

K. R. CONWAY

CRUEL SUMMER



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Summary: When a dangerous killer finds himself stranded on Cape Cod at the height of the Fourth of July week, he is forced to accept the help of a feisty female mechanic who changes his outlook on life, love, and monsters.

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~ DEDICATION ~

For the fans, because they rock my world!

And for Uncle Phil, because he would've loved Cerberus more
than anybody . . .

Dear Reader:

This story is a prequel novella regarding the characters Kian, Ana, and MJ. In the timeframe of the series, this book takes place before the first book, *UNDERTOW*.

While *Cruel Summer* can be read at any point in the series, it **DOES** contain some story spoilers for *UNDERTOW*. Therefore, if you are someone who likes surprises, it is highly recommended that you read *UNDERTOW* first.

Then again, you may be like me and try to peek inside the gifts way before you are supposed to open them . . .

Read at own risk and ENJOY!

K. R. CONWAY

CRUEL SUMMER

~ PART 1 ~

LIES



❧ KIAN ❧

THE 1935 AUBURN SPEEDSTER was easily the finest automobile I had ever driven in my 182 years. With its curving lines, huge fenders, and miles of chrome, it was the pinnacle of vehicular perfection.

Unfortunately the car's former owner, whose body was wedged in the truck, was really ruining my evening at this point.

Granted, Samuel Benton, who barely fit in the Auburn's tight cargo area, had been a greasy weasel of a man with a severely overinflated ego. At only five and a half feet tall, he had reminded me of one of those monkeys from the circus that bounce around at the end of a rope, clamoring for a bit of attention. Thanks to his thriving cocaine business, he had thought of himself as a god, which made him even more irritating.

Luckily his stellar personality made killing him an hour ago quite enjoyable, and I took my time dragging every ounce of life-force from his ratty little body, like a smoker enjoying a fine cigar.

He thought I'd come for a hit of his over-priced powder.

He didn't realize that *he* was my drug of choice.

Honestly, I would've never come to his vacation villa on the Cape, except that he had the one thing I really wanted – his car. The fact that he happened to be at home when I arrived was simply a perk. Dinner on the go, as it were.

The Auburn was everything I'd been searching for in a new toy and had glided down the street towards the harbor like a bead of liquid mercury. That is, until it mutinied just before 11pm, sputtering to a halt and stranding me in a darkened, dirt-covered parking lot with Sam. He was destined to smell up my new ride if I didn't ditch his body soon.

I thrummed my fingers over the leather steering wheel, staring through the night at the side of some run down building named The Milk Way, which I could've sworn was a blacksmith's place a few decades ago.

I knew where I was, and breaking down in this exact location, a few hundred yards from Elizabeth Walker's house,

had to be some sort of cosmic penance for stealing Benton's car.

Not for killing Benton however.

That twit deserved what he got.

I watched as a lanky boy in an apron walked along the side of the building, carrying trash bags to the dumpsters for the third time. He was humming to himself, totally oblivious to my presence . . . and how rotten his job was, apparently. He hadn't seen me roll silently into the far end of the parking lot, which probably was a good thing since Benton was with me.

Well, technically his body was with me.

After I'd drained him of his life force, I shot him up with enough cocaine to take out an elephant. I had intended to drive his slowly stiffening carcass to the harbor, and dump him in the water, where the cops would think he had overdosed. But no – instead I was stuck with a half-million dollar car that wouldn't start and a dead drug dealer in the trunk.

To make matters far worse, it was Thursday night and the coming week was the start of the July 4th holiday, which meant that every loser in New England would head to the Cape. And being that it was 11pm, no bloody garage would be open to check what the hell was wrong with the Auburn.

God, I hate Cape Cod.

At this point, with karma kicking my ass, I didn't even care that the area was a prime hunting ground thanks to all the swimmers. Stealing souls from beach-goers was like taking candy from snot-nosed brats, thus making the Cape a great place for my kind to kick back and soak up a few souls.

We Mortis made tourist season quite the killer.

Killing swimmers was an art of which I was well practiced. Like my fellow soul sharks, I could hold my breath for hours, staying submerged within the valleys between the sandbars, waiting for a human to cross the dark channel of water. Shadows would cling to me like a velvet skin when I needed them to, making nighttime the best time to hunt. I usually kept tabs on bonfire parties and the occasional group of night surfers since they were the optimal targets; drunken and therefore fairly stupid.

Of course, the real trick to making murder look like an accident, was to draw from the swimmers slowly, weakening them so they couldn't fight their way to the sanctuary of the ocean's surface. As they panicked and weakened, they would begin to suck water into their lungs.

That was the key - water in the lungs.

Young soul sharks tended to get too over zealous and not allow their target to draw in water. No water in lungs equaled no report of drowning from the coroner's office.

Morons.

Despite the wealth of targets on the Cape at the moment, I only wanted one thing: to escape this godforsaken town as soon as possible.

If I was lucky, the kid in the apron would go about his menial job and close up the shack he worked at, never the wiser that I was camped out in the far corner of the parking lot.

True, I'd be stuck here until the town fell silent, but then I could hopefully hike my way to nearby Craigville beach and dump Benton without being noticed. Then, tomorrow morning, I could deal with the car.

As I ran every conceivable way to move a murder victim to a dump site without being caught, I heard the kid's phone ring. I glanced up, half bored, half pissed I wasn't halfway to New York by now, and focused on the thin cell phone the kid brought to his ear.

Even from a distance, I could easily hear him answer the phone, thanks to my advanced eavesdropping ability.

God, I loved the perks of being me.

"There you go. Calling me when I'm super busy, breaking my flow. Sheesh – you are such a bad influence!" scolded the kid with a laugh, leaning back against a large outdoor freezer. He picked at a frazzled thread from his faded apron and his lips twisted

into a grin as he listened to the caller. I was about to tune out his teenaged stupidity until I saw his smile fall sharply and his face grow serious.

“Then don’t go home. Swing in here – you can crash at my place. No. NO. It’s fine – my mom won’t care. No, she won’t. SHE WON’T! Listen to . . . yeah, I know, but you know you should wait.”

The kid had gone from easy going to strung-out stressed in a matter of seconds. Morbid curiosity (and an obscene amount of boredom) made me continue to listen in.

The kid began pacing, and then suddenly turned, heading in my direction.

Concerned that he had seen me, I immediately began trying to figure out where I could stash HIS body if need be. While I loved the Auburn, the lack of storage was going to be a problem at this rate.

Thankfully the kid turned, heading toward a black Wrangler that had been parked closer to the road. He yanked open the door, still arguing with the caller as he leaned in to get something.

“You know damn well that I’m right. Just come here and at least hang out. What do ya mean, why? Stop being such a pain in my ass, and just come over. Not to mention I’ve got something to show you.”

I saw the kid slap his hand to his forehead and mouth a few silent curses. He obviously didn't have anything to show this person. Talk about a poorly planned lie.

Idiot.

But then he began looking around the area near the shop, obviously trying to think up SOMETHING to show the stubborn jerk on the other end of the phone, and his eyes landed on my mostly hidden car.

Crap.

I really needed more trunk space. If his stupid friend shows up, I may need to carjack a bloody minivan.

The kid squinted in my direction, trying to make out the lines of Benton's former vehicle.

