down in her seat, and I watched as her skirt grazed across her thigh. I tightened my jaw. Her hair fell into her face, and she was quick to tuck it behind her ear. She glanced at me sideways, and smiled slyly. I smiled back, looking to the front of the room, pretending that I hadn't been staring though I knew that she *knew*

I began to wonder if she had heard anything Jane had said in the car. Though Jane hadn't said anything that would upset Emily, I was still cognizant of the fact that the occasional thought of Jane would creep into my mind. Throughout the week, I'd learned that the more crowded the room, the more distracted Emily became, and thus, the less she heard from me. It was those moments when I chose to get my consideration about Jane out of the way, such as now. The way I saw it, there were three desks and three minds between Emily and me, three lines of thought she would have to sift through to find mine.

I glanced back at Emily, unable to resist watching her. Why hadn't I ever noticed her before? Was I so blinded by Jane that I couldn't see what was right in front of me?

The teacher walked to the front of the room, watching Emily with a close eye, suspecting that her act last week had been a fraud. Emily shot him a sassy smirk, extending her leg as though tempting him. I rolled my eyes, at last understanding why she did these things. She was a no-nonsense

girl, always pushing the envelope, and I liked it. I'd never felt so much excitement and adrenaline. I'd never felt so *alive*. For the first time, I was beginning to see what it meant to have someone love me.

I flexed my chest and sat back. My muscles felt good. I thought about the lion, thinking that if this were something I could control, then being something like a wolf, or lion, made a lot more sense than the weepy raven I'd first changed into. I looked at the kids around me, so oblivious to this whole other world, oblivious to the power I had. Why I had this talent was what I was beginning to wonder. What exactly was I meant to use it for?

"Gregory, please continue with this problem." The teacher broke my concentration, saying a name I wasn't familiar with. I sat up, looking to the back of the room as a chair brushed across the floor. He was wearing all black, his narrow green eyes less than impressed by the fact that the teacher had called on him. I watched him as he stood, a noticeable afterglow glimmering behind his kelly-green stare. My heart beat faster, feeling a familiar hatred toward this boy, the same hatred I felt for Max. That's when I realized this must be the other brother all the rumors were going on about.

The teacher looked noticeably frightened as Gregory strode to the front of the room, leaning close to him in a threatening manner. Gregory took the dry erase marker from his hand as the teacher cowered away. It was then that I felt Emily's heart amongst all the others, surging to life. I winced, the pitch of it like a scream in my head. I looked at her, seeing her squirm as though to hide the fact that she was clearly put-off by the new student. Her head was bowed, her hair forming a curtain that hid her face. *Howdid she knowhim?*

I looked back at Gregory, jealousy tingling throughout my body. Was he one of her dealers? A crush? But that didn't make sense. Hardly anyone had spoken to the brothers at all, so how could she act this way? I saw him glance at her, a noticeable look of hunger in his eyes. Looking back at Emily, I saw she was still squirming, now touching her temple as her heart throbbed in my own.

I watched Gregory with a heightened sense of protective duty, noticing my own feelings of unease toward him were growing. My mind went wild, now wondering if he had assaulted Emily somehow. She hadn't told me anything, but would she? Gregory finished the long equation with a flagrant dot that rattled the board. He had answered it perfectly.

He tossed the marker at the teacher who fumbled to catch it. Gregory walked back to his desk, leaning into the chair with a look that was smugger than my own. I glared at Emily, trying to get her to look at me. When she did, I saw the pain in her eyes. My emotions were suddenly a mess, my hormones raging. I felt sweat form on my brow, and for the rest of class, I wasn't sure if I even breathed. I was too afraid that if I let myself go, my secret would be revealed.

And the new kid would be *dead*.

Emily:

There was something about this Gregory kid, something evil. He was seducing me, and I felt his body the same way I had that day he had approached me in the parking lot, when he gave me the pills. *What was he doing in my head?* And whose voices were those that followed him?

Class was almost over, but I was afraid to move. I felt Gregory waiting for me in the back of the room, as though he were hunting me down. His thoughts were impossible to hear over the screaming, and though I tried to endure it, I couldn't. I flashed Wes another painful look, hearing his thoughts flood with uncertainty, jealousy and anger. The students filtered out, and I held my breath as I saw Gregory move from his chair, his gaze locked on mine. He approached, leaning close to my ear—*too close*. I dared myself to stare at him, and for a moment, I swear I saw his green eyes flash with flecks of red. He smiled, and his hand touched my thigh.

"Hello, *Darling*." His voice whispered over the screams in his head.

I wanted to tell him to leave me alone, but my lips were sealed. There was a foreign twang of both familiarity and fear resonating through my thoughts. Greg laughed, knowing he was making me uncomfortable. I forced back his image and thought about Wes, focusing on him as someone grabbed Greg by the shoulder, shoving him away from me.

"Leave her alone," Wes had appeared beside me. He growled at Greg.

I took a deep breath, afraid it was the last one I'd be able to sneak in before a fight broke out. Greg shoved Wes away from him, causing Wes to flail backwards. Wes steadied himself, about to charge back at Greg.

"Hey, *hey!*" the teacher interjected. "Break it up!"

My eyes darted toward the teacher, seeing him standing at his desk, clearly frightened. Seeing that he was a small, rather rotund man, I was surprised he'd said anything at all. With a closer look at his thoughts, I saw he had been driven by his educational duties to keep the peace, and his promise to do so. I twisted to face Wes, glaring at him to stop. His body was taut, and his muscles flexed.

"*Control yourself*," I whispered through clenched teeth, praying that his animal instincts wouldn't kick in and a bloodbath would ensue.

Gregory suddenly stood tall, glaring at me and then Wes, as though he had discovered something interesting that he hadn't noticed before. "Well, would you look at that," he seethed under his breath. His gaze locked on mine. "You're a—and *you*..." His head snapped to meet Wes's fuming mask. Greg snorted, straightening his black leather jacket as he stood tall, finding us—for some reason—more amusing than before. He nodded toward the teacher as the teacher swallowed hard.

My heart pumped harder, the breath in my lungs hot.

I was a *what*? And Wes was a *who*?

It was all I could think about. What was he going to say? What was it that he knew about me?

Greg let one more exalted laugh pass his lips before he turned and strode out of the room, no further explanation offered.

As the door slammed behind him, Wes's face faded from anger to guilt. "Sorry Mr. Johnson," he looked at the teacher in a rueful manner.

The teacher seemed to be breathing again, which was an improvement. He nodded, bracing himself against the desk. He cleared his throat nervously, waving us away with his other hand. "Oh, yeah... it's fine."

I grabbed Wes's hand, trying to pull him from the room, knowing that the seemingly confident Mr. Johnson was about to be sick with nerves. "*What was that?*" I hissed as we turned and walked away from the teacher. I was confused.

I heard Wes swallow hard. "I don't know, but that kid knows something we don't."

I snorted as I grabbed the handle of the door. "Something tells me that's not a good thing, either." I began to regret taking the drugs from him.

Wes gave me a grave look of agreeability. "I think you're right. I don't think we're alone."

Jane:

"Hi." I got into Max's car, remembering to buckle in this time.

Max smirked. "Thank you. You remembered."

He eyed my outfit, a dramatic change from earlier. My mother had finally showed a bit of motherly grit, forcing me to accompany her to the mall where she placed me in a new pair of sale skinny jeans and a modest, yet form fitting long cardigan. At the end of it, my mother was so drunk with a joy I thought was gone forever, that she'd even splurged on a pair of tall black riding boots.

"Of course. I understand your emphasis on vehicle safety..." I looked out the window. "I was in a horrible accident when I was seven. Buckling in is something I've always done. I think that one time, though, I just forgot because..." I trailed off on purpose, hoping he could fill in the blanks—blanks meaning I'd forgotten because all I could think about was how lucky I was to be in his car.

Max's smirk grew. "Oh, I get it. You were *distracted*." He winked at me and backed out of my driveway as his headlights lit the front porch of the house, illuminating the fact that my mother was standing in the window, watching us with a proud look on her face.

I smiled to myself. Most people asked further questions, or acted awkward when I mentioned the accident, but Max hadn't. He didn't even seem curious, as though he already knew about it. I twisted the ring on my finger, finding it was my new nervous habit.

"I hope you're hungry. My grandfather insisted on making a feast. Or rather, *catering* a feast."

I furrowed my brow. I'd never had anything catered.

"He's rather old-fashioned when it comes to entertaining. I tried to explain to him that when people come over, there is no need to get so formal. He clearly doesn't get out much, nor does he have many guests—at least not for the last fifty years."

I smiled. "He's probably lonely, Max. I understand." I pressed my palm against the seat, hoping the cool leather could cause the blushing in my cheeks to stop.

"Yeah, his interest in history bores most, so as you can imagine, the result is a lack of people willing to listen." He tapped his fingers against the wheel, exuding an aura that I would never find to be interested in history of any kind. "But when I told him you had a special interest in his brand of history, he nearly fell over with excitement. He's a ninety-six year old man; not much happens in his life anymore."

It felt good to know that, but where were Max's parents? Would I meet them, too? "What about your parents? They don't visit?"

I saw Max's features change, and the glimmer in his eye disappeared.

"I mean..." I knew that look, and I instantly wanted to take my comment back. I shut my eyes, cursing to myself. *Of course!* Why hadn't I figured it out sooner?

"They died a long time ago." His voice was monotone.

My body tensed, afraid I'd made him angry. It was then that I was reminded of his visible strength, and the fact that I still didn't know that much about him. "I—I'm so sorry. I..." I was tripping over my words like an idiot. What could I possibly say to reconcile?

He twisted his hands on the wheel.

"I..." I swallowed, hoping that by relating, it could help. "My father is dead," I blurted, finding it came across rather blunt. "I mean... what I meant to say is that, I understand." I bowed my head. I'd ruined everything. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried."

Max turned the wheel to turn around a corner. We headed out of town on the main road, close to where the accident and my father's death had happened, making me increasingly uncomfortable. An image of my father flashed across my mind, laughing as we played catch in the yard on a summer day. I tried to press the image away.

Max seemed to relax a little. "It's alright." He looked at me, the tenderness in his blue eyes filtering back. "Like I said, they died a long time ago, Jane. It doesn't hurt so much anymore."

He gave me a shaky smile, and I found it hard to believe that he meant what he said. His reaction certainly didn't seem as though he were over it. And the toughness explained a lot about his somber exterior. I began to wonder what happened to them. My eyes fell to the tattoos on his arms.

He noticed me. "One is for my mother, the other for my father." He released one hand from the wheel, tilting his forearms toward me. "Wings."

I lifted my hand to touch it. "May I?"

His eyes scanned my face before he nodded.

I touched my hand to his skin. It was cold as always, yet it sent warm tingles across my skin. "You're so cold." I remarked.

He eyed me. "Bad circulation."

I traced the scalloped outline of one wing, and then pressed my palm against the length of it. It was as though I could feel his pain, and the loss of his parents. There was something appealing in the meaning—the death. I saw the look on Max's face change, a flash of vulnerability in his eyes.

"My grandfather is the only family I have left..." he paused. "Well, *almost*."

"Almost?" I pulled my hand away.

"I have a brother, too."

My ears perked. I felt this was my chance to learn some more about this illusive mystery student that had lurked in my dreams. "Oh. A brother! Does he live here as well? Is he older? Younger?" I already knew the answers to most of this, but I figured that by pretending I hadn't known I'd learn more about him.

Max laughed at my sudden burst of energy, the mood taking a turn for the better. "He's younger, by a few minutes."

"So, twins?" I pressed.

"Yes, but not identical." His flash of humor was once again gone.

I placed my hand on the armrest of the door, mindlessly tracing my finger around the button for the window. The ring on my hand was glowing lightly. A part of me sensed an unease toward the subject of his brother. I dropped this conversation as well. I watched the shadowy trees pass by, imagining my father, Max's tattooed wings, and the beings I'd seen that day, or at least *imagined* I'd seen.

A cello began to play in my head, the very song my mother played to me after the accident. She used to be a beautiful cellist, her songs draped with love and gentle melodramatic melodies. She would play to us as we fell asleep, the music trailing from the living room and up the stairs into our rooms. As the sadness of the accident faded, and the wounds healed, her playing grew less and less, until she no longer played at all. It was as though her love had slowly died away, and as my father's memory left her, so did her life.

When she was gone at work, I began to teach myself, still longing to hear the music. Playing helped me to hold onto him and ease the early anxiety my dreams often gave me. She would have been angry if she knew I'd played, but it was one of the things I did in order to feel alive, and now, my dreams created the music for me. The orchestras in my head were all I needed at times—the music and the drawing were what kept me going.

"Beautiful." Max finally spoke.

The music in my head stopped, and I shot my gaze to his. "What's beautiful?" I accused.

He stared forward, his head tilted and relaxed. "You are." His lip curled and he looked to the woods. "It's peaceful, isn't it?"

I relaxed and turned away from him, looking out my window. The reflection of trees glittered under the light of the headlights, dew beginning to grow as the evening temperatures dropped. "Yes, it is." I swallowed. "I love it here. I love the trees."

"They play their own sort of melody, don't they?" His eyes met mine, glimmering as though he knew my music.

"Sure," I gawked, narrowing my vision. "Like a *symphony*," I challenged.

His eyes grazed across my body. "Exactly." He winked.

I stopped breathing. *What did that mean?*

Wes:

“Wes, should we just ask Gregory what he knows about us?” Emily’s voice was full of uncertainty.

“*Ask him?*” I snorted, crossing my arms against my chest. “I’m not asking him anything. Are you nuts? Did you not just see what happened back there?” I pointed over my shoulder for dramatic effect, trying to make my point. “I will never talk to that kid again, come Hell or high water.”

Emily rolled her eyes. “I just thought...” She looked hurt by my reaction.

I grabbed her arm, spinning her to face me. “Are you... *defending* him?” My gaze narrowed.

“No, Wes,” she denied, but her eyes spoke otherwise.

“*Emily,*” I hissed. “You were there. He’s a complete jerk!”

She looked at me with sheepish eyes.

“Wait...” my grip on her arm tightened. “Is he one of your dealers? Is that why you’re defending him?”

“No! I mean, well yes, but...” She squirmed in my grasp. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I don’t want to defend him at all! But something inside me wants to leave him alone, as though I don’t want him getting hurt, or—*something.*”

I felt sorry for her. She was clearly just trying to be nice. I couldn’t understand her compassion, though. The guy was a freak at best, not to mention the creepy vibe he gave off.

“Wes, what’s happening to us? Why are we all so *stra—*”

I stopped her, pressing my fingers to her lips and pulling her close to me. “I don’t know, Em,” I whispered. The sorrow in her eyes made my heart ache. I kissed her nose, sensing her need to be comforted. I brushed her auburn hair from her face, admiring the freckles on her cheeks that she finally allowed to show. “But that does not change the fact that I’m falling in love with you.”

Emily smiled, the freckles lifting. “I know that, Wes,” she whispered, her eyes seeing into my very soul.

I licked my lips, trying to find a meaning. “There is a reason why we’re here together, Em. Perhaps we were meant to support each other, drawn to whatever demon has possessed or blessed us with these thoughts and changes.”

Emily tilted her head. “But with Gregory—I’ve felt that same dangerous feeling from him before. Greg is different than you, Wes, or anyone else. I should want to hurt him for the things I hear, but I don’t. What does that mean, Wes? Why do I feel so... *protective?*” A tear fell from her eye.

I kissed it off her cheek and licked my lip. The salty sweetness reminded me of the way her lips tasted. I suddenly craved them, but the fear in her eyes told me it wasn’t the right time. I drew a deep breath and pressed back my desires. “What do you feel? What do you hear from him?”

She looked frightened by the answer on her mind. “*Screaming.*” Her voice shook. “Like *murderous* screams.” Her face changed, now laced with a look of bewilderment. “And Max, too. Only what I hear from him is much different, almost like a lullaby. But still, I fear it because it’s a strange and dark lullaby, like a song of death.” She was whimpering, struggling to hold herself together. “My sister, she must not sense that from him. How could she? I mean, I know she’s a smart girl, and would never get involved with someone shady, but—”

“*Max?*” I creased my brow. “You hear that from Max, too?” Anger surged through my heart. Though I was falling in love with Emily, I still wanted to protect Jane.

Emily looked disturbed, showing that she’d heard my thoughts and was bothered by the fact that I still cared.

“Em, don’t look at me like that. We need to get Jane away from Max, and you know that as well as I,” I pressed. She still looked perplexed. “Jane’s your sister, and she could be in danger by being with him. We can’t let anything happen to her. I’m telling you this from a romantically *unattached* position. Just look into my head, you’ll see that I’m telling you the truth.” I forced her to look me in the eye.

I could tell she agreed, though resentfully. “But what do they want?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know yet, but doesn’t it seem strange that it’s all happening at once? What if these changes are in correlation with the fact of the brothers arrival in Glenwood Springs?”

She nodded. “But I don’t understand, Wes.”

“Em, what if they are evil. What if I’m meant to protect everyone, and... *kill* them?”

“Wes!” Emily looked cross. She lowered her voice. “Wes, you’re talking about murder. Besides, you’re jumping to conclusions a little fast, don’t you think?” She shook her head. “I know your hormones are raging right now, but that does not justify bumping off the creepy new kids in school!”

I finally released my hold on her arm. “I know, Em. I’m sorry. It’s just... I don’t need time to get to know them like you do. I know they’re bad news, and my mind is made up. Just don’t come crying to me when you finally realize that too late.”

“Whatever, Wes.” She pouted for a moment as we walked in silence.

I let my mind wander, watching her. The angry lines around her eyes were cute, and her somewhat tough exterior crumbled as I felt the soft passion of her heart.

Emily finally smiled, relaxing a little as my flirtatious thoughts calmed her. “So, Wes, back to what’s important...” Her cheeks flushed. “You’re falling in love with me? Is that what you said?”

I laughed.

Max:

I’d planned to get the door for Jane, but she was already out of the car. Women these days: no longer willing to allow a man to show a little chivalry.

“Wow,” she was looking up at the house.

“Yeah, it’s rather old.” I looked at the European style eaves. The quiet rustle of the woods around us crackled in my ears.

“I’ll say,” she swooned. “I never knew there was a house like this in the area.”

I walked up to her, forgetting myself as I took her hand, still drunk from the way she touched me in the car. She looked shocked by the intimate connection, but when she didn’t pull away, I felt better.

“When was it built?”

“Late eighteen-hundreds.”

Jane nodded, and I knew what question was coming next. “Was it in the family?” She squeezed my hand.

I tried to think of a good explanation. This house wasn’t part of our family, but rather the alchemist’s family, but it wasn’t time for me to explain that to her just yet. The alchemist never had children. Being that my mother was his one true love, he’d never married. Because of this, Erik had inherited his estate when he’d finally passed on.

“Yes. You could say that,” I finally answered.

Jane gave me an inquisitive look, but didn’t venture further with the subject.

“My grandfather loves it, as you can imagine. He believes the house is magickal, and the history of it lends itself to his tales. I’m sure you’ve read a lot about the things he believes.” I lifted her hand as it remained in mine. “He found that ring in this house, in a secret room.”

Jane’s eyes grew wide with enthusiasm. “A secret room? That must have been fascinating! I bet he has a lot of tales.” Though her thoughts were hard to read because of the ring, holding her hand let me see that her mind was alive. “It was probably fun to hear about growing up, wasn’t it?”

“It was fun, and his stories were vivid, as though I was there.” I smiled to myself, knowing that in truth, I was there.

As long as Gregory stayed away, I always managed to make my way back here. Years would pass without a word from Gregory, but then there were years where he never left my side. For the most part, he left Erik alone. I don’t think he meant to murder him at all, as things were beginning to suggest, but in his rage, he had gotten out of control. Erik was just a child at the time—innocent—and I think Greg always felt guilty about it, though he’d never flat out admit it.

I took her up the stairs and onto front porch, our shoes echoing across the ancient wood. I grasped the tarnished silver handle, opening the door as I led her in.

“Hello?” I announced.

There was a rustling from the library just to the left of the front door. Erik emerged, rolling toward us in his wheelchair. “Hello!” He chuckled.

I’d briefed him on the ring, and the fact that he was now my *grandfather*, and no longer my brother. Erik had groaned when I told him that, reminding me that there was a time when he was an uncle, but was now too old for that to apply.

Erik’s eyes flashed me one last warning. The last few days he’d lectured me about the fact that having Jane here was dangerous, but I refused to

allow Gregory to prevent me from trying to have a normal life, and a normal girlfriend. It had been over eighty years that I'd dealt with his torment, and I was done giving into the death. I wanted to live again.

I placed my hand on the small of Jane's back as we stood. Erik noticed, winking discreetly.

He turned his attention back to Jane. "Aren't you *gorgeous*, my dear?" Erik rolled closer to her, taking her hand and holding it between both of his. He eyed the ring. "Do you like the ring?" He touched it. "Absolutely magnificent, isn't it?"

Jane giggled bashfully. "You really didn't have to give it to me." She allowed Erik to continue to hold her hand.

Erik smiled large, the wrinkles on his face engulfing his eyes. "It was my pleasure. Besides, I have plenty of other magickal things."

He turned, and Jane followed him. We entered the dining room, the table filled with an array of foods, all things I had no appetite for. A waiter came up to me and offered me an hors d'œuvre. Erik was mocking me now, and I didn't like it.

"Oh, *wow*, Mr. Gordon." Jane laughed. I loved her laugh. "You really went out of your way!" She took a hors d'œuvre, taking the heat off me.

Erik's eyes were laughing, and I gave him a reproachful glare in return.

We all sat, the clocks on the walls ticking. I watched her as her eyes remained occupied by the pictures on the wall. I saw Erik smirk further.

"You enjoy art as well?" she asked. Jane was looking at an image of our family, tilting her head with interest. I tried to read her thoughts to see if she suspected anything, but I heard nothing.

Erik glanced sideways at me. "That is... *Er*... That is our family."

"Erik's parents, my *great*-grandparents," I added, still exchanging glances with Erik.

Erik's expression was nervous, but it had been a long time since I'd heard his thoughts. The alchemist had created a potion that permanently blocked his thoughts from prying minds. He had given it to Erik before he died. I wasn't prepared to use that elixir on Jane, thinking that there may come a day when I'd need to know what went on in her head.

"Yes. I'm the youngest, and... *Er*... Max's father is *uh*..." He pointed to the boy in the middle, me. "The boy there."

Jane giggled. "Max, he looks just like you! Or rather, you look just like *him*."

"You have no idea," I mumbled.

The image of me in the painting was when I was ten. Thankfully, I hadn't looked too much like the person I was now. I threw a discreet glare toward Erik. He shrugged. We hadn't prepared for her to ask questions about the art, and in truth, we had completely forgotten.

"So, then, that must be you." Jane pointed to our father. She then looked at Erik, squinting as she struggled to find the resemblance.

Our father had green eyes, where Erik's were hazel. Our father also had black hair, and Erik had brown. Luckily, though, Erik's hair was now white.

"You were so handsome, Mr. Gordon!" She exclaimed.

Erik chuckled with a mouth full of food. "Dear, please call me Erik, and I think I still am *handsome*."

Jane laughed, nodding enthusiastically. "Oh, yes. You are!" She looked back at the painting, and my nerves refused to relax. "So, then the other two boys... are those you're uncles?" She was directing the question toward me.

I didn't like the questions. I should have been better prepared.

A laugh erupted from deep inside the house then, just when I thought things couldn't possibly get worse. I shut my eyes and exhaled, dread washing over me.

Greg walked into the room. "Yes, those are his *uncles*."

Jane:

I froze when I saw his face. He winked at me.

Gregory?

My nostrils flared as I tried to get oxygen to my brain. He was exactly the same as I'd seen him in the dream, right down every spiked, black hair on his head. Max touched my hand, and I looked at him. He looked perplexed, his brows a narrow line of anger. My heart plummeted into my

stomach, and I dropped my fork.

“Gregory, what are you doing here?” Max spoke through his teeth, clearly angered to see him.

How was he real? I'd never seen him aside from my dreams, but then, how was he here? Gregory eyed my ring, the smile on his face never faltering.

“Ah, Max. You gave her your ring.” He was smiling falsely.

I snatched my hand from the table, hiding it within my other.

His ring?

Gregory rolled back onto his heels. “How... *inventive* of you, Brother.” His smile faded, and his green eyes grew wide and piercing.

Gregory walked toward me, “Where are my manners?” He shoved his hand toward me. “I'm Greg, Max's brother.”

I swallowed, hoping the fear in my face didn't give away my secret. I was too shocked to take his hand, not to mention too afraid of what would happen if I did. He gave up and dropped it to his side. “Rather *rude* guest,” he spoke under his voice.

The room was thick with tension, the clocks now the only sound. Gregory took a seat beside me as the legs of the chair scraped against the old wood floor. He was smiling as though nothing were wrong. He hastily grabbed some food and I watched him heap a plate.

“*Man...*” he addressed the room as everyone stared. Clearly there was something more to this than the tension between him and me. There was a tension between everyone. “I'm *starving!* Aren't you, Max? Seems like *ages* since I last ate.” He threw a look toward Max, tilting his head. I couldn't understand the emotion on his face.

Max stood. Gregory dropped his fork to the plate, standing faster than I'd ever seen anyone stand before. He still held a table knife in his other hand, his body poised for attack.

I saw Max's jaw tighten, his fists clenched at his sides.

Gregory's hand lowered, and he threw the knife onto the table with a loud clank. Food flung from the blade, and I was quick to dodge a bit of potato. “I guess I'll take my dinner in the other room then, if no one minds?” Gregory snatched his plate from the table as he turned, leaving the room without another word or explanation said.

Max sat frozen for a moment before sitting once more, placing his napkin back in his lap. I said nothing, feeling the awkward displacement of family drama, and then also my own anxieties because of my dreams.

Erik wiped his mouth. “Please excuse my... *grandson*.

He's—”

“*Erik.*” Max's voice was cold, silencing his grandfather. His face terrified me, but as he caught my eye, the anger faded. “Sorry, Jane. Please excuse my brother. He had a bad day at school, I'm afraid.”

I swallowed, hoping my voice wouldn't crack. “He goes to Glenwood High?” I also knew this, but begged for something to disprove the fact that he really was in my dream.

Max nodded, sipping a glass of water. “He does.”

I exhaled, hoping that perhaps I'd seen him after all, but then forgot. Maybe that was why I'd seen him in my dreams, so maybe I wasn't as crazy as I suspected.

“We have a lot of rough family history,” he added.

Erik nodded in agreement.

“Things here get tough with three men under one roof.” Max was calmer now.

I took a bite of food, chewing delicately as the clocks still ticked. I swallowed, finding it hard to eat. “I understand. My house is full of three women. Things get tough there, too.” I raised my brows. “You saw how it is, Max.”

He laughed. “I did. It does remind me of our home here.”

Erik cleared his throat. “So, Jane. My grandson says you're interested in history?” Erik moved on to something more appealing, and I tried to forget about Gregory.

“I am.” I pushed food around my plate.

“Well, what would you like to know?” He was more than obliging, and the change of subject was a much needed improvement.

The fork in my hand suddenly felt lighter. "I know that you focus on the mythological and magickal past. Is it difficult to back your findings? I've read through all your writing, but you never mention how it is that you know for certain that these things exist."

Erik slowly chewed, his knife scraping across the plate. "Most often, people accuse me of making up lies. No one wants to believe what I *know*."

His answer skirted around my question. "So, when you say what you *know*, you mean that you've seen these things first hand?"

Erik pushed his lips out in thought. "Perhaps I have."

I gave up on that question. "How is that some people come to possess magick? You don't mention that, either. You mention artifacts, and already existing beings, but no way of knowing how it could be passed on. Do you believe that magick is hereditary?"

He placed his fork on the edge of his plate, dropping his hands into his lap and leaning back in the wheelchair. "There are three kinds of magick: hereditary, learned, and Sheol. But what you need to understand is that it's all supernatural, or Heavenly. You see, long ago, a woman named Pandora—"

I interrupted him. "Yes, the Greek goddess that was sent to Earth with a jar of evils. She opened it out of weakness and curiosity, releasing evil among the world. In other words, she released magick."

Erik grinned, impressed by my knowledge. "Yes, exactly. It's Heaven's magick on Earth, so you can see the controversy."

I nodded gravely.

"But as I was saying, hereditary is rather rare, but the learned magick is an art that can be passed through generations. Learned magick is magick that almost anyone can do, as long as you've been touched by the gift. The problem is, no one realizes they can, and there are a lack of texts to teach it. Hereditary magic is a deeper, stronger form. It includes shape shifters, mind readers, and sorcerers that naturally carry the gift without any magickal training at all, and they can pass it to their offspring."

He took a bite of food, but then continued.

"The kind of magick that one is born into is much stronger than the kind that can be learned, and far more impulsive." Erik was glancing toward Max. "And then there are some forms of magick that happen somewhere between learned and hereditary, perhaps a result of a traumatic event, or brush with death, or death itself. This is called Sheol magick."

"Sheol?" I asked.

"It's the Hebrew word for Hades, or Hell, but this does not mean that those with it are devilish, or damned—it's more subjective than that. This kind of magick is very volatile, a brush with the divine world that leaves a lasting mark. Because of this, beings find themselves in the world of Sheol —"

"*Hell*?" I blurted, horrified.

Erik laughed. "No. It's the *in-between*. It's a place we go to be judged so to speak, the place we go when we have unfinished business."

I listened to his story as the hairs on my arms stood on end. *Sheol*. I'd never heard the term used before today. Nowhere in his grandfather's texts had Erik ever mentioned it. "I never knew it was so extensive! But tell me, Erik. The Sheol magick, have you ever known someone inflicted by it?" I pressed.

Erik smirked to himself. "I know you are an open minded girl. I can see it in your eyes." There was a look on his face I couldn't quite place. "I have seen it before."

I hung on his words, noticing the gravity in his tone.

"Sheol magick occurs because the soul was supposed to die, but was either spared or unwilling to leave this realm. You believe in angels, don't you?"

I bit my lip. "I suppose I do." I had to believe because I had no choice. I knew what I saw the day my father died. I saw the shadowed beings, and the objects hanging from their backs. They were not human.

"Angels possess a form of Sheol magic—a very *rare* form. So rare, that perhaps there are only a handful of these beings in existence. Angels are souls that have in fact died, but refuse to leave. They are tied to this realm by unfinished business. Until they unlock what it is that binds them here, they cannot go on. They are stuck in Sheol. It is interesting to find that angels are the only beings that can actually spare a soul from death, being that they seem ill-fit to make such decisions. This is why, in the angel world, it is typically frowned upon to spare a soul, and angels like to follow the rules. But every so often an exception comes along, and the angel is left to decide. If the angel chooses to save the soul before them, stating a valid reason, they are then bound to that human and become their guardians until their natural death." He scanned my eyes as they glimmered. "You may be familiar with the term *guardian angels*."

I nodded.

Erik smiled. "There are many types of angels, my dear. But the guardians are by far the fiercest, but also the sweetest."

I thought about the foreseen death I'd seen when I shook Erik's hand earlier. Erik was lying in bed very still, but then Max was there beside him,

like a guardian. Never had I seen another being other than me in a foreseen death, but where Max was consistently alive within in his own omen, it somehow seemed acceptable.

“What about those they *do* save? What becomes of them?”

Erik grinned to himself. “They are also Sheol, but of an opposite form. These special, also rare beings are tied to Sheol because they *did not* die, though they should have.”

I swallowed hard. *I* was supposed to die. My life here is a lie.

Erik folded his hands on the table. “What you need to understand is that there was a time when magick was more prevalent on Earth, almost trendy. People inflicted with these talents should not feel ashamed. It saddens me to see that magick has become as big of a myth as Santa Claus.”

“But why?” My gaze was locked on his. For a long time I’d dreamed of a place where I could belong, a place where other people like me could coexist in an open environment.

“It’s controversial, my dear, as I pointed out before. People with magick understand that in order to protect the human race, it is safer to remain anonymous. Otherwise, the social balance of this world will topple.”

“Why doesn’t magick take over and control the world? Like a *Heaven-on-Earth*?”

Erik laughed at my question as though it were obvious. “Certain magickal beings know what kind of destruction that could cause, because there is also the possibility of *Hell-on-Earth*. Within the magical world, there are the bad and the good—those that cohabitate with the human race, and those that would rather eradicate them. A long time ago, dark magick tried to take over, but was quickly squashed. It was then that it all seemed to disappear, or go into hiding.”

I tilted my head. “So, it’s sort of a *war*.”

“Exactly.” Erik nodded once, telling me I’d reached a concluding point.

Max put his fork down, and the clang of it broke my attention away from Erik. His food was pushed around the plate, but barely eaten. His eyes met mine, and I was reminded of his presence beside me. “Are you done?” he asked.

My hunger was completely gone. “Yes.” The things Erik had told me where things I’d desperately wanted to know.

Max looked to his grandfather and then stood, placing his napkin on the plate before him. He offered me his hand. I took it, and he lifted me from my chair with little effort. “Erik, please excuse us.”

Erik nodded and smiled. “Of course! Don’t let this crazy old man hold you back! My tall tales are a bore to most, I’m afraid.”

I giggled. “Oh, no, Erik. I very much appreciated you taking the time. I very much enjoyed the opportunity to speak with you.”

“I’m sure you did, my dear.” He bowed lightly in his chair.

Max gave him a polite partial bow in return. They were so formal!

“*Br*—Grandfather, have a good night.” Max said his good-byes and turned.

He gently tugged my hand and I followed his lead.

So there was hope for my abilities after all. I had *Sheol* magick.

Emily:

“Well, when did she say she would be *back*?” I was yelling at my mother as I paced the room.

She eyed Wes as he sat on the nearby couch, his growing body causing the cushion to sink dangerously low.

My mother put her hands up, trying to calm me. “Emily, I hardly think that you should—”

“That I should *what*, Mother?” I knew what she was going to say. How was it that she could drag my own misfit past into this? I understand that I’d been a horrible daughter, but never were my actions life-threatening as she assumed at this moment.

“Just calm down, Em. Jane’s with that nice Max Gordon kid.” She had a dreamy look on her face as she shrugged, oblivious to the possible danger. “He seems very nice, and polite.” She continued to eye Wes, discomfited by my embarrassing display of anger.

I rolled my eyes. If she only knew how dangerous Max was, or at least how dangerous I *supposed* he was. I grumbled, storming toward Wes and

grabbing his arm. "Wes, come on." I yanked him off the couch, finding his weight was close to impossible to budge.

My mother exhaled, putting the moment behind her. "Where are you guys going?"

For the first time she didn't seem concerned, but simply curious. It felt strange to hear her treat me that way, and I knew it was because I was with Wes. She worshiped the ground Wes walked on, figuring he could do no wrong.

I held his hand longer than I should. My mother's hawk-like eyes began to put the pieces together as she analyzed the nature of our relationship. Her gaze narrowed. "Are you two *dat*—"

"No, Mother." I cut her off, leaning my weight on one foot and dropping Wes's hand like it were a hot potato. She was analyzing my face now, noticing the change in my makeup. I grumbled and turned away from her, marching toward the door. Wes followed, and before she could say another word, we were gone.

Max:

Jane followed me down the hall, thinking about the things Erik had told her. I rubbed my hands together, turning into the library. I heard her gasp as we entered.

"Look at all these books!" She exclaimed.

I turned. "Yes, we have a lot."

"Are any of these magick books? Like your grandfather talked about?" Jane walked to a nearby shelf, running her hands lovingly over the spines.

"Some are," I shrugged, not knowing which ones were magick anymore. To me, books about magick were common place at this point.

"Where did he find them?"

"Here and there over time. Some he found in this house, much like the ring, and some he found elsewhere."

"Did you have magick in your family?"

I didn't know what to say. Erik had been adopted into the alchemist's magickal world, but my real family did not have magick until it came to my brothers and me. Our death, or our *near* death, left us all stuck in the world of Sheol. "Yeah, in the past. But it wasn't hereditary." I figured that was vague enough that it wasn't a lie.

She saw the cello then, and forgot about the books in their entirety. I was relieved to find we were on to a new subject. Her steps floated across the room and she sat on the bench beside it. I followed her, lifting the cello off the stand and handing it to her. She traced her fingers across the strings, snugging it between her knees.

"Do you play?" I asked. Of course I knew that she did because of her thoughts in the car on the way here, but I tried to stick to social conventions and pretend I didn't know what she was thinking.

"A little." She was being modest.

I grinned to myself, leaning against the nearby wall. "Play something."

Jane's smile faded. "Oh," she shook her head, her eyes wide. "No. No, I couldn't."

"Come on," I pressed, narrowing my eyes.

She placed the cello back on the stand, folding her hands into her lap. "I *can't*, Max." She looked up at me, searching my eyes. "I should have specified. I *used* to play, but not anymore."

"You loved it, didn't you?" It was more of a statement to me than a question.

Her face grew pink. "I did."

"Then why did you stop?" I pressed her, pushing the memories of her father to the surface.

She didn't answer for a long while as she ran her hand back and forth across her knee. "My mother used to play, until my father died. Then she stopped. I missed the music, so I taught myself. My mother doesn't know about it, but it's my way of remembering my father, and finding a sense of peace."

I knelt toward Jane, moving behind her. I reached for the cello, my chin hovering just above her shoulder and close to her ear. I could feel her resentment toward my actions. I ran my hand slowly down her leg, placing the cello between her knees. I placed one hand on the neck, the other now grasping the bow. "My parents used to play all the time."

She relaxed into my arms as they wrapped around her, my cheek against her ear as I whispered.

“They loved to play, but what I learned...” the pressure on the bow in my hand transferred to the strings. I played a long note, the sound of it echoing throughout the room, “...was that what once hurt, eventually helped me to heal.” I moved my fingers along the strings of the neck, playing a few more notes. It was her father’s song, but I played it so slow, that she didn’t recognize the melody.

I saw her hand lift to mine, taking control of the bow and neck as she drew the threads across the strings. Her note mirrored mine. My hands fell as I stopped playing. She played another note, and then another. I let her song gain momentum as I remained behind her, within her world of life. A smile crept across her face, her cheeks lifting.

I could tell that I’d lost her in her own head. She had forgotten where she was, instead allowing her thoughts to go to a place where she was comfortable and happy. She shut her eyes, and I watched her hands dance across the frets, hearing her breath pass her lips. Wisps of her hair danced in the air, and life glowed on her rosy, freckled skin. The girl I’d known in her dreams had finally come out.

When the song was over, Jane opened her eyes and reality returned to her. I felt her back grow rigid once more. “It feels good to hear that out loud,” she whispered.

“Out loud? What do you mean?” I tried to sound surprised, wanting to bring the Jane I knew back.

She twisted her head to look at me. Her face was suddenly full of anxiety. “I mean, it’s been a long time since I’ve played it.”

I looked at her sideways, our lips close. “Ah.” Though I already knew her whole sad story, it would mean a lot more if it were told from her lips, rather than through the prodding fingers of my mind. Her lips stayed sealed on the subject.

“Let’s play something else.” She turned away, smiling wide and leaving the subject behind her. “Do you like folk?” She laughed.

Jane:

I played the song mindlessly, knowing it so well that it hardly took any effort. I was angry at myself for making the comment about my father's song. The last thing I'm sure Max wanted to hear about was my sad story. I couldn't mess this up. I really liked him and his family—except Gregory, of course. I laughed as I stumbled over a fret, lost in my thoughts rather than the simple melody. The song ended.

Max stood behind me, sending a shiver down my spine as his hand grazed across my back. I watched as he moved to a nearby couch, looking exhausted with laughter. He propped one arm over the back of the cushion, resting his ankle on his knee. I thought about my dream, thought about the taste of his lips on my fingers. I had wanted to kiss him, but was too chicken to lean in. I placed the cello back on the stand, propping the bow beside it.

Max was looking into his lap, smiling to himself. He ran a hand through his hair, pulling it away from his face and revealing the small freckle near his ear. "My grandfather wouldn't tell you, but he has a little magick. That's why he knows what he does. He had a near death experience when he was a child, and ever since, he is convinced that he was supposed to die."

Max said it as though it was no big deal, and I couldn't help but let my jaw drop. "So, he has Sheol magick?"

Max shrugged.

"You don't find that surprising?" I pressed.

"Not really."

I shut my jaw, my head swimming with disbelief. Erik was like me. "Was he saved by an angel?"

Max picked at the fibers of the couch as he continued. "At least Erik seems to think so."

I looked at the tattoos on his arms. "You sound like you don't believe in angels."

His blue eyes found mine. He smiled, but didn't grace me with an answer.

I took his mocking expression as a no. How could he not believe? "So what if he really was saved by an angel?" I said tartly. "What's so unbelievable about that?"

Max laughed then, bending forward. I grew annoyed, wondering why he was being so mean.

"Stop laughing," I demanded.

He stopped, hiding his amusement. "I think you took that the wrong way. I *do* believe him." He motioned to his arms. "I thought it was rather obvious."

I frowned and crossed my arms against my chest, admitting defeat.

Max patted the cushion beside him, inviting me to come sit. I stood from the bench, moving across the room and sitting with a distance between us, too scared to give in and get close.

Max grinned, "You're so far away." He clasped his hand around my knee, yanking me closer. "I don't like that." His hand remained on my knee, his other touching my forehead, his finger trailing down my cheek. "I believe in what Erik says because I have to. He's my family, but aside from that, I want to believe that there is something more, something magickal. Otherwise, what is living all about?" His eyes were searching mine, his words diving into my soul.

I found this conversation the first where I truly felt engaged, but I could tell there was something else, something I couldn't quite put my finger on. I opened my mouth to reply, only to shut it as I saw that Max was leaning in. My heart leapt, but before I could shut my eyes, I saw Gregory enter the room. I jolted and leaned back. My chest tightened and my heart ceased to beat—the excitement drained from every inch of my being.

"Hey, *guys*." Greg kept his gaze on me, and I gazed back. "Not *interrupting* anything, am I?"

Max said nothing as he moved away from me.

Greg sat on the couch between us, exhaling as he settled down into the cushion. "My family isn't driving you nuts yet, are they, Jane?"

I shook my head, my lips arched into a frown. "No."

Greg smiled, his eyes dark. He was handsome, just as handsome as his brother but with a mischievous glimmer in his eye. I must have seen him before. I looked between Max and Greg. I could tell he was the bad boy of the two, like Emily was in our family. Every family had a bad egg, it seemed.

"I met your sister at school the other day, Jane." Greg looked dreamily ahead of him. "She's a *charming* girl." He clasped his hands before him, his own set of wing tattoos showing. They were just like Max's, but with an added edge as each feather was tipped with a knife. I shuddered.

I saw Max glare at him, but so did I. I knew Greg's type. He was more than likely one of those guys I often found myself peeling Emily away from. For all I knew, he was a dealer, too.

I snorted with disgust, finding his reference to my sister was laced with noticeable vulgarity. "Emily can possess a certain charm, at times." I replied only because I didn't want to seem rude in front of Max.

Greg tilted his head. "I was telling Max earlier that she's just my type."

I didn't like the way he said it, as though Emily were a piece of meat he could simply buy at the market.

Greg snapped out of his daydreaming. "Well, kids, better take off. I do have a party to attend tonight." He rose from the couch, smoothing his shirt. "Unlike you losers."

"A party?" Max's voice sounded hallowed.

"Yes." Greg looked at me. "If you want to be less *drab*, then you guys should come. Our house is hardly the place to bring a date, *Brother*. You'll bore poor Jane to tears." He pouted dramatically at me, as though I were a baby.

Max looked at me with curious eyes, asking me if I was at all interested with a series of deep stares. I could tell his desire to go was laced with ulterior motives, and not the good kind. He wanted to keep an eye on Greg, as did I.

Greg left the room, a noxious wave of cologne following him. "Come if you dare!" his voice trailed down the hall.

Wes:

I held Emily's hand as we walked down the street, the thump of music guiding us in the right direction.

"Emily, I've never really done this before."

"Done *what*?" She looked confused, but then understood as her eyes scanned mine. "You mean go to a party?" Emily squeezed my hand and giggled. "It's not as reckless as it seems, Wes. More than anything, it's just a bunch of students trying to get drunk or laid."

I rolled my eyes. "That seems pretty reckless to me," I murmured.

She continued, not noticing I'd said anything, but I knew better than to think she hadn't heard. "It's actually one of the best places to disappear, because in a crowd, it's *always* easy to disappear."

I raised my brows, sighing. "Sounds great." I was less than excited, but it was Emily, meaning it was worth putting up with.

Emily smiled at me, pulling on my hand despite the obvious fact that I'd flooded my thoughts with disdain. We stopped on the sidewalk. Emily stood in front of me, lacing her hands under my arms and across my back. Her cheek rested against my chest. "Oh, Wes. Don't tell me you're *nervous*." Her face was buried in the wool of my sweater, her auburn hair glittering under the streetlights.

"Emily," I exhaled sharply and rolled my eyes, trying to squirm away from her.

She giggled, tickling my sides.

I laughed, grabbing her hands to stop her. "It's not that I'm nervous, Em. I just don't feel comfortable with my little *issue*, if you know what I mean. What if someone wants to pick a fight? They'll be faced with an animal, maybe even that lion you're so fond of."

Emily giggled some more, but finally understood. "I see you're side of it, I do. Just let me know if you start feeling that way, okay?" Her voice was comforting, and it was hard to see how I could ever let her down. She blinked, looking up at me as though I were her protector, her everything. I ran my hand through her hair, kissing her on the forehead. I shut my eyes, a flash of Jane's face lighting up my mind. I shook the image away, but not fast enough.

Emily stepped away from me, dragging me forward with a glare on her face. Though my gut knew this was a bad idea, I followed. Whatever happened, I had Emily to help me through it. *Emily*, not Jane.

Emily smirked.

Max:

"Why do you *really* want to go?" Jane eyed me from the passenger seat of my car.

I knew she was too smart to believe I wanted to go just to hang out. "I need to keep an eye on my brother. I don't trust him." I started the car.

"Why don't you trust him?"

Jane's curiosity toward him was a concern of mine. I knew the dream had thrown her off, but it wouldn't happen again.

"Greg is someone that needs to be watched," I replied plainly.

I saw her face turn to understanding. "I get that." She laughed sarcastically. "Perhaps Emily will be there, and then we could both benefit from the night."

I felt guilty for making her go, especially when I'd had a more meaningful night planned. "I know this isn't really your thing. I'm sorry to drag you along."

Jane was looking out the window as we reversed and turned around in the driveway. I saw her shrug from the corner of my eye. "I guess if you're there, though, I can handle it."

I grinned, wanting to feel my own body react to the happiness, but it only felt her. Jane's attention remained on the world outside the window. I watched her, unconcerned with the road, not that it really mattered if I watched it. I didn't have to. What was important was that she was beginning to like me.

"Max?" She finally made a move to look at me, so I quickly turned my gaze forward, pretending to be responsible.

"Yes, *Beautiful?*" I shifted in my seat, trying to look as though I hadn't been staring at her.

She grinned. "Thanks for letting me meet your grandfather. It really means a lot to me. I don't think you can understand just how much."

I nodded. "I can understand."

She exhaled with a smile. "Yeah, I suppose you do." She sat up straight with a change of energy toward the coming situation. "Well, it'll be an adventure at least. Don't you think?" She changed the subject.

I laughed once. "Yeah, you're right about that," I agreed.

Emily:

I saw Alexis from across the room. Our eyes met and she gave me an excited wave. Her wave faded as her eyes wandered to Wes beside me, a noticeably confused look on her face. Wes tapped me on the arm, leaning close to my ear.

"I'm going to find the beer. Maybe it'll help keep me calm." He chuckled, nibbling my ear. "Do you want one?"

I nodded, not bothering to look at him as my eyes remained locked on Alexis, not wanting to lose her in the crowd. I made my way toward her, and Wes and I parted.

Alexis yelled over the music as I reached her, "Hey, Em. What are you doing with *him?*" She looked disgusted that I'd even talk to Wes. She knew he was a far cry from our regular type, but then again, she had no clue that my lack of chastity was a lie. Unfortunately hers wasn't.

"Leave it alone, Alexis." I hissed, hoping to sound mean enough that she'd drop the subject.

"*Fine.*" She glared at me, but brushed it off rather quickly. "So, I saw that new guy here." She took a sip of what looked like a sugary malt beverage, but she'd taken the label off the bottle to avoid letting anyone find out she drank anything but beer and hard liquor.

I felt my stomach twist. I grabbed her. "*Which* new guy?" I searched her eyes, finding my answer.

Alexis looked at me slyly, withholding the information just to piss me off. Too bad it didn't really work on a mind reader. "You know, the mysterious new boy." She traced her tongue along the rim of her bottle.

I looked away, disgusted.

Alexis giggled, narrowing her eyes. "The dark one, of course. Who'd you think I meant? The poser brother, *Max?*" She laughed. "I mean, he's cute, too, but I can tell he's a goody-goody underneath it all. It's the green-eyed one I'm interested in." She pressed her chin into the air.

"Greg?" I gawked. "I don't know," I mumbled. A loud sigh passed my lips and I shook my head. "There's something about him I'm not too sure about, Alexis." I was trying to deter her attention away from Greg.

Alexis snorted. "*You* think he's bad news? Since when do you care?" She sounded mad that I'd tried to warn her, but then again, she was always mad. Her weight shifted dramatically. "See, *there he is.*" She looked across the room from under her lashes, trying to look sultry.

I attempted to follow her gaze, shivering as I pictured his dark face from class. I didn't want to be near him, knowing that I lacked control in his presence.

Greg spotted us, staring for a moment before approaching with a mischievous grin. Alexis adjusted her top suggestively. I was thankful that he was looking at her and not me, but as he got closer, his gaze suddenly locked with mine. Alexis' elbow found its way into my side. I winced, but the pain didn't matter. His glowing green gaze had already grabbed me.

Where was Wes? I felt my heart begin to race, the screams from Greg low, but still there. My skin was crawling from the noise, my body freezing as though suddenly made of stone.

"Hey, girls." Greg nodded toward me. "Emily." His voice snaked above the screams in his head.

I listened to them for a moment, trying to calm my own mind enough to hear what they said. I heard children's voices, women and men. Some screamed for help, others screamed in plain agony.

I shook them away with a grimace. "Leave us alone."

Alexis nudged me again. "*Emily*," she hissed. "Don't be so rude!"

Greg turned his attention back to Alexis. He blinked twice, and then smiled. "Do you want to dance, Alexis?"

I calculated his movements with meticulous attention. My head was screaming as the voices in his were. *No, Alexis. Don't!* I wanted to say the words out loud, but my lips wouldn't move.

Greg glared at me as he put his arm over her shoulder, walking her away from me. I was helpless to stop them, confused by what was happening. The screaming faded as they disappeared into the crowd, the music flooding back to my ears. My frozen skin began to melt and I felt a release in my chest. I inhaled, finding I'd forgotten to breathe. I could move again, but all I could think of now was finding Wes.

Jane:

We walked up to the party. I was too distracted to care about advancing my relationship with Max at the moment, too worried about where I would find Emily, and with whom. At least this time, I had Max to help me.

I know I didn't know Max all that well, but there was something that made me trust him, made me feel safe enough to tell him things I never told anyone. I wanted to tell him about my ability to foresee death, but there was always something stealing the moment away. At the same time, though, maybe I was too scared.

As Max and I entered, I scanned the room for Emily, but didn't see her among the faces of my peers. The music pounded in my ears, leaving them ringing. Max put his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close to him and protecting me within a shell of his arms. People danced all around us, their arms flailing in their inebriated states. I didn't care about any of them, instead shutting my eyes and breathing deep, Max's musky scent tickling my senses.

He squeezed my arm to get my attention. "I'm going to try to find Greg," he yelled.

His voice stung my ears, but I nodded in agreement.

Max left me standing in the middle of the room as everyone seemed to stare. They saw me as a threat, a party wrecker, and most of all, a complete loser. I licked my lips and dropped my gaze to the floor. I quickly worked my way through the crowd, trying my best to disappear to the side of the room. I was being thrashed around, the house filled to the brim with bodies, reeking of beer. The ground below me shook from the weight, covered in a thin sticky layer of— I didn't even want to know. I began to wonder what parent would allow their kid to do this sort of thing, but most parents were oblivious, or at the very least, in denial.

I squeezed my way along the wall, moving toward an arch that led into an adjoining room. Reaching it, I slipped into what looked like the kitchen. I stood in the middle of the space, finally finding some air. A kid from my English class walked in and went straight to the fridge. He grabbed the remnants of a six pack from the middle shelf and handed me one of the two that were left, not bothering to ask if I'd even wanted one. As though he was in a trance, he left the room, re-entering the dance party that was happening in the living room.

I stared at the beer for a moment, the chill of it comforting on my hot hand. The can began to perspire, and I found myself suddenly thirsty as the condensation began to drip to the ground. I popped the top, bringing it to my lips. The tart smell of barley filled my nostrils and I took a sip. I wrinkled my face in distaste as I swallowed. It was horrible, but the bubbles felt good on my dry throat. As I lowered the can from in front of my eyes, I saw Emily among the crowd in the living room. She was scanning the swarm with a look of fear on her face.

Finding a nearby table, I placed the beer down and brought my hands to my mouth. "Emily!" I tried to yell over the crowd. She didn't seem to hear me, so I began to walk toward her, pressing through the swarm and slowly gaining ground. "Emily!" I yelled again. This time she heard me and her head snapped in my direction, her auburn hair flying about her shoulders. Her face was filled with relief as our gazes met.

"Jane!" She yelled back, waving. She ducked her head and began to make her way toward me. We met in the middle.

"Emily..." I was almost out of breath, my arms feeling taxed as though the sea of people were in fact the sea itself.

Emily grabbed my arm. “Jane, I need to find Wes.”

I furrowed my brow. “Wes is here?” A small part of me felt better knowing that he was.

Emily rolled her eyes, grabbing me as she pushed through the crowd, trying to get us back to the kitchen where it would be easier to talk. We finally made it to the room a moment later, my arm red where Emily was still grasping me.

I twisted to face her; she looked frantic. “Listen, Jane. I know this is going to sound strange, but I think there’s something dangerous about Max and his brother.”

I felt my heart stop. *Howdid she knowabout Greg?* “Emily, what are you talking about? Max is fine.” I tried to deny it, not willing to give him up.

Emily shook me. “Jane, I don’t have time for to you be naïve, okay? There is something about them I don’t trust.”

I glared at her, crossing my arms against my chest. “Max is fine, Emily. You’re hardly the one to judge.”

She shook her head, her arms in the air. “Then at least believe me when I say that his brother is dangerous. I mean, I *know* that you do.”

I laughed slightly. “Okay, I agree with you there. But I don’t understand. How do you know all this?”

“I’ll explain later, Jane, but I think Alexis is in trouble.” Her eyes were wide.

Everything was happening so fast. “In trouble? What do you mean?”

Emily was pacing in small circles. “Greg took her to dance, but now I can’t find her or Wes.”

“Greg did *what?*” I’d heard what she said, but hearing it made the hairs on my arm stand on end.

“Emily!” I heard a yell from the other room, and we both looked.

Emily’s face was relieved. “*Wes!*” She yelled back.

I saw Wes push his way into the room.

“There you *ar—*” He froze when he saw me, his body becoming rigid.

Neither of us spoke for a moment as we stared at each other, speechless.

Emily finally grumbled, shaking her head as though irritated. “Listen, Jane. There are some things you need to understand. I’ve been meaning to find a better time to tell you, but I have a feeling this is as good as it’s going to get.” Emily’s eyes scanned mine, a weight carried within them. “The truth of the matter is, *well...*” She exhaled, seeming to gather her words.

“What, *Em?*” My own words were curt. I didn’t have time for her games.

“It’s just that...” She eyed Wes one last time. He gave her an approving nod. “I *hear* things, Jane, and Wes, well, he changes *into* things. Mostly animals. That’s what all the pain was about.” She was nodding arbitrarily, as though urging me to find what she was saying acceptable —*believable*.

I was in shock. I said nothing.

Emily went on. “Because I can *hear* things, Jane, I also know that you *dream* about certain things...” She shook her head, her eyes now avoiding mine. “*Apparently.*” She continued to eye Wes, “And then... Wes and I are dating. Got it?” Emily paused as though the fact that they were dating was meant to shock me, but it wasn’t that part that was shocking. It was the first three things she’d said. “But right now it’s important we find Alexis. So, please, Jane, try to keep up!” Emily’s cheeks were flushed.

“*What?*” I finally spoke, digesting her words but paralyzed by the absurdity of it all. Wes was staring at Emily with a half smile.

She grumbled again. “Get over it, okay? For the last time, Jane, Alexis is with Greg right this second, and Greg hardly seems like good company, especially alone.”

It finally sank in. I felt my heart lurch, and horror engulfed me. Whatever it was she’d just laid claim to was something I was just going to have to trust her on—for now.

“We need to find her!” I gasped.

Emily rolled her eyes at me. “*Exactly!*” She was nodding enthusiastically. “Finally, I’m not the only one that thinks he’s a cree—*eep.*” Emily froze, the color in her face draining.

“Emily, what is it?”

I felt a cold hand on my back then, and spun around. My eyes met Max’s. I smiled and looked back at Emily, her mouth ready to scream. Max was quick to grab her arm, his eyes like darts. Emily’s face instantly seemed to release, the color returning.

Emily looked confused for a moment, and then looked up at Max. “*Oh.*” It was as though she had discovered something new.

I heard Wes spout an angry breath. He pushed past Emily, breaking the hold Max had on her.

“*Don’t touch her,*” Wes hissed, his veins suddenly bulging on his forehead.

I gasped. I’d never seen Wes this mad before, not to mention protective, as though Emily was his mate.

Max put his hand in the air, his fingers splayed in a display of innocence. “Calm down, Wes. I’m not here to cause harm.”

Wes was huffing hard, his face beet red.

Emily looked like a pot ready to boil over, and the frantic look on her face returned. I could hear a scream slowly began to rise from her throat. I lunged at her, putting my hand over her mouth and latching my arm around her neck. I stood behind her, my chin on her shoulder. I hated that she was taller than me. Wes looked at me, his anger fading as he found himself conflicted—hurt me in order to help Emily? Or give in.

“Can we just stop this?” I spoke calmly, addressing everyone.

I could see that Emily was glaring at Max. She wriggled away from me. “*What are you?*” she spat at him.

I looked back at Max but he wouldn’t look at me. Max didn’t answer Emily’s question, instead burying it with a remark. “We need to find my brother, before he...” Max’s mouth shut, his face nothing but business.

I finally spoke. “Before he *what?*” I felt a little betrayed, as though I didn’t know Max at all, even though I thought I had.

It was then that a scream erupted from somewhere in the house. I looked at the crowd in the living room, but everyone was carrying on as though they hadn’t heard what we had. *Why had I heard it?* I looked to where Max was, but he was already gone.

“Where...” I looked at Emily, seeing she had the same look of confusion on her face that I did. “Did you hear that?”

She nodded gravely. “Clear as day.”

I heard the scream again.

“I think it’s coming from upstairs,” I added.

Our eyes grew wide, and our bodies lurched to life. We took off in the direction of the noise, pushing past the couples that were making-out in the middle of the dance floor. Reaching the stairs, we stumbled up the flights, stepping over one student that had fallen asleep there. In the upstairs hall, we saw Max standing outside a door toward the end. How had he gotten there so fast? He turned his head as he heard us, motioning us forward.

We walked carefully, trying to be quiet in case we heard the scream again. I scanned Max’s eyes for answers, but they were void of knowledge, void of the serene blue ocean I’d grown to love. Max grabbed the door handle as another low scream echoed in the room beyond. Emily and I looked at each other with fear in our eyes.

I heard the cold scratch of metal against metal as Max twisted the handle, finally throwing the door open. Emily and I arrived at his side. I was anxious to look in as I peeked over his broad shoulder.

The scream turned into a crazed bout of laughter. Alexis was jumping on the bed, screeching as she let herself fall onto the pillows, blankets fluffing all around her. Her hair was wild, and she was in her underwear. I scanned the room, seeing Greg was in a nearby chair, watching her with a look of amusement on his face.

Greg’s attention slowly turned to us. “Oh, hey, *Brother.*” He gave Max an innocent wave, but I knew better than to fall for that. “I think this one is a little *drunk.*” He winked, speaking in a whisper as though Alexis couldn’t hear.

“I’m not drunk!” she squealed.

I watched Max’s jaw tighten as he stepped into the room, his hands clasped tightly at his sides. He walked up to the bed, getting Alexis’ attention. “Alexis, are you alright?”

She giggled into the covers of the bed.

Max glared at Greg. “What did you give her?”

Greg looked annoyed by the question. He rolled his eyes and exhaled dramatically. “I don’t know. Something *good*, though. I *can’t*—”

In the blink of an eye, Max had crossed the room, grasping Greg by the neck. He lifted him out of the chair with one arm.

I gasped. “Max!”

Alexis continued to laugh and moan into the covers. She rolled herself inside them, and then rolled onto the floor. She squealed as she landed on the rug. I didn’t bother to help her, figuring she knew how to handle herself in similar situations. I stepped toward Max, touching his arm as he continued to hold Greg in the air. “Max, stop this!”

It was as though I'd broken him from a trance. The blue color in his eyes returned, and his stone like face released. He dropped Greg.

Greg smiled at me from where he'd been discarded on the chair. His expression instantly made me regret saving him.

Max turned his head to look at me, his pupils still dilated. I stepped away from him, frightened by the familiar madness I saw in his eyes. It was a face I could never forget, even after ten years. He blinked a few times as he stared at me, his body seeming to deflate in size. I stood as still as I could, afraid that if I moved, Max would snap me in half. He shut his eyes, taking a deep breath before opening them again. The color had changed, the familiar stare of his past replaced with deep blue guilt.

He reached for me, but I backed father away from him, frightened by what I'd seen. Turning to look into the hall, I saw that Emily and Wes were no longer there. I looked back at Max, guilt still lacing his gaze as his brother began to chuckle. The chuckle was a song I'd told myself never to forget, a song that reminded me of death, and more specifically, *my father's death*.

Not knowing what to do, I fled the room, too confused to understand what had been real and what had been a dream.

Emily:

"Wes, calm down." I grabbed his face, willing him to look at me. His pupils wavered. "Listen to my voice, Wes."

I'd managed to get him out of the house, stashing him in the cramped backseat of his car with little success. He was breathing hard, unable to focus on anything but the overwhelming urge to change.

I licked my lips, frightened that this wasn't only dangerous for him, but also me. If he did choose to be the lion, or monkey, or anything for that matter, there was no telling what he would do to Greg or Max, especially when triggered as he was. I knew now that it was a bad idea to come tonight. Wes had been right to feel anxious.

I grabbed Wes's hand, my own knuckles turning white as I grasped as hard as I could. Thinking of nothing else that could calm his anger and mimic the adrenaline, I crawled into his lap and straddled his legs. I took his hand and placed it on my hip before grabbing his face. I pressed my lips against his, his breath streaming through his nose and across my face, hot as a furnace.

His hand gripped at my skin and I winced, letting out a small squeal of pain, but refusing to let it stop me from distracting him.

His hormone fueled rollercoaster of thoughts began to slow, and he responded to my touch for the first time since I'd dragged him from the hall. My tactic was working. Wes was coming back to me. My muscles were taxed, but I continued to grasp his face. It was no easy feat for a one-hundred-and-twenty pound female to haul a two-hundred pound, blood hungry brute out of that house. I was sweating.

He bit my lip, splitting the skin. I tasted the metallic flavor of blood fill my mouth, but I didn't care. He pulled me against him, his hands like steel. Slowly, his breathing became more regular, his thoughts no longer sinister, but rather something sweet. With all my strength, I pushed away from him.

"Wes." I said his name, hoping he could hear me.

His eyes were shut as he tilted his head back against the black leather, groaning. I felt him rub my hip where he had grabbed it, his touch so soft that you'd think it was another person all together. I licked my lip, still tasting blood. As he opened his eyes, guilt flooded them.

"Emily, I'm so sorry." He saw my bloodied lip, though I tried to hide it. He touched his finger to the cut, his eyes filled with hurt.

"Wes, it was my choice," I reassured him.

He gently rubbed both my hips where I knew there had to be two large bruises forming. He relaxed into the seat. "I never want to hurt you, Em."

"You won't, Wes. I'm a strong girl."

He grinned and pulled me against him, pecking the cut on my lip before twisting his lips with mine.

Just don't break my heart, I thought.

Max:

I saw Jane walking along the street as my headlights shown across her familiar silhouette. I slowed, rolling up beside her and dropping the window. The tires slowly crackled against the cement.

"Jane." She refused to look at me, though she knew I was here. I rubbed my head with my hand, frustrated with myself. "Jane, *please*."

She stopped, her arms crossed against her chest. Still, her gaze remained on the sidewalk before her, staring straight at the ground. At least she had stopped.

“Jane, I’m sorry. Please, let me drive you home.” I was pleading. “It’s cold, and it’s too far for you to walk alone.”