I needed a plan, fast. I drew a deep breath as I heard the kid tell the caller that there was some "*sick looking ride*" sitting in the corner of the parking lot. I watched him begin to approach my car, and rather than stay behind the wheel like a psycho-stalker, I decided to confront the kid.

Then kill him if he didn't leave me alone.

As I pushed open the heavy door, I heard the kid say to the caller that I might be broken down. "*Jeez, he's not a serial killer! Chill out! I'm just going to go knock – oh, hang on. He's getting out.*"

He turned his attention away from his phone as he approached. “Hey man – nice ride. You having car trouble?” he asked.

I cleared my throat and began lying, “It stalled out on me, but it’s not a big deal. I have a friend coming in a while to help me out.” Hopefully this kid would move along with his insignificant life still intact.

“Well, I know a great mechanic. I’m on the phone with her right now,” chirped the kid.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “A girl? Your mechanic is a chick? Yeah – that’s okay, but I think I’ll pass. Wouldn’t want her to chip a nail on my engine or something. I’ll just wait for my friend, but thanks.”

A girl. How ridiculous.

I thought the kid would take a hint and leave, but instead a smirk climbed on his face as he brought the phone slowly back to his mouth. “Yeah, he’s broken down, but he says not to worry about looking at the car. He said he wouldn’t want you to break a nail.”

I heard a sharp voice say something loudly in reply through the phone, and the kid winced, pulling it away from his ear so he wouldn’t have hearing damage. When the line went quiet, he carefully brought the phone back to his cheek. “Hello?” he asked, but the caller had apparently hung up.

He stuffed his phone into the front pocket of his apron and reached his hand out to shake. “She’ll be here in just a second. I’m MJ, by the way.”

“Terrific,” I replied sarcastically. I took his hand, giving it a firm shake as I began to wish I had a fucking mommy mobile. “I’m Kian. Kian O’Reilly.”

I wanted to strangle someone . . . anyone.

Even a dog would do.

2

❧ KIAN ❧

IT TOOK ~~MISS~~ PISS ~~ED~~ about ten minutes to get to the shop, though trying to maintain small talk with the walking apron was a new level of hell for me. He went on and on about bands I'd never heard of, ice cream flavors that I'd never taste, and the infinite joys of living by the beach.

When he rolled into a monologue about how *totally wicked* the surfing at Cahoon's Hollow was, I nearly thought about killing myself. Nearly.

But then I pictured backing the Auburn over him as soon as it was running, and felt instantly better.

As he begun describing the new graphics he was getting added to his board, a beaten-up four door roared into the parking, sending dust and dirt scattering.

"Oh good! She's here! She's amazing with cars!" proclaimed the kid who had turned his attention to the new

arrival whose vehicle seemed to yack up a piston as it sputtered and died.

In the momentary silence, I could hear the base beat of the radio playing inside the car. I braced myself as the door began to open, sure I was going to be hit with 100 decibels of angry chick rock. Instead, it was Green Day who blared through the empty parking lot.

Okay – so she had good taste in music. That didn't mean she could identify a screwdriver.

I watched as a riot of black hair twined with purple streaks appeared from the door, quickly followed by a faded green tank top and grease-covered cargo pants encasing an entirely feminine frame. As she turned I finally got to see her huge, green eyes lined with black eyeliner, and lush pink lips that seemed to sparkle in the street lamp's light. She looked me over, crossing her arms fiercely over her chest, effectively enhancing her delicate cleavage and ramping up her mean-girl attitude to a stellar level of sexiness.

I let my eyes drift over her, taking in the barely-there curve of her body, the graceful arch of her shoulders, and the rope bracelet that hugged her sun-kissed skin. A golden belly-button ring winked at me from her navel as she tossed her hip to the side, leaning against the car she rode in on.

She was Tinker Bell's bad-ass, smoking hot, alter-ego. And granted, she was technically a walking meal ticket to me, but *damn*. For a moment I thought that humans might actually carry more potential than simply snack-value.

But then I dragged my gaze back up to her face and all lustfulness that I'd been entertaining, shriveled.

The look she was giving me could crack a windshield.

I straightened and began to approach her, but she shoved off her car as Apron Boy tried to introduce me to her. She ignored him and walked right past me, headed for the Auburn.

She stopped at the front of the massive car and began running her fingers under the lip of the hood, searching for the latch. As she did so, she glared at me. "So – what did ya do? Raid the museum?"

Raid the what?

"Hey – Kennedy. I asked you a question. Where'd ya get this thing?" she demanded again, jutting her chin toward the Auburn as the hood finally gave a *click*, releasing.

She began to lift the massive slab of steel and I snapped out of my momentary confusion. "Here – I got that, " I said coming to her aid.

"I don't need your help. Me and my *delicate* fingernails are just fine without your over-dressed muscles."

As if to prove her point, she raised the huge hood above her five-foot tall frame, pulling up the hood stand to prop it open. As she stretched on her tip-toes, the top rode even higher . . . and those damn cargo shorts slid dangerously low on her lean hips.

“HEY – eyes up here,” she scolded sharply, pointing to her face.

I couldn't help a devilish smirk.

The girl had sass. I could get down with that.

She glared at me. “You gonna screw your head on straight and tell me where you got a '35 Auburn, or just stand there like an overpriced lawn ornament?”

“Excuse me?” I demanded. Suddenly sass wasn't so appealing. “Who do you think you are, talking to someone you don't know like that?”

“I'm the person who is gonna save your khaki-clad ass from the side of the road, so you can hurry off to the next ocean-front orgy and show off your metal man parts to all the ladies,” she replied, gesturing to the Auburn. “Men that drive cars like this are trying to make up for certain shortcomings, if ya know what I mean,” she winked.

“I assure you that nothing of mine is short,” I muttered under my breath. One part of me wanted to snap her neck, but the other part was totally intrigued.

She was unlike anyone I'd ever met – prickly, intelligent, and twistedly addictive in a tooth-fairy-gone-wrong sort of way. Sadly, I was fairly sure she'd rather remove my maleness than ever let me get near her, so I decided to do the next best thing: piss her off.

I took a step towards her as she looked over the engine. “First of all, how I got the car is not your business. Secondly, we are not on the side of the road, Pixie Pants. We're in a parking lot, and a shitty one at that. You should be more observant of your surroundings.”

“HEY! Our parking lot is not shitty!” protested the apron, who had wandered back towards the ice cream shop. Or rather, shack. He watched me and Pix from afar, probably to make sure I wasn't a creeper, though the mini-mechanic appeared to be feisty enough to hold her own.

“So what's the verdict, Pixie Pants?” I asked with a wide grin.

She didn't look up, but continued to fiddle with the engine, checking fluids. “Call me Pixie Pants again and I'll make sure your ride turns into a fireball before you make it past the harbor.”

“You're so delightful – like a scorpion on acid. Did anyone ever tell you that?” I purred, taking another step

closer, pretending to be interested in how her fingers traced over the mechanics of my car as she bent over the engine.

“My stellar personality wins me the popular vote all the time.” She stood back, wiping the grease from her fingers along the butt of her pants. The lines streaked her rear like a tiger’s stripes. I could examine those stripes all day.

She finally turned to look at me, “Try cranking it over now, Kennedy.”

“It’s Kian,” I replied, sliding in behind the wheel.

“Whatever, Daddy Warbucks,” she muttered to herself, though I could hear her clearly.