I saw her lips move as thoughts jumbled inside her head, filtering through in cloudy snippets of information. “What was that all about, Max? *What just happened?*” She sounded scared; she *felt* scared. “I don’t understand. *What. Is. Happening?*” She was inspecting her hands.

I put the car in park and got out, sensing that I couldn’t let her do this alone. I watched her from over the hood. Her breathing was erratic, and I could almost feel the cold sweat that coated her skin. I couldn’t stand to see her this way. I wanted to comfort her.

I slowly navigated my way around the car, my hands held before me in my attempt to show her I wasn’t a threat. She backed away a few steps, but stopped. I knew she trusted me to some degree, but she had been caught off guard by my anger. I walked up to her. Her eyes remained locked on the ground, her muscles tense as she tried not to shake.

I weighed my options, knowing what I wanted to do, but unsure of what she wanted. The ring had hampered my efforts to completely understand her thoughts. I was fumbling in the dark, something I wasn’t used to. After much debate, I went with my gut for a change, carefully reaching up and touching her face. She flinched away from me at first, but as I coaxed her, she began to relax against my touch. I hadn’t done anything to persuade her relaxation; I couldn’t, not like I did with Emily in the kitchen.

Finding it an open invitation, I clenched my teeth and wrapped my arms around her. Jane’s calm enveloped me, the world relaxing for the both of us. Her tense muscles succumbed and our bodies welded into a comfortable shape. I shut my eyes in relief, knowing that my relationship with her was salvageable. Running my hand down the back of her hair, she buried her head in my shirt.

“You’re as cold as I am,” she muttered. She shivered against my chest, and I knew my lifeless body was only making it worse.

I pulled her away so that I could look her in the eyes. “Please, will you get in the car?”

She nodded, her teeth chattering as an icy drizzle began to fall from the sky, matting her hair.

I led her to the car, opening the door as she got in. Shutting it, I walked around to the other side and got behind the wheel. I cranked the heat and pressed a button on the center console for the heated seats. I shut the door and shifted into gear, planning to take her home. The car was silent as we drove, intensity filling the gap where calm once lived. I watched her from the corner of my eye, seeing her rigid and still in her seat. Her hands remained tightly wrapped in a ball on her lap, the shiver in her breathing slowly fading as the car grew warm.

I turned down Jane’s street, her house just up ahead.

“I don’t want to go home,” she whispered, seeing the front porch light through the dying fall trees.

I gripped the wheel, swallowing. A part of me was elated, but also sad. “Where do you want to go?”

She shook her head, and I could see the glimmer of tears in her eyes. “Anywhere.”

I sped up as we passed her house. I didn’t see Wes’s car in his driveway, but I knew that he and Emily were safe. Something inside me told me so. Being that close to Wes had allowed me to tap into his thoughts. He was a shape-shifter as I’d originally feared the first day I’d brushed past him.

It was clear now that there was more magick in Glenwood Springs than I’d originally suspected. The Priory wouldn’t be happy to learn that it had gone undetected for so long. They will want to get to Wes and Emily before the Black Angels do. My brother would kill them if he knew, or if he already does know, then he’s planning to recruit them to his side. I only prayed that Greg didn’t notice what I had tonight; hoped he hadn’t yet narrowed his focus on Wes. He was important.

I’d left the Priory, gone rogue, but I feared that now that I was back, my old ties would resurface. The Priory always regarded me as a strong force against the dark evils of Greg’s world. They knew I had a special connection with him, almost like a tap into their very plans. It was only a matter of time before the Priory found out I was back, but at the same time, I feared I needed them as much as they needed me. I knew I could protect Jane on my own, but Emily wasn’t connected to me the way Jane was. She needed the protection the Priory could provide.

I was confident that Emily’s clairvoyance had given her a fair warning about Greg, and the shape-shifter could also protect her. I just hoped she was smart enough to recognize what Greg’s energy meant before he could suck her in. Wes’s magick was stronger than ours. A shape-shifter is one of the few beings that can defeat our kind. I don’t think Wes understands that yet, but if my brother decides to reap again, as he has before, Wes will learn the extent of his power soon enough.

I drove out of Glenwood Springs and down the long highway toward Denver, where the road was lonesome and the forest foreboding. I didn’t know where else to go, but I knew that driving in a car always helped me to relax. Hopefully it helped her the same way.

I knew how abandoned Jane felt. I knew she had been forsaken by everyone she loved: her mother, her sister, and worst of all, her father. I knew that what my brother did to her family was uncalled for. Jane’s father was hardly a threat to the Black Angels, but to put Jane in harms way in Greg’s vendetta against her father was unforgivable. I had to save her. She was innocent.

“I haven’t been honest with you.” Her voice was almost foreign as it cut the silence. I was so lost in my own guilt that I’d nearly forgotten she remained beside me. I cursed myself, knowing that her words should have been something I’d initiated. Especially after a night like tonight where I

allowed my own demons to rise. I had plenty of explaining to do.

I swallowed.

"I dream about death, Max, like your grandfather does." She paused as though waiting for my reaction, but I remained still. She went on. "I feel as though I should have died with my father in the car wreck. I'm here without a purpose, because my purpose was to pass on." Her words were like a knife, sharp and to the point. "As I told you before, my father died when I was seven. What I didn't tell you was that I was also there. I think I have Sheol magick." Jane began to cry. "I should have *died*, Max, but someone saved me." She looked deep into my eyes with a knowing stare. "I don't know why I was saved, or why my father had to die, but I know what I saw. I know *who* I saw."

She must know it was me. I tried to read her thoughts and find my proof, but the wall put up by the ring was only strengthened by her current emotion. I desperately wanted to tell her that it was me. I felt the words well in my throat, but my mouth refused to speak.

"I believe in angels, Max, just as I said. I believe that there is more happening to me than I can ever understand, but I want to try. When I dream, I dream of death, and I..." I saw her face twist. "I've seen *you* there, and your brother. Until now I couldn't understand why. The people in my dreams are dead, but, then why were you there? Why are you alive?" She paused, seeing the look on my face. "You *are* there, aren't you? Just like me. You see me."

I opened my mouth, but she thwarted my words a second time.

"And now my sister is hearing things, but I don't see how. How can Emily be magick if she never had an experience like mine?" She looked at me, her eyes so innocent and young.

I knew so many of the answers she was looking for, but where to start? "There are many forms of magick, Jane. Like my grandfather said. Hereditary. It could be from a parent."

I saw her face twist even deeper. "A *parent*? You mean, my mother?"

I felt every muscle in my body tighten. "No, more likely your father."

"My *father*?" It was as though something had clicked, and her body language changed.

"Yes. He probably kept it from you because it wasn't safe. He likely distanced himself from Emily to keep her from finding out, because Emily would *know*."

"How do you know this?"

I bit my lip. "It's just a guess." Why couldn't I just say it? "Your mother probably had no idea." Which in truth, she didn't. Nowhere in her thoughts did John ever tell Sarah about his own gift of clairvoyance. The same gift he passed to Emily.

Jane was the one at a loss for words now.

I pressed on. "Jane, have you ever considered that maybe your father was murdered?" The word murder was rough on my tongue.

She leaned forward and pressed her palm against the dashboard, as though trying to slow the car down—as though stuck in fast forward. "—yes, I have."

She'd had the notion since the day of his death. "Why?" I pressed, trying to bring her memory to the surface, trying to get her to admit that it was me she had seen saving her.

Her mouth hung open, her face sickened. "On the day my father died, my body lay beside him. I saw us both from above, as though I'd already died, but then there were two more people there—"

"Who?" My jaw tightened.

Her head was shaking. She didn't want to say it. "*Angels.*" The word sounded painful for her. "One of them saved me, and one seemed to look upon our dead bodies with pride and satisfaction." She looked at me, her brown eyes deep and revealing. "The type of satisfaction you would expect to see from a murderer. It was never an accident at all, but no matter how hard I tried to explain that, no one believed me." Her eyes filled with tears, the pain in Jane's heart flooding into my own. "Why, though? Why did my father have to die? Why didn't the one that saved me save him as well?"

"Jane..." I pulled the car off the road, the gravel of the shoulder flying into the wheel wells as we skidded to a stop. I shut the car off, the silence of the forest around us creeping in as the dust settled. "Magick is supposed to be dangerous, Jane, but as you know, it isn't. Nothing about what you have and what you see is in any way dangerous. There are two sides to it, just like anything else. And just like anything with two sides, one side wants to destroy the other." I made two fists with my hands to signify the good and the bad. "Like my grandfather explained, one side wants magick to remain a secret, the other wants to use it to take over all things, and presume a role of power." I shook one fist, signifying it to be the bad side. "Just like any war, it's a give and take. There is a dark side, Jane, along with a good, and if your father did have magick, it's likely it was the good kind." I looked into her eyes, dropping my hands into my lap. "He died because of this war."

Her eyes fluttered forward. She unbuckled and rubbed her neck, probably feeling agitated and confined. I rolled the window down, hoping the fresh air would help her to relax. I wanted to wrap her in my arms and ball her against my chest where she would be safe forever. Since the day I first

laid eyes on her, it was all I wanted. I knew this was a lot for her to take in, but it had to happen.

“Your grandfather tells you this?” Her voice was pitchy. I could tell she was still denying what her heart knew: that I was one of the two beings there that day. She refused to believe it, refused to remember.

I nodded. Thinking of her father John, and remembering him from the Priory. “Jane, I haven’t been honest with you. I don’t really know you, or rather, you don’t know me. I’m afraid to scare you away. Afraid you’ll never speak to me again if you know who I really am.”

I saw her hands grip the seat, readying herself for what she knew would be a shocking revelation. I hadn’t told her about the nature of my parent’s death, knowing that mentioning the involvement of my brother in all of this would come as a detriment to our relationship, especially when Greg would always be there.

“My parents didn’t just die in a car accident, Jane; they were murdered.”

Her eyes shot to mine, her mouth agape. “What?”

I bit my lip. “The story is complicated, so try to follow if you can—and try to understand that I’m not a danger to you.”

I felt her spine stiffen, and her eyes searched mine. I knew she heard me, but was frozen by my previous confession.

“Jane, my parents had three boys. My brother Greg and I came first. We were the twins. And then our younger brother a few years later.” I didn’t yet want to reveal that my younger brother was the man she assumed to be my grandfather at this point. “My twin brother, Greg—who you’ve met—was always jealous of me.”

Her lips moved. “I know about Greg, but a *younger* brother? You didn’t mention a younger brother before.”

I touched my hand to her lips, opening the doorway to her thoughts. We both leaned into the connection, wanting nothing but to weave together. “I’ll get to that,” was all I could say. I brushed my fingers from her lips to her ear, relishing the feel of her warm skin.

“But...” she tried to protest, but her voice faded. I felt her breath against my hand, warm and moist. My jaw tightened, wanting so badly to kiss her, to feel happiness with her. “But then where is your younger brother?”

“He’s *around*.”

The fear on her face faded. She had first assumed he’d died with my parents since I hadn’t mentioned him, but she was relieved to hear he was alive.

“Oh.” Jane looked confused, her mind flashing with images of Denver. She figured he was there. “So, who murdered your parents, and why? If they didn’t have magick, like you said, then what was the reason?”

I compressed my thoughts and let it out. “Greg murdered them.”

Jane gasped, her hand covering her mouth. She slunk down in her seat. “That’s not true. It can’t be. Why isn’t he in jail?”

I pressed on with the story, ignoring her questions and letting it pour out like an open wound. “Like I said, Greg was always jealous. He thought my parents loved me more than they loved him. He hated them for that. As we grew older, he never allowed himself to see that they loved us both the same, and his denial and hatred grew until...” I felt my throat begin to choke up, the thought of the day painful. I’d never told anyone about what had happened. “Until the day Greg learned that my mother was also having an affair, but not just that; the man she was seeing had magick. Greg did not approve of the fact that my human mother was cavorting with his type. In his rage, he set the library on fire with us in it. He didn’t mean for our younger brother to be a part of it, and in fact, I don’t believe he meant to kill my parents at all. I think more than anything, he was trying to prove a point, but as the flames blazed in his eyes, something inside him changed. Greg locked us all inside that burning room, sending us all to our death, except our younger brother, Erik.” I winced as I said his name. “I was able to save him before the flames engulfed the room—he lived.”

“Erik? Named after your grandfather?” Her voice grew clear. It would have been the logical explanation.

I said nothing, and I fear she took it as a yes.

“But, *you* got out. You’re alive,” she added. “And Greg. So, you mean to say, everyone but your parents *lived*.”

I shook my head and her face wrinkled. “Erik, the man you know as my grandfather, is not my grandfather at all. He’s my younger brother.”

She blinked, the words taking a moment to sink in. “*What?*” She gasped again. “That’s not possible.” She was shaking her head. “Erik is... *old!*”

I felt her body heat rise, her mind struggling to decide if I was a liar or if my story was true. She eyed the forest outside the door, considering her options. I knew she was terrified by what I was telling her, but in my defense, we both had a terrifying secret—mine just happened to be bigger.

I touched her arm, causing her to freeze. I hastily grabbed her face, feeling I was losing her. I forcing her to look at me. “Erik is my *younger brother*, Jane,” I reiterated, my eyes searching hers, my hands pulsing honesty into her blood. “He’s been touched by a Sheol magick that does not prevent his aging, as it does to me. Erik grew old, and I did not.”

Jane did not try to pull away from me. “Then...” She started speaking before she let it sink in. “Wait, *what?* Prevent aging? You have Sheol magick?” She jerked out of my grasp, struggling between breaths. “What kind?” There was an appalled twang in her voice.

I bit my lip, leaning back into the seat and letting go of the wheel. I felt the jeans under my hand—they were cold. I avoided her question, saying anything I could to distract her, but at the same time calm her down. “Erik is like you. He was touched by death because of that fire. He has been inflicted with a lust for it, not unlike your own.”

She froze. “Lust for death?” The term had done just what I’d wanted it to; it had hooked her.

“A lust for death, because he should have died with my parents, in 1928, but—”

She finished my sentence, whispering, “But he was spared...” She drew in a sharp breath of air, her eyes wide and accepting. I could sense the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place in her mind. There was a distinct veil of clarity filling the space between us.

I felt the anxiety in my chest release. She was accepting this. I put a hand on her shoulder out of instinct.

At first she did not seem to notice, but as her thoughts slowed, she jerked away.

“What are you?” she snapped, her face now a deepening shade of red. Her thoughts floated around the idea of what I was, but her mind refused to accept it.

“Something else, something much deeper,” I uttered. Wincing, I clasped my hands in my lap. I’d left her only one option of what I was.

“*What. Are. You?*” She demanded for a second time. “You know what I am. So, tell me.”

I pressed my back against the seat even harder, the butt of my palm pressing against the steering wheel. “I, well...” I didn’t want to say it. I knew the words were there, waiting like a tidal wave that was about to crash to shore, but I was afraid she would never talk to me again. This was the moment I’d been waiting for all these years, waiting for her to come of age so that she could understand, so that we could fall in love as I’d hoped.

I saw her become overwhelmed, and her thoughts compressed as though she’d shoved them away to a place where they were no longer real. My heart rate quickened. I’d lost her understanding.

“You know what, Max? Forget it. I don’t think I want to know what you are.” She put her hand up to silence me, looking away with disgust. “Just take me home, Max.” Contempt lingered in her wavering voice.

Her thoughts screamed at me through the wall of her mind.

A lie.

She thought it was all a lie.

I felt it. I knew it. My heart shattered. I was in no position to question her, or force more information on her already brimming mind, especially when I wasn’t ready for her to know why we’re here now, and why we’re connected. I took a deep breath and put both hands on the wheel, wishing I could rip it apart in my frustration. I started the car, skidding from the shoulder as I whipped it around toward home.

I was angry; but most of all, I felt like a failure.

...

She was running through the woods, the twigs below her feet snapping. The breath in her lungs twisted and stung its way up her throat. She was sweating, but her arms felt cold.

The Black Angel swung down through the canopy, large branches the size of small trees crashing to the ground behind him, shaking the Earth. His eyes glowed with the flames of Hell, his chest bared, exposing the unmistakable sign of the Black Knights on his skin.

She knew this was finally it; he had found her. She knew they would come one day, but she tried to hide, tried to fit in. He was faster than her. There was no use. She stopped, turning to face the Black Angel, her fists tight at her sides. She was prepared to die now, what other choice did she have?

She grit her teeth as he took her, his vengeful laughter echoing in her ears as he crushed her bones, her body disintegrating in a cloud of dust and ashes.

* * *

Wes:

I woke with a start, sitting up in bed. I heard a delicate moan beside me, and I looked down, seeing Emily was still asleep. I looked under the covers. I had my clothes on—that was a good sign. The last thing I wanted was to take advantage of Emily when I was loaded on the hormones of

my condition, not to mention the adrenaline of the night.

I calmed my frantic breathing, bringing my arm across my body and touching my hand to Emily's face. I brushed her long auburn hair back and behind her ear, trailing my hand down her neck and across the soft skin of her chest. She moved, but still, she did not wake.

There had been a scream in my head, but I couldn't be sure. I'd never felt or heard anything like it before, and I began to wonder if it wasn't the resonating memory of Alexis' intoxicated scream of laughter. The air in my room was cold, the window coated with a dewy film.

I saw the light in Jane's room turn on. She had shut her blinds on me, and a part of me was hurt by it. She had been my best friend—a part of my life for as long as I could remember. Never would I think that it would crumble over love.

My feelings for Emily were growing fast, in a way I never would have thought before, but that didn't mean I no longer carried a torch for Jane. I cared about her because for ten years, she had been my best friend, but the truth was that she didn't love me the way I'd always loved her. Our relationship had climaxed to a point where it could no longer progress. It had become volatile, and the ease of happiness we once shared had disappeared.

I had to let go.

Emily twisted beside me, her brows creased. I lay down, wrapping my arms around her stomach and pulling her close, cupping her inside the curve of my body. I didn't know if she had heard my thoughts, but I hoped that in her sleep, she would forget—or at the very least, think of it as nothing but a dream. I nuzzled my nose into her hair, breathing deep.

She was beautiful.

Emily:

In the morning, I snuck out from under the covers, trying hard to be silent. I watched Wes as he breathed, his chest rising and falling, his arms sprawled across the pillows. His skin was a pale grey in the dull morning light, and smooth like gun metal. I shivered as I grabbed my coat off the back of his desk chair, delicately fishing my arms into the sleeves and fastening the buttons. I tiptoed to the door where I snuck out, leaving it slightly ajar behind me.

Downstairs, I found the house was still sleeping. His foster parents were more like grandparents, so they slept late. As hard as they had tried to be trendy parents, they weren't always quick enough to keep up, or understanding of their teenage son whose interests were decades ahead of their own. I know they tried to understand Wes, but it was almost comical to watch, as though they'd adopted him in an attempt to stay young.

I'd met them a handful of times over the years, but tried my best to avoid them, not really knowing what to say. They had loved my father, talked with him everyday over a cup of coffee. Though I tried to pretend his death didn't bother me, it did, and their attempts at comforting me always grew ironically *uncomfortable*.

I walked out the front door, shoving my hands in the pocket of my plaid coat as the faux fur around the hood tickled my cheeks. The grass under my feet gave as I crossed the lawn, walking around the large evergreen trunk that shaded our front porch.

"It's a little early to be sneaking around, isn't it?"

I froze in place, the voice chilling as it rolled down my spine. I watched as the steam from my breath rose around me, hiding me in a cloud.

Greg appeared from around the evergreen, his skin even paler than Wes's had been. He looked striking in a well-tailored black coat and casual jeans. "You're quite an inventive girl, Emily. I admire that in you."

"What are you doing here?" I demanded. I watched his pupils wavering, feeling drawn to them. Greg walked up to me, touching my cheek. His hand was so cold, but soft like cotton.

He laughed. "Tell me... Why is a girl like you with a boy like Wes? You deserve someone *better*." He was arrogant.

I shook my head away from Greg's touch, controlling my thoughts as his screams tried to drown them out.

He smirked, leaning so close to my ear that I felt his lips move. "It's cute that you think you can fit into his life as you have, especially when he's still not over your *sister*. It's funny to think, you're just second best." He made a clicking noise with his tongue. "You'll never be Jane." He laughed mockingly.

The words stung, and I tried to deny them, but something inside me felt it was true. I was consumed by the feeling that there was still something between them, something Wes would never be able to put in the past. Did I really want to spend a lifetime worrying about his faithfulness? Always scanning his thoughts like an obsessed girlfriend? Wes would forever see Jane as the girl that got away. That was just the way it worked.

"Leave me alone," I finally muttered. I tried to push past him, but he gently blocked my way.

Greg's expression changed from one of trickery to one of understanding. "You and I are very much alike. We love someone we can't have."

I scanned his face, my lips parted and confused. “Who can’t you have?”

He brushed a piece of hair from my face, his finger lingering against my skin longer than it should. “You.”

I knew he was dangerous, but something about that suddenly appealed to me. Maybe this was what Jane felt for his brother. Perhaps now I saw that Greg wasn’t dangerous at all. In fact, he was *right*. Wes *did* love Jane.

Greg continued to pet my cheek. “You deserve to be with someone that *loves* you, Emily.” Inflection was added on all the right words.

I shook my head slowly, but his touch on my face was filled with a new kind of poison. I felt my mouth go dry.

“Just think about it, Emily. You’ll see soon enough. Wes does not love you.” Every time Greg said it, I found myself doubting Wes even more. “I can show you how to be stronger than you already are, Emily. I can show you how to prove your validity to the world. Jane thinks she is so special, but in fact, it is *you* that deserves the praise. It is *you* that has the true gift.” He laughed.

Greg leaned close to me, and though I wanted to get away, I allowed him to kiss me on the forehead. His lips were like a breath of cold air as they touched my skin. He was delicate—*sexy*. The screams had disappeared, and I found myself feeling at ease. My eyes fluttered closed as he traced my jaw line with his finger, wrapping me in his seduction.

“You’re gorgeous, Emily,” he whispered, tilting my chin up. His lips found mine. At first I did nothing, but as he continued to kiss me, I found myself kissing him back. His lips tasted like frosted sugar. I wanted more.

Greg pulled away as I tried to lean in after him. I reached out for him, feeling nothing but air. I opened my eyes, only to find that he was gone.

Jane:

I grabbed a carton of milk and a bagel off the cart in the lunchroom. I felt drained, my weekend a blur of needless conversation with Liz, and strange phenomena I refused to process. I’d tried to avoid Emily all together, too frightened by the concept that she could read my thoughts. For the brief moments when I did see her it was no more than a glance. I’d taken a position of ignorance, as though nothing had happened. I refused to let my life take a turn for what I now saw as the worst.

I entered the courtyard as a gust of wind blew across my face. I shivered, the cold milk in my hand making my skin sting, adding to the discomfort. I spotted an empty table across the courtyard and made my way to it, hoping the wind would soon stop. I didn’t want to sit inside. I was tired of the staring and whispered comments the whole student body seemed to put upon me, especially after the fiasco of the party on Friday night.

What had really happened? What was it that was going on with Greg and Max? For the last ten years, I’d convinced myself that I was alone, grown apart from my entire family under the belief that they could never know or understand. My father and I had had a strong connection, so why hadn’t he told me about who he was? If he were in danger, he should let me know. At the very least caution me that something was after us. And Emily—of all the people who should have been able to confide in me, she should have been the first.

I saw Emily and Wes enter the courtyard, the only other bodies in sight. Emily had swapped her typical short skirt for a pair of leggings and knee high boots. Her continued transformation was unbelievable. It was hard to deny that Wes really was good for her. A feeling of jealousy washed over me; jealousy because they had each other to discuss this with. Emily had a look of trepidation on her face, and Wes’s was drawn, as though he’d had as much sleep as I had.

I was surprised when they made their way toward me and sat down.

“Jane, I think we need to talk about this,” Wes’s voice was elevated to carry over the wind. He glanced sideways at Emily but she kept her head down. She dug her nail into the wood of the table, following a carving someone else had left. Clearly she wasn’t too fond of the pending conversation.

I nodded, looking down at the bagel before me. I picked at the skin, peeling it back and leaving it on the napkin.

“I know that on Friday a lot of things happened,” he continued. “Namely what Emily had said.” He paused. “I think we can all benefit from sticking together.” He paused again, this time waiting for me to react, but I said nothing. “I realize how suddenly strange everything has become, how strange *we’ve* become. I don’t understand any of this, or why it’s happening. My idea is that something is not right, something is making us change.”

“Change how?” My remark was a little bitter.

“All that pain I felt over the summer, it seems it was almost a warning. Like Emily said, I can change into things, namely animals. Isn’t it strange that it should all happen now, though? With the arrival of the *twins*?”

I felt the same frustration I had in the car with Max. I did not want to believe that magick was right here, right now—directly under our noses. The harder I denied it, though, the more prevalent it became. “*Animals*? Like a shape-shifter?”

Wes looked thoughtful. “A shape-shifter? Is that what I am?”

I looked up at him, remembering the description from Mr. Gordon's books. "Yes. I suppose." It was then that I was reminded of the fact that Erik Gordon was somehow Max's younger brother. I flinched, my head aching.

"Well, that answers a lot of questions I had. I knew you of all people could figure that out."

I looked up at him, seeing him smile sweetly. Emily glanced sideways at Wes, a look of distrust on her face. My gaze bore a hole into Emily's head. If she could hear my thoughts, as she had claimed at the party, then she should know exactly what I was thinking. I was not a threat.

I looked back at Wes. "But the important thing is that now we know, I suppose." I tried to make the best of the situation. I looked at my bagel. My appetite was gone.

I heard Wes exhale. "What is this, Jane? What is going on with these brothers? *Who are they?* I know you're—*close* to the one." His words dragged as he adjusted his seat. Emily flinched. "What did he have to say for himself?"

I lifted my shoulders to my ears. "He's different, too, I guess. I didn't really stick around long enough to get an exact explanation, but—"

"I don't trust them, Jane," Wes snapped.

I felt defensive all of a sudden.

His eyes were fiery, and his brows cynical. "I don't get what you see in him. Can't you see that he's dangerous?"

I stiffened my grip on the carton of milk, my hand stinging from the cold. "He's not dangerous, Wes." *Why was I protecting him?*

Wes snorted. "Whatever, Jane."

Emily:

I listened to them bicker as I traced the carving in the table, over and over again. It was a half moon shape, and nothing important, but I pretended it was in order to stay out of the conversation.

I could hear the jealousy in Wes's voice, and in his head. He was angry that Jane liked this Max kid, this creature that sent chills through every fiber of my being. Max wasn't human; he couldn't be.

As I listened to them bicker, jealousy began to form in my own heart. I thought about the things Greg had said the other morning. *He was right.* Wes was never going to love me the way I wanted. He didn't love me first, so why could I believe that he loved me now? Wes was using me to get to Jane. *I knew it.*

I began to consider the brothers for a moment. Maybe Greg wasn't bad at all. Maybe it was Max that I needed to fear. What if I'd had it all wrong? What if the way I felt around Greg had been love and attraction, the screams my own? Greg clearly loved me, and best of all, he wasn't at all interested in Jane. If he were, then he would have tried to go for her. I licked my lips, wanting to taste the sugary chill of Greg's kiss.

At least Wes couldn't hear *my* thoughts.

Wes:

My spine tingled, a strange feeling emanating from Emily that hadn't before. I pushed away the feeling, concentrating on Jane. I was so frustrated with her. How did she not see that Max was a bad idea? How did she not see that on *Friday night?*

I'd always considered Jane to be a level-headed person, but it now seemed that her conscience had completely left her. All I wanted to do when I saw Max was slit his throat with a set of claws. There was a chill that surrounded him, as though he had no heart at all.

"I'm just saying that I don't trust him, Jane. So don't say I didn't warn you when we find you stashed in a dumpster, *dead.*" I wanted to control the sting of my words, but I couldn't.

I touched Emily's knee under the table, feeling sorry that I'd offended her by speaking to her sister. I knew how it must seem to her, but I was protecting Jane because of our friendship, not the infatuation I once held. Emily pulled her knee away from me. I frowned.

"Can we get back to the important things now?" Jane's voice was curt.

I stopped talking, trying to forget it.

"It doesn't matter who has turned into what, or whether or not we shared that information, because now we have. I'm sure we had our own fears about what each other would think, so let's try to forget that and move on from here." Jane was preaching now. "Wes, I do agree with you. We do

need to stick together, so yelling at me about the decisions I make in my personal life isn't helping. So *stop*."

I rolled my eyes, agreeing... at least for now.

Jane:

"All I know, Emily..." I was trying to get her to stop scratching at the table and enter the conversation. "...is that our father was murdered because he also had something resembling what you have, or so I'm told." I didn't want to trust my sources, but found that saying it had made it real.

Emily finally looked at me for the first time since they had sat down. "*What?*"

I exhaled slowly, thinking that apparently her mind reading skills weren't all that great if she didn't already know that information, but then again, it was rather clear that her only concern seemed to be Wes, so why bother with my thoughts at all? "I've been led to—I mean—I *believe* that dad also had some sort of magick, and that is why you have it too."

Emily leaned into the table. "Wait, he was *clairvoyant*? And *murdered*?"

I was slighted by the word. "Yes," I replied sternly. "I believe that my magick was a result of the accident, but your magick is hereditary, like dad's was."

Emily watched me with eyes full of a sudden connection. I knew that she'd never felt close to our father, and perhaps it was because our father wanted to protect her, distance himself in order to keep their abilities a secret. He probably saw that eventually she would be able to hear his thoughts, and know what he was. Our father's obvious distance now had a heartfelt merit.

"So, Emily, you are in turn more tied to this gift than I am. And Wes..." I looked at him now, all business. "You are likely the same... hereditary I mean. It's quite possible that your father or mother was also a shape shifter."

"*Hereditary*? Are there different kinds?"

"Yes," I snapped. "Three: Hereditary, Learned, and Sheol, like—"

Wes snorted. "You call it what you want, but I'm calling it a *shape-shifter*," he sounded proud of the title.

"Okay, whatever." I shook my head, aggravated. "But it's also a possible reason as to why you were orphaned." I felt excited all of a sudden. *Yes! It made perfect sense!* "Think about it, Wes!" I leaned across the table, mindlessly grabbing his hand. "Your parents left in order to protect you, not because they didn't want you."

Wes jerked his hand out of mine and grasped Emily's instead, as though trying to save face. Emily didn't look impressed by my forward action.

"Oh, chill out, Emily. He's all yours," I spouted, unable to control the comment.

Emily glared at me—like she used to.

I pulled my hand back into my lap with a noticeable tartness. "Don't you agree, Wes?"

He came back to the matter at hand. "Yeah," he replied hesitantly. "I mean, do you really believe that could be the case?"

I knew Wes had accepted the fact that his parents hadn't wanted him, but now it was like realizing they actually had loved him, and he was understandably confused. "Yeah, I do. I bet they're still out there as well. We can try to find them!"

Wes looked over his shoulder uneasily.

I left the subject alone, figuring I'd let him stew over the notion. "So, I guess the last question is: What is hunting us, and why?"

It was the question I knew we all held, and I knew this because we seemed to put our differences aside for a moment and look at each other as a group. We all nodded in unison. I thought for a moment, wondering if it was smarter to stick together, or pull apart. In the end, though, it always made sense to stick together.

"We have each other," I began to finish. "And that is what we need to remember. That is what is most important." I put my hand on theirs as Wes still held Emily's. "Let's do this together, okay?"

Wes:

I felt the warmth of Jane's touch, and the warmth of Emily's touch. I was so juxtaposed, so lost inside them both. I couldn't decide.

It was then that I saw *him* enter the yard, the wind blowing across his dark, full frame. He was calm, cool—he knew how to hold himself. Every fiber of my being tightened with anger, my senses attuned to the danger no one but I saw.

Jane noticed the change in my demeanor and looked over her shoulder. Her grip on my hand tightened, taken by Max's presence. I saw her eyes scan his outline, her mouth parted, a careful cloud of breath escaped. I felt her heart begin to race, her body growing warm with anticipation. My heart broke, realizing that look, the one I'd longed to see for so long, but was never meant for me.

Jane's grasp released and her hands fell to her sides. I squeezed Emily's hand out of habit, trying to overcompensate for the obvious feelings of jealousy I had. Max arrived at the table, a look of apprehension in the blue eyes that never parted from Jane's. I glared, my palms sweating.

"May I sit down?" He addressed everyone, though his eyes continued to remain on Jane.

I snorted and slid off the bench, grabbing my bag and throwing it over my shoulder, leaving Max standing with no answer. I was still grasping Emily's hand, as though we had been glued together. "Come on, Emily," I hissed, tugging on her arm.

Emily looked up at me, standing as she tried to balance herself against my abrupt pull. Once she was beside me, I put my arm around her shoulder, dragging her away.

I couldn't bear to watch. I couldn't bear to see his face.

Max:

"Hello." I pressed my hands in my pockets as I stood behind Jane, my voice sincere. I scanned the planes of her face, seeing her cheeks had a slight flush, accentuating the hazel spears in her otherwise flawless brown eyes.

Jane's gaze on me released and she turned back to the table, leaving me in a cold shadow behind her. "Hi," she mumbled.

I walked around the table, trying to catch her gaze once more. I needed to set things straight. I needed her to see that my words were heartfelt.

She adjusted herself, her thoughts nervous, but open.

"Listen, Jane." I swung my leg over the bench and sat diagonal to her, trying not to invade her space and ruin this one chance I had to explain. "You need to understand that I mean you no harm—emotionally or physically."

Jane lips were pressed together, her eyes diverted. "I can't understand, Max." Her voice was wavering. "*Help* me to understand," she pleaded.

The tone in her voice played at the desperate thoughts in her head. She needed me. I wanted to take her hand and hold it in mine. I wanted to feel the way her soul calmed me, but my hands remained flat on the rough wood of the picnic table.

I organized my thoughts, thinking of the right thing to say. "I can't change who I am, Jane, or why I'm here. I have to protect you, though. Regardless of what you want, I will always be watching you, whether you see me or not."

She looked up, her brown eyes dark and wavering with anger. "Protect me? From *what*?"

I felt my body tingle from the angered remark. "From..." I wanted to say it. I had to, but I settled for a vague answer instead. "From danger."

I saw that she wasn't pleased by my attempt to explain. Her body shifted restlessly, and I feared she was about to leave. "And you're *immortal*?" The word sounded bitter. "Is that what you were trying to tell me the other night when you said you didn't age?" Her body fell still as she twisted the ring on her finger.

"I am—to a degree." I answered truthfully, knowing it was the only thing that would make her stay.

"And you're like my sister? You know what I'm thinking?" She was stumbling over her words, finding it hard to admit.

"In a way. But as I said the other night, your sister's gifts were hereditary. She is a clairvoyant by blood. My gifts were... *earned*. They're meant for a purely protective cause."

We sat for a moment, the only sound coming from a car in the nearby parking lot.

Jane's gaze avoided mine, though mine did nothing but watch her. "But, then what are you?"

I knew she was as afraid to ask as I was to tell. She had asked me twice the other night, but I'd refused to give her a straight answer. I knew if I was going to set things right, though, I had to tell her the truth—I had to tell her *now*.

"You must have some sort of title. My sister is clairvoyant, Wes is a shifter. *What are you*?"

There it was again. *Four*. She had asked four times now. I bit my lip, hearing the title repeat in my head. "I..." I placed my hands flush on the wood

of the table, again starting from the beginning. “That night, in the burning library...” I paused, seeing my mother and fathers faces as though it was yesterday. I saw them through the flames, too far from me to save them. They were reaching for me, my brother Erik at my side, shielded in my arms as the flames tickled across my back.

I shook away the image. “I protected Greg as we grew up, but he was always jealous of me. I know now that he was sick in a way none of us could understand. My mother always thought she could cure him by showing him as much love, if not *more* love than anyone, but he was deluded. It was never enough for him. Greg was convinced that we hated him.” I was wasting time.

I saw the burning room again. “That night, in the library, we all died except Erik. I wasn’t ready to die, though. I wasn’t ready to give up on my life, or the life of my little brother. I managed to throw him from the window just moments before the fire choked me out, but somewhere along my way to the ever-after, I decided to stay behind. I’d given my life for Erik, and that was the thing that bound me to Sheol, just as murder bound Greg. It is a blessing and a curse.”

I felt emotion I hadn’t felt in a long time begin to tickle my nose, but it quickly died. I felt Jane yield, allowing me time to form my words.

“It was an *angel* that saved my brother’s life...” I paused, knowing that that angel was me. I didn’t want to look at her, afraid my eyes would give away my secret before my words could.

“Max...” Her voice was soft and alluring. She was trying to get me to look at her, so I did. Her lashes were thick, her face creased ever so delicately around her eyes. I could feel her breath as it blew across the table and landed upon my face.

I sat tall, no longer afraid of the truth my eyes told.

“I believe in angels because I am one, Jane.” The words were almost palpable as they left my mouth. I could taste the certainty of it, the longing I’d felt to tell someone other than my brother.

She stared into my eyes, hers so big now, that I saw myself in them. “You’re lying,” she accused, but her voice wasn’t at all irritated.

I bit my lip. “I wish I were, Jane. I never wanted this.” I felt weak for the first time in decades, my limbs disconnected from my body. I suddenly saw that the only thing I wanted was her approval, as though that would change my circumstances.

“And that is why you’re immortal, because you’re—”

“*Dead?*” I looked up at her sheepishly. “Well, at least dead in some form. I can’t go to wherever it is we go when we die because I passed up the chance long ago, but I can’t really be here in the normal sense, either. I have unfinished business. I’m stuck.”

I could tell she was having a hard time believing me, and I wish that for a moment, I could take the ring back and hear her thoughts. She remained silent, so I filled the gap with further explanation.

“Jane, there are a band of beings out there that don’t want magick around, like I explained the other night. They call themselves the Black Angels. Some of them are like you, some are human, and some are something entirely different, like me or Wes. They are a renegade cult of sorts, and they answer to a false god—the devil.”

She was interested in what I had to say now, and I could feel the frustration in her begin to fade. “So then the Black Angels aren’t really angels.” She said it as a fact.

I tilted my head and lowered my eyes. “Well, some aren’t, some are.”

“Are you telling me this because you’re a Black Angel?” Her spine was noticeably steeled. She was likely wondering if that was why her sister felt so fearful toward me—wondering if that’s what Emily had seen inside my head. She made a move as though to get up and leave.

I was quick to grab her hand across the table. She froze. “No, Jane. I would never go to that side.” My words were stern and my grip hard. “Like I said, Jane, I would never hurt you. I have to *protect* you.”

She tried to jerk her arm away, but I was stronger than her. “You don’t need to protect me.” She hissed. “I don’t need—”

“*Please*,” My voice was begging. I didn’t want to hear her say that she didn’t need me. “Don’t say that, Jane.” I let go of her hand, releasing her as my ability to read past the wall in her head also released.

“Say what?” She coiled her hand into herself.

“Please, Jane. Don’t say what you were going to say, just—you have no idea what those words can mean.”

She was looking at me with pity, but also anger about the fact that I knew what she had been thinking. Her hands dropped to her sides. “Why?” she pleaded.

I couldn’t look at her as I whispered, “I once broke the rules and saved a soul, Jane, and I think you know whose.”

I looked up, meeting her eyes in time to see a tear fall.

“Jane,” I continued. “I’m *your* angel.”

Emily:

Wes dragged me back inside the cafeteria where I slunk away from him. “What was *that?*” I snapped bitterly.

He turned to me, a twisted look on his face. “What was what?”

Wes was acting as though he didn’t know what I was talking about, but he couldn’t hide it from me. I’d heard the whispers of his thoughts and the jealous beat of his heart.

“I had to confront Jane about this,” he went on, clearly trying to cover for the fact that he was jealous of Max—that he still *felt* something for Jane. Wes was just trying to avoid the obvious, something that wasn’t going to work on me.

“*No!*” I screamed. I bit my tongue, looking around the room and noticing that people were now staring. *Who cares*, I thought. *Let them stare*. I lowered my voice “No, Wes. I meant, what was that with *her*? All those thoughts you just had? You still have feelings for Jane, don’t you?”

Wes paused, and I knew all I needed in that moment of hesitation.

“You *do*,” I accused. I crossed my arms against my chest, feeling like an idiot for opening my heart to him.

He reached for me but I backed away, shaking my head. Tears stung my eyes, the doubt that was already there now confirmed.

“Emily, I…” Wes dropped his hand. “It’s not easy to turn off the feelings I once had for your sister, just like that. It’s going to take time.”

I scanned his face, but his expression wasn’t as pained as I would have liked. I felt my blood boil. Greg was right. Wes was still in love with Jane. “Screw you, Wes,” I spat. My cheeks were on fire.

Wes looked hurt, but I didn’t care. I snorted and turned away from him, walking down the hall as I heard his thoughts fill with guilt and sorrow. I wanted him to hurt, and I wanted him to know how it felt. There was only one thing I could do to achieve that, and though it scared me, I had to do it.

He was the only one that seemed to care.

Wes:

I watched Emily walk away, feeling my heart break in two.

What had I done?

What was I doing?

I hit myself in the head with the butt of my wrist, finding that the whole concept of school felt stupid at this point. It was clear that I was a freak, both emotionally and physically. Everyone was better off without me. I ripped the bag from my back, throwing it down the hall in an attempt to release steam. It landed on the ground with a thud and slid into a nearby locker. The door smashed in with the force of my throw, my bag bursting open as papers flew across the hall. *Great.*

My chest was heaving, and sweat was now coating my brow. I grit my teeth and strode in the other direction, throwing open the doors to the cafeteria with such force, I heard the window crack.

I stormed away from the building and to my car. Getting in, I turned the key in the ignition until it nearly broke off, not caring what it would cost to possibly fix if it had. The car roared to life with the same anger that smoldered in my chest. I slammed my foot down on the gas as it sat in park, rewing the engine as the whole chassis shook.

Anger boiled over inside me, and I could no longer control it. I gave up running away from my instincts, and I gave up running away in my car. I shut off the engine and opened the door. The animal in me came to the surface, longing to explode out like a bottle of champagne that had been shaken too hard.

I didn’t bother to check if there was anyone in the lot. I tore out of my clothes, leaving the world behind—leaving my humanity in the dust. All I wanted to do was run, all I wanted to do was shred something limb from limb.

I became the wolf my heart desired, pawing my way out of the lot as the pads of my feet gripped on the damp asphalt. My claws tore into the cement, the hair on my back spiked and furious. I leapt off the curb, jumping just in time to avoid a car that swerved out of control and into pole, sending a spark of wires to the ground.

I didn’t turn back. I didn’t care about their fate. I scrambled into the nearby forest, not bothering to hold back a hearty howl of despair.

Jane:

“*What?*” I gasped.

Max stood, his height suddenly looming. “Please, Jane. Believe me. I am your guardian angel. I was there the day your father died. That was me.”

He walked around and grabbed both my hands with a touch that was soft and sincere. I searched his eyes, seeing the truth, feeling the truth as the ring on my finger seared into my hand. His features no longer lied to me, the planes of his face like a dream I’d lost long ago. It was the face I’d seen as the life in my father’s eyes had faded, and Greg’s face that of his murderer.

Max lifted me from the table, pulling me close to him. The wind blew over us, and I shivered. My body felt weak and malleable, giving into his lead as he urged me to follow him.

With a smirk on his face he added, “Trust me, Jane.”

• ..

He sat in the small cabin in the woods. He had been running from the Black Angels since he was eighteen, hiding and feeding off the forest itself. Life as a human and life as an animal had begun to stitch together, and it was hard to know what he was anymore.

The world outside was silent, and the fire his only light. He tried to make his fingers work as they once did, but he was clumsy. There was a sudden knock at the door, and the man stood with a start. He felt his chest compress with fear. He knew who it was, but he was in no state to face him, not like this.

The Black Angel outside knocked again, but did not offer the man inside much chance to respond as his patience grew thin. He kicked the door down, coming face to face with the man, now a panther. The panther hissed, low to the ground and ready to pounce. The Black Angel smiled at the panther, a malicious smile that was certain of the man’s cruel fate, for he had never failed to finish a kill.

The Black Angel’s eyes burned with hate for the very fact of the man’s existence, disgusted by his refusal to join with the Black Knights. A pity; the panther was gorgeous.

The panther circled the room, but so did the Black Angel. The angel’s wings were spread, black as midnight and dripping with the blood of a thousand dead souls. The panther swatted at the angel, but the angel was fast to reveal the blade and cut the panther’s paw as it slashed through the air between them. The man fell to the floor bleeding, screams erupting from his now human mouth. The angel laughed once more.

“You die now,” the Black Angel said. He lifted the blade above the man as the man’s gifted eyes stared at the blade that would kill him. The angel thrust it down through the man’s heart, and the man’s eyes went blank.

* * *

Jane:

I followed Max to his car, his hand never letting go of mine.

“Get in,” He motioned me to the passenger side of the black Land Rover Defender.

I eyed the vehicle. Getting in meant that I was giving in, and I wasn’t sure I was ready to do that. Once I was inside, I had no control over where I was going, or when I could leave—unless I was willing to jump from a moving car. On the other hand, he’d never held me against my wishes, and honestly, what did I really have to lose at this point? I already knew that I should be dead.

“I told you to trust me, Beautiful,” he reminded, smiling slightly as though knowing what I’d thought, knowing that my feet were frozen to the cement of the lot.

I felt a chill wash over me. I needed to remember that he could tune into me like a radio, or at least feel my emotion. I wondered then what it was he’d heard, thinking back to all those times when it seemed he could hear me, but it had seemed crazy. It was then that I began to wonder what it was Emily knew about me. Did she already know about my dreams and visions of death? Why hadn’t she told me? What was the extent of their talent? My mind was wheeling out of control, lost in the seemingly endless array of thoughts I’d always wished to keep to myself.

I heard Max clear his throat in a way that was meant to break my thinking. I forced a smile and did as I was asked, lifting the handle of the car

door with a soft click. I got in as my ears were filled with the sound of rustling coat fabric against rough leather.

"Where are we going?" I asked timidly. I grabbed the buckle, now understanding just why it was so imperative to Max that I buckle in.

He was climbing in on his side, the keys jingling. He buckled, starting the car. "Someplace that I can prove to you what I am."

My imagination went wild as I stared at his hand with the key in the ignition. *What would prove it to me?* Surely he doesn't—

I looked back at the doors to the school, feeling a pang of accountability in my gut. I knew I was skipping class, and that was something I rarely did unless sick beyond reason, but this was beyond that—this was bigger than school ever would be. It was my *life*. Max had known so much about my father, about me and my family. I deserved to know if he was for real—he deserved a chance to prove it to me.

We left the lot, heading toward his house. I said nothing, but only because he said nothing to me. A nervous sweat covered my body, and I wished there was some way to gain control of this situation, but I couldn't. The car slowed, taking the same exit from the highway. We drove up the mountain about half a mile before we stopped in the middle of the road.

"This is far enough," Max said, shutting off the car.

He glanced at me before I heard his car door pop and he got out. I scrambled to follow suit, my hands shaking, thinking that this little adventure was beginning to seem a lot like the unsolved murders you hear on the late night news—*tonight on Dateline... Murder in the serene peaks of Colorado...*

Max eyed me over the hood of the car with an amused smirk.

I pushed the thought away. The mountainous air was clean as it entered my nostrils, smelling of fresh pine and mud. I felt the gravel below my feet crunch as I twisted in place, watching as he approached me and thinking that this was finally it—my death.

His blue eyes were serene, though, no sign of the murderous black I'd seen Friday night at the party. Max took my hand in his and tugged me toward him. We were standing close now, so close that I could hear my heart echoing off his chest.

He let go of my hands, gently touching my cheek. "This is all you'll need to know in order to see that I'm not lying to you, Beautiful."

His fingers barely touched my skin—icy cold. He shut his eyes, and for the first time I noticed the tinge of blue that encircled them, powdered with a delicate shimmer, like frost. His shoulders flexed, his body groaning. Something grey began to fan from behind him, slow at first, but as it continued to grow, I had to take a step back to in order to see them in their entirety.

They were soft and delicate, but massive at the same time. Muddied grey feathers draped in intricate layers from two large muscular bows, dipping to the ground in an elegant arch. A light cottony glow surrounded each side. The same silvery shimmer I'd found in the flecks of his eyes coated each individual feather. He moved them slightly, and the wind of it fell across my face, wafting toward me a smell I knew all too well—the sweet smell of death.

I allowed myself a moment to relish the familiarity of it before attempting to speak. "How is it possible?"

He opened his eyes, the flecks of silver now brighter than they'd ever been. "These are it, the thing I know you've been wondering for the last thirty minutes."

I furrowed my brow, stepping toward him, challenging our closeness in my attempt to look brave. His wings had not surprised me the way I thought they would, almost as though a part of me had known they were there all along. The dimple on his cheek was deep, his lips curled.

It was true.

I said the first thing that came to mind. "So, you really can read my thoughts." My cheeks blushed, wondering if he knew all the other thoughts as well—namely the ones involving the level of attraction I'd had for him—*still* had for him.

Max grabbed me around the waist, his strength suddenly overwhelming, yet soft. His arm caged me, finding my body fit into his like a lock and key. He winked with a knowing smirk, making me feel further mortified. "Some of them," he whispered. "But that ring I gave you protects you from most of that. Touching you makes it pretty clear, though." He released me and I leaned away.

He had a sudden air of arrogance around him that he hadn't before, as though his wings validated confidence. I looked down at the ring. My hand floated in the small space between us, unable to hide my amusement. "From your grandfather, huh?" I lifted my brow. I was surprisingly calm and confident, despite the circumstances—despite the *wings*.

Max shrugged.

"Was anything you told me before the truth?" First it was the fact that his grandfather is actually his little brother, and now the fact that the ring was a gift from *him*. Then... the wings? What else was a lie?

"It also protects you from Greg," he protested. "Most of all him."

I looked at the wings once more, seeing they moved just like any other limb, with as much ease as any skilled bird. I had to believe him now; there was no other choice. But why wasn't I more surprised?

“Do you believe me now?” His head was low, but his eyes still watched mine.

I nodded.

Max shook his head. “No. Not good enough, Beautiful. I want to hear you say you believe me.”

I swallowed, my skin drenched in a cold sweat. “You really are a...” I paused, afraid to say it. “An *angel*.”

He laughed, standing straight and crossing his arms against his chest. “Yes, *and?*”

I swallowed, taking a brave step forward and around him, my fingertips grazing the down of his feathers. They were dense but soft, layered in scalloped rows with a silky shimmer. It was undeniable, and he knew I had more to say.

“And you’re *my* angel.” I pinched a feather between my fingers, watching as it fanned back into place as I pulled. “Which means...” It was all so obvious. The face I’d been longing to know and see was suddenly so clear. I came full circle, looking him in the eyes. “You saved me.” It was the first time I could bring myself to say it out loud—it was the first time I’d seen the pieces fall together as one.

Max nodded. “Yes, it means that I saved you,” he replied. His wings dropped, carrying his emotion. “So, you can see that killing you is not what I’m here for. Not even close.”

“I was supposed to die,” I blurted, my hands clenched. Max did this to me. He *cursed* me.

A flash of guilt washed across his face. “I’m sorry for that. I know what it did to you.”

I didn’t want to be torn away from my father. I’d wanted to go with him. Every day here was like a cage, my soul with my father, but my body left behind.

“Are you sorry that I saved you?” He reached for my hands, seeing they were tense and knowing his answer. He traced my knuckles, coaxing me to relax my grip. I let him. “I know that I shouldn’t have, but I’d finally found you. I wasn’t willing to—” He stopped himself, watching for my reaction.

“Finally found me?” I whispered.

He laced his fingers between mine, ignoring my question. “You shouldn’t have lived, Beautiful. I know what it’s left you with. The thing is... I also knew that it would. I know the decision I made ten years ago was made too fast. If I’d had time to consider the consequences, things would have been different. I’m sorry.”

I tried to pull away, finding myself overwhelmed by the disconnected feelings I held toward life, but then also the things I’d been allowed to stay for—to see. “I know that I seem bitter toward living, Max.” He let go and my fingers slid through his, falling to my sides. “But in truth, that’s not it. Sometimes I wish I’d died, but sometimes I’m happy I’m still alive.” What I didn’t say was that the times I felt happy to be alive all involved him. Though what he was came as a surprise, it didn’t change the tingle I felt. “A part of me is glad you saved me.”

His solemn expression lightened a little, reflecting the same look of relief I’d seen in my dream.

“That was really you in my dreams, wasn’t it, Max?”

He nodded. “It was.” He looked up at me, his blue eyes washing over my body. “I’m sorry to pry, but it’s my job to watch you.”

I swallowed. “So, you saw when Greg kissed me, didn’t you? And that was real, wasn’t it?”

He didn’t move or respond, glancing at the ring on my hand.

I grumbled, angry with myself. “I didn’t want to do that, you know. Something about him tricked me. Greg put me under some sick spell.” I was pacing in small circles. “And it makes sense—you gave me this ring just after that.” I lifted my hand, inspecting it.

His mouth opened, and I waited for anything to come out—staring at his perfect lips, his frosty eyes, his giant shimmery wings that loomed taller than me.

He stood quite still and calm. “It’s not your fault. Greg has that power over people. He can brainwash anyone he wants. You saw Alexis—though I don’t think it took much to get her to do what she did.” Max had a skeptical look on his face. “I’ve been in her head before, and she leaves it rather open.”

My pacing stopped and I giggled, unable to hold it back. I knew what he’d said about Alexis was true. Her foreseen deaths were so vivid and clear. It was as though she’d wanted me to see them.

After allowing myself that moment to relax, I wiped the smirk from my face and concentrated back on what happened in my dream. “He just—Greg did something to me and it was like I couldn’t resist. I actually felt as though I *loved* him.” Disgust laced my expression.

“He’s a Black Angel, Jane. They have different tactics than I do. I would never falsely convince someone they loved me. It’s dark magick.” He raised his brow, half smiling.

I rolled my eyes, knowing that Max had meant that he’d wanted to seduce me with his charm, but chose against it. “But you *can*,” I interjected.

I watched his wings slowly begin to retract back into his spine. He moaned as though the stretch had felt good. Standing before me now, he looked so ordinary. It was hard to believe the wings had even been there. "I would never trick your thoughts into feeling something toward me..." He paused, his eyes looking at the ground with shame, though the smile on his lips remained. "Besides, I don't think I have to."

My mouth fell open, trying to protest. *Stop reading my thoughts!* I yelled in my head.

"Then stop leaving them so open," he replied. "Sometimes you're close to impossible to read, but right now..." He laughed and shook his head, mocking my open mind. "But like I said, I'd never use that power unless it was to protect you. Mind control is dangerous, and addictive, as you've seen with Greg. My soul may be dead, but we still have our vices, and our rules. What he's doing is considered illegal."

"*Illegal?* To whom? I guess you're going to tell me there are supernatural police now too, aren't you?"

He chuckled, kicking a rock on the ground. "Sort of." His gaze met mine, showing a noticeable tension over the subject. I didn't press further.

He changed the focus. "When I saw my brother in your dream, I was mortified. It was my fault he was there. I left myself open when I went there, and Greg followed." His brows stitched together. "I would be an idiot to say that what my brother did hadn't bothered me. It infuriated me." His face relaxed. "It had been my plan, after all."

I was a little frightened by the possession in his voice. "*Your plan—what do you mean?*"

Max closed the already small space between us, brushing a strand of hair from my face. "Don't you want to know exactly *why* I saved you?" His tone hadn't changed.

"Why?" I mumbled. I'd thought to ask, but was afraid to.

He hooked his finger under my chin, tilting it up until our eyes met. I felt weak against his wishes. "Because there was something about you I couldn't let go of. I feared that if I let you die, I'd never know what that thing was. We live many lives, Jane, but very rarely do we ever come across the same soul twice."

I felt my heart surging with fear, but also curiosity. I knew what he was getting at. It wasn't hard to see it in the glimmer of his eyes, the same glimmer Wes always had. Max had a *crush* on me, and he'd had it for ten years now. He kept me alive in order to quench that desire. I swallowed hard. I wasn't quite ready to jump head first into a relationship with a man that was not only something like a stalker—not that it was all that bad—but was also stuck somewhere between alive and *dead*.

He let go of my chin, looking a little stung.

I felt sorry for thinking it, but I couldn't help it. "I'm sorry. It's just that, I barely know who you are, Max. I mean, I *really* don't know who you are."

He forced a smile. "I'm not here to force you into something. I'm just here to see what happens. I can wait. I can wait as long as it takes for you to know me. After I saved you, and became a part of your life, the reason why I wanted you to live grew clear to me."

"But why me? I'm no different than anyone else. I'm just an ordinary girl."

The pain in his features faded, now alive with a new emotion. "That's what I'm trying to explain to you—that's not true."

"It's not?" I tried to back away from him, but he advanced until I was backed against the car. His eyes blazed upon me, the hood still warm from the engine.

"Have you ever met someone, and you just know right away that there's more—like a future?"

I thought of the day Wes and I became friends. I knew right away that he was going to be important to me in some way, though I was young—too young to even understand that.

Max went on. "Everyone has connections. For some it's family, like my brother and I. For some it's friendship, like you and Wes. And for others, it's something much more powerful, something yet to be seen."

I tried to sidestep away from him, wanting to avoid the fact that I felt this connection with him, though he scared me. His arm lifted to block my way, trapping me between the side mirror and his body.

I swallowed. "Powerful like what?" I asked, still trying to figure a way to escape.

He smirked, his face close to mine. There was no answer, leaving my head swimming with possibilities. He was close enough that I felt his breath, cold and seductive. His nose grazed across my cheek, the touch so unbelievably soft.

"I know you feel it, Jane. You just don't know what it is yet. You have no way to understand or compare that feeling to anything else in your life."

I let his breath surround me, enveloping me with an intense feeling of comfort. I still wanted to hear the reason. I wanted to see the words form across his lips.

"How does it feel?" I pressed.

He took a deep breath, his chest rising. "It feels like a veil of safety, a notion that you're not alone."

I searched his eyes, listening to his words, envisioning the veil.

“More specifically...” his lips spoke against my cheek “...it feels like...” A cold chill ran down my spine as his words stopped, silenced by a kiss against my skin.

I shut my eyes, the heat of my emotion a direct contrast to his touch. He leaned against me, his hands pressed against the car, holding me there. He kissed my nose, my other cheek. I stopped breathing, and finally, his lips found mine. They were soft like air, the pressure so delicate that it almost didn't feel like kissing at all.

My body felt weak, the cold tingle in my spine spreading into a feeling I'd never felt before. I pictured the veil surrounding us, holding us together. His body felt powerful, his hands sliding from the car to my sides, grasping my hips as his fingers arched my back.

Wes had been my first kiss, and where I guess you could count Greg as a second, this kiss was still far different than both. His lips were sugary as they intertwined with mine, but sweeter than his brother's had been—kinder. His hands spread across the small of my back, his thumbs pressing against my skin.

Just as quickly as he had leaned in, he let go, backing away and leaving me stunned. My chest tingled, and I remembered that I'd forgotten to breathe. My eyes fluttered open, meeting his. His cool ocean of blue washed over me, defusing the warmth that had nearly overwhelmed my inhibitions.

“Are you ready to go back now, Beautiful?” He asked, as though he had done nothing more than talk frankly with me for the past ten minutes.

I forced myself to nod, peeling myself off the car. I fumbled for the door handle, clumsily finding it and getting in. He rounded the hood, his expression filled with pride as he got in on his side. His movements were calm and cool, but also more alive than I'd ever seen. I cleared my throat, telling myself to buck up and quit acting like such a wuss.

I swallowed, thinking of something to say. “But if your brother is so evil, why not—” The word was hard to think, let alone say.

“*Kill him?*” Max said it as though it was no big deal. His car door slammed and I jumped, finding the talk of murder and loud noises hard to handle. He stretched his neck to one side. “Simple. Since we're twins, if he dies, then so do I. It's the way we were made. When I chose to stay behind, so did he, but there had to be balance. Something had to be compensated in order to make what had happened in our last living moments fair.”

The answer seemed so obvious once he'd said it, but the thought made me sick. How was it I could even conceive that a world like this could exist! I swallowed. I didn't want him to die, right? I wanted Max to stay alive, and I wanted Greg to... *die?*

I chewed on the inside of my lip, rolling everything around in my mind. I was assessing and reassessing the situation. I thought of his brother Erik, trying to forget about *murder*.

“How old are you?” I ventured, seeing the wrinkles of Erik's face in my mind, reminding me of *their* age.

Max grinned. A grin void of such wrinkles.

I laughed. “Come on. I know how old Erik is, so there's no use hiding it. I'll find out eventually.”

He nodded as though seeing my point. “Nearly one-hundred years old, but that's young for an angel.”

I swallowed again, continuing to hope that that simple act would allow me to digest this. I suspected Max added that last part on purpose, as though it leveled our ages. It was like saying that one human year is equal to seven dog years. The car lurched. We were backing up to turn around.

“Do you age then?”

Max nodded, “Actually, Yes. But very slowly.”

“Well, how old were you when you... *died?*” I ventured.

He tilted his head as though trying to recall. “Seventeen?”

“And how old are you now?” He didn't look much older than that.

“Seventeen,” he replied freely.

I let out an annoyed breath, rolling my eyes.

He chuckled. “Okay, maybe... *seventeen and a quarter* then, does that make it better?”

I gawked. “You've only aged three months in the last *one-hundred years?*”

“You mean eighty-one years. You have to subtract the seventeen of that that I was alive, and I'm not quite a hundred yet, mind you.”

I shook my head. “So you've been the same teenage, hormone ridden, high school student for the past *eighty-one years?*”

Max was really laughing at me now. "I don't know about hormones, or school for that matter. I'm only there for you."

His remark made my stomach flutter.

His eyes found mine. "You do something to me, Jane. You make all the death disappear—you make my past and my current circumstances bearable." He released one hand from the wheel, reaching for mine. "You make me feel alive again."

I concentrated on his cold touch as our fingers weaved together, finding that the chill still did not bother me, but rather calmed me. When I was dreaming, I also felt calm—at home and safe. I hadn't noticed before, but it's that feeling that had drawn me to Max. I was so confused when he was with me that I hadn't noticed how the confusion was really peace—something rare to me.

I gazed at him, a warm feeling flooding my chest. My throat tightened and a buzz filled my limbs. It had only been two weeks since I first met him—two weeks, and already I'd fallen for an angel—*my* angel.

Max adjusted in his seat, hiding a smile as he cleared his throat. "What was all *that* about?" he asked innocently.

"What do you mean?" I tried to feign ignorance.

He looked at my head.

I swallowed hard, fear washing over me. "I was thinking about... *nothing*." I pushed the dreamy thoughts away, quickly thinking of something else. "Do you know other angels other than your brother?" My voice was strained, fearing the emotion inside me had been exposed.

He was looking over his shoulder at the road behind us. "Yes."

"But your brother is a Black Angel? What is that?"

I saw Max's jaw tighten. "He's a Black Angel because of the murders. Like an angel of death and doom."

I felt a sharp pang in my chest, knowing that by *murders*, he was also including my father's. I changed the subject again, knowing the murders also included *his* parents. "What's the oldest angel you know of?"

His eyes looked into mine. "*Old*."

I snorted. "Yeah, but *how* old?"

He plumped out his bottom lip in thought. "A couple thousand, maybe?"

My eyes grew wide. "A couple *thous*—" My mouth fell open. "How would you even remember how old you are anymore?"

Max laughed. "History keeps records, but as far as remembering it on thought alone, it's impossible I'm sure. They say you keep track for the first century or so, but after that it all gets fuzzy."

I laughed.

"But they don't often do what I'm doing now, Either. For the most part they hate the human race. For a lot of them, they have no idea what age they are because they refuse to classify their age in human years."

I tilted my head. "But weren't all angels human once? So why do some hate us?" We were back in town now, and nearing the school.

Max laughed. "Hypocrites, aren't they? There's no real reason. They just figure they've earned the right to act superior. It's a lot like the wealthy opposed to the poor."

I giggled in return. "Yeah. We get a lot of that here."

He shrugged. "I guess perhaps they're jealous. They *want* to be human again, especially when the choice was stolen from them."

I looked out the window at the dreary clouds in the sky. "Why don't *you* resent humans?"

Max was silent for a moment, but there was a light in his eye that told me he was thinking of something pleasant. "Because. When I'm around them, I feel alive again. I don't want to distance myself from humans because I'm afraid I'll forget about my life before, as many of the elders have. When you live that long, you simply forget. Choosing to become a guardian was my way of holding on."

"Holding on? To what exactly?"

He smiled and clasped my wrist. His fingers pressed gently, finding my pulse. "The feeling of life beats through you. I feel every pound of your heart because of my special connection with you—because of my *drive* to protect you. It's a feeling so sublime, but to you, it just *is*. The blood in your veins thrives in this world—I thrive on your blood because it keeps me grounded here."

Looking into Max's eyes, I could see the way he longed for life. I felt bad for him. Max had been placed in his position without a choice. No part of him was ready to leave. In all reality, he had done me a favor. Max had given me a second chance—a choice. I could die now and move on, but if I'd died with my father, I would have been left wanting—if not right away, then in time. Max gave me something he never had the chance to hold onto

—*life.*

The realization washed over me, and I was overcome by sudden emotion. Tears began to fill my eyes.