I turned the key and the Auburn shocked me by roaring to life. I couldn’t believe she actually fixed it. The sound of the engine purring reminded me why I was so desperate to get the sucker running in the first place.

I still had a corpse to dump.

I left the Auburn running and walked around to the hood. Pixie Pants stood watching god-knows-what-parts in the engine, as if daring them to break down again. I was still amazed she had done it.

“How old are you?” I asked, floored at her ability.

She squeezed by me to reach the hood stand. “Why? Trying to add ‘pediophile’ and ‘pervert’ to your long list of charming qualities?”

Ouch.

“Okay, first of all, I’m twenty, not some elderly grandpa looking to get a few thrills from a fourteen-year-old.” Well . . . technically I was more than 160 years old, but I looked 20. *Pfft – details.*

She shot me a snarky look. “I’m sixteen, almost seventeen, but thanks for labeling me a middle-schooler.”

“Hey – you made me guess. Totally your fault. And speaking of the Blame Game, who can I thank for that lovely man-hating vibe which you so eloquently give off like shrapnel? An ex-boyfriend who jumped your candy-striper cousin perhaps?”

Her mouth dropped open as she was about to hurl some well-constructed insult my way, but the hood slipped. She moved fast, trying to get out of the way so as not to be decapitated, but in her rush she tripped on her own black boots.

I grabbed her around the waist before she smashed face-first into gravel.

Immediately she scrambled out of my hold and I could hear her heart rate going far faster than it was before. She stood there, looking at me, eyes wide, but then she managed to pull herself back into that snarky shell of armor she wore so well.

Her reaction to my touch screamed one thing loud and clear: fear. In that one moment, she was terrified, and not from nearly losing her head.

No. She had been afraid of me.

“You okay?” I asked, stepping back as unease crawled over my skin. She couldn’t know what I was – there was no way. Humans couldn’t identify what we truly were, which was why we were such effective killers.

Pixie’s reaction to my touch, however, was entirely different from that of other humans I’d come in contact with.

“Of course,” she snapped, twisting her multicolored hair over one shoulder. She nodded to the Auburn, “You’re good to go. I just tweaked the timing.”

I nodded, fishing a few hundred dollars from my back pocket. I knew I was overpaying for her work, but between her faded clothing and rust-bucket-on-wheels, I knew she could use the cash.

Plus, I was still running over the look on her face when I had grabbed her. It was haunting. Disturbing.

I took a step towards her, holding out the cash. “Thanks.”

She eyed the money, but shook her head. “A twenty is fine. It only took me a few minutes.”

Wow. I never knew a human to turn down an easy four hundred dollars. She was like a mini Goth girl with a conscience.

“Just take it – twenty for the car and the other 380 for putting up with me,” I urged, smiling.

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Forty then. I’m not taking more than that. I didn’t earn it, despite your breathtaking banter.”

“Did you just admit that my banter is breathtaking?” I replied, unable to keep from teasing her.

Her eyes lit with fire. “Are you freaking kidding me? You know what? Just forget it. I don’t need your money.” She began stomping off towards her car, muttering things about me and every other spoiled rich wash-a-shore that she dealt with each summer.

It was only then that I realized I’d actually enjoyed her company.

Dear god, I needed to get out of this place.

It was messing with my mind.

Tweaked by my reaction to the whole debacle, I shook my head and trotted after her just as she slid into her car. Apron Boy also ran up to her, and I slowed so he could talk to her without me hovering, though I was close enough to see that she had a few pillows and blankets in the back of her car.

Jeezus, was she sleeping in that rust bucket?

“You’re not going home, right?” asked the boy, concern etched over his face.

Pixie sighed, “No, I’m not, so calm down. The Howlers are out tonight, so I’m just going to go hang with them. I can crash at the overlook. You wanna come?”

The boy looked torn and seemed to know who these *Howlers* were. “Shit, I’d love to, but I’ve got to open tomorrow at the crack of dawn to make a double batch of just about everything. This week is huge for us. I’m sorry, but I can’t. My mom would kill me.”

“No worries, MJ. I’ll text ya later,” said Pixie, starting her car. Apron Boy (whose name I’d entirely forgotten was *MJ* until Pixie had reminded me), backed away and I stepped quickly up to her window, propelled by a need that I bloody well didn’t understand.

She looked at me and moaned, “Now what?”

Hell if I know.

“I’m paying you. You did a great job and, all joking aside, you deserve the money. So here - take it.” I held out the forty dollars she’d agreed to, but as she took it, I let the rest of the cash carefully slip onto the floor behind her seat.

By the time she'd find it, I'd be long gone from the Cape and she'd be forced to keep it. And then, finally – *hopefully* – I could get my screwed up emotions in check.

She looked down at the money in her hand and then up to me. Her eyes were the most stunning, liquid emerald I'd ever seen. “You really need to find a mechanic that can handle that Auburn engine. I'd locate one fairly soon.”

“I will and thanks again, uh . . . what is your name anyway?” I asked, stepping away from her car as she shifted into drive.

“I'm Ana. Ana Lane,” she replied, giving me a quick nod as she pulled out of the parking lot, leaving a trail of dirt in her wake.

I turned to MJ, who was watching her drive away. “So who are the Howlers anyway?” I asked, my curiosity bordering on an obsession.

I really needed to get the hell out of here . . .

“That's what the members of the night surfing club call themselves – you know, like they howl at the moon because they know they can go surfing and see well during the full moon. I know – it's a stupid name but it's loads of fun.”

“She's going surfing? Right now? IN THE DARK?” Tension ran through me as I knew it was the perfect time to hunt, especially if you were a soul shark, like me.

She'd be a prime target tonight.

Why, *WHY* did I ever come back to the Cape? Benton's car was not worth this amount of bullshit. Nothing good ever happens to me in the sand flea state, I swear.

MJ looked at me oddly. "Dude – don't worry. Ana can haul ass on the water. The girl is half sea witch, I swear. Not to mention, Marconi beach is really open. The Howlers go there to surf because there isn't any coral to smash your head on. She's perfectly safe."

I suspected Ana Lane was many things.

Perfectly safe wasn't one of them.

I glanced past the kid to the windows of the ice cream shop, where a garish selection of Milk Way branded clothing hung on display. I ground my teeth together, debating what to do.

Ana Lane wasn't my problem.

I shouldn't get involved.

I was THE shark for crying out loud, not the blasted lifeguard! And I still had a body to dump.

But I knew all too well what trolled the dark water of the Cape at night and all I could visualize was Pix, desperate to breath as one of my kind slowly drew her soul from her body.

“Damn it!” I growled, my conscience apparently sliding back into place after a century and a half of being AWOL. How convenient.

The kid – MJ – stopped and looked back at me. “What did ya say?”

I let out a defeated breath and said something I never thought would come out of my mouth. “I’ll take the cow-print swim trunk in the window.”

MJ blinked at me, no doubt convinced I’d lost my mind, which was probably accurate at this point.

“Really? You mean the ones with *Milk Way Rules* on the back or *Udderly Delicious*?”

“Surprise me,” I moaned. MJ smiled wickedly and nearly skipped back to the shop to grab my new swimwear. I could almost hear Benton laughing at me from his toasty spot in Hell.

As soon as I convinced Pixie Pants to get out of the damn water, I was out of here. No way I was staying on the Cape past tonight.

No way. Never.