Max touched my chin. “Jane, what’s wrong?”

I shook my head, knowing that if I spoke, the crying would be impossible to subdue.

Thank you, Max.

I let my thoughts say it for me, knowing he was in there.

You gave me something—a choice you never had. I get it now

“You don’t know how much it means to hear you say that, Jane. I’ve felt so guilty…” his voice was a whisper.

I got my tears under control. “Release your guilt, Max. I’m here now. What’s done is done, and it’s time to move on. You’re important to me in a way I feel like I’ve known all along. I was so scared about the strong connection I felt toward you, since the first day I saw you in the hall. It makes sense now, and I know that you and I are bound by more than just what you did to save me.” Max’s blue eyes suddenly seemed more familiar than even Wes’s. Max was the best friend, the best—*whatever*—I’d ever had.

“No matter what life, I feel like I would have eventually known you, Max. You are the key to all the things that I’ve been missing.”

I saw the dimple on his cheek threaten to make an appearance. I could tell the things I was saying were things Max had been waiting to hear since the day he saved me. He probably felt then what I did now. It was an inkling—a taste on the tip of my tongue. Max knew that there was something about me that he needed to know, but time had been stolen from the situation.

“You belong in this life, Jane. I’m not sure just why, but you are meant for great things aside from what I feel for you. There’s electricity that surrounds you, far stronger than anything I’ve seen before. Something is destined for you, and it’s not just me. Your father must have known this. A part of me even wonders if you already didn’t have magick, even before you became a Seoul.”

The mention of my father made me tighten. “What happened that day, Max?”

The dimple on his face faded. “I know I told you why I saved you, at least initially, but there was more. Your father *wanted* me save you. Your father *asked* me to save you. And though I’d already decided to long before his wishes, hearing him say it sealed my decision. The look on his face told me that there was more behind my connection with you—there was a mission.”

“*My father spoke to you?*”

“He did. They were his last words. I was able to grasp you before you crossed over, but I had to sacrifice saving him in turn.” There was something personal about the way he’d said it.

“Why did Greg try to kill him?”

Max looked away from me. “I knew your father before the accident, Jane. Greg knew him, too. Your father lived a secret life aside from his family. He led the Priory against the division of the human and magickal world. Your father wanted peace. In Greg’s eyes, he had to die.”

“You *knew* my father?”

“I did. But I didn’t know about you, or your sister. He kept you all safe by keeping his human life a secret, just as his magickal life was a secret from you.”

“So, you were like—”

“Colleagues—*friends*,” he interrupted. “I respected your father.”

I saw the loss in his eyes. They *had* been friends. My world was suddenly blown apart, all over again.

“His wishes were kept, and I am honored to be the guardian of John’s child.”

The way he said it—*John’s child*—it showed his age. I no longer saw the cool and collected teen from Denver, but a web of history and fate. The fact that Max was old in spirit did not bother me, and in fact, it gave me a sense of security in knowing I was never alone—my father had made sure of that. I suddenly felt as though my father had never left my side. I was safe in his arms—in Max’s arms.

“You should probably get back to class.” He was eyeing the front doors of the school.

My head was swimming with the things he had told me, but he was right. I was yet again left with more questions than answers, but right now was hardly the time to ask. A part of my conscience was telling me I needed to get back to class, but it was also screaming for time to think. I put my hand on the handle of the door and clicked it open. “Aren’t you coming?” I asked.

Max pouted. “I have math class right now, and I hate math.”

A roar of laughter passed my lips. "I get it. Now that your secret is out you're going to bail on me, aren't you? You're going to leave me all alone in there. You only went to school for the purpose of finding me."

He glared. "That's not entirely true. A part of me was going because I never finished my senior year to begin with, and I thought it might be nice." He winked.

"Then why are you skipping? You'll fail and they'll refuse to let you graduate."

He laughed. "At least I can say I tried. Besides, you think I care about my GPA? I don't really *have* to be there either. I can cheat like Emily does."

"Emily cheats?" It made sense. "*Figures.*"

Max laughed. "You're a goody-goody who never likes to skip class. I, on the other hand, resent school as much as the next kid does and I'll do the minimum necessary to get by. I can allow myself the occasional skip. Besides, I'm trying to fit in. I'm seventeen, remember? Technically, the law makes me go. I can't hang out with you on weekends and expect that someone won't notice I'm not going to school." He thought for a moment. "Maybe I'll just transfer into all your classes, that way I can study something worth learning about—like you."

Max reached for me one last time, taking my hand as he hooked his other behind my head. He pulled me into him, kissing my forehead. When he pulled away, and my hand slipped out of his, I was surprised when I felt something was left in my grasp. I looked down, curling my fingers open to reveal the small white origami dove he'd left behind.

I blushed, unable to think of a reply.

Emily:

I walked up the front porch and into the house.

"Emily, what are you doing home so soon after school?" Mother said this to me as though it were a miracle. A feeling of astonishment beamed from her mind, her thoughts all jumbled and confused, as though it were so shocking to see me acting like a compliant teen.

"Leave me alone, Mother." I threw my pink bag by the shoes in the front hall, walking past her without as much as a glance. I traipsed up the stairs.

She said nothing in my wake—that is, at least nothing *out loud*—and I liked it that way. I hadn't medicinally diluted my clairvoyance in the past few days because of my blinded love for Wes. But I was back, and the first thing I wanted was a healthy dose of Vicoden.

My little trip down the lane of normal was short and sweet, but it was time I stopped kidding myself. I knew Jane only saw me as a failure, and likely someone that would end up in all the wrong relationships, so why disappoint her now? I knew what she thought of me, and that was never going to change.

I went into my room and straight to the bathroom where I reached to the back of my drawer, finding one of many bottles. I popped the lid and fished inside. It was the bottle I'd gotten from Greg, filled with red and the white pills. I knew the white ones were Vicoden, but every time I took the red ones, I found they worked a lot better to numb my freakish abilities.

I grappled one out of the jar and threw it in my mouth. I swallowed, then pumped some face wash into my hand and turned the water on warm. I began to suds the soap and apply it to my face, wanting to wash away the light fluffy pink makeup that I associated with the normal. I needed to turn back into the dramatic, troubled self I always was, because that was me. I turned the water off with my face dripping. Reaching for the towel ring, I was surprised to find the towel that was there a moment ago was gone.

"Here," a deep voice echoed in the bathroom and a towel touched my hand.

I jerked back and yelped, opening my eyes and ignoring the residual soap that stung my vision. I wiped my face with my hand, backing against counter. Bottles toppled to the floor as I tried to balance myself. Greg smiled.

"*Howdid you get in here?*" I hissed. My heart was pumping and my voice low, afraid my mother would hear.

He raised one brow. "I have my ways." He tossed me the towel and I caught it. "And your mother didn't hear."

I wiped my face, never breaking my gaze, "*Whatever.*" Shaking my head, I found I was too depressed to care. First he had shown up in the yard, and now the bathroom. So what? It was his thing and I was in no position to judge. His thoughts weren't screaming, and a part of me wondered what had changed. All the voices I'd heard were now replaced with a series of concise and organized bullet points.

Greg laughed. "You're funny. Not many people are as confident around me as you are." He leaned against the counter, lifting an eyeliner pencil and inspecting it with arbitrary fascination.

I snatched it from him hand, leaning close to the mirror and hastily applying a deep, thick line above and below both eyes. "You're just another loser like me, so why shouldn't I act with confidence?" I said bravely.

His brows shot up in his reflection. "And you're just another freak, so we're even." He watched me, mildly intrigued.

I glared at him with my now darkened eyes, back to the way they'd always been. I grabbed the tube of black mascara, loading the brush and fanning my lashes.

I sighed. "Let me guess, you can read my thoughts, right? No lack of people like that it seems." For the first time, it didn't surprise me to think that was a normal occurrence.

"How did you guess?" He was mocking me.

I snorted.

Greg laughed again. "We should team up, you and I. I think we'd really make a *killer*."

I finished applying my makeup, assuming a comfortable pose with my hand on my hip. "Sorry, Greg, but I think my trust in human nature is about tapped out. Find a girlfriend somewhere else."

He chuckled to himself. "Oh come on, Emily." He stood and took a step toward me. "You can't resist me. You *love* me, right?"

I saw his eyes waver, enticing me. He was handsome, I knew that. My impulse to hate him faded, replaced with a tingling feeling of desire, and even lust.

"I know you crave revenge, Emily. So, why not join me?" He brushed the hair from my face, pressing me against the counter. I felt his hips against mine, the power of his body overwhelming.

His cold nose grazed my cheek, and I longed to taste his lips, to devour the sweetness of his kiss.

"See? You *do* love me after all," he whispered. "I knew you would." He traced the back of his hand across my cheek and into my hair. "We're the perfect pair, don't you think, Emily? A match made in *Heaven*." He smirked.

The more he kept talking, the more I believed him. His mouth was so close that I could taste his icy breath. My lip trembled and my thoughts were clouded. I leaned into him, closing my eyes as my lips melted into his. His hands clamped around my hips, and I began to forget who I was.

All my problems fell away as I was drawn into his world. Being with him was better than any drug. Being with him kept my thoughts clear. He lifted me off the ground and sat me on the counter, wrapping either knee around his sides as his lips kissed every inch of my face.

The Emily I was was gone now.

I liked it that way.

Wes:

I stopped by a tree to rest as the rain began to fall. My fur was matted against my back, the steam from my breath filling the air as I panted.

I liked it this way. I liked to run, to feel that I was someone else for a change—someone *savage*. The blood from the jack rabbit coated the fur on my front paws, and I began to lick it off. The metallic sweetness was delicious, far more appetizing than anything I'd ever had before. I felt satisfied—my life as a human so distant, that I no longer cared.

I began to wonder if this kill of mine was the way it tasted for every animal. As a horse, would I enjoy grass? As a monkey, perhaps a banana?

I laughed, but it came out as a series of pants and whines. I lay back against the wood of the tree, rain dripping on my head. It didn't seem to bother me the way I would expect. I licked the rain as it ran down my jowls, enjoying the freshness of it on my hot tongue.

I found I couldn't stop chuckling, my whole body shaking. The next moment I was much smaller, the rain now cooling against my glistening skin. My laughing changed dramatically, this time coming out as a croak.

I leapt forward and over a branch—I *loved this*. Why did I need Jane or Emily at all? I was a lone wolf, a lone stallion, or whatever I wanted to be. I never needed to go home if I didn't want to.

The sound of the forest filled my ears like an orchestra of life. The rain on the fall leaves making a papery thud. The dreariness I always felt didn't creep in as it always used to—not here.

A beetle struggled to get over a fallen leaf and it caught my attention. After my initial confusion, my question from earlier was finally answered. In a flash, I reached my tongue out and snatched the beetle. It flung back and into my mouth, the crunch of the shell delightful as the beetle juice spread across my tongue.

Amazing!

I backed myself into a nook where two roots dug into the ground, allowing my eyes to close, my belly full. My human thoughts continued to tumble

away from me. I didn't need anyone anymore. All I needed was this.

Jane:

Someone grabbed my arm, a foreseen image of death pulsing through my head. I jumped, dropping my books to the ground. I winced as one hit my toe, turning and exhaling. It was Liz.

Her lashes fluttered. "Hey, girl! Haven't seen you since Saturday, and being that it's Thursday—that's like—that's like, *five days*. Where have you been hiding?" I noticed the hall was already empty, indicating she had deemed it acceptable to talk to me.

I knelt and picked the books up off the ground, continuing to organize them into my cramped locker. I tucked them in one at a time, careful not to ruin the two origami doves I'd hung there. "I've just been tired, is all." My voice sounded strained. Her death today was back to skin cancer, her newly bronzed skin glowing under the otherwise brutally washed out lights of the hallway.

She nudged me. "You little liar. I bet Max keeps you up late at night," she whispered, winking at me.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. "Liz, *really*." I'd been keeping myself up at night, but not because Max had done so. I was unable to process the gravity of what was happening. I couldn't decide if I'd felt liberated or trapped by the fact my new boyfriend was bound to me for the rest of my life.

She slouched against the lockers in disappointment. "Yeah, what was I thinking? You're not really the sexual *type*." Her eyes lit up, a mischievous grin on her face. "You should try to be sexier. Come on, I'll help you. Men like that, and let's face it, if you don't change this dreary look you seem to be owning..." she glanced with disgust at my pilled-out long sleeved shirt and faded jeans, "...he'll *leave* you. Don't you know how that works?" She looked genuinely concerned.

I shut my locker and leaned against it, mimicking her stance. "Liz, he's not like that. He won't leave me. Besides, we haven't even decided that we're dating yet. We've just hung out a few times. That's all."

Unless you count the kiss. And I guess all the couple talk.

Liz looked confused, as though it was inconceivable to be around a man like Max and not be wrapped up in a never-ending make-out session. She smiled then, and I saw the pity behind her eyes. She thought I was just being naïve—if only she knew.

Even if I wanted to tell Max to shove off and leave me alone, he still wouldn't. He was supposed to be my angel. The idea itself made me shiver. This was moving rather fast.

She moved on to something new. "So, what is Emily doing with that Greg guy?" Her lips pressed together, her brows further perplexed. "I never would have thought they'd be the type to be attracted to each other. I must say, though, they are sort of *cute*. Much better fit than Wes was for—"

"What? *With Greg*?" I grabbed her arm.

My heart stopped as a weak feeling pulsed through my bones. I hadn't talked to Emily since Monday, but it was no surprise that something was up. Wes was gone from classes for the third day in a row, and Emily's makeup application had gone back to normal. I would be blind not to notice. I just had bigger issues to be concerned with, and my sister's psychic abilities were sort of at the bottom of the list, as crazy as that seemed.

"Earth to *Jane*," She said it in a bratty tone—like she always did. She snatched her arm out of my grip. "You are so impossible," she groaned, shaking her head.

I snapped out of it. "Did you see them together?"

She snorted, her face dramatic, like it was when she talked with her friends and was about to announce a juicy bit of gossip. "See them together? Jane, I had a hard time discerning that there were two people in that heap of limbs. They were practically *doin'* it in the courtyard."

"*What*?" I gasped. I felt my stomach twist. I knew as well as anyone that Greg was dangerous. He was a *murderer*. A member of some dark cult I never hoped to come face to face with, though that's hardly my luck.

She nodded gravely, and then pouted. "I was going to go for him too!" She stamped her foot like a two-year-old. "What is it with you guys? Is there some perfume you're wearing that I need to know about? Why do you get all the hotties? You're not even..."

I knew she wanted to add the fact that my sister and I weren't even hot to begin with, but I saw her swallow her words. I tuned her out, not caring about her trivial pursuits.

What was Greg up to?

I began to wonder where Max was as I scanned the hall. He had met me at my locker everyday after class, but today he was late. Liz was now humming to herself as we stood together, the halls empty.

She grew bored of the fact I wasn't giving in to her whines for attention. "Well, I better get home," she finally announced.

I nodded, too concerned to respond. She walked away, not all too concerned with me, either.

“Max, *where are you?*” I whispered under my breath, feeling dread wash over me, my head alive with notions.

Max:

I silently stormed up behind Greg, my jaw fixed. He was sauntering in a way I knew meant he was up to something, pleased with some sort of evil plan. I grabbed him by the back of his jacket and threw him into a locker, just before he turned the corner to meet with Emily.

“*What are you doing?*” I hissed.

He smiled at me, though I had him choked against the wall. “Fitting in like you are, *Brother.*” His answer sounded rehearsed and hollow. He was hiding his thoughts away from me.

I pressed my arm harder against his neck. “I know you well enough to know that’s not the case. What are you doing with Emily?”

Greg laughed. “Isn’t... it *cute?*” His words were choked as my arm pressed against his voice box. “We’re dating sisters, Max. It’s kind of... *sexy.*”

I let go of Greg and he fell to the ground in a pile of black leather. He rubbed his neck with his hand, leaning his head against the locker, seemingly unconcerned by the fact that I wanted to kill him. He knew better than to think I’d give up being with Jane for that.

“That *hurt,*” he pouted.

I shook my head. “You’re an angel, Greg. Give up the act.”

He stopped rubbing his neck and stood. “Oh, yeah, you’re *right!*” He was being sarcastic. “For a moment, I almost thought I was *human* again. It must be all this *pretending.*” He narrowed his eyes, his face close to mine, menacing me.

My whole body was rigid, my fists tight at my sides.

“I can do what I want, Max.” He smiled at me. “You should really try to show me a bit more brotherly love. I’m stronger than you, yet you don’t see me throwing you around.”

I wanted nothing more than to hit Greg, but I knew how much that would hurt me.

“Now you know how it feels, Max. How it feels to be the weak little brother, the poor outcast of the family that didn’t fit in. You were all so cute together, the perfect unit, if not for *me,*” he spat. “Oh, and perhaps that stupid *alchemist.*”

I took a deep breath, calming myself and keeping my emotions in check. “We loved you, Greg. We tried to make you see it, but you refused. You wanted to believe we hated you, but we didn’t. It’s all in your head. You just want to be angry. You just want a reason to hate—just like you want a reason now.”

He laughed once. “Love. There was no *love.* I envied you, Brother. I saw the way Mother’s eyes glimmered when she held you, a glimmer that never came when she held *me.* If I were the first born, then I would have been the one to steal her heart, but no, you had to beat me to it.” He was shaking his head with jealousy. “You got everything, Max. But now—now I’ll take everything you care about in return, starting with what’s left of Jane’s family.”

“Leave her family alone,” I warned. “Leave *Emily* alone.”

He chuckled, straightening his leather jacket on his shoulders. “I won’t harm her, Brother. Emily’s far too much of a talent to simply throw away. It’s not everyday you come across a natural mind reader. I’m just going to *teach* her.”

I exhaled hard, my heart pumping cold hate into my blood. “Do not convert her, Greg. You know what that does.”

He shook his head. “She wants to be like me. I know she does. Who wouldn’t? And with her on my side, we’ll be unstoppable.”

Emily couldn’t protect herself against his mind control. She didn’t know what she was getting into. Someone circled the corner then, and I turned my head, seeing Emily glaring at me. Her eyes were dark, her mind so wrapped in Greg’s lies, that she was losing hold of herself.

Her thoughts screamed at me, gripping and tightening their hold on my brain. I winced.

Greg pushed me away from him. “See, Max. *She likes it.*”

I looked at Emily, begging for her to stop as the shrill sound pulsed through my bones like electricity. I tried to cover my ears, but it did nothing. I pleaded with my eyes but her lips remained a concentrated line. Her face was already turning white with death, her talents heightened by the addition of evil.

“She... does not... *understand*...” I gasped.

Emily stopped the attack on my mind, allowing me to speak.

I was breathing hard. “You have her so doped up, Greg.” I pointed at Emily. “This is not Emily. This is you inside her head, like a puppeteer.”

Greg shrugged. “What’s wrong with that? It’s nice to have control.” He advanced toward me, backing me against the locker on the other side of the hall. “Too bad you let the intensity of your power fade, Max. If only you had come with me and taken lives, you could have had the same power she will have.” He looked upon Emily with pride. “This is just a taste of what’s to come, Max. When I’m done with her, you’ll wish you never came back. You’ll wish you remained on that dreary mountain, all alone. No pathetic teenage love affair will justify the destruction you’ve brought upon her family.”

“No matter how many souls you recruit, you will still be lonelier than I ever will be, Greg. No one loves you without your manipulation pulsing through them. *No one could.*” My words were filled with spite.

He laughed. “So, you admit it? Our family never loved me.” He drew in a breath of air. “Good to know the *truth.*”

I shook my head. “You’re delusional, Greg.” I did not want to play this game, not again.

Jane:

Something felt increasingly wrong as I stood against the locker, watching the clock on the wall slowly tick, counting the seconds of Max’s tardiness. He was now fifteen minutes late, and since he always made a point to be punctual, it concerned me.

Maybe he’d decided I was no longer worth the chase. Maybe he’d finally seen that all I am is human, while he was suspended in a never-ending purgatory. Who was I kidding to believe we could be together? Like a flowering spring tree, things were destined to come to a natural end.

My heart pounded hard for no reason, at least not that I could see beyond my petty fears of abandonment. It was then that I heard something—something from far away, but still within school grounds. I pushed myself away from the locker, opening my ears in my attempt to hear more. I took a careful step forward, and then another, shutting my eyes and concentrating on the disturbance.

I heard the sound again, a shrill twang of dread hanging like a weight inside my heart. My sneakers gripped the linoleum as I took off at a run down the hall, my brown hair fanning out behind me. The school had a series of halls shaped into an ‘H’, each lined with identical beige lockers. I slid around the corner as my sneakers fought for traction. Images began to flash across my mind, dark ghosts, and the decaying faces of people I didn’t know.

I ran faster, seeing Emily amongst the faces—her eyes void of life, the glow of her soul leaving her body. I turned another corner, and that’s when I saw them. I halted abruptly, nearly falling back as Max’s pained eyes met mine. I looked to Emily as she stared at Max, and finally, my eyes rested on Greg. I threw myself at him before I gave them a moment to explain, my fists flailing at his face before a scream erupted in my head. I was crippled to the ground, grasping my ears as the fingers of the sound burrowed into my brain.

Greg laughed. “Look who’s finally made it to the party!”

I looked up at him with teary eyes, my gaze flickering to Emily. I furrowed my brow as she stared at me, her expression fixed. Nothing about her face seemed at all familiar. Her eyes were blank and dark, her skin drained of life. I recognized the scream in my head, knowing it was hers. I tried to force it away, but found no relief. Not knowing what else to do to break her concentration, I swung my leg out to trip her. She fell to the ground with a thud, falling like dead weight. The screaming ceased.

Max rushed over to me, grabbing my face in his hands and looking me in the eyes, “Jane, are you alright?”

I nodded, the pressure in my head slowly beginning to subside. “Yes, I’m fine,” I motioned for him to tend to Emily. He left my side, his cool grip lingering on my hot skin. Sitting up, I saw that Emily was rolling on the ground, moaning to herself.

Max hovered over her, touching her face and looking her in the eyes. He had a concerned expression on his face. “Emily.” He shook her gently, but she did not respond. “*Emily.*” He shook harder, but all she could do was moan.

Greg leaned against the locker, looking annoyed. “She’s *fine.*”

Max searched her pockets, retrieving a pill bottle from her coat. He popped the lid open and looked inside. His expression twisted into a grimace, a look of both recognition and dread on his face.

I glared at Greg. “*What did you do to her?*” I hissed.

Greg snapped his fingers and Emily pulled herself away from Max, now pushing her body off the floor as though controlled by a force that wasn’t her own. She stumbled over to Greg, slowly straightening out and standing tall. Her eyes rolled back into her head for a moment before refocusing. Greg put his arm around her frail frame, grasping her tightly. She tilted her head, her eyes reflecting the same dark stare Greg’s had—soulless.

Max stood, offering me a hand as he lifted me off the ground. I walked up to Emily.

“Emily?” I tried to take her hand, but she shied away from me. Her fingers slipped through mine, cold and clammy. I tilted my head, glaring at Greg.

He raised his brows. “See, she’s fine. And she’s with *me* now.” His eyes looked straight through me. “Maybe if you had treated her like a beloved sister, and not an inconvenience, then perhaps she wouldn’t have turned on you.”

Emily smiled, leaning her head against Greg’s shoulder.

I swallowed hard. Max reached for my hand, intertwining our fingers and grasping tightly. His touch gave me a sense of comfort, as though telling me he would solve this, but for now, we needed to go. He began to pull me away from them, but my feet refused to move.

“Come on, Jane. We’ll get her back, I promise,” he whispered.

Greg smirked at Max's words, treating it like a challenge.

My stand was firm, but Max's grip on my hand was firmer. My feet began to move as though unattached to my body. I couldn't stop staring at Emily, hoping that she would snap out of it, wishing she'd run into my arms where I could comfort her. I reached toward her one last time. "Emily, please," I whispered.

There was a flicker in her eye, and for a moment I thought I'd found her, but Greg's influence was too strong. Her eyes quickly flooded with a black that was deeper than ever. We rounded a corner and they disappeared from my view. A tear fell from my eye.

How could I have let her down?

This was entirely my fault.

Max:

I helped Jane into the car and buckled her in. Her face was blank, the rose of her skin replaced with a morbid white. She looked at me with fawn eyes, the weakness of her spirit filling me with guilt.

"It's going to be okay, Beautiful." I tried to reassure her, rubbing her arm.

Jane's eyes squeezed shut, tears pouring down her cheeks. I leaned in, kissing her tears away, the saltiness a reminder of what it was like to be alive.

"I promise," I whispered against her skin.

She tried to nod, but her body shook too hard. Brushing the hair from her face, I shut the door and walked to the driver side. I got in, glancing at her, my thoughts filled with concern.

"How is it going to be okay, Max?" Her voice was breaking my heart. "*How?*"

I started the car. "There is something we can do," I reassured her. "But we need to find your friend, Wes. We're going to need his help. He is the only one with the ability to go in unnoticed."

I felt her relax a little, forced to gather her emotions. "I haven't seen Wes in days," She whimpered. "I don't know where he is."

I pulled out of the lot, taking her home, knowing that my house was no longer safe. "He's gone rogue, but I can easily hunt him down. He's new at this. He'll be simple to find."

She nodded, wiping the last tears from her face. "What can I do to help?"

I touched her hand as it sat on her leg. "Keep your thoughts open. Your dreams can help give us clues. Greg will not show up in them again, you have the ring, but Emily still might—she shares your blood. She will be drawn to you, because she trusts you to help her as you always have." I squeezed her hand, feeling her fear. "That girl in there wasn't your sister, Jane. Greg has her brainwashed and drugged. We will get her back."

I hoped my words were reassuring enough. I'd dealt with this before, but I didn't want her to know that. It hadn't ended well for the girl, but I knew what it was I'd done wrong, and that was to try and do it by myself. Wes loved both sisters, and I needed to use that love against Greg. Wes's abilities would provide us with the perfect cover, and the perfect poison.

...

There was a splash in the ocean, and the man looked up over the brim of his newspaper. The man saw nothing, shrugging it off and going back to his reading. Another minute passed when he heard the splash again.

The man quickly laid his paper down, jumping to his feet to swiftly set the shield around him, but he was too late. The dark figure stood before him, one arm preventing the shield from sealing shut.

The man's heart surged to life, knowing that no amount of sorcery could save him now.

"So this is it. You're finally going to kill me?" the man asked.

The Black Angel laughed. "No, I won't..." a girl walked out from behind him, her eyes as dark as night and her hair as red as hell itself. She was in transition. "But she will." There was a dagger in her hand.

The girl approached the man. He shut his eyes. Before he knew it, the sharp object entered his side. It was all over. Now he was in a better place, a safer place. Here, there would be no more hiding. He hoped the girl knew that; he hoped the girl understood that his murder had done

him a great favor.

He was in the arms of the woman he loved once more...

* * *

Wes:

I cleaned my paws after another hunting trip in the woods, the bones of a deer lying beside me. My tongue combed over my smooth grey fur, the taste of the meat lingering between the pads. I heard a snap of a branch overhead and looked up, my satisfied purr coming to a halt. My ears were perked and my cougar eyes sharpened. I waited for a moment, but there were no further sounds. I flicked my tail, licking my jowls as I moaned and rolled onto my side.

I lazed in the leaves before extending up to my feet. Leaning all my weight onto my back paws, I stretched my front paws before me and then leaned forward to stretch the back. I yawned, eyeing the deer carcass with fond memories of the vigorous hunt.

It was then that something came crashing through the trees overhead, landing beside me as the forest floor shook. Leaves fell delicately in its wake. I hissed and hunched to the ground, my ears flat against my head.

As the debris settled, I saw a figure of a man, a man that tickled my memories. A low growl escaped my lips. I scanned his familiar build, surprised to see a large set of wings sprouting from his back.

I squinted, feeling a pang of hate, mixed with a long lost memory. I circled him, every muscle in my body tight and ready to pounce. He stood tall, crossing his arms against his chest as the wings on his back relaxed.

“Wes,” he addressed me with a name, one that seemed to belong to some part of me I no longer knew. “I know that’s you, Wes.” He looked down at me from over his nose, saying the name for a second time.

I hissed and lunged at him, wanting this devilish creation dead, though I wasn’t sure why. I landed a few feet before him, withholding for a reason I also was unsure of.

“Wes,” His arms remained crossed, as though unafraid. “You need to remember who you are. This is not you. You are *human*. Remember that, Wes.”

His words angered me. Why did he keep calling me Wes? I growled again, holding it deep in my throat.

“Wes!” he yelled. “Wes, it’s *me*. Snap out of it.”

I watched him, feeling the name grow on me.

The man began to look annoyed. “Listen, Wes. Something has happened to Emily.”

I stopped growling, a pang of sadness now replacing all else. Memories rushed back to me—a rosy face, a sweet smile, and best of all, a soft kiss.

“Jane and I need your help, Wes. Emily is in grave danger.”

I couldn’t help but hiss when he said the name Jane, as though it held some sort of bitterness inside me. Pieces began to fall together now, the face before me growing increasingly familiar until I knew his name.

Max.

Max smiled then. “That’s it. You do remember.”

I felt suddenly uncomfortable. I wanted to change into something, but I couldn’t decide what.

“Greg has Emily.” Max continued to coax my memories. “Greg, Wes. *He has her*. He will take her from us forever if we don’t act fast.”

I let out a loud growl this time.

“Please, Wes. I mean you no harm.” Max pulled a bundle from his belt hook and tossed it at my feet.

I jumped back as a lump of fabric scattered across the forest floor. It was clothing. I looked up at Max.

“I can’t do this alone, Wes. Come on. Come back to us.”

His words were tempting, but how did I know he was telling me the truth? How did I know that what I felt was truly real?

He smiled. "I don't lie, Wes."

I hissed, angry that he could also read my thoughts. *What was he?*

"Wes, I'm a guardian angel, and a member of a Priory that wants to protect what you are. But my brother is not, he means to do us all harm, and right now, it is Emily he has focused on. He hopes to recruit and brainwash her to his side. We cannot let this happen." His voice was firm.

I let my ears relax. What choice did I have but to believe him?

I thought of this girl named Emily—her smile, her soft kiss. I thought the same of the girl named Jane. I heard Max move, and I looked back at him, seeing jealousy flash in his blue eyes. I felt a sense of smugness from that look, but it was quickly replaced by urgency.

Shutting my eyes, I concentrated on the itch in my soul. Something inside me was beginning to surface, wanting out in a way that made me finally give in. I felt the hair of the cougar begin to shed, the chill of the forest now reaching my skin as I shivered. My back arched—my legs and arms stretching as the skin grafted to newly formed bones. When the transformation was complete, I lay on the ground for a moment, catching my breath.

I looked up at Max. He had his back turned to me out of respect. A part of me thought to attack him.

"Don't even think about it," Max said over his shoulder before I'd even gotten the chance to really consider the idea.

I snorted, reaching for the clothes. "Can you really blame me for thinking it?" I heard the words leave my lips as though they weren't my own. I was surprised by the ease of speech, like a forgotten best friend.

He laughed.

I pulled the jeans on, then the shirt, still finding it wasn't enough clothing to keep me warm—not like the fur had. I rubbed my hands together, feeling tall as I stood on two feet. The muscles on my arms were tight and my back rigid. Max turned to face me.

"Thank you, Wes." Max forced a smile, though I could feel he disliked my continued thoughts on Jane.

I examined the feathers on his back, circling him as he allowed me to observe. His face was a smug mask, as though proud—as though better than me.

"Feathers, huh?" I asked, finding it a bit feminine.

Max laughed. "We can't all be cougars, Wes. And it's not that feminine. Not like a feline can be."

I hissed out of habit, and it came out sounding lame. I felt frustrated. "So, what happened to Emily?" I grumbled, stopping to stand before him, still a good distance away in case he'd lied to me, leaving enough time to change and get away.

"Greg came to her after you left. He played on her vulnerabilities, twisting her anger and jealousy into hate. Now she's been sucked into his world, and the only way to get her out is with a special poison."

I nodded, shoving my hands casually into the pockets of the jeans. That's when I realized that these were probably *his* jeans... I took my hands out of the pockets. "Special poison?"

He nodded. "It's from a rare Brazilian frog, but luckily for us, that rare frog won't be so rare for you to replicate."

I felt smug as I puffed my chest. "And what will this poison do?"

Max watched me with a smirk on his face. "It will poison the demon inside her, so that she can come back to us. It's pretty run-of-the-mill stuff."

I thought about it for a moment, thinking that it really was rather serious, and certainly seemed anything but *run-of-the-mill*. I exhaled, letting the tightness in my chest go. "And then what?"

"Then I'll leave, and so will my brother," Max said it with confidence, but it didn't cover the hurt in his eyes, "...if that's what you want."

My memories were returning now, and I recalled the reason why I was here to begin with. His attraction to Jane was deep, this I could tell from my own turmoil over the years, and the same quiver in his voice at the mention of her name. The jealousy I felt toward Jane was also deep, but there was one thing that set Max and I apart. Jane loved him back. I wanted Max to leave, but I also didn't want to see Jane sad.

"Why leave? Why not kill Greg instead?" The words were sweet on my tongue, still tasting the thrill of the hunt I'd felt with the deer this morning.

Max took a step toward me, looking a little shocked by the fact I'd basically admitted that maybe he should stay—that maybe he was right for Jane, despite the fact that he had a strange set of wings and a smell of death that was somewhat unsettling. I guess to Jane, it was anything but.

"If I kill him, it will be suicide. Our lives are linked. He dies, I die."

I reveled in the words, still seeing an opportunity to tease. "And that's a bad thing?" I lifted one brow.

Max smiled. "It would be, considering I'm Jane's guardian angel. If I were dead, then she would be left extremely vulnerable to other attacks. She has a rare form of magick. My brother is not the only one out there that is hungry to see her bleed."

“Her guardian angel?” I was confused. What died and made him so privileged?

“I saved her when her father died. If it wasn’t for me, she would be dead. Because of this she and I are bound. In a way, we always have been. I’ve been searching for her all my life, and—”

I laughed, stopping him there. I wasn’t interested in hearing his sappy love story, especially when I had my own in reference to Jane. “So, you were always there. You watched her grow up?” I chuckled menacingly. “Well, that’s not creepy or anything.”

Max had a half smile on his face, but said nothing, acting smug as though acknowledging me would mean stooping to my level of childishness.

“So, how old are you?”

Max looked at the sky, then the ground. “About a hundred years old.”

“A *hundred*?” I gasped. “That’s gross, dude, seriously sick.” I shook my head. “So, what does being a guardian angel entail, exactly?”

Max tilted his head, sizing up my question. “When I died, I wasn’t ready to go. I stayed behind, and so did Greg. I was an angel then, but saving Jane turned me into a guardian.”

I snorted. “So you’re dead, like a ghost, or something?”

Max shrugged. “Sure, I guess.”

“Shouldn’t you be like, invisible? All smoke and cold air?” I thought of the ghost hunter shows I watched on the Discovery Channel.

Max smirked. “I can be.”

Just like that, he was gone. “Max?” I blinked, looking around the silent woods. I was alone. A cold chill fell over me, and I spun, my arms flailing.

I heard Max’s laugh echo off the trees, his figure reforming beside me. I swung at him, but he lunged away from me, leaving a trail of black smoke.

My jaw clenched, realizing I’d been fooled. “How are you dead if you’re here?” I spoke through clenched teeth.

Max raised one brow. “I say I’m dead because I don’t really have a heart beat. It feels more like suspended animation, though I do age, only *very* slowly. I guess in that respect, some part of me is alive. The only life I feel, though, is Jane’s. She’s my connection to the human world I once loved.”

I released my jaw. “Still, dude, that’s weird.”

Max shook his head as he turned and walked away from me.

“Hey! Max! Where are you going?” I yelled after him. “I wasn’t finished talking to you yet!”

He lifted his hand over his shoulder as though to blow me off. I stared at the wings on his back as they slowly retracted into his spine. I stood still, grumbling under my breath. Max stopped then, looking over his shoulder and motioning me to follow.

I growled one more time and gave in.

Jane:

I lay my head against the pillow, my sketchbook in hand as I re-traced a drawing I’d made long ago. There was a fiery lion standing in the woods, watching me as though protecting the ground I walked on. It had large wings, much like Max, but they were ablaze like the rest of its body. I’d always seen it as something evil, but when I looked again, its eyes in my memories had changed to something different—something friendly. I erased them, redrawing what I now saw before I laid the book beside me, its eyes following mine.

Wes’s window was still dark, and Max hadn’t yet returned. My mother had gone to bed hours ago, so when Max did return, at least she wouldn’t notice his presence.

I was excited to see Wes, and not because I found I’d had feelings for him, but because I missed him as a friend. Max had explained to me that he figured he’d taken to the woods, and I knew why. I was the only person in his life he could talk to. I sighed—at least other than Emily.

The downhill slide of Wes and I’s friendship had happened fast, and being that Wes was someone that wasn’t fond of change, I was certain it had affected him on a deeper level than it had affected me. I felt guilty that he felt that way, but I couldn’t pretend to be in love with him when I saw that there could be someone better.

I felt my eyes grow heavy, and though I wanted to wait up for them to return, I couldn’t. I felt the sweet velvety release of sleep wash over me, followed by a heavy mist. I woke in my dream as I lay in an old freestanding tub, my hair cascading out behind me as my head rest on the ledge. The water was cold, and the room grey. There was a window above me, shining white light across the walls. I moved and the water moved with me,

splashing over the edge and onto the floor.

I turned in the tub, looking behind me and into the vastness of room I was previously turned away from. The room was made of stone, signs of age showing upon its crumbling surface. There were two large mirrors on the wall, both coated with a thick layer of dust. Two more windows filled the far wall, light pouring through the glassless cavity.

I shivered and placed my hands on the side of the tub, lifting myself out of the water as it ran down my body. I stepped from the tub, leaving a pool on the stone floor. Loose bits of sandy rubble dug into my feet, clinging to the dampness.

A soft white dress hung from a hook on the wall. I reached for it. Pulling it over my head, it draped down my body, clinging to my skin. The house was abandoned. I knew this because there was no way someone could possibly live in such disarray. Some of the windows were missing glass, and leaves were blown into the corners of the room. I walked to the window and looked outside, seeing the yard was overgrown, the house surrounded by forest. I turned back to the room, walking to one of the mirrors. There was a basin of water and I ran my finger through it, seeing bits of organic debris swirl inside.

I looked up into the mirror, but my own reflection was absent. I looked deeper into the mirror and then looked behind me, seeing it was indeed reflecting the room I was in, but still, I wasn't there.

Frightened, I backed away from the mirror, making my way to the door of the room. I grabbed the cold rusted handle and yanked hard. The door gave, but dragged across the rough floor as dust fell over me. Once the door was open wide enough, I hurried out, finding myself in a long dark hall. There were dusty paintings lining both walls, and a long thin table where leaves and old candles were scattered.

I slowly made my way down the hall, debris crunching below my feet. I looked up at the paintings, but recognized no one. They wore clothing that was dated, clearly signifying both their age and social rank as they dripped with jewels. It was then that I heard someone crying, and my pace slowed in order to hear.

The crying was low and even, like a small child. I walked in the direction of the cries, finding myself face to face with a large wood door at the end of the hall.

"Hello?" I asked, but my voice was just a whisper.

I knocked on the door, and as I did, the door opened slightly. I heard the cries clearer now, a whimper that was so sad, and so lost, that I felt it inside my own heart. I pushed the door open softly, looking in on the room that was beyond. The walls were just as grey as all the others, the light dusted with age. There was a large bed in the middle of the room, draped with white curtains and sheets. I walked in, treading lightly. As I drew close, I saw that there was someone lying on the bed, the cries coming from them. Mirrors were leaned up against the walls on either side, but still, I couldn't see myself in them.

I approached the foot of the bed, and the girl stopped crying.

"Hello?" I asked.

I circled the bed, the girl's face now visible. At first I couldn't recognize her through the sad expression, but as I saw the color of her familiar brown eyes, I knew it was Emily. Her skin was soft, her gaze void of the darkness I'd seen. I touched her auburn hair, comforting her as tears fell onto the bed.

"*Emily*," I whispered her name.

She watched me, drying her eyes with a shaking hand.

"Emily, you're okay," I continued. She still didn't answer, but her eyes said what her mouth couldn't. She was frightened. She was weak. I caressed her hair over and over, wanting to comfort her. This was my dream, and I knew she was only here in thought, but at least she was here—at least she had found me.

Emily's whimpers returned, but there was nothing I could do to reach her. I leaned down and kissed her head, humming to her the way I used to when she was small. She felt cold, but my own skin felt cold as well. She sniveled as I leaned back. Grabbing my hand, she looked at me, her eyes like darts.

"*Help me.*"

Jane:

Something cold touched my arm and I was whisked from the dream, sitting up straight in bed with a yelp. I was met by a strong set of arms, wrapping me in a comforting chill. I looked up, the dim morning light glowing across half of Max's face. I put my hand to my chest, taking a deep breath.

Max smiled sheepishly. "Sorry," he whispered.

I was so relieved to see he was back that I wanted to kiss him, but I looked past him then, seeing Wes standing in the background with his arms crossed. Wes was wearing an outfit I'd never seen him wear before, in a style he hated. I smirked, knowing they were Max's clothes.

"You found him," I gasped.

Wes rolled his eyes. "I'm not giving you a reunion hug. Not after *he* touched you." He sounded bitter, and I wasn't about to press.

I sat back against the headboard, still trying to shake away the dream. Wes looked different, though only a few days had passed. He seemed wild, taller, his eyes sharp and on edge—nothing was the same.

"As I thought, he was easy to find," Max replied, looking over his shoulder at Wes.

Wes snorted, turning away from us. "I *let* you find me. That's the only reason you did."

I giggled, knowing that wasn't true. "So, what's the plan?" My voice was low. The last thing I wanted was my mother waking up to find me alone at five thirty in the morning with two boys in my room.

Max walked to my desk and sat in front of the computer, turning it on. "We need to get an antidote."

Wes still hadn't looked me in the eye.

I looked back at Max. "From where?"

Max looked at Wes. "From him."

I furrowed my brow. "From Wes? How?"

Max pulled something up on the screen, and I saw Wes take notice. He crept up behind Max, looking closely at the picture. His whole demeanor changed, as though he had seen the most amazing thing in the world. I squinted, trying to see for myself.

"What is that?" I asked.

Max sat back. "It's an endangered frog from Brazil. A dart frog."

"A dart frog?" The screen displayed a small black and yellow frog.

"Tribes used to use their secretions to poison darts that they'd then employ against their enemies. But more importantly, it was also used to rid their enemy's of the devil inside them so that it wouldn't haunt the tribe after the enemies death," Max explained.

I nodded. "So, we're going to use it on Greg?"

Wes finally looked at me. "No, Jane. We're going to use it on your sister."

Wes's voice was surprisingly deep and raspy. It was clear it had been a while since he spoke.

I was confused. "But won't that kill her? Hence the whole *kill the enemy and rid it of the evil ghost* thing?" My voice was louder now.

No one answered me.

"Max?" I pressed.

He sighed. "It *could* kill her, but if we leave her the way she is, she'll be as good as dead. If Greg gets what he wants then you'll never know your sister as the girl you once loved ever again. She will be lost forever."

I swallowed. "But how do we do it?"

He scrolled down the page. "There are few animals that can withstand the poison, such as this one..." He pointed to the screen which displayed a new image. "The Amazon ground snake. Wes will have to use the poison from the frog, but also the immunities from the snake, which he'll pass to Emily. Wes will have added immunities to the poison because he also technically supplied it, though it will have some residual side effects on him in a human state afterward," his voice trailed.

"Like what?" Wes snapped.

Max laughed. "Nothing you'll hate. The secretions of the dart frog have some benefits to man in variable degrees. Their poison can actually be used as a very powerful pain reliever, two hundred times stronger than morphine. You'll feel the effects of that."

"You mean, I'll be *high*?" Wes looked shocked, but there was a hint of delight there as well.

"Pretty much." Max nodded. "I know the whole thing sounds complicated, but getting the demon out of her will help her body to naturally build immunity against it."

I snorted. "You mean the devil in her is like the flu?"

Wes laughed.

Max rolled his eyes. “If that makes it easier to understand, then yes.”

I sighed. “Well, how soon can we do this? My mother is finally realizing that Emily hasn’t been around much, or rather at all, so it’d be great to get her back rather soon. I keep lying, but I don’t know how much longer that’s going to work.”

Max stood from the chair and walked over to me. He sat beside me and took my hand. I heard Wes groan and look away.

“We’ll do this today, Beautiful. Can you handle missing school?”

I heard Wes grumble again. “Of course she can. It’s her *sister*, not some stupid doctor appointment. Besides, it’s Friday. Who in their right mind would pass up an extended weekend?” He said it under his voice, but we heard it anyway.

I nodded, ignoring him.

Max traced my hand with his fingers. They were soft despite how long he’d been living. I eyed Wes, now angry that he was here. I wanted to be alone with Max. I saw Max smile; he had heard me. I smiled back, meaning for him to hear me. Wes was pacing. I gave Max a look, asking with my thoughts if Wes could also hear what I was thinking. He shook his head. I smiled, thinking of our kiss in the woods. My chest warmed.

Wes:

I felt her heart—I felt that it had no feelings of warmth toward me, just him. Max calls her *beautiful*? Why hadn’t I thought of that? This was torture. I could handle knowing it was happening from a distance, but being in the same room was impossible. Did he not respect the fact that I’d loved her—*still* loved her maybe? It was sick. He was a *bazillion* years old!

I thought about what he’d told me—the fact that he’d saved her. I pursed my lips together, further angry because that meant I owed it to him in some way. The truth was that if it weren’t for him, Jane wouldn’t even be here. I hated having to team up with him, I hated being friendly. But who said I had to?

I turned, seeing they were now grinning at each other, their hands performing acts I know they’d rather do with their bodies.

“Can we get this over with?” I couldn’t stand it anymore, but my words didn’t seem to affect them. I grumbled, thinking there was only one thing I could do. I thought hard, and just as I’d hoped, Max’s attention was pulled from Jane and he frowned at me. My lip lifted in a half smile.

Take that, lover boy, I teased mentally.

My thoughts were filled with the memories from this summer—filled with images of that night when Jane and I had shared something special. I hung the image on the walls of my mind like a favorite picture, knowing it would keep Max focused on more important things.

Max continued to glare, dropping Jane’s hand and taking the hint. He didn’t seem smug, but I felt it inside him—somewhere deep. I clenched and released my fists, over and over, trying to hold the animal in me at bay. Max stood, pointing back to the frog on the computer screen.

“Can you manage that?”

I snorted, rolling my eyes. “Can I *manage* that?” I let one laugh pass my lips. “Piece of cake.”

Before the words could even make it to their ears, I’d shrunk to the floor, now a tiny frog. Max’s clothes sat in a pile around me like a nest. I sat in the neck hole of the shirt. I looked down at my bright blue hands, figuring I’d liked blue better than yellow and black.

Jane gasped. I felt smug. I bet her little angel couldn’t do *that*.

Max knelt beside me, taking something from his pocket. “This might hurt a little,” he warned.

I could take it. Who did he think I was? He lowered a large stick toward me, which had I been bigger, was no more than a toothpick. He scraped it across my skin and I winced. It did hurt, but I hid it, glancing at Jane for affirmation. Her face was all shock and awe.

“Okay, thanks.” Max stood. He placed the toothpick in a small clear container, fastening the lid.

“So, where does the snake come in? I still don’t understand its purpose.” Jane asked.

Max walked back over to the computer, his fingers grazing over the keys in a blur, pulling up a new image. “Now, Wes, change into this. It’s just for practice so you’ll know how to do it in the future.”

I hated being compliant to his wishes, but it was for Emily’s sake. I had a hard time seeing the screen from my position on the floor, but I was able to see the snake’s head, and from there the rest was rather self explanatory.

I changed quickly, finding the absence of arms was less annoying than I’d expected. My torso felt powerful, and I sat up as tall as I could. Max

backed away from me, a wary look in his eye. Jane hadn't noticed it, but to me it was unmistakable. He hadn't made a look like that the whole time I'd known him.

Max cleared his throat. "*Uh...* perfect, Wes. You got it now."

I narrowed my eyes, wondering what his apprehension meant. Was he afraid of snakes? I laughed mentally.

Max lifted his chin in the air, his frame puffing. He glared at me, enough to show that he was acting tough.

I laughed again, this time hissing slightly. I saw Max's features tighten. I relaxed, lowering back to the ground. As amusing as it was to see him squirm, it was time for me to get back to being human. Mostly because I could see that Jane was beginning to notice the clash between Max and I, and I didn't want her to get annoyed and blame me.

I looked at them both, and Max understood what I was thinking.

"Turn your back, Jane," he stated as he too turned away from me.

Like it mattered if Jane saw me naked, I thought. *She has before.*

I saw Max shift his weight uncomfortably, still bothered by the images I'd tortured him with. I quickly changed back, grabbing the jeans and shirt off the floor. I pulled on the jeans, fighting with the button.

"Okay, you can all look now," I announced.

I hadn't put my shirt back on, but that was how I'd meant it to play out. I wanted one more chance to irritate Max, and then I swore to stop. Jane turned back, looking at me with a noticeable hint of awe. I held the shirt in my hands, twisting it as though I was struggling to put it on, though that was hardly the point. Max's face was less than impressed.

Beat that, Max.

There was a scratch across my arm where Max had taken the poison. The mark was about twelve inches long and bleeding lightly. I used Max's shirt to blot the bleeding. Jane was still staring. I winked at her, causing her to crinkle her nose and look away from me. I laughed to myself, feeling her heart beat just a little bit faster.

"*Thanks*," Max added with sarcasm, referring to the spots of blood on his shirt. "You can keep that."

I finally pulled the shirt on, displaying the blood stains as though it were a trophy.

"So, now what?" Jane continued to press forward.

Max shook the toothpick in the bottle. "We need to stab her with this."

"*Stab her?*" Jane gasped. "With a toothpick?" Her eyes narrowed in disbelief.

I tilted my head. "Yeah, sure. I've been stabbed by a toothpick before, why not?"

Max gave me a strange look, probably wondering how in the world I'd been stabbed by a toothpick. The memory came back to me, an embarrassing one. Max laughed under his breath. I was dumb for bringing it up.

"Actually, Wes. That was a joke." There was a flash of challenge and delight in Max's eyes. He'd gotten me back.

I pressed my lips together, embarrassed.

Max let his amusement fade. "Now that you know how to be the snake, when it comes time, you'll need to turn into the snake, ingest the poison, and bite Emily. This will do two things: give her immunity to the frog poison from the snake, and also help her to retain the antidote from the frog. It'll knock her out pretty good, but in a few days she should wake up."

"A few *days*?" Jane huffed. "I don't have a few days to lie to my mother! You don't understand what she's like!"

Max looked a little stumped, but that quickly washed away. "I guess I can help you with that. I'll just charm her."

Jane's expression was wary. "Like Greg did to Emily?" she challenged.

Max smiled. "Sort of. She'll be fine, though. Nothing invasive, just a little imagery block. It won't harm her." He walked up to Jane, his hands trailing down her arms, her face melting.

I shook my head, aggravated.

"I promise, *Beautiful*. She'll be fine." His voice was smooth, even seductive. I hated the fact that I'd noticed. I shivered with disgust.

"So, how do we find her?" Jane's eyes never broke from Max's.

"She's going to be with Greg." Max shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Well, gee. Thanks, *Captain Obvious*,” I mumbled, a little bitter about the mental war Max and I had having turned against me.

Jane finally stood from her bed. “Where will that be? At your house?”

Max looked perplexed. “Yes, but not the house you know, Jane—a different house.”

Max:

Jane looked further confused. “A different house?”

Just thinking about the house caused chills to run down my spine, if that was even possible. “Yes, the house where Greg killed my whole family, or tried to. It’s not far.”

Wes was looking at me with interest now, and I felt a little less guilty. I knew I’d taken his whole life away from him, or at least that was what he thought of when he looked at Jane and me. He hadn’t heard my whole story yet, but I could tell he’d suddenly found something we could have in common. His parents had left him, and mine were murdered. We were both orphaned.

“Sorry, Max. I didn’t mean to bring that up.” Jane had her head bowed. “I just figured the house no longer existed, considering the fire and all.”

I exhaled, thinking that we didn’t need to dwell on the facts of my sad past. We needed to get to Emily, before she became a sad past.

“Let’s just go,” Wes said it for me, changing the subject.

I looked at him, but he was already on his way out the window. His surprising show of pity was a new development. Perhaps our similar past had been the ticket all along. Perhaps I should have confided in him sooner.

Jane:

We all piled into Max’s Defender. Wes took the back without hesitation, scanning the tan interior with lust. I was a little surprised by his interest at first, figuring his type was more muscular, definitely not the safari feel of the Land Rover Defender. The sun was just coming up over the hill, and the frost was still clinging to the once dewy grass. He started the car, and I was thankful for the fact that it was quiet.

“Buckle up, Wes.” Max looked in the rearview mirror. I heard Wes groan, but then I also heard the click of the belt.

I liked driving this early in the morning because everything seemed new and fresh—just maybe not today. We drove out of town in the opposite direction of Denver, and the opposite direction of the house I thought was his only home. The mountains closed in on us, and the trees were edging the road. We drove for about two miles before I heard Max turn on the blinker and we exited the main road. We continued down this new road for quite a ways, and I wondered what his idea of *close* really was—this felt like the longest ride of my life.

Max leaned close to me. “You should try riding it in a carriage. It takes almost two hours to get into town,” he whispered, acknowledging my thoughts.

I smirked, actually finding the fact that he could read my mind refreshing, though it would be nice to learn a way to control what he could and couldn’t hear with the ring. A girl’s got to have a few secrets.

Max chuckled lightly. “I promise to give you a better understanding of that ring when we’re finished here.

I smiled, reaching for his hand. He grasped it. The chill of his fingers was soothing, the feeling entering my body and filling my mouth with the taste of sugar.

I looked back at the road ahead of us. I’d wanted to talk about the plan in a little more detail, but it felt awkward talking with both Wes and Max in the car. Though I knew Max understood what I was thinking at times, this thought didn’t matter. I just hoped he didn’t know too much about Wes and me, but I also knew that if he were indeed my angel, it was likely he had been there for every scandalous moment. I cringed.

The car slowed, and I turned my attention back to the front. I didn’t see what he was slowing for, so I looked to him for some sort of sign.

“Wait, I think I’ve been here,” Wes announced rather suddenly, sitting up straight.

The car came to a sudden stop, pressing me against the seatbelt.

“*What?*” Max looked at him in the mirror with a hint of horror in his voice.

I was confused. “Been *where?* I don’t see anything.” It was true, there was nothing but woods.

Wes leaned forward in his seat. “Emily took me here, not long ago. I know where this is. I remember this road and I’ve seen the house you’re taking us to.” His hands gripped the edge of the two front seats.

I looked at Max, watching him as he watched Wes.

“You have,” he reassured, likely scanning Wes’s thoughts. “That’s strange, how did Emily…” Max sat back in his seat, looking forward. “Greg must have gotten to her sooner than I’d thought, possibly even years ago.”

“*Years ago?*” I gaped.

Max nodded. “No one is ever supposed to find this place. It’s been protected by magick. The only way she knew it was here is if someone had told her, or at the very least, gotten in her head enough to draw her to it.” Max looked perplexed. “*Why?*” he spat, trying to find reason.

Wes and I both stared at him, waiting for answers.

Max exhaled. “This could be harder than we think. If he’s had his claws in her that long, we may have to do this a few times, but at least we’ll be able to get her away from here.” Max’s eyes were blank.

“*A few times?*” I felt my heart begin to pound.

Max looked me in the eyes. “Maybe, maybe not. Let’s hope for the best, though. Okay?”

I relied on Max to be strong, but even he’d faltered. He took his foot off the brake. We rolled forward another hundred yards, and it was then that I finally saw the outline of an old gravel road.

Max turned down it, the forest grown up around us on all sides. We drove on for another hundred yards before something began to peek through the trees, and this time it was me that remembered.

“Wait, Max. You’re not going to believe this, but… *I’ve been here too!*” I squeaked. “But—it was in my dream, just last night. Just as you thought, Emily came to me. I found her in there.” I pointed toward the upper portion of the house. “She was crying, and no matter what I did, I couldn’t get her to stop. But then, just before I woke, she turned to me and asked me for help.”

I recognized the yard I’d seen through the window. This was the exact house. It had to be. I stared at the fallen in roof, the whole place built from stone and singed with fire on one half. It was huge, nothing like any house I’d seen before.

“How old is this house?” I asked.

Max looked at it as though he hadn’t seen it in a very long time. “It’s been in the family since they moved here. My parents were wealthy aristocrats and the founders of the town in 1886. Within their social circle, they were very powerful.”

“Is Greg in there?” Wes was fixated on one thing, uninterested in history when there was saving to be done.

Max drew in a slow breath. “No, he’s not. At least not right now. He must be out training her.”

“Training her?” I couldn’t understand. I didn’t want to understand.

Max shook his head. “There’s a process to this. He wants to make her like him and that takes a lot of… *training.*”

“What kind of *training* are you referring to?” I snapped.

“She needs to kill and grow a lust for blood. More than likely, they are hunting beings like Wes or you—beings that are resisting the Black Angels. The final step is her death by the hand of an enemy so that she can be an angel. You’re sister is technically still alive, but I know Greg well enough to assume that he wants to make her as strong as possible. If someone kills her, and she becomes an angel, then her psychic abilities will only grow stronger. She will be an unstoppable force. We have to hope we can get to her before she decides to die.”

“So, to be an angel, do you have to be murdered? I mean, you were, and Greg, well, he sort of murdered himself, I suppose.” I tried to find clarity and reason.

“I guess in a way. What really makes you an angel, though, is the fact that you’re not ready to die and move on. Being murdered typically supports that. When you choose not to cross over, you are then left behind.”

“Like a ghost,” Wes added from the back seat.

I gave Wes a strange look.

Max shrugged, telling me with his eyes that it was something Wes and he had already discussed. “We are given wings so that when we do decide to finally pass, we can fly away.”

Max’s words chilled me. “Why didn’t you fly away?”

“Because, I was waiting for something—*unfinished business.*” He smiled, and Wes moaned. Max ignored him. The way his finger traced my

cheek told me that the something he was waiting for was me. "I wasn't sure just what I was waiting for, but now I know beyond every doubt."

I felt uncomfortable by his forward comments, but I tried to press it away. I leaned into Max's touch. "And Greg? Why doesn't he fly away?"

"Greg won't leave without me, and even if he could, I doubt he would at this point. He's in love with power now. He'll want to stay and build his legion—his unfinished business is destroying the world."

Wes cleared his throat, interrupting us the same way he had all day. "When will he be back?" Wes asked. "Not to act like the only one that really *cares*, I just thought that focusing on saving Emily was rather important."

Max dropped his hand from my face and put the car in reverse. "I'm not sure," he said coldly.

I sat up. "So, are we just going to leave? We came all this way for nothing?" My face was twisted. I agreed with Wes; I wanted my sister back.

"No." He backed down the drive, and then into a nook under a tree. "We're going to wait for him. But if he comes back and the car is right there—clear as day in front of the house—then he'll just run, and who knows how long it will be until we find him and your sister again."

Max kept backing the car into the woods, and with how thick the trees and foliage were, I could no longer see the house. He stopped the engine and got out. Wes and I followed suit. Wes stretched as his feet hit the ground, as though the car were too small for him—which it was.

Wes yawned dramatically. "Let's get this show on the road!"

I snorted, thinking his new state of being seemed rather urgent and yet slow at the same time.

It was cold, so I grabbed my leather coat off the seat and put it over my shoulders. I shut the door, looking at the house with both fear and excitement. I understood now, but still, I didn't know where I fit in. Was my destiny truly with Max? Or was our destiny and connection meant for something else?

I needed answers...

Max:

The air around me was thick with memories; the house they saw run down and tired, now a place of evil. But no matter what had happened here, that was just one part of my life. The house I saw was something else—something of love.

I saw my mother on the front porch, my brother Erik and I playing baseball in the yard. I saw Greg, sitting on the steps, watching us with that same glare in his eyes. I saw my father coming home on horseback, the stables still standing behind the house. I saw the way the alchemist taught me new tricks, my father's gaze knowing, but not willing to care.

This home had so much history, far more than any other.

Jane approached me, owning a look of curiosity.

"Max? Tell me about your life. I feel like you know so much about mine—a friend of my father's and all. I want to know you."

I'd heard the question in Jane's head long before she said it, her mind weighing the gravity of such a question, hesitating slightly, only to wash the hesitation away.

I took her hand, squeezing it in a way that told her it was alright to ask. For all I knew about her, it was only fair. "Before the murders, my world had been far different—far more straight-forward. College was a prospect, and then, a respectable job that would make my father proud. My mother wanted me to marry, but I hadn't yet found a suitable spouse, and..." I wanted to say it was because a part of me knew I'd find her one day, but it wasn't time.

I moved on. "Magick was something that was whispered about town. There were a few kids in my circle that had it, but kept it hidden from most of the adults."

I looked at Wes, his golden eyes like a tickle in my memory. I'd thought it for a while now, wondered if Wes, this abandoned shifter, was indeed *theirs*. Charlotte was a good friend of mine, and when she'd found Mark, it was like seeing what I'm sure I saw with Jane now—love. Charlotte and Mark were the same. Both had the ability to shift, finding in each other a rare confidant.

Jane cleared her throat. I looked at her, realizing I'd let my thoughts wander.

"Sorry," I smiled. "Soon, the magickal adults in town noticed that things within their world were changing, especially within their powerful youth. It was growing, and those with magick were falling in love with humans," I winked at her. "Because of this, a rift formed within in the magickal world, a rift that is now gaping. The two sides separated—those that wished to overtake the humans, and those that wished to preserve them, like your father. Purists within the magickal world who were on the side of overtaking the humans felt threatened by the dilution of genes the human and magickal union would create. What those beings didn't understand, though, was the fact that love was blind. Many amongst those that saw the unions as blasphemy were hypocrites, often cavorting with human women and men, not bothering to acknowledge their accidental magickal

offspring. Most human never knew, and still don't know of this rift, and we hope to keep it that way. Even your mother doesn't know about us."

"But I know," Jane smiled.

I tilted my head, touching her chin. "You're different. You're a Sheol."

She giggled. "Go on."

"My mother and father loved each other, but my mother's love wasn't as strong as my father's. Like I've mentioned, she fell in love with the clear-blue eyes of the alchemist across town, and though my father knew, he denied it. He loved her too much to let the affair ruin them, and so he let it continue—let her think that he didn't know. The alchemist was a doctor, but also a natural sorcerer, mixing potions no human could. Not long before our death, the affair was exposed, marking the beginning of the official war when Greg killed the whole family, placing Greg and I in a position of blame after our death."

"That hardly seems fair. You were so young, and you had no idea!" Jane's head was full of compassion, a thing I loved about her.

I took her hand as we walked toward the house, Wes wandering ahead. "After that, there's no real record of exactly what happened because it was pure chaos. It had split the two worlds forever, sending a ripple throughout the magickal world. Still though, a small group of magickal beings remained in Glenwood Springs, receding into the caves of the mountains where they formed the Priory. We were left to protect the humans."

"So, are they still there?"

I shrugged. It'd been a long while since I'd been back. I'd previously severed my ties with the Priory, no longer able to handle the duty and guilt it entailed.

Jane let go of my hand, satisfied with the story I'd told her. She wandered into the yard. I stopped, gazing back at the house, though my peripherals never left Jane.

When I'd found Jane, long ago, I knew I'd found what it was my mother had with the alchemist. Until that point, I'd always been confused by my mother's dangerous game, but it was then that I understood. The boundaries of magick did not stop love—love really was universal.

I looked up, seeing Jane had stopped in front of a stone. I walked up beside her. She was reading the words carved into the stone—the names of my mother and father.

"Is this..." Her voice was soft, allowing her mind to finish the question.

"Yes." I pushed my hands in my pockets. I felt my parents' presence among us, wrapping me in a cloud of comfort. They were here with me, but I couldn't see them because they'd crossed to a place I hadn't. There was no denying that being here was hard for me.

She continued to stare at the stone, her breathing shallow. She felt surprisingly calm despite the circumstances, but it was the death inside her that kept her that way. She had seen death, felt it creep upon her. It was something that fascinated her. It was what fascinated me about her.

"Max? Do you ever get past it? The death, I mean. Does it get easier to deal with?" Only her lips moved.

I heard my mother breathe in my ear, trying to whisper to me, but I couldn't make out the words. "It does get easier, but it's also what makes you so unique." I sensed a sudden apprehension from Jane as she stared at my parent's names. They had been laid to rest beside each other, though their falsified love did not extend to the afterlife.

"Why did you want to save me again?" she said bluntly.

I could sense her backtracking. Though I had told her about her father's wishes, and my connection, I knew it still hadn't been enough to justify her current situation. I thought for a moment.