3

ANA

THE BITE OF THE frigid Atlantic was just what I needed to escape reality. To forget what waited for me at home if I returned before sunrise.

As I drove to Marconi beach I convinced myself that the car could once again become my camper for the evening. I'd done it before, many times.

Too many times.

My father's tuna boat, Miss Charlotte, would shove off in a few hours, just before daybreak, and my father would be on board. For five days, he and his crew would be hunting tuna and I'd be safe, if only briefly.

In years past, he could control it – the drinking, the lost days, the brittle hold he kept on his temper. But once I hit teenhood, he let the booze-induced demons win and they whispered to him one thing over and over: it was my fault.

My mother, gone from our lives, had disappeared into the night when I was just two-years old. My father said she was a drug-addict – that the lure of the needle was a greater reward than we were. It wasn't until he started drinking, that he began pointing fingers. He said the stress of having a child had pushed her over the edge.

That she'd left because of me.

And maybe that was true. Maybe she couldn't handle having a kid. Maybe she couldn't handle being married. The truth was, it didn't matter why she left, only that she did, and for that I paid the price.

My dad was a good guy until that one fishing trip when he was introduced to the numbing void of alcohol. I don't know whether it was because it dulled his pain or made reality less sharp, but he quickly descended into THAT man – the one who sat in front of the TV, smashed out of his mind, entirely ignorant of the fact that we were once again without food and that the rain was beginning to seep through the neglected roof.

He once took such pride in our small, two-bedroom home. Now it was a shell of what it used to be, not unlike our lives.

At one time Dad and I were awesome together. He'd read me stories at night and take me to the drive-in, giving me

all his popcorn. He taught me to ride a bike and hit a curve ball.

He taught me to be brave.

But once the liquor took over, Jack Daniels became a greater joy than anything else in his life, including me.

I still held out hope that he would eventually be willing to fight his way through the addiction and be the man he once was, but until then I needed to steer clear of his wrath – and the back of his hand.

MJ knew it too.

He'd seen the results all too clearly in the past. He wanted to call the police, but I begged him not to because I knew they would put me in foster care and Dad in jail. I needed to just make it to my eighteenth birthday, a little more than a year away, and I could move out. I could be free and get my dad help from a distance.

And so MJ agreed to keep my secrets and help hide the marks.

When I'd called him tonight at The Milk Way, I knew he was gonna freak out. My dad wasn't supposed to be home. He was supposed to have left earlier in the day to head out on the boat, but he hadn't. The fact that he was still at home when I drove up to the house could've cost me a black eye, except his truck tipped me off to his presence.

I'd been at RC Garage, working on a side job for crazy Dalca Anescu and her riding lawnmower. She was one strange lady, owning an herb and essence store known as The Crimson Moon.

People said she was a witch. Dalca claimed she was a Gypsy. I just thought she was nuts, but she also paid me well.

Jack, who owned RC where I worked, was a good guy. He allowed me to do side work on my own time, and let me stash the beat up Trans Am I was slowly restoring in the shed out behind the shop. Jack also let me keep all the money from the sidework, though he could've very easily charged me a fee to use the space. He seemed to know that I was always in need of cash, no matter how much I worked.

My father's cut of Charlotte's profits were usually donated to the local liquor store as soon as he stepped off the dock, so every dime I made paid for food, heat, lights, etc. I could tell that Jack knew something was up with my home life, but he never mentioned it.

So when I drove home and saw that Dad was still there, I dialed the docks and found out that Miss Charlotte had been rescheduled to leave tomorrow, instead of today.

That's when I called MJ and learned of Fat Head who believed anyone with ovaries couldn't turn a wrench. Pissed over his ignorance and determined to prove my worth, I had

quickly climbed through my bedroom window, grabbed a few things, and headed to The Milk Way to kick some ass.

I was correct. The guy – Kian – was a TOTAL player and a rich brat to boot, especially with that Auburn. That car had to be worth at least five hundred thousand and was nearly the same as the one in the car museum in Sandwich.

Kian was also irritatingly handsome and at least six-foot tall. Hell, he was not even a normal level of pin-up poster good looking. With his golden skin, god-like build, and short-cut blond hair, he was like a living, breathing Photoshop file for crying out loud!

He was probably as one dimensional as a computer file too, especially since I couldn't get a read on what he *really wanted* from me. Granted, I was still a novice at reading people's true desires, but I could almost always get a vague outline of what someone really wanted. Of course, being able to read someone was both a blessing and a curse when it came to my father. A blessing, because I knew he still loved me. A curse, because he seemed unable to pull his love through all the layers of hate and rage.

MJ used to joke that my ability was due to some freaky government experiment and that I'd escaped from their lab . . . or I was just another worker at 1-800-Psychic. He joked, until

one day, while we were watching a movie, his skin became reflective.

Talk about an epic freak-out.

I damn near choked on my peanut M&Ms.

After digging through his family tree, he realized he had the ability to phase his body, which was what had caused his glitter-ball moment while watching Point Break.

Eventually (after some seriously messed up attempts that resulted in nightmare-worthy creations), MJ nailed a black dog form. I nicknamed him *Marsh*, short for his first name Marshall James, and he soon became known as the big, friendly town stray.

Yeah, MJ's ability made my gift as an emotional psychic *pale* by comparison.

So we formed our own support group, which consisted of just the two of us. We called ourselves "WA" for Weirdos Anonymous. We met exactly one time, got bored, and disbanded. I smiled as the face of my dear friend popped into my head as he declared our first meeting "open" for business, only to realize we had no real business to discuss. Then we went surfing.

I was still smiling as I pulled into the overlook parking lot at Marconi beach and saw a dozen or so people riding out

into the silver waves. I hoped they had a board I could borrow, since I had to sell mine last year to catch up on the mortgage.

I slid out of the shop's rickety Ford that Jack was letting me use until the Trans Am was running, and quickly stripped out of my clothes. In the dark, so far from the other surfers, I really didn't worry about someone getting an eyeful of my lady parts as I got into my zip-back bathing suit. I'd found the expensive board suit at a local thrift shop for just a few dollars, and it did a decent job of keeping me warm thanks to its high neck and long-sleeves.

Of course, certain less enjoyable classmates had laughed at my suit, claiming it was relic of their own grandmas' attics. And I admit – it did have a moth-bally smell when I first got it, but now it just smelled like the sea and me. More importantly, it could hide the occasional bruise.

It was one more layer of armor against the world.

Ready to ride, I jammed my boots under the back of my seat, but as I did so I felt something paper-like on the grungy floorboard. I picked it up, only to realize it was a wad of twenties – eighteen to be exact.

Three hundred and sixty dollars.

“Shit,” I muttered, stuffing the money into a tear in the back seat. I bet my next meal that that guy, *Kian*, was half-

way to Boston by now. The money was a windfall by my standards, but I didn't earn it and I didn't like pity.

He had thought I was broke. Took one look at my clothes and my ride and jumped to his own white-collared conclusions, figuring he could feed his thin morals by donating to the needy.

Pride made me want to hurl the wad of cash into the bonfire that flickered down near the water, but reality kept me sane.

I DID need the money. I WAS broke.

I kick the door shut and locked it, angry at Kian for looking down at my crappy life from his privileged perch.

Jamming my keys up under the car's rusted frame, where they would be hidden from sight, I finally headed toward my own form of therapy.