"Jane, I've told you this..." I'd tortured Wes enough already, and I sensed his tension. He didn't need to feel more pain.

Jane didn't seem satisfied with my response as she kicked at the dirt on the ground. "I don't like that answer. I want a real reason. It doesn't seem to warrant why you risked so much to save me." She frowned. "I know what my father asked of you, but you would have saved me anyway."

She was right. I would have. I took my hands out of my pockets, looking into my palms. They were so pale, and yet they were the only thing I knew better than Jane's face. "There was something about you, like I said." Wes was climbing up the steps of the house. I watched him from the corner of my eye.

"But what? What was so different for you? It's more than just a crush, isn't it?" She was being difficult. She wanted an even better answer—a personal answer. "You don't risk as much as you did over a hunch."

I'd hoped the kiss was enough to explain it, enough so that she could see and feel what I'd meant by connection. I knew she wasn't ready to hear what I had to say, but the want in her eyes was so great, I didn't want to resist her wish.

"Jane, I just—"

Her eyes narrowed, the want now becoming a demand.

I swallowed. “Love, Jane. Because I loved you.” The words were thick, and they choked in my throat. I’d used the term fate, and connection, but not yet love. “The mad, deep, and forever kind of love rushed over me in that instant, Jane.” I was making it worse for myself, but the truth was all I could say. “When I saw you, I saw what my mother had in the alchemist. I couldn’t let that go. Even though you were so young at the time, I knew the day would come.” I had let it pour.

She stood for a few more moments, perfectly still. Her heart had not changed but her mind felt confused. “Oh.”

I blinked rapidly, desperately wanting to hear her thoughts, but they were suddenly shut away. I hadn’t necessarily expected that type of response, though I feared it. I’d expressed my intentions to her all day, but not like that. I’d foolishly let myself be exposed. I was suddenly so confused. All this was still so abrupt, and here I was, forcing love upon her when she wasn’t ready. I should have waited to say that phrase. *I was such an idiot.*

I heard my parents leave me then, the warmth they’d surrounded me with now filling the air with chill. Jane shivered slightly, feeling what I had. I took my attention off Wes, now seeing Jane move her hand and lift it before her. Her fingers toyed with the ring on her hand. She turned and walked away from me, leaving the sound of crunching leaves drumming in my head.

My eyes traced the names of my parents on the stone, and then I shut them. I drew in a heavy breath, my mind racing. I tried hard to read Jane’s thoughts one more time, but they were still clouded.

I was a selfish fool for doing what I did, and I was an idiot for saying that I loved her.

Jane:

I needed my space. *What was happening?*

Love—it felt like a word I’d seldom thought of, but why was that feeling so strong inside myself? I had been comfortable with the idea of a crush, but hearing him say those words had sent a spark of electricity through me. Was that a good thing, or Bad? What made it happen? Was it the story of Max’s mother and the alchemist? Or was it the fact that I longed to have someone to share my every secret, someone who could protect me the way Max could? I felt like I didn’t have a choice, but did I need one?

I walked toward the house, not knowing where else to go and drawn by the murderous aura that surrounded it. Wes turned on the porch, watching me approach with a smile on his face—a smile I’d come to find as comfort, especially in a time like this. I refused to look him in the eye, instead looking at the ring. I twisted it over and over, until my finger burned from its heat.

Was I afraid to love?

I’d loved my father, and I’d lost him. It was the same feeling I felt around Max, but I barely knew him the way I’d known my father. What if Max died? What would I do then? What if he decided that he needed to fly away? I would never hold him back; I couldn’t. He belonged with his family, but had stayed behind for what?

For me? For love? For my father’s dying wish?

And what will happen when I turn eighteen, nineteen, and even twenty? I couldn’t help but compare it to the teen vampire books that Emily had grown obsessed with. Eternal love—it was so clichéd! But here I was, face to face with some helpless heroine’s same dilemma.

Would he promise me eternal love?

Would I jump in head first before I’d even known him longer than a few weeks?

I shook my head. Perhaps I had it all wrong. Perhaps he had no plan at all. I wasn’t prepared to live forever, not with death so close at mind, tickling me to come join in. Max believed there was a destiny for me in this life, and so did my father, but what?

I reached the porch, placing my foot on the first step and hoisting myself up with a heavy mind.

Wes smiled. “Hey, Kid.”

I smiled back. His words were full of reassurance, as though he knew the exact frustration I felt.

“Hey,” I murmured, in no mood to be cheery.

It’d felt like decades since I’d talked to Wes this way—like friends. Even after what had happened this summer, I knew the friendship we once had was never going to be the same. I hoped we could get past that, especially now.

Wes wrapped an arm around my shoulder in a platonic way—or at least that’s what I tried to assume. “Pretty wild, huh?” He was looking at the house.

I nodded, distracted by my thoughts. “Wes, why didn’t you tell me you were... you know...” I referenced his body and the fact that he could be any animal he wanted.

He smirked. "I didn't think you cared."

I gave him a playful punch in the stomach. He pretended it hurt, though it seemed it hurt me more. "You know you can tell me anything, Wes." I rubbed my hand. "You're... my best friend." I was afraid to say it, but that's what he was to me.

Wes was acting bashful now. "I know." He reached for my hand, trying to hold it.

I snorted, ducking out from under his large arm and avoiding his grasp. "Something still tells me you don't." I walked up to the front door, placing my hand on the old handle and tracing it. "Wes, you understand how I feel, right? When I say friends, I really mean *friends*."

He nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets, which meant he was shutting down on me.

I looked at him and smiled wearily, dropping the subject. I looked back at the old door, dotted with bits of iron. "Suppose I should just go in?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Don't see why not."

I looked back at Max. He was walking toward us with his head down. He looked so hurt, but I had to be selfish. I had to take the time I needed.

I twisted the handle, pressing my weight against the door as it gave slightly. The sound of small fluttering wings echoed behind the door. There was a slight breeze that blew across my face through the crack in the jam. I heard Max trot up the steps, approaching fast as he pushed against the door and it swung open and out of my hand. The door thumped against the interior wall. Clearly there was no need to be careful.

I looked at Wes, furrowing my brow. There was a definite sense of frustration in Max's actions, and I could see why. My response to his declaration had been less than acceptable. I just hoped it was okay to invite myself in.

Wes shrugged. "Shall we?"

I peeked my head around the door, watching as Max walked leisurely down the hall toward the back of the house. Birds flew out from around him, fluttering upward as my gaze followed them. I saw Max shudder, the birds triggering some sort of emotion. There was a large stone staircase that spiraled to the second floor. I stepped in, and Wes followed in my footsteps.

"Max?" He'd disappeared into the house.

A moment passed.

"Yeah?" I saw his head look around the corner at the end of the long hall. "Come on," he urged. "There's nothing to be scared of."

"*I was just trying to be polite,*" I whispered under my breath.

Wes chuckled, and I couldn't resist a chuckle myself.

I walked into the front hall, my eyes sweeping the room. It was just like my dream, but far more real. The colors were grey, leaves piled into the corners as light flooded from the vaulted ceiling above where the roof had caved. There were paintings on the walls that depicted scenes of a world I didn't recognize—a world that no longer existed in the present tense.

I made my way toward the back of the house where the whole room opened up. Pillars lined the back wall, large glass doors between each, though most were broken. I envisioned what it must have once been like—the grand view of the yard beyond and lavish aristocratic parties where Max's mother would be found flirting with the magickal alchemist, just under the nose of his knowing father.

I approached the back doors. The stone floor flooded out onto a large patio that bled down into the forest. There was a large circular fountain in the middle of the yard, and stone figurines—each staring blankly ahead, frozen beautifully in time. At the end of the yard sat a grand barn, drooping with age yet still intact.

I turned, finding Max as he stood between two large corbels that formed the pillars of a tall fireplace. I knew the room we were in must have acted as the main ballroom. I spun slowly. I could almost hear the music play, and see the guests, dressed in the fine clothing I'd seen in the paintings on my way in, and in my dream.

I heard Wes's heavy footsteps echoing. "Do we just wait?" Wes broke the silence.

Max turned to us. "Yes."

Wes exhaled. "This is going to be the longest day of my *life*," he mumbled. "I'm going to check out upstairs," he added, hooking his thumb over his shoulder to point.

I didn't object. I was anxious to get him out of the room so I could talk to Max alone. I heard Wes bound up the stairs. If they weren't made of solid stone, I was certain he would have shaken the whole house down.

I eyed Max from the corner of my eye as he stood by the fireplace. I was tapping my fingernails together, looking at the ground and hoping he would say something to break the awkward silence. There was a sudden flash of light, followed by a roar, and then a crackle. I jumped, looking at the fireplace that now brimmed with flames.

“How did you do that?” I gasped.

Max had an arm leaning against one of the corbels, his long, lean body relaxed. “Come here and I’ll show you.” His voice had returned to the same sweet tone I’d grown used to. Perhaps he’d noticed my need for space and had decided to respect that.

He glanced at me, motioning me with his hand. I stepped toward him, noting that what he’d done was in fact a good way to break the awkwardness that had grown between us. My footsteps echoed over the sound of crackling flames, and as I got closer, the warmth of it was a welcomed relief on my chilled hands.

I stood a distance from him, afraid that his touch would seduce me into submission. He was rubbing the tips of his fingers together, focusing with intensity.

His lips moved. “It’s magick. Have you ever seen this kind of magick?”

I watched his hand as he continued rubbing his fingers. Suddenly a spark flew into the air, growing into a small fireball. He cupped the fire in his palm, containing it as it tried to escape. My mouth fell open, mesmerized by the transparent flames dancing within his control. There was no smoke rising from it, and no smell, either.

“That’s amazing! How’d you do that?” I stepped closer.

He looked nostalgic. “The alchemist taught me. He was gifted with the power of sorcery. But in truth, this is just plain physics.”

“Sorcery and physics?” I laughed. “Seems a little juxtaposed, don’t you think?”

He smiled, still playing with the fire in his hand. “In theory, it’s possible to manifest anything you want. You just have to know how.”

I thought about the fourth period physics class I’d taken fourth quarter of last year. I’d failed, so to me, it made no sense at all.

His eyes met mine, flashing with amusement, knowing about my failure in science.

“Is it something I could learn?” I asked. My eyes were locked on the flames in his hands and my heart was jealous to try it, especially now that I knew all that science nonsense actually meant something.

“It is. Like I said, this particular trick is just science, but also a science that wouldn’t exist without Pandora’s magick.” He stepped toward me as the flames in his hand went out. He took my hand, and I was shocked to find that the flames had at last made his touch warm. He turned my hand over, exposing my palm.

“You’re going to teach me right now?” I didn’t fight against his grasp, knowing it was useless.

“Sure, why not? You have a pretty good grip on the idea of magick—though your science skills aren’t all that great.” He winked at me.

I blushed, still doubting that I could accomplish anything at all.

“Close your eyes.” He looked at me expectantly.

I shut them, hearing his other hand move. I recoiled slightly as he touched my face, still fearful of our pending attraction.

“Relax, Jane,” he whispered.

I took a deep breath, forcing myself to forget the fears I had about commitment, and focus on the magick I was about to learn.

“Concentrate on the feeling of my hand, and the things I’m telling you. Think of the fire. Now see the word. Repeat it over and over until you find it almost palpable.”

I concentrated on his hand, feeling something seep into my skin and then my mind. Bright colors swirled in my head. The word ‘fire’ was written there, spelled out in a swirl of flames. Suddenly, it seemed so logical—so obvious as though it should have been something I’d known all along.

Max let go of my face, and then my hand. I opened my eyes, the feeling of the flames leaving my mental vision as they went out. “See. Piece of cake.” He smiled.

I chuckled. “We’ll see when I actually do it by myself.”

He watched me. “Then try.”

I looked at my hand, knowing what to do, but feeling foolish for trying. I brought my middle finger and thumb together until they barely touched. I began to rub them in a circular motion, slow at first, and then faster. My heart began to pound as an immense amount of heat and energy flowed down my arm, concentrating on my finger tips. I kept rubbing, and then there was a spark. I couldn’t help but let my lips spread from ear to ear as the flame grew, finally big enough to sit in my palm.

“See, piece of cake,” he repeated.

I laughed, watching the flames dance, trying to contain it. “*Ouch!*” I suddenly felt burned as I shook my hand, putting the flame out.

Max was laughing. "It takes practice."

I looked at my hand, seeing a blister form on my finger. "I guess it does."

"It's a bit easier when you're cold like I am. My body isn't exactly ninety eight degrees to begin with."

I exhaled, sucking on my finger. His smile stayed on his face as he turned back to the flames in the fireplace.

"So, is there more?" I let my hand sink to my side, touching the blister against the cool fabric of my coat.

"You mean more magick like that?"

"Yeah."

Max nodded. "There's much more. Magick doesn't have to be something you're born with; it can be learned. At least some of it, remember? The most important thing is that you have the ability to learn it, which clearly you do."

"Oh." I grinned, feeling special.

Max shook his head. "You are special." He tried to warm his hands in the flames of the fire, holding them much closer than I could ever handle. "I promise to teach you. Someone in your position could really benefit from knowing."

"Who taught you, just the alchemist?" I pressed.

He pulled his hands away from the fire, touching my face and trailing warmth down the length of my jaw. He took a moment to himself, enjoying the happy thoughts in my mind. "Yes, the alchemist. He gave my mother a lot of books, which as I told you, was dangerous if anyone in the magickal world found out. My mother always told my father they were remedies, but naturally he knew better, and so did I. The library was full of them. I learned a lot from those books."

I tried to imagine this library. "But they all burned, didn't they?"

He tilted his head. "Most did, but some were protected in a few metal boxes and are now in Erik's collection, or still here. We left a lot behind. They're plenty safe, though. The house is invisible to humans." He smiled. "You see, after our death, it was the alchemist that took Erik in. He knew about me, and Greg, and I tried to visit as often as I could. He became a second father to me."

"Where is the alchemist now?"

"Not all of us with magick live forever. The alchemist lived longer than most humans, but only by a few years. He invented a way to live forever, but chose not to indulge in it. He liked the idea of dying one day. He believed it made his life here richer and the experience better felt. He also looked forward to seeing my mother one day."

I knew what the alchemist meant, and I agreed with him. "When did he die?"

Max was still watching the flames, "About twenty five years ago. I know he died of a broken heart, but at the same time, he knew my mother was there on the other side, waiting for him. He was happy to go in the end. I was the angel that led him across."

"So, you didn't mind that your mother and he had an affair?"

He shook his head. "Why would I? Everyone deserves to experience true love, no matter how that happens to come to them. You can't ignore your soul-mate." He looked at me then, a look so deep, so full of meaning, that I couldn't help but feel what he had. If life was short—or long—either way, I wanted to feel love, too. What I was denying with Max was something most fight for all their lives, dream of and yet never get to have. I was being selfish by ignoring it.

"Why didn't Greg come after him? I thought he hated the fact of the affair."

Max nodded. "He did, but he felt guilty for nearly killing Erik. Erik begged Greg to let the alchemist live. Greg knew the alchemist was the only other person Erik felt comfortable with, and he wasn't naïve in knowing what the orphanages here were like. For the first and last time in Greg's life, he showed a bit of mercy."

I wanted to cry as he told me the story. Max drew nearer, sensing my sadness. He hooked his arm behind my back, pulling me against his chest. "I've lived a long life—a cold life. I'm sorry about what I said earlier. I just—"

I leaned back, pressing my fingers to his lips and stopping him. "It's okay, Max. I understand. Just relax. I'm here for you no matter what, okay? I can promise you that." If he was going to be here for me, he deserved to have me here for him, no matter what form that was.

He grasped my wrist, lowering my hand from his lips as he leaned in, kissing me softly. I shut my eyes, allowing myself to enjoy it, allowing the warm feeling he had introduced me to envelope my body.

I heard a loud bang upstairs, jolting Max and I out of our moment as my heart surged. "What was *that*?" I asked, wondering if that meant Greg and Emily were back.

Wes:

“*Blast!*” I cursed as my leg bumped into a stack of charred books. They crashed to the ground, rumbling the sound across the house as the smell of soot filled my nostrils.

I looked down at the pile I’d knocked over, finding the dust now cleared from a few of the burned covers. I squinted, trying to read one cover that had been severely mutilated by fire. A book called *Magick Basics* was on the top of the mess.

“*Magick Basics?*” I whispered. I knelt down, grabbing the book and running my hand over the cover to remove some more of the deep rooted soot. The subtitle read: *Modern Sorcery of the Eighteenth Century*. I snorted, thinking that nothing about it seemed at all modern.

I opened the book, the pages delicate and about ready to fall apart. There were etchings of various techniques, chemical elements, and demonstrations.

“*Cool,*” I mumbled.

It was then that I heard someone coming up the stairs. I quickly knelt to try and straighten the books, afraid to anger Max. Max and Jane entered the room.

“What was that?” Jane sounded exasperated.

I rolled my eyes. “Calm down. I just knocked over a few of these old books.”

Jane looked annoyed, crossing her arms against her chest.

“Max. What is this stuff?” I looked at him, and then looked at the blackened room around us. There were a few remnants of carved wood paneling on the stone walls, but most of it had been burned away. There was little to no furniture in the space—just splinters of what it once was, and bits of metal and nails that hadn’t burn with the rest of it.

He looked at Jane, giving her a look I didn’t quite understand. He glanced back at me, and that was when I felt it. There was so much despair surrounding him, fear, and also a sense of death. I realized then just what this room was—it was the place where he had *died*.

“Oh...” I murmured, suddenly feeling bad for even stepping foot inside this room.

I thought about the day Emily had brought me here. To her, this place was a refuge. I began to wonder if she’d ever gone inside, or if she simply liked to sit in the car as we had, or on the porch. I looked back at Max, seeing that he was watching Jane as she searched the room. It was as though the saddest song was playing in his head—a melody for Jane, a melody of love. I felt the same thing he had for her, but his feelings had an added assurance, making even me see that he was connected to her in a way I never would be.

I felt an itch of hatred wash over me, but it was uninvited. I wasn’t angry about Max and Jane, not in the way I felt now. This hatred was different. Where was it coming from? And why could I not shake it? Why did I want to hate him when it was clear that he was doing all the right things, and with what seemed a true heart?

“We’re supposed to be enemies,” Max answered the question for me, his eyes still watching Jane.

I tilted my head, surprised by his attention to me when it seemed all his attention was on her. “Really?” I found that fact interesting. “Why?”

Max walked to a nearby stack of debris, grabbing a book from under a tarnished silver platter and tossing it toward me. I caught it, twisting the cover to face me. Max placed his hands in his pockets, looking calm.

I read the cover: *Nature of a Shape Shifter*. I opened to the front, scanning the contents until I found the chapter titled: *Natural Enemies*.

I flipped to the page, reading aloud, “Pixies... *Pixies?*”

Max’s eyes grew wide. “Evil little things. They’re annoying on principal alone. I think everyone just about hates them.”

I continued to list under my breath. “Faerie, Pegasus, and...” I ran my hand down the rather long list, finding it just about listed everything. “And... yeah, Angels.” I nodded, letting one laugh leave my chest. “Makes sense, I suppose.”

Max leaned back on his heels. “This doesn’t mean we can’t be friends, it just takes work is all. Two of my best friends in high school were like you. Obviously that was before I died.”

I raised one brow, looking at him strangely. I looked back at the list, aghast with how many things I hated.

Max shrugged. “But to me, you are one of only two enemies. Except as I said, I have a particular dislike for Pixies,” Max added. “You are one of the only things out there that stands a chance against me in a fight. I know you wouldn’t hurt me, though. Once we get past the animal instincts, I believe we’ll form a great friendship.”

I snorted. “What makes you so sure?” Hearing him say the word friendship in reference to me sounded unlikely.

“Have you seen that list? There’s just about no one you don’t hate except beings like Jane and Emily, and they’re special cases. At some point, you’re going to want more friends.”

Max had a know-it-all look on his face and it annoyed me, as though he thought he was better than me. I also knew that it was likely my natural hatred for him that amplified this, but still, it was there.

I exhaled and placed the book back on a nearby pile of debris.

He’d turned his attention back to Jane as she roamed the room. “So, what happened between you and Emily?” His voice was low, as though making sure Jane couldn’t overhear.

I chuckled, finding it hilarious that he was trying to be best buds by discussing relationships. “Nothing,” I said bitterly. My body suddenly felt warm at the mention of her name.

Max smirked. “You do love her. You just don’t know that yet. I can see why, though. You’re confused by your previous emotions for Jane, and you mistake that feeling for true love. Trust me, the feeling you have for Emily is the real thing.”

I furrowed my brow. “What do you know?”

Max laughed. “It’s not a shameful thing, Wes. I know what happened to your ideas of love in the past, but you need to let go of the guilt. Emily is the one you really want. You haven’t lived as long as I have. You have yet to learn through trial and error, but in the end, you will agree with me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. I hated to be told what I wanted. “*Whatever.*”

I blew him off and walked away, grumbling under my breath. As he’d predicted, my thoughts were now filled with Emily. She was beautiful, fun, and adventurous. Jane had always been rather boring, calm and in her head—what I imagined was just Max’s type.

I looked at Jane. Perhaps the jealousy wasn’t over love for her at all. Perhaps it was the type of jealousy a protective brother might feel. I didn’t like to see Max with her, or anywhere near her, but it was because I knew what he was capable of, and that was breaking her heart. When I thought about kissing Jane, it wasn’t the same as when I thought about kissing Emily. Emily’s was filled with fire and passion, whereas Jane’s felt platonic and dull in comparison.

I shook my head, hating that I’d let Max get into my head. I felt something sharp enter my heart then. I stopped dead in my tracks. The feeling began to burn, and then a heartbeat formed, beating in tune with my own, attached to me in a way that felt like longing.

I turned on my heel, my eyes wide. “They’re here.” I saw that Max was already frozen, but Jane had not yet felt what we had.

Max lifted his hand to his mouth, moving quietly. It was then that he suddenly braced himself. The next moment, I saw why. Someone crashed into him suddenly, appearing from thin air. It had moved so fast, that there was no warning of his arrival.

Max heaved, but held his ground as the floor crumpled beneath him. I heard laughter then, and I saw Greg form from the blur of bodies, buckled over as though his impact had hurt him as much as Max. Max shook his arms, standing out of the crack that had formed in the floor. I heard soft footsteps approach from the hall—the sound tickling my ears, and my heart.

Emily entered the room, and my jaw dropped. I’d not yet seen her, and had no idea just how bad it had gotten. She was frighteningly pale, the skin around her eyes shadowed, and not just from her heavy makeup. The bruise on her hip, were I’d grasped her after the party, was still there. It was showing just below the hem of her skirt, though considerably faded. My chest stung—I wanted her back. I *needed* her back.

Emily’s dark eyes scanned the room before resting on me. She did not smile. Her expression was as cold as ice. I’d forgotten to breathe, the breath in my lungs beginning to sting.

Emily’s mouth was sullen as she looked away from me to Greg. I wanted to cry, I missed her soft gaze so much. She walked up to Greg, and he put his arm around her. I clenched my fists. Greg stopped laughing, looking from his brother to me. “Oh, look. It’s Emily’s ex. How nostalgic.” He grinned.

I locked my jaw, my palms beginning to sweat as the pain in my muscles quickly spread. I didn’t even have to think it, and already I’d become the lion. I let out a loud growl.

Greg pretended to look shocked. “Look at that!” His voice was demeaning. “You found yourself a *shifter*, didn’t you, Brother? You should know that they’re a deceitful friend to keep. You remember the way his parents treated you...” Greg looked at me, his eyes blazing. “And the way they left him *behind.*”

My mouth remained open, showing my teeth. What was he saying? *Max knew my parents?*

“This shifter’s got a fierce little heart, doesn’t he? So chivalrous!” Greg continued to laugh, angering me further.

I saw Max put his hand up toward me, telling me to stay back, but there was something else. I perked my ears, hearing his voice in my head.

Let me talk, you need to focus on saving Emily.

I hissed, shaking my head like a race horse yearning to be released from the gate. Max reached in his pocket, discreetly grabbing the bottle that

contained the toothpick from earlier. My attention and anger toward Greg switched to concern, and I remembered why we were here. Max tossed the bottle behind his back, his brother too fixated on Max to notice. I quickly changed back into my human form, standing naked in the middle of the room as I caught it, but I didn't care.

"Greg, listen... Give us Emily. She is not yours to keep." Max's words were heartfelt, but I knew he was just buying time.

I untwisted the lid, carefully grabbing the toothpick and shoving it in my mouth like I did after a visit to the steak house. I grinned as the poison numbed my tongue, quickly switching into the snake as my whole body dropped to the ground.

Jane:

I stared at Wes. Despite all that was happening, seeing him as a lion was fascinating. His hair was standing on end, his tail snaking behind him. His whiskers lifted and fell as he breathed hard, his teeth showing below his lip line. My heart raced watching him, seeing why it was possible that Max and Wes could be enemies.

It was then that I saw something fly through the air. I focused on it, seeing it was the bottle that contained the toothpick. Wes was suddenly human again. I blushed, eyes fixed upon his beautiful, naked body. He twisted off the top, placing the toothpick in his mouth with a smug grin. The next moment his body disappeared, a black snake falling to the ground in his place.

"Greg, you know you only want to do this to her because of me, and my love for Jane." Max's words broke my attention, drawing it back to the center of the room where their stances mirrored each other.

Emily was standing like a shadow behind Greg. I saw now that I needed to separate her from Greg, so that Wes could get to her. I took a step forward. Emily's head snapped to the side, her eyes meeting mine. There was a murderous glimmer that played at the edges of her blackened gaze, but I knew that somewhere in there, the Emily from my dream still lived.

I took another step, and her face tightened. Her weight shifted, and she took a step toward me, and then another. She was determined to protect Greg, and as long as she thought I was coming after him, she would continue to advance toward me, and away from Greg.

I glanced down at Wes, seeing his dark scales blended with the charred room, making him almost invisible. He advanced toward us, at the same pace Emily advanced toward me.

My heart began to pound as I found myself within her reach. Her eyes narrowed, her face twitching with energy. I saw her weight shift back as though in slow motion, knowing she was about to attack. I looked over her shoulder, wishing Max would help me. To my dismay, I saw him and Greg now wrestling across the floor, Max's grey wings tangled with Greg's pitch black pair.

Looking back at Emily, time sped back up. She lunged, toppling into me and we fell back. My back hit the ground. I heard my spine crack, but not break. She had a strength she'd never had before, and I hoped that it wasn't too late—I hoped that she wasn't already dead. She pinned me to the ground, and that's when I felt her heart beat against mine and the warmth in her hand as she locked them around my wrists. It wasn't too late.

She growled at me, as though all conventions of speech had been stolen from her, leaving her savage. She let go of my wrist long enough to slash at my face, her nails grazing the skin on my cheek, leaving it stinging. I winced, trying to push her off me. She sat up, her legs locking me to the ground.

Her lips formed the most vindictive smile I'd ever seen, her eyes showing that this was it—this would be my end.

I shut my eyes, not wanting to see her face when it happened—not wanting that to be the image that would haunt me forever. I waited for the end, but when I heard the scream erupt from her throat—a scream so full of agony, and so full of death—I knew that Wes had bitten her.

I opened my eyes as she rolled off me, claspng at her ankle as the screaming continued. I saw Wes swing in the air as she flailed, attached to her skin, his jaw clamped tight.

"No!" Greg yelled. He threw Max off of him, sending Max flying across the room and crashing into the wall.

Max slumped to the ground, shaking his head.

Greg ran up to us, shoving me away from Emily. He grabbed Wes's tail, ripping his teeth from her body. "What have you done? *You imbecile!*" He discarded him to the side in a coil of black scales.

Wes looked stunned, but otherwise fine. I made my way to him, petting his head as he blinked a few times. Wes's body tightened then and he slithered up, hissing wildly at Greg as Greg tried to bring Emily back to his side. Greg heard the hiss, looking over his shoulder with a surprising hint of fear.

Wes slithered toward him—so fast, it was more like a leap. Greg covered his face, trying to shield himself. I was confused by his cowardice, but as Wes clamped his fangs into Greg's arm, I heard Max's yell.

"Wes! No!" Max winced as he said it, reacting to the same pain that Greg now felt. He pushed himself off the ground, stumbling toward us.

Wes released his bite on Greg's arm, reacting to Max's cry. Wes's body fell to the ground, now human.

"Wes!" Max reached us, his eyes filled with alarm, the life in them fading just as Greg's were.

Wes looked at me, not knowing what he'd done.

"Wes..." Max's voice was weak now. "You can't... do..." His eyes fluttered closed, his breathing suddenly labored.

I felt my skin burn with fear. "Wes, what's happening?"

His eyes were wide. "I—I don't *know*." His eyes darted about the room, and I saw there was an idea forming. "Quick, help me find a book about angels. There was one for me. There must be one for him. *Quick!*"

I leapt to my feet, running toward the pile where Max had pulled the book about shifters moments ago. I shoved the pile over with both hands, covering my fingers with black. I searched and flipped through the books, my hands frantically grazing each cover.

"*Demons... Faerie, Dragon...*" I mumbled. There was nothing. I shuffled through another stack. "*Alchemy, Unicorn, Angel, Gho*—Angel!" I screamed, jumping to my feet and lunging back to Wes's side. I gave him the book, and he quickly searched the contents.

"Mortal Enemies..." he muttered, lacing his fingers through the pages. He then listed the names. "Shifters... and..." he looked at me, his eyes grave.

"And what?" I screeched.

"And *snakes...*" Wes was frozen, and so was I.

"Wes, what do we do?" I cried. My skin was covered in a cold sweat. Emily let out a moan, rolling on the ground.

"Should we try to suck the poison out?" he suggested.

I shrugged. "Yeah, but you've got to do it. You're the one that can stand the poison." My eyes looked frantically upon his, pleading him to do the right thing. *Don't let him die!*

Wes pressed his lips together, and then leaned toward Greg as he lay unconscious beside him. He reached for his arm, clamping his jaw across the wound in the same way he had when inflicting it. He sucked on the gash, blood seeping down his chin. His eyes were shut tight, his expression showing disgust.

He stopped for a moment, spitting blood on the ground, but when he went back for more, this time I saw him swallow.

"Wes, *what are you doing?*" I found that fact a little appalling, but as I saw Max begin to rouse, I no longer cared.

I hunched at his side, stroking his head. "Max, wake up." I placed my hand against his cold cheek, finding that in his already dead state, it was hard to know how alive he now was. "*Max—*"

His hand grasped my wrist as I continued lightly slapping his face. A smile crept across his lips. "Beautiful? Can you stop that?"

I fell back, panting wildly. "Oh, Max. You're okay!" I looked back at Wes, alarmed by the fact that he was still sucking on Greg's arm. "*Wes!*"

Max looked to his side, seeing what I had. Max's hand left my wrist, clamping around Wes's neck as he yanked him off Greg. His eyes were wild, and he looked stunned, as though he'd woken from a deep trance.

"*Great,*" Max muttered, eyeing his weakened brother but seemingly unconcerned, suggesting that he would unfortunately survive. In retrospect, I suppose that was a good thing.

"Great *what?*" I gasped, watching Wes's eyes whirl inside their sockets.

Max appeared frustrated. "Not only is he high from the poison, but now he's addicted to angel blood." He looked at Emily, still writhing and moaning on the ground. "We have a lot of detox to do."

"*Detox?*" Every word that came out of his mouth only shocked me further.

It was then that Greg roused, his eyes meeting ours. He then scanned the room for Emily, seeing her thrashing about. His eyes narrowed, glaring at us with an expression that seemed weakened and deceived.

I blinked once but missed it. Just like that, he'd disappeared.

Max drew in a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "At least it's over."

I rolled my eyes. "At least for now, right?"

Max looked at me, his eyes scanning mine but leaving me with no answer—no reassurance that my remark was just a joke, because it wasn't. As long as Max was alive, Greg would always be there in the shadows.

Emily:

“*What the...*” I sat up, my head spinning. I moaned and lay back against the pillow, keeping my eyes shut.

“Oh, Emily, dear!” I heard my mother squeal, making me wince. “This flu is just the worst, isn’t it?” She was talking to someone else that was in the room with us.

“She’ll be better soon, Mrs. Taylor.” I heard Max’s voice, freezing as it entered my ears.

“Max...” my mother went on. “That medicine you brought is really bringing her fever down. Don’t you agree, Jane?”

Jane? Jane was here? Knowing that made me feel better.

“Mmmm... Yes. I do agree.” Her tone sounded false, and I wondered what was up.

“Well, are you two hungry? Would you like some sandwiches?”