The long sweep of pine stairs that led from the dune to the rolling water was cold under my palm, and the air held the smell of the ocean in the restless wind. My hair snaked and twisted around my throat as I leapt to the sticky sand, soaking in the dampness and freedom that accompanied the endless waves.

Here, at the mercy of the unforgiving Atlantic, I controlled my fate. On the cusp of a perfect wave, the choice

was mine alone: take the drop into the water's fury, or fall back into the safety of the gully.

In the distance I could see five or six surfers catching the metallic waves and bobbing in and out of the moonlight. We night surfers rarely spoke to one another. Rather our emotions and desires were spelled out clearly with a simple nod or how we cut our boards into the backs of sea-born dragons.

That's what I called the surfers when I was a child – dragon riders.

My father used to tell me stories about ghostly mermaids, sharks that lived among us, and how the waves hid the arching backs of sea dragons. It was his way of connecting me to his work as a fisherman, and I could easily recall the feel of his heavy boots as I stomped around the house.

At one time my father's love was effortless, and I held fast to that knowledge by remembering his stories and the way he laughed at my wide eyes as he told them to me.

Looking out over the breakers, that's what I still saw – dragons, invisible to the human eye, bowing their backs to give birth to the waves. I'd never fail to see them and prayed that someday my father would see them too.

4

❧ KIAN ❧

AS I WATCHED MY car-fixing Pixie paddle out into another set of swells, I knew my list of regrets was going to be a mile long by dawn. The swim trunks, which were riding up in the most irritating way possible, were going to top that list – right after I torched them.

In my haste to get to Marconi, I'd left Benton in the trunk, which was NOT good. I needed to get rid of his body soon, otherwise he would be permanently folded like a Chinese take-out box, which would definitely tip-off the coroner's office that he didn't actually overdosed.

What the hell was wrong with me? I shouldn't be here, stalking some after school special with a bad case of "screw you" attitude.

So what if she gets herself killed?

So what if she has a kick-ass personality?

I had slammed the door on whatever scrap of humanity I had left years ago. Centuries ago. For crying out loud, there was a dead guy still in my car!

His car.

Whatever.

But with one streak of lousy luck, I had come face to face with someone who was a curiosity to me. An oddity that burned like a vibrant green flame, setting her apart from everyone else. She demanded my attention, like a puzzle that dares to be solved, and weirdly, I wanted to know more about her.

Maybe I just like a worthy adversary, almost like a cat that stalks a cobra. Maybe I like the thrill of the hunt and the knowledge that the target of my semi-obsession has one hell of a bite.

Humans normally didn't do "it" for me. I liked my females flawless, stacked, with legs like a blue grass filly. And Mortis females were like walking slices of Playboy perfection. The fact that they were egotistical, self-centered sociopaths was something I tended to overlook, thanks to their curves and deliciously loose morals.

Quite frankly, I liked the killer ladies because they were very much like me – selfish, wealthy, and hot. Hey, I'm not afraid to admit any of that because facts are facts: I'm built

like Captain America and probably have more money than Marvel.

Except right now the cow print was kicking the crap out of my ego. I swear, if one of these weed-infested surfers made a single comment about the *Udderly Delicious* now on my ass . . .

I needed to leave. Turn around, RIGHT NOW, and get off the Cape. Toss Benton off the Sagamore Bridge and floor it all the way to Boston.

But as I watched Pix carve her way down the side of a wave, I knew I couldn't leave. I needed to unlock her secrets – decode *why* she had lured me in, and more importantly, *how*. And the only way I could do that, was to keep her safe, at least for tonight. I assured myself that if she turned out to be a total dud, I'd leave her to her own defenses.

Survival of the fittest and all.

I headed down the dunes to the beach, hoping to steer clear of the handful of humans dotting the area. Pix had chosen a more remote stretch of water, placing herself a football field's distance from most of the other surfers.

In one way, I was thrilled she was farther from the others since I wouldn't be forced to give EVERYONE a nice display of my beachwear. On the other hand, being by herself made her a bigger target.

Riding solo in the waves, she was exactly who I would've tracked to kill. Someone who kept to themselves and whose death would remain off the radar for a little while – someone whose existence was not acknowledged by those around her. The fact that none of the other surfers seemed to pay her any attention, made my chest feel tight. I hated the sensation.

Would anyone care if she died? Would anyone mourn her?

How does someone so unforgettable become so invisible?

I stuck to the shadows of the dunes, making my way silently towards the water's edge where she was bobbing on her board, her face to the sky. In the darkness, the moon had leached the color from the world, leaving a stunning black and white portrait of my mechanic moving gently with the waves. She twisted her hair through her hands, sweeping it over her back as she lowered herself to the board and began to paddle farther out, seeking a ride.

I slipped into the water and traveled deep below the surface, swimming along the rippled sandbars. The water, to me, was the same as the air. I could see easily. Hear clearly. My lungs didn't burn, demanding I take a breath.

In the water, as on land, I was deadly.

I stalked her, as I would any victim, only tonight I sought to protect her from my own kind . . . and the occasional finned hunter.

Soon, I was within ten feet of her board, watching her float on the glistening surface from my spot below her. Under the water, the waves were all the more spectacular, like thunderclouds gathering above me as they rolled.

I could see one swell coming in the distance and she began paddling, her hands dipping into the water and pulling with all her strength. I paced her easily, swimming just under her board, and soon the wave pulled higher, lifting her and her board away from me. I watched as her hands disappeared, and the board's edge angled into the wave as she caught the edge of the curl. I broke the surface and watched as she sailed through the night air towards shore, a beautiful hitchhiker on the ocean's pulse.

The wave folded in on itself as it ran against the sandbar, slowing her ride, and she leapt back into the water, turning her board to head back out . . . and towards me.

For the next hour, I hung near her with out her knowing, a soulless shadow to her brilliant one. I watched, bewitched, when she would push the board under an oncoming wave, her eyes tightly shut against the seawater and her hair trailing behind her like an oil slick.

In those moments when she was flying under the waves, her body lifting off the board in a weightless arc, I could *feel* her freedom. In those fleeting seconds when she would streak by me under the water, so close I could almost touch her, I too became free. Free from all the sins I'd committed and buried.

In that one moment, I finally realized why she had such a pull on me – she was freedom, defiance, and fearlessness.

She was everything I was, in human form.

When she finally dragged her board onto the sand, dropping it by a cluster of surfers warming themselves by a fire, I quietly followed. I kept my distance from her, allowing her to get up the dune's staircase ahead of me so she wouldn't realize I was tailing her.

As I passed the surfers, laughing and loud in their buzzed haze, I noticed one inhumanly beautiful girl sitting with them. While we soul thieves could not instantly identify one another, those people who seemed to stand out in a spotlight all their own, always drew my attention.

This girl stood out starkly to me.

Her red hair seemed to bleed a perfect shade of merlot and her skin was radiant in the firelight. She tracked me with her sapphire eyes, appraising me much the same way I was

with her. I suspected she was a Mortis, like me, and had planted herself among her targets – a ruthless wolf cloaked as a breathtaking lamb.

She was there to kill one of her unsuspecting companions, I was certain, but I needed to be sure. I locked eyes with the fiery beauty and flashed my blue eyes to black for a fraction of an instant – too fast for a human eye to observe but a clear signal to another soul thief.