I heard Max and Jane reply in unison, adding to the phony cloud that was already floating around the room. I heard my mother leave, shutting the door behind her.

“*Emily,*” my sister whispered sharply. “*Emily, open your eyes.*”

I didn’t want to open my eyes. My lower lip jutted out stubbornly.

I heard Max laugh. “She’s just trying to be difficult.”

“No surprise there,” Jane replied, meaning for me to hear it.

My eyes shot open. “Shut up!” I cried—wincing as my head pounded in rebellion.

They both laughed at me, their voices low out of respect for the fact that my head was splitting open. There was a bitter taste on my tongue, and I was thirsty for something I couldn’t put my finger on. I felt a sharp pulse, my leg throbbing near my left ankle. I sat up enough to look, seeing it was wrapped in a thick layer of gauze.

“Flu, huh?” I gave them an accusing glare.

Max shrugged. “I think you know enough about mind control to understand why she thinks *that...*” he motioned to my ankle, “...is the flu.”

I wanted to laugh, but knew it would hurt too much. I hadn’t forgotten a single second of what had happened as it all rushed back to me. It was like I’d been locked inside a body that I could no longer control, viewing everything but having no way to stop it. I frowned, filled with a sudden feeling of guilt as I remembered the things I’d done.

I looked at Jane with a tear in my eye. “I murdered someone, Jane. Greg made me do it.” Tears streamed down my cheek. I saw the man, a terrified look in his eye though his posture was relaxed. I saw myself stabbing him, his body sinking to the ground where his blood mixed with the sand of the beach.

Jane brushed my tears away, kissing me on the forehead. “It’s okay, Emily. That person wasn’t you. You did not kill anyone.”

I continued to sob, not knowing what else to do. Jane held me for a long while, Max remaining at Jane’s side. I no longer hated him, though the fear remained because of the fear I felt toward his brother, and the things he’d done to me. As far as I saw, though, I would respect Max for as long as he was in our life. He had saved me, after all.

Jane finally released me, unsure how much time had passed. I opened my eyes, seeing Wes was now standing in the room. Tears returned as he smiled at me. He came to my side, kneeling until his lips were beside my ear.

“I love you, Emily,” he whispered. I saw him look up at Max as though looking for affirmation. Max nodded. “There’s only one person I love, and it’s you. You are everything to me.” His words were true. They had come from a place in his mind that I knew held no memories of my sister.

I scanned his eyes, seeing there was still another internal struggle brewing inside his head. It was a struggle that wasn’t there before, but a struggle that felt so familiar to me.

Max cleared his throat, as though wanting to answer my question. “You both have a lot of recovery to do. Emily, you were fed my brother’s blood in those pills you kept taking. They made you feel numb because of the addictive, drug-like quality of our blood that makes us age so slowly.” Wes was watching Max as he talked, an undeniable hunger glimmering in his eyes. He viewed Max as a source of this drug he now longed for, but struggled to deny.

“And, Wes,” he continued. “Unfortunately, in order to save me, you had to suck the venom from Greg’s arm, which naturally, included that same

addictive blood that Emily had.” He addressed us both now. “You are addicted to a thing called *blood lust*.”

Jane chimed in, whispering in my ear. “*Sort of like vampires.*” She winked, knowing I’d loved vampire books—it hardly brought me any comfort now. I hated them.

Max glared at Jane, hardly finding it the time to make such analogies. “You’ll find you want it less and less as time passes, but for now, it’s going to be difficult to subdue your desires. I’ll have to wean you off it. I’m at least thankful that you have each other to lean on.”

There was a knock on the door then, and my mother walked back into the room. “I brought you your favorite! Chicken noodle!” She noticed Wes. “Oh, so great to see you’ve already recovered from this *horrid* bug, Wes!” She smiled blindly, not even noticing the fact that my leg was purple and wrapped in at least an inch of gauze.

I shook my head, finding this all a bit strange, but for the first time in my life, I felt like a part of something real.

Jane:

I shut the door behind us, hoping it wouldn’t wake my mother as she slept soundly on the couch downstairs.

Max turned the second the door clicked shut, clutching my face in his hands and pulling me toward him. His coolness pressed against me—I shuddered. He gazed into my eyes. “I never got the chance to thank you for saving *me*. Funny how that happens, isn’t it?”

His breath tickled my lips, teasing me the same way his body did, close to mine. “It is. How ironic.” I smiled, nudging his nose with my own.

He laughed lightly, smiling as the delicate wrinkles around his eyes creased. His hands left my cheeks, falling to my sides where he curled his fingers around my hips, our lips meeting. A chilled sugary flavor filled my mouth as they intertwined.

I wedged my hand between us, leaning back and licking my lips. “I…” my eyes fell, seeing where our hips met. His fingers were hooked in the pockets of my jeans, locking us together. “I never got the chance to tell you that…”

I saw his eyes light up, knowing what I was about to say.

“That… I think I love you.”

He laughed. “You think? You mean you know?”

I smirked, rolling my eyes. “Sure, okay. I *know* I love you.” I blushed. “When I saw you dying, it hit me. I felt that overwhelming feeling that you had long ago, when you spared me.” His thumbs traced my belt. I sighed, enjoying the way his skin felt—cold and protective. “I was just scared, you know, and confused.” It seemed too fast to say those words, but I felt it all the same. “I’m not one to believe in love at first sight, but… I guess I do.”

“That’s okay, Jane. If it makes you feel better, Wes was scared by the feeling for Emily as well. You were both confused by your somewhat complicated friendship.” I saw his brows knit together when he said complicated. “But now that I’ve shown him what love is, he knows.”

I felt a twang of love for Wes, but a different kind of love than the desperate, Earth-moving love I felt for Max.

Max licked his lips, and it made me jealous to know that he got to taste the sweetness of his kiss, but I couldn’t. He smirked, his hand trailing up my back as he pulled me against him, kissing me once more. The gentlest nudge was all it took to make him fall back onto my bed, the whole while never breaking the kiss.

My body heated up despite how cold his was. His hands under my shirt helped to cool me. I liked the feeling, and I wanted more. I reached for the button of his jeans, but he stopped me, laughing in a nervous way.

“Wait,” he whispered into my ear, driving me mad.

I gave him a strange look. “*Wait?* Usually that would be my line.”

Pulling away, I saw his face also seemed nervous, his eyelids struggling to hide the telltale shake of emotion I was certain pulsed through him.

“I just… I’ve never done this before and… I want to wait.” He nipped at my bottom lip as I gaped at him.

“*You’ve never done this?* In one-hundred years, you’ve *never* done this?”

He shrugged, kissing my cheek. “I thought I told you. I never found someone. Besides, only in the last thirty years has it even become acceptable to do that before marriage.”

I laughed, but not in a way that would hurt his feelings. I wondered then why he was such a good kisser.

He was the one that laughed this time. “I’ve kissed someone before. I’m not that much of a prude.”

“Who?” I ventured.

He gave me no answer.

I sat up, straightening my top. “Well, then. I guess I can wait.” I chuckled uneasily. “But let me warn you,” I leaned close to his ear, regaining my confidence as my lips grazed his skin, “I’m not very good at waiting.”

He ran a shaky hand through my hair and smiled. “We really do have this all wrong, don’t we?” He was scanning my thoughts, seeing how everything was backwards and nothing was what I’d expected.

I touched his neck, noticing a small delicate chain peeking from under his shirt. “What’s that?” I hadn’t noticed it before, it’s weave so small, it was almost invisible.

He watched me, his eyes scanning mine. “That’s a story for another time, Jane.” He weaved his fingers into my hair. “I wasn’t finished kissing you yet.”

The chain dropped from my hand as he wrapped me in his arms, pulling us back against the pillows. As we kissed, enjoying every moment we had, his hands explored my body in a way that told me that next time, he’d know what to do.

...

The breath from Greg’s lungs was cold as it passed his lips, his brow creased. The branches below his feet were snapping as the weight of his body bore down on them. Greg was not about to give up. This simple setback would not deter him from his ultimate goal.

Something whizzed past his ear, almost silent if it wasn’t for the gentle brush of a feather. Greg halted and spun on his heel, his thoughts on failure momentarily buried.

Seeing nothing behind him, he looked back in the direction the object had gone. Something gleamed from a nearby tree. Greg squinted, recognizing the arrow. He laughed.

“Avery!” Greg yelled, amused by her presence.

Another whizzing sound alerted his senses, the feather of a second arrow brushing his other ear. It pierced the skin of a second tree. Greg made a sudden move to snatch a third arrow, catching the tail between his fingers as it flew by. He spun the shaft in his hand, taking note of the characteristic silver swirls that decorated the tip. His lip was curled.

“Avery, stop teasing!” He looked to the canopy above him, his sharp nocturnal eyes catching what little light the moon cast across the forest.

A branch rustled overhead, and Avery fell to the ground before him. Her knees bent with expert ease, accepting her weight. Avery slowly stood, adjusting the quiver on her back. Her silver-blue eyes never left his, her pale skin and long blonde hair glowing in the light of the moon.

Avery had a sassy grin on her face. “Long time no see, *Greg*.”

Greg stood his ground, finding trickery was already written across her face. He held the arrow toward her. “You missed.”

Avery laughed. “*Missed?*” She reached forward, touching Greg’s ear. When she drew back, his blood stained the tip of her finger. She wiped the blood on her silk tunic. “I never *miss*, dear Greg.”

“You didn’t kill me.” He challenged.

Avery grinned and looked at the ground. “Killing you would defeat my purpose.”

Greg lifted one brow. “Your purpose?”

Avery finally took her arrow from Greg’s still outstretched hand.

“Are you saying you’ve finally seen my side of things?”

Avery’s eyes met Greg’s. “Maybe I have.” Her lips were pursed, giving no tell to her intentions.

Greg put his hands on his hips. “Max won’t like that news.”

Avery laughed. “Max? You think I still care about him after what he did to me?”

Greg shrugged.

“Besides, the point is that Max doesn’t need to know.” She eyed Greg, telling him with the confidence of her pose that her plans were deceitful. What Greg couldn’t decide was to whom they would benefit—him or Max.

“So, you’re saying you want to trick him?”

Avery didn't move. Her eyes locked on Greg.

"Have you even seen him since he's been back, Avery?"

Avery looked down at her nails, inspecting their flawless beauty. "Unfortunately I have seen him, but only from a distance." She rolled her eyes. "Seems Max has found a new *pet*. I wonder how long that will last." She gave Greg a look of contempt.

Greg snorted. "He thinks he *loves* her."

They both laughed for a moment.

Avery exhaled. "A Seoul? He loves a *Seoul*? Classic."

"So, then your on my side," Greg pressed again.

Avery smiled. "We need to get rid of that little brat. She'll stain his honor, *my* honor." Her face was solid.

Greg laughed. "Jealous are we?"

Avery glared, a pinkish hue lighting her cheeks.

He nodded. "Finally, someone get's it."

* * *

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About The Author

Abra Ebner lives in Washington State with her husband and two cats. She writes everyday, unable to find anything else that brings her as much joy, other than love.

Her travels to England, Scotland, Switzerland and Germany, as well as her studies abroad in Australia have granted her a life full of wonder and excitement. She graduated from Washington State University with a degree in Fine Art.

Special Thanks

Kenny and Amber

Brenda

Heather

Tessa

Mom

Dad

&

My Husband Erik

* * *

The Feather Book Series

Book One

Feather

Preface

The Gods once created a being far greater than anything in existence. These beings, the highest form of human life, were closer to the Gods than even the Angels, and their beauty far more appealing than any earthly creation.

The Gods, upon seeing such a beautiful creation, grew jealous. The being needed no love, longed for no power, and hungered for no nourishment of either mind or soul. Their flawless creation was angelically perfect, and therefore appallingly wrong, for nothing could be more perfect than the Gods themselves.

As the being flourished, troubled by nothing, the Gods grew dark and vindictive. Fueled by their hatred, they plotted, and the plan they constructed was horrid, inhumane, and dark. They chose to split the perfect soul for eternity, for the Gods thought themselves ultimately endangered by their creations' power and strength. In one swift movement, they ripped the being apart, creating two hearts; both sharing one soul.

One half was the creator, the life and energy of the Earth, and the mother of man. The other half was the power and protection, a warrior of worlds. In this, they created Male and Female.

As the Gods schemed in their eternal greed, they chose to make their creation a game, no more than mere pawns for their enjoyment. As punishment, they scattered the beings among the humans of Earth, both halves separated and eternally locked in hunger and longing for the love of their shared soul.

The female half was the holder of their life, the emotion and beauty of the soul. In her, she protected this delicate power, never abusing its energy, and forever giving to the Earth and nature. Despite her possessions, she was lonely and lost in love - weak, sad, and alone.

The male half, the powerful half, was left lifeless and drained of the energy only the soul could give him. In the male's life on Earth, he searched for his strength, the female, and the power he could ultimately gain from it. Their lethal lust for that soul was so great, that it drove them into madness, anger, and despair.

Upon meeting their soul mate, the male half was found hungry and vicious, murdering his other half in his greed, and ultimately leading to their demise. But despite their vicious love, many survived long enough to understand their power, and in finding each other, they unlocked the secret to their lives.

Together, the two halves created a whole, a life force greater and more powerful than anything on Earth. Though eternally tormented by jealousy and hunger, they were better together than apart, the ultimate test of eternal love.

A New Day

“Estella, take this.”

Heidi thrust a thick envelope toward me as tears of sadness filled her eyes. Her hand was trembling and weak as it floated in the air between us.

I looked at the envelope with caution.

“Oh, no!” I shook my head, my face contorted into a sad frown. “Heidi, no, I couldn’t.” I squeezed my eyes shut, unable and unwilling to accept the gift.

“Please, Estella.” She paused, her voice breaking. “I just want to see you happy. I am old and tired. My life is ending and yours is just beginning.”

Heidi walked toward me with a determined look on her face. The envelope was still stubbornly held out in front of her. Her eyes pierced mine, and I could see she loved me like her own.

I grabbed the small, manila package between my trembling fingers, treating it with delicate care. The contents were beyond what I could ever deserve, but the needs reflected in Heidi’s eyes ran deep, and I found myself unable to say no.

“Thank you.” I looked at the ground as a familiar sadness pierced my heart.

Heidi leaned in and hugged me, her thin arms squeezing the breath from my lungs.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t have been more of a mother to you,” she whispered, her breath hot as it fell across my ear. She sounded responsible, as though the fact of my absent parents was her fault.

She was crying now, and I felt her tears seeping into the shoulder of my blouse.

“Heidi, you are the closest thing to a mother I’ve ever known. Don’t think any less of yourself.” I put my arm around her frail shoulders as she trembled against my chest, the guilt in me rising as I forced back my desire to stay, to save her from her lonely life.

She pulled away, a determined look now filling her tear-stained face. She was strong, I knew this, but she hated to say goodbye.

“You go, make me proud,” she said bravely. “And find your happiness.” Heidi patted both of my shoulders with surprising strength, her nails digging into my skin.

“I promise I will come back as soon as I can.” I tried to smile as I bent to pick up my last bag, but try as I might, I couldn’t summon the action.

Heidi followed me to the car in her housecoat and slippers as I threw the last bag in the back seat of the old, rusty, green Datsun. I was finally able to afford the car after my summer working at the Market downtown. I did everything I could to scrape enough money together, to make my escape from the city.

Heidi’s eyes had dried and I looked at her with nostalgic love and admiration as I climbed into the car. The old vinyl seats yawned against my sweaty skin, and I winced at their searing heat. I squeaked the door shut, slamming it with as much force as I could muster before putting my hands on the plastic wood grain steering wheel. She waved to me with hopeless vigor as I coaxed the vehicle to life and forced it into reverse.

“I will visit soon!” I yelled out the window as I drove off. “The college is not too far.”

Heidi took a small step forward as she waved goodbye one last time. I would miss my foster mother, but this was my time to make something of my sad life. The upbringing she had given me was more than I could have hoped for, but something inside me was driving me away, pushing me to another place.

As I drove down the crowded streets, the shadows cast by the towering buildings of downtown Seattle always left me somewhat disappointed. The tiny house where I had been placed when I was ten glared at me in my rearview mirror as it disappeared between the apartment complexes of the west side.

I took a deep breath, exhaling with a heavy heart. I had decided the city was not for me. After years of adoption and rejection, I couldn’t stand its cold cement and moist, dirty air any longer. Why the city had let me down I was unsure, but as the depression in me grew deeper over the years, it had become a sort of cancer. There was death here, and everyone took their happiness for granted. I would have given anything to feel a smile, to muster out a happy laugh.

I rolled my windows up, closing out this world as I headed north toward the Cascades. As the hills of Seattle whizzed by, each growing less crowded with houses, I felt a sort of liberation. The stern grip I’d had on the steering wheel slowly eased, and soon I was casually driving with one hand. My lonely life had never granted me the experience that was ahead of me, the chance to be with nature as my heart had so longed.

The college brochure had promised a tranquil and secluded experience, and that was just the thing I was hoping my dark heart needed. College had always been a goal for me, and despite my graduation from high school with a bachelor's degree that I had earned taking night courses, it still didn't satisfy my insatiable need to learn.

The sun shone onto the serene valleys of northern Puget Sound, filling the basin with energy and warmth. As I crept further north, the dense forest began to creep ever closer to the road. Like always, I felt a strange pull from the plants that sat there, each bowing toward the concrete as though longing to escape to the other side. The cement was like a wall, much like the invisible wall in my heart that was refusing to allow me happiness. Despite the confines of the road, I still envied their freedom. They had a life of simple happiness, and the ability to adapt and grow. I, on the other hand, had never belonged, and despite how hard I tried, I always stood out in a negative way. The world hopelessly saddened me, as though somewhere in my past life, it had let me down, my soul now darkened by my mere existence. I felt like a mistake, and I felt like God had forgotten me, as though he were too ashamed to grant me a fair life.

I reached into my bag as I drove, retrieving a bottle of medication that seemed like my only lifeline. Keeping one hand on the wheel, I popped a small pill into my mouth, as I habitually did every day for the past twelve years. Each clouded thought was further stifled by the power of Prozac. I allowed myself a brief second to close my eyes as I once again opened my windows, so that the wind could whip through my white-blonde hair. As the sun touched my pale skin, it felt warm and soothing, like a bath of heavenly light. Opening my eyes, I felt discouraged that even a moment like this could not muster a smile.

Even as a baby I had never laughed, never let out even so much as a delighted coo. Smiling was something I did because I had to, in order to fit in. I learned what was funny from my peers, and practiced for hours in front of the mirror, my facial muscles stretching with pain in a way that came so naturally to everyone else. Tears never came, either. Though I knew what I felt was sadness, I never experienced that emotion in the true sense of the feeling. It was as though someone had taken my heart and stashed it away, someplace I could never find it.

I thought about all my adoptive parents and how many times each tried to create a happy life for me, how relentlessly they urged me into activities designed to muster a laugh, though one never came. I was like a poisonous berry, beautiful on the outside, damaged and sick on the inside. It was an inevitable truth that each parent would fail, and so they sent me back to the social workers, apologizing for their failure as parents. After a while, I gave up hoping that I could find a place to fit in, hoping instead that I could just be in one place for longer than a few months. It was that fact that I moved in with Heidi and her other foster kids, and for what I planned to be forever – or at least until I was old enough to strike out on my own.

I exhaled from deep within my charred soul as I finally reached the town of Sedro-Woolly. There, the road split and I turned onto Highway Twenty, heading east into the North Cascades. The small town of Sedro-Woolly was far north, close to the Canadian border and the San Juan Islands. It was just far enough from Seattle to make me feel like I could leave the past behind me and start anew. The town was the gateway to my future, a new life.

As I headed into the wilderness, the trees that edged the roadside seemed to welcome my presence, the branches swaying in the gentle breeze. The air seemed full of magic, and I saw the glimmer of bugs flying between thick rays of light, like fairies in the trees. With my windows opened, the gentle clamoring of water softly whispered in my ear as I passed spring after spring, cascading down the granite rocks and into the roadside reservoirs.

The mountains closed in around me like a blanket, casting deep shadows on the road, but not the same depressing shadows I had grown up around in the city. These shadows revealed a whole other world beyond the dirty streets and sadness, a world full of life. For the first time, I felt a soft warmth flicker in my vacant soul and I gasped, the feeling ripping the breath from my lungs.

Rounding the corner with caution, the trees parted before me like a curtain at the opera. Sun poured into the car, a fresh scent riding on the rays. The river that had followed the road burst open into a large lake that was held back by a small dam. The water sparkled clearer than I'd ever seen in Puget Sound, and the glimmer made my eyes water. The air that blew into the car was crisp and cool from the glacial waters, and I breathed deep, feeling reenergized.

I gazed in awe, wondering how I'd let this whole world hide from me for so long. As I followed the lake, I kept glancing toward it, afraid that it would disappear as fast as it had come, akin to a dream or a fleeting memory.

Like the meandering stream, the road wound to the right and I crossed over the lake on a small bridge. I felt a rush of something cold enter my body as though the water were pulsing through me, becoming a part of my blood and filling every vein. I allowed the feeling to control my thoughts, and I imagined a tidal wave washing through my wounded mind, cooling each burning gash.

Just when I thought I couldn't have seen anything any more stunning, the lake expanded further, revealing an even larger dam before me. The structure was astonishing in its sheer size and power, solid as though the Earth had made it. I took in the complex structure and it amazed me to believe that man could create something so magnificent. As I tore my gaze from the structure, I saw that the college was now before me, nestled into the hillside on the other side of the dam. I was almost there. I was almost free.

As I turned from the main road toward the campus, I slowed my car as it rolled onto the quaint cobblestone roadway atop the dam itself. The gentle vibration was soothing as the cobbles shuddered under my weight. The college had utilized this dam as the crossing to the school, and I allowed myself to imagine that it was a bridge to my fairy-tale castle.

To my left was the lake that I had driven beside on my way up. As I peered over the ledge, I beheld the plunging drop, my head experiencing a gripping vertigo. To my right, the water churned, anxious and foamy in its attempt to escape its confines. The lake itself was crystal blue, and rich with minerals that added a milky consistency. Rocky peaks surrounded the water on all sides, reaching with open arms into an even bluer sky. The unique coloring was unbelievable and I recognized it to be Diablo Lake, upon whose shores the college was situated.

As I neared the other side of the bridge, I noticed a cascading waterfall drop like a graceful veil from a far peak and into the lake on its final decent. Its raw power humbled me, reminding me of my infinitesimal existence on this planet. I watched in silence as the falls misted the air around it, rainbows flashing in its wake. The wind whipped toward me across the water and I enjoyed the untamed beauty.

I tightened my grip on the wheel and held my breath as I heard a gust of wind tickle the small waves of the lake. The wind rushed toward me, unfazed by my position in its path. As it landed on the car, the cool breeze whipped through my long hair, making it dance. My skin prickled and I shivered from the chill, the hairs on my arms now standing on end.

When I reached the other side of the bridge, I released my breath, feeling refreshed and grounded as my car rolled onto the gravel drive, the water no longer flowing below me like a force of energy greater than I could control. I circled Diablo Lake and just a few hundred feet farther east, the road became even rougher. My tires struggled to find their grip so I drove with caution up the hill toward the front of the small cluster of buildings. I tried to stifle the anxiety and fear I now felt toward this unfamiliar place. My mind was cautious, but also roaring with curiosity.

An anonymous donor had created the Cascades College a few years back. Its purpose was to provide a Masters in Environmental Studies through hands-on experience and practice. There were also primary classes but mainly it was a place to get your hands dirty and experience the real world, in its truest sense.

When I had learned about the college, I remembered that it was the first time I'd felt my heart truly beat. Something about its design, location, and description felt more like home than anywhere I had ever been. I needed to be close to the earth, close to the place where life began.

I was never the nature-loving type, yet my choice to come here had been motivated by nature and my desire to heal. Ever since I could remember, I possessed a strange talent for growing plants; a green thumb, you might say. But my talent did not simply involve using the right fertilizers and making sure to water regularly. My talents seemed to involve something much more magical and indescribable; something I was here to figure out.

Turning my car off with a heavy sigh, I sat in front of the main learning center, the large 'Welcome' sign looming over me. I felt something flicker in my chest as it had on the drive up, and for a second time, it stole the breath from my lungs. I was right to come here.

Taking in the small modern buildings, I again wondered if perhaps I was dreaming. I had been trapped by the city for so long, that I had never seen nature first hand. Though I coveted the magazines on every store shelf, I now saw that pictures could not give it justice. Nature was a sensory experience, meant to be enjoyed in its natural environment.

A lanky red-headed man, startled by my abrupt arrival, jumped up from a bench by the office doors and ran toward my parked car with a smile plastered across his face. He couldn't have been much older than I, but his demeanor made him seem years younger. He came bounding down the hill, tripping with inherent clumsiness. He was quick to regain his composure with a small smile of embarrassment. He wore a green plaid short-sleeved shirt with hiking shorts and Columbia boots. I chuckled to myself, finding his outfit a cliché.

The man was breathing hard as he placed both of his hands on the window. He leaned down to my eye level, locking his gaze on mine.

"New arrival?" he asked, in a cheerful voice that was also winded.

I looked at him with nervous eyes as anxiety gripped my stomach.

"Yes," I managed to squeak.

His eyes were a light blue like mine, but unlike mine, his were full of life and happiness.

"Great," he exclaimed, sticking his hand through my window for me to shake. "I'm Scott."

I stared at his hand for a moment, allowing my anxiety to subside. Finally, I deduced that Scott was harmless, and I grabbed his hand between two fingers and gave it a soft shake.

Scott yanked his hand back just as quickly as he had thrust it forward, unfazed by my reluctance.

"Well, it sure is great to meet you. Would you like some help with your things?"

He opened my car door, and I cringed as it shuddered and scraped, rust flakes falling to the ground.

"Um..." I was processing the information as quickly as I could. "Sure. That would be great." I pulled myself out of the seat.

"Thanks," I added, giving him a small, tight smile.

Scott stood there with his hands on his hips, smiling eagerly. He was like a dog, just waiting to be thrown a bone.

"So what's your name?" As soon as I was out of the way, he jumped forward, lunging into my backseat and loading his scrawny arms with my three somewhat small bags, the makings of my whole life.

"I, uh..." I stuttered, grabbing my throat, willing it to stop. "My name is Estella." My medications always caused me to think slowly, as if I were in a cloud. It was an unpleasant but unavoidable side-effect of the medication I needed to make it through my days.

"Hi, Estella." He grabbed a sheet from his pocket, juggling his load as he struggled to bring it to his face. He squinted. "Looks like you got your own cabin." His eyes widened with excitement. "Cool," he crooned.

I nodded in agreement. I had worked a few extra shifts at the fish counter of the local market to make that possible. I wasn't about to bunk up in a group dormitory again, like I had for a good portion of my life at the orphanage.

"Well, then." He smiled with a sweet glow as he urged me forward. "Follow me."

"Thanks." I grabbed my shoulder bag from the passenger seat and rushed to keep up.

"So, Estella..."

"Oh, you can call me Elle," I quickly corrected him.

He looked back at me as I followed behind him. "Okay then, *Elle*... What brings you here?"

I looked at him sideways. What else would I be here for? "For the Master's course," I said softly.

"Oh, really?" He looked back at me again, this time scrutinizing my face more closely. "Aren't you a bit young for a Masters?"

I shrugged, watching my feet as they struggled to stay on pace, nerves again gathering in my stomach. "I got my undergraduate degree while I was young."

"Really?" He sounded shocked.

"Well..." I felt embarrassed and my cheeks began to flush. "It's just that...it came so naturally." I paused, breathing hard as we passed under a large pine that left a thick bed of needles on the ground. "It wasn't very difficult for me. I had a lot of time on my hands."

The fact that I never had friends made me resort to anything that could pass my time, and mostly that was homework and studying. I was a first class nerd and social reject. Even when I did try to make friends, my awkward personality eventually put them off. I knew that at some point, Scott probably would come to learn this as well. But for now, he seemed to accept this.

His eyes smiled at me when he spoke. "Then I am impressed. I'm in that program, too, but I'm not quite as young as you. I'm twenty-one. I kept pretty much on pace with things through high school." He eyed me with curiosity. "I suppose we'll have the same classes. There aren't many people here."

I nodded, thinking that was how I'd wanted it, quiet and secluded. As we rounded the path, I finally spotted a small cabin nestled on the hill.

"So, that will be yours," he announced. We approached fast, climbing onto the porch with our boots echoing beneath us. He threw down a bag so that he could open the door. I noticed there was no lock.

"I will just set your bags here in the corner. Does that work?"

I nodded again. "Yeah. Thanks, Scott."

He thrust his hand toward me again, still the same energetic spark to his face.

"Well, good to meet you, Elle." He still didn't seem fazed by my standoffish behavior. "I guess I will see you tomorrow in class?"

I shook his hand and tried to give him another smile, though I was never able to succeed in getting it quite right. "Yeah, I guess I will. Thanks again."

I shut the door behind him as he bounded down the hill with the same awkward gait as before. As I looked around the small, square cabin, I was pleased to see there was a lot more than I'd first imagined. I had my own bathroom with a small shower and a tiny kitchenette with a miniature refrigerator. My bed was full-sized, bigger than I'd ever had, and I experienced a small feeling of satisfaction at my turn of luck.

I reached in my bag and pulled out the thick envelope Heidi had given me. I slid it in the crack where the fridge met the cabinet, thinking I'd save it for an emergency. I pulled my boots off, placing my stocking feet on the wood boards of the floor, testing the texture on my toes. I then circled the inside perimeter of the cabin, inspecting every square inch of my new home and opening the blinds as I went to let in the light.

After deciding everything was in order, I sat on my bed and pulled one of my bags toward me. From inside I grabbed a small stack of moleskin journals and placed them on the shelf above my bed. I had began documenting my life the day I was able to write, a craft that soothed me. The simple act of getting my feelings down on paper was cathartic, keeping my soul open for happiness to come in, though it never did.

Deep in the bag, nestled between my clothes, I found the framed note from my real mother. It was the only thing I had from her. I flicked on the bedside lamp so that I could see it more clearly. The beautiful script and rough edges played at my emotions, and every day I read it in anticipation:

Estella,

You are beautiful, and it pains me to leave, but some day you will find the beauty you seek living inside your darkest soul. You are safe now

The poetic words puzzled and saddened me. I had searched for her when I was younger, but found nothing about her or where she'd gone or even if she was dead or alive. And so my soul remained black.

Placing the frame on the wooden side table, I reached back into my bag and pulled a small, tattered brown box from its depths, treating it with extreme care. Opening it with caution, I retrieved a small pot containing a tiny purple plant that was snuggled inside. Grasping it with two hands, I set the purple clover on the sill and touched its butterfly leaves. It reacted to the light and stretched its petals toward the sun like an opening umbrella. I had decided to take just one tubular with me from my vast garden in Seattle, just one child with whom to start my new life.

After unpacking the few clothes I had, leaving some in the bag out of sheer laziness, I finally laid on my bed, letting my platinum hair fan out around me. After a few moments of restful silence, I pulled myself back up and reached into my bag once again, grabbing a book. I leaned back into my pillow and I began to read as the darkness of the night crept in around the cabin. Soon, only the light from the bedside lamp shone dimly across the room, casting eerie shadows against the walls of the unfamiliar place.

I glanced away from the page to the windows and realized that the hours had passed faster than I'd expected. The blackness seemed infinite and my heart began to race anxiously as the world of my book faded away. I lifted my head off the pillow and sat up, sliding my legs to the floor. As I approached the window, I was shocked to see only a few faint lights glimmer from the campus that surrounded me. I had never experienced anything like it in my life: profound darkness and quiet, all at once. I leaned toward my lamp and switched it off, allowing the lights outside to magnify.

After a moment, I walked to my door and opened it, walking quietly onto the small deck, not wanting to disturb nature's slumber. I squeezed my eyes shut and tilted my head to the sky, enjoying the tranquility of the night. When I opened my eyes, I gasped at the tiny diamonds that littered the sky, sparkling greater than I had ever seen and in far greater numbers than I could imagine. I had read about the stars, seen images and studied their matter, but never would I have expected the sight that welcomed me now. The city lights of Seattle and the almost constant thick shroud of clouds made star gazing difficult.

My body and mind felt clear as I stood there connecting with the night. A light breeze swept playfully through my hair, gently caressing my face. I could smell pine and sage, and a feeling I had never experienced before slipped over me: peace.

For a moment I couldn't help but feel I might at last smile, but then the wind subsided and my dark soul remained empty. As the stars twinkled ever brighter, I realized I was getting close. There was something out here I needed to see, something I was meant to do, but what that was, for now, would continue to elude me.

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Índice

[Knight Angels: Book of Love \(Book One\)](#)