She turned her attention back to the surfers, tossing her head and flirting shamelessly with one of the boys who was downing another beer. But then she glanced back to me, and her blue eyes flashed to midnight, confirming my suspicions, and I gave her a nod.

Whatever happened to the other surfers that night was not my concern, but Pix was off limits.

The young huntress glanced to the staircase where Pix had disappeared, and I gave a subtle shake of my head. The girl replied with a simple nod, and just like that, Ana would not be on her hit list.

There was some honor among thieves when it came to the Mortis and hunting . . . most of the time.

The girl by the bonfire probably thought that I'd targeted Pix as my kill for the evening, and thus she would not make an attempt to harm her. Mortis rarely got into arguments

over targets – there were always plenty of humans to go around.

Every once in a while, however, the honor code was ignored, therefore I'd keep watch over a certain decrepit car all night long and the petite passenger who'd sleep there.

It would be my first attempt at being a protector since failing to defend my old friend, Elizabeth Walker, in 1851. And while remorse was not a luxury I should entertain, Elizabeth was a haunting reminder of the day I truly lost my last shred of humanity.

As I watched Pix up on the dune, I began to wonder if anything was every truly lost, myself included.

5

ANA

"WOW. DID YOU SLEEP at all or just hang-ten all night?" asked MJ from behind the counter as I dragged my exhausted butt into the Milk Way at 6am. I let the faded screen door slam back into place behind me, scattering the sleepy moths by the outside light.

I slumped into one of the retro stools.

"Thanks for the pep-talk," I yawned, sliding my hand out over the faded countertop, turning my arm into a pillow. I could fall asleep, right now. Instantly.

Last night I'd been plagued by a freakish instinct that someone was watching me – ALL NIGHT LONG. While it was probably an owl or a hungry coywolf, it freaked me out enough to scare away any decent sleep.

Prying one eye open when I heard MJ sigh, I found myself staring at a sweaty offering of orange juice.

I studied the watery lines that slid down the side of the drink, trying to discern the imperfections in the glass that caused the drips to zigzag every once in a while.

“You should’ve stayed at my house. My mom wouldn’t have cared,” he scolded, watching me as he placed a few slices of chocolate chip bread into some electric oven thing. I pulled myself back up to sitting, stretching as I did so in a vain attempt to perk up.

I had to be at work in an hour. Ugh.

I wasn’t willing to attempt a shower at home on the chance that Charlotte was still in slip 12 at the Barnstable docks. While Dad should be long gone by now, I was determined to wait until after work to finally head back to our house and scrub the salt and seaweed from my body. Then I’d collapse on my mattress and sleep for twelve hours straight in the silence of the house.

That’s all it was to me anymore – just a place to crash when my Dad was away or sober, which was unpredictable at best.

Winter was going to be a challenge, as it always was. Sleeping in the car wouldn’t be such a great idea when the temperature dropped, leaving my house the only real option and a dangerous game of Russian roulette.

Sneaking inside when I suspected Dad had been

drinking was the only way I stayed safe in my room. Often, he was too bombed to know I was there, hiding among my threadbare stuffed animals with the bureau up against the door. Hell, I suspected he was too bombed to even care where I was.

But every once in a while, we ended up colliding when he was drunk. My body shivered at the memory of the last time he lost control and I was in his way. After that, MJ and I installed a heavier door to my room, complete with dead bolt.

I still used the bureau however – a silent defender against the rage that randomly lurked inside my house.

I looked out the wall of windows that framed the Milk Way. The fog that had set in from the night before drifted down the street like a parade of children seeking mischief. It slipped through the hedges and fences of the antique homes, and gathered in damp, sticky pockets around the street lamps, only to be shooed along by the morning breeze.

Inside the Milk Way, the walls were plastered with posters of upcoming events and photos from patrons and workers. There were newspaper clippings and clothing strung haphazardly over the ceiling, and the blackboard was riddled with flavors and specials.

Nothing here had changed in decades and it was the closest I had ever come to having a home that welcomed me

without question. I owed this sanctuary to MJ and his folks.

Unfortunately, the boobs and butt I had finally sprouted meant sleep-overs had officially become forbidden by MJ's mom. "We aren't in elementary school anymore, MJ. Your mother would freak out to have me bunking at your house, and you know it."

"You could've just snuck in."

"Oh yeah – because THAT wouldn't make her suspicious at all! If she ever found out I'd bunked on your floor, she would totally think we were . . . you know."

"Trying to make babies?" He gave me a wink as he pulled two thick loaves from the toaster. God bless the Nirvana coffee shop down the street that delivered daily to the Milk Way.

"Exactly," I replied as MJ placed the steaming bread in front of me, complete with silver ice cream dish of vanilla butter. Just the smell of the oven-baked chocolate was enough to make me want to lick the counter. I slathered on a heaping portion of butter and started to devour my breakfast.

MJ leaned against the counter, watching me stuff my face. "You slept in the car again?" he asked, all humor falling away.

I didn't take my eyes off my meal and nodded. I could feel him watching me. Could feel the sadness in his eyes.

I didn't have time to feel sorry or sad – I just needed to plow forward and I'd be okay. And my Dad would be okay too.

Someday I'd fix my Dad, I was certain. I just needed to get through the next few months, start junior year at Barnstable and keep to the background. By next summer, I'd be eighteen and could help my dad get sober.

Thirteen months was all that stood between me and independence.

And once I was officially an adult, Dad would see, finally, how bad he was when he drank. He would realize that he needed to stop drinking and I could help him, all while living safely in the apartment above RC garage.

Well . . . there wasn't an apartment there *yet*, but I knew I could convince Jack that I could turn the old storage area into a tidy, studio living space.

Everything was going to be all right. I had to believe everything was going to be okay. I wiped my lips and stuffed the paper napkin into the empty glass as I got up.

“Thanks for the food, MJ. I've gotta get to work, but wanna catch up later? Maybe rent a movie?” MJ knew my Dad's fishing schedule as well as I did. He demanded to know once he realized I wasn't just a clutz, often falling against the stairs or doorframe.

“Sounds good. I’m done by 8pm tonight. Want me to grab the movie?” he asked, glancing behind him at the sound of a door banging shut in the back room and his mother’s voice calling to him. “I’m out front with Ana, Mom!” he yelled back.

MJ’s mom appeared through the swinging backroom doors, her arms loaded with files. “Good morning Ana. How’s things?”

“Good, Mrs. Williams. How are you?” I replied.

“Oh you know – busy. Always busy,” she replied, stretching on her tip-toes to try and give MJ a peck on the cheek. He leaned down to her under five-foot frame and was smooched by his mom, who then hurried upstairs to the office. Though MJ looked nothing like his Chinese mom, he did get his shifting ability from her side of the family. His mom, however, didn’t know that her son barked at the cats once in a while.

“I’ve gotta fly. I’ll see you tonight,” I said, heading to leave, but as I began pushing the screen door open, I noticed that there was a gap between some of the Milk Way branded clothing.

The horrible pair of cow-print swim trunks was missing.

MJ and I had made a bet over those awful things the day his mom hung them up. I bet him five dollars they'd never sell and his mother would make HIM wear them as advertising. MJ said that they would sell, someday, because tourists were just that weird.

I pointed to the gap in the clothing and looked at MJ. "You're kidding, right? Did someone ACTUALLY buy them?"

"YUP," he chirped with a huge smile. "You owe me five bucks!"

I shook my head. "Who in the heck would've ever bought those?"

MJ had the most ridiculous, Joker grin plastered on his face. "Let's just say that Mr. Fancy Car has a thing for bovines."

I blinked. "Are you serious?"

MJ nodded.

"Dear heavens . . . he really is a pervert," I muttered as I dug five ones from my back pocket and slapped them down on the counter.

As I left, I heard MJ cheerfully yell to his mom something about winning a bet.

6

❧ KIAN ❧

I was officially done pinching automobiles from drug dealers.

I'd spent the night watching over Pix's car, but just before dawn I decided I needed to finally get rid of Benton. Unfortunately, it wasn't until I was at a nearby beach, ready to drag his body to the surf, that I noticed the powder in the bottom of the trunk. It seemed to be spilling from a panel near the wheel-well and I soon realized that Benton wasn't the only thing stuffed in the vehicle.

The Auburn was a rolling buffet of cocaine.

I'd heard of the cartel using cheap model cars to bring drugs over the border, stuffing their wares in every door panel, tire, and seat, but using a half-million dollar vehicle was a new one for me.

Determined to distance myself from whatever major illegal activity Benton was wrapped up in, I took him and his

car back to his house and parked it in his garage. I propped Benton up behind the wheel of his car like a moldy mannequin, and left on foot.

The cops and the feds were going to be all over his death once someone found him. And hell only knows how many other drug dealers he was connect to. For all I knew, his death could cause a domino effect among the drug king pins. No thanks – I didn't need to get wrapped up in that nonsense.

I walked through the town, now car-less, watching paperboys deliver the news and early risers sip coffee from porches. There was a peacefulness to the morning – a quiet that blanketed Cape Cod with a sort of untouchable reverence. In the early morning, cars didn't clog the roads and children weren't yet up, shouting and playing.

It was the type of world that welcomed me – silent, shadowed, and misty.

Somehow I ended up standing in front of Elizabeth Walker's home, studying the grand porch and towering roof. It was obvious that no one lived here anymore, and I wasn't sure anyone had since her death.

Though it was just a house, it was also a symbol of a time when I was still human. When I was the golden son to a ship building family and I was set to marry a young woman named Mary. Though she adored me, I admit that I was less

than loyal, even back in the 1840s. But Mary's family represented a powerful alliance for my family, and thus we were matched to marry – she was seventeen and I was twenty.

And then the night of Elizabeth's Christmas party happened and I ended up a Mortis by morning . . . and Mary was dead in my arms within a day. Less than a year later, I watched Elizabeth die in the arms of a powerful Mortis named Jacob Rysse – he was a clan leader, and I was one of his soldiers.

I did my best to distance myself from those memories – harden my heart to the suffering and the death. For the most part, it was easy. But on rare occasion, I ran up against the past in the form of a Mortis named Raef Paris, and the memories came rushing back.

He had built Elizabeth's house, and as I studied the strong lines and perfect angles, I had to give him credit – he was a great carpenter, even at seventeen. But that party also marked the end of his human life as well – turned, like me, into a soul thief.

He too was drafted into Rysse's clan and stood beside me the night Elizabeth died.

Like most Mortis, he kept to himself, but every once in a while I would see him in some random bar in some random city. In those moments, I was back on the Cape with

Mary and Elizabeth and my parents and every sin I committed against those who trusted me. Being in front of Elizabeth's house had the same effect on me.

Being with Pix also felt oddly similar, but with her, the pain didn't exist. Whereas Raef and the house dragged me back to the past, Pixie seemed like a chance at the future.

A chance to be different.

I looked down the street towards the Milk Way and wasn't all that surprised to see a familiar, beat up blue Ford sitting by the front door. The sight of her car, sitting among the drifting fog, gave me something I hadn't felt since the days when I was human.

Hope.

7

ANA

THE DAY WAS GOING to be murderously hot. Sweat had already begun to mingle with the rust and grime that was slowly spreading over my coveralls, like a mold that could defy Mr. Clean.

I wiped my brow with the back of my hand, but my hair stuck like superglue to my cheeks. Even worse, it had taken on a hay-like consistency thanks to the salt water from last night's surfing.

What a thrill.

Jack tried to get me to come into the air-conditioned office and eat my lunch, except there was one problem: I didn't have a lunch to eat.

Plus, Corbin, the other mechanic whose greatest claim to fame was getting tossed out of college last year due to some stunt-gone-wrong, always checked out my rack. A few weeks

ago, he even went so far as to congratulate me on my small boobs because apparently they were the “perfect handfuls.” When he offered to prove his point, I nearly hurled a socket wrench at his head, but Jack got between us.

So lunch, for me, was best spent tucked under the chassis of the Trans Am I was slowly restoring. Jack had inherited it from a customer who traded it for some work on his motorcycle. Realizing I was drooling over it the moment it was towed out back, Jack agreed to let me have it, in return for working half-days on Saturday for free. I jumped at the chance to have something so beautiful that I could call my own.

Well . . . it *would be* beautiful when I was done with it. Right now it was one cylinder away from the junkyard.

I sung silently to the Fall Out Boy song playing through my elderly iPod’s ear buds as I worked, urging the rusted bolts out of the oil pan one by one.

Lost in the music and my work, I didn’t realize I was no longer alone in the garage until someone squeezed my leg. I jumped, startled, and banged my head against the car’s frame, swearing.

Corbin was such an ass.

I yanked the ear buds out of my ears and began pulling myself out from under the car, yelling at Corbin as I did so.

“You’re such a moron! Keep your skeevy hands away from me or I’ll unscrew a whole new set of balls from your body! Do you hear me, Corbin?” I demanded, finally sliding out from under the car.

Standing over me, a look of pure amusement on his face, was the dude from last night. I was stunned into silence for a moment, but then narrowed my eyes as a confident, irritating smile spread on his lips.

He offered a hand to help me up. “We covered this before, but I’m Kian, not Corbin. And in my defense I did call your name at least five times. How’s your head?”

“Dented, obviously, because I must be hallucinating. As far as I can recall, you were headed out of town,” I replied, rubbing my forehead as I got to my feet, refusing to accept his help. I tossed the wrench on my tool cart with a *clang*, and he tucked his hands into his designer khakis, watching me. I noted that he hadn’t changed since last night and I wondered what he did with the swim trunks. “What do you want?”

“What? No question of concern at all? No curiosity as to whether or not your automotive skills got me past the harbor without major engine failure?”

“My skills are flawless, thanks. I know what I did under your hood last night.”

“Do you say that to all the guys you rescue from the side of the road?” he asked, smiling. I blushed, fiercely, which only pissed me off more.

“Ya know what? I don’t need to be harassed anymore than I already am, so why don’t you cough up the reason you’re here or move your ass along.”

Something odd crossed his face for a moment, as if he was thinking of asking me something, but then he seemed to pull back. He cleared his throat and slid into a more business-like mode.

“I’m looking for a car to buy and I thought I could pay you to help guide my selection. I entirely trust your fine skills under any hood I have.”

Ha! I bet you do. “You should buy a Pinto. Hatchback. It suits you.”

“Trust me – the storage on those things is *way* too small and the car, way too crappy. I don’t think so.”

“What the hell happened to the Auburn?”

He leaned against the edge of the open bay door, the hot sun making his golden hair take on a halo effect. “I had borrowed it from a . . . friend of a friend. I had to return it last night.”

“Did you leave the *Udderly Delicious* swim trunks in it as well?”

He actually smiled, and the way his face lit up nearly made my heart twist. “Oh no. I kept those. They’re one of a kind – at least, if there’s a scrap of mercy in the world, they WILL BE the only ones every made.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Kian was everything that I avoided, and while he may not be as loaded as I once thought, he was still wearing beautifully made clothing and was shopping for a car.

He was still one of them. One of those guys.

As I looked him over, from his looming height to his sculpted body, I realized I was probably nothing more than a game to him. I was a “wrong side of the tracks summer chick” who the rich kids from Stamford or New York use to soil their trust-funded oats for a couple of months. I saw it happen every year to the local girls.

I still couldn’t get a read on him though, which bugged the heck out of me.

He must’ve seen my hesitation. “I’m happy to pay you to help me. Whatever you see as an honest rate. But I want your expertise, especially since you seem to like old cars.” He tossed his head towards the Trans Am.

I glanced to the TA then back to Kian. “Whatever I want, huh?”

“Be kind woman,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Fine. Two hundred?” I offered, figuring a couple days worth of looking at antique cars which ends with me two bills richer, couldn’t be that bad of a way to make a dime.

The fact that Kian was hot didn’t hurt either – I could probably ignore the fact that he was a self-centered, frat boy slumming it on the Cape for the weekend.

“Two hundred a day seems fair. Done,” he replied, extending his hand to shake.

Two hundred *A DAY*? I was about to correct him, but then the sun glinted off his TAG Heuer watch and I decided to keep my mouth shut. I took his wide hand and though it was solid, he didn’t crush my fingers, which surprised me. I got the impression that he liked to feel indomitable – that he liked to win. I gave him a firm shake.

“Meet me at the Island Ferry tomorrow – 8am. I’ll be waiting by the ticket counter.”

“Wait. What? We’re going to Nantucket? Why?” I asked, now alarmed.

Kian pulled a folded paper from his back pocket – it was a section of the local newspaper. He handed it to me. “Not Nantucket. Martha’s Vineyard. There’s a car auction going on tomorrow on the island.”

I studied the paper clipping with a picture of a really nice 427 Stingray Corvette above the listing for the auction. I

looked back up at Kian, who was smiling as if he dared me to back out.

Two could play his game and I intended to win.

I handed back the paper and smiled, “I’ll see ya at the docks. Don’t be late.”

“Never,” he replied with a smile that twisted my tummy.

For one second – one fleeting moment – I wondered what it would be like if someone like Kian O’Reilly didn’t just see me as a game to win, but as something more.

❧ KIAN ❧

THE NEXT MORNING I found Pix at the docks, sitting on a bench under the shade of a spindly oak, bouncing her foot. At first I thought she was nervous about going to the island with me, which pleased me – hell, it made me even want to gloat.

But then I got closer and realized she had those damn earbuds in again and her lips were moving to some song that must be playing.

So much for being flustered.

She didn't notice me right away, caught up in some mind candy magazine she was reading, and honestly I was a bit put out that she hadn't been looking for me. Keeping an eye out for her wealthy, good looking employer as it were.

I sat down heavily next to her and she nearly jumped out of her skin, dropping the magazine. "Jeezus – you damn

near gave me a heart attack,” she snarled, yanking the buds from her ears.

“Sorry. Guess you should pay more attention to the world around you rather than reading about how to twirl your hair and the best colors for fall.” I leaned down to grab the magazine on the ground and was mortified to see that it was actually the auction catalog for the car show.

I wanted to melt into the pavement.

I slowly sat back up, handing it to her carefully. She snatched it from me. “So . . . what *IS* the best color for fall? Because apparently you read that crap, ‘cause I sure as shit don’t.”

“Probably something hideous like mauve,” I muttered.

“Good thing your swimwear is black and white – it can go with anything,” she smiled evilly, standing up as she slung a worn, leather backpack over her shoulder. “So – are we going or what? Time’s money and it’s yours, apparently.”

As screwed up as it was, I *really* liked this girl. Her smart mouth and fearless attitude were so damn addictive.

She was the ultimate challenge, daring me to bail on her. But I didn’t bail and I never walked away from a fight. I didn’t fail, period.

I rubbed my hands together and got to my feet, causing her to step back so she could look up at me. At least our height difference was one thing decidedly in my favor.

“Right you are – time is money, and I’d like to spend some on a fast car that my mechanic deems worthy.” I tossed my hand towards the boat in a “ladies first” attempt at chivalry, but she just stood there.

“You need to buy the tickets, bright boy.”

Oh. Right.

“Fine. Go get in line and I’ll meet you there,” I said, giving her a brilliant smile. She sighed and stomped over to the line of tourists heading for the island for the Fourth of July. A few of them eyed her nervously.

Normally I would just fly to the island, avoiding the huddled masses of the boat. But a Corvette wouldn’t fit in a commuter prop-plane, which limited my choices to the ferry or a black hawk helicopter. Sadly, the military didn’t lease their fancy toys.

The woman at the counter looked like she was about ninety with glasses so thick that her eyes had morphed into golf balls. I paid her and managed a quick “thanks,” but as I was about to leave, she said something to me about a storm.

“What storm?” I asked, holding up the line.

“I SAID, there’s an offshore storm and there’s a chance that the ferry will not be running this evening due to high surf. We just have to tell everyone, son.”

“So I may be stuck on Martha’s Vineyard for the night?” My mind was now rapidly plotting how to make this little island hop a bed hop with Pixie Pants. Surely I could melt her icy exterior by evening and perhaps explore what was under HER hood.

But then I remembered Mary, and the R-rated ideas I was having about Pix evaporated. I swallowed back the brutal memory of killing my former fiancé.

“Do you know if there are any places that may have vacancies on the island for the evening?” I asked, knowing that everyone would scramble for rooms if the ferry cancelled. I didn’t want Pix sleeping in a car again if possible.

The lady eyed me with a small smile. She tore a piece of paper from a pad near her and scribbled a phone number on it, handing it to me.

“My friend has a place in Oak Bluffs and there is a cute little bedroom above their barn. They rent it out to travelers, but also use it for friends and family. She had held it open for me for this weekend, but I am unable to make it due to work,” she wheezed, thumbing her hand at the office behind her. “I’ll call her and let her know you are coming.”

I was shocked. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Well – don’t worry about it. I saw you and your girlfriend on the bench and you two seem like a cute couple. Thought you wouldn’t wanna be sleeping on the beach all night.”

We looked like a cute couple? The woman really did need glasses – new ones.

I thanked her again and walked over to Pix, handing her the tickets. She saw the piece of paper in my hand and I quickly folded it, stuffing it in my back pocket.

“What was that?” she asked, suspicious.

I shrugged and gave her a smile. “Possibilities. Just endless possibilities, Pixie Pants.”

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “Whatever KEY-ANNE. Squirrel away your little secrets, I don’t care.”

HA! She totally cared.

Score one for Team Kian.

9

❧ KIAN ❧

THE RIDE OVER TO the Vineyard consisted of screaming children and people plastered with Martha's Vineyard sweatshirts, as if they needed a reminder of where they were going. Couples talked non-stop about places they were hoping to see and families gossiped about other people. I even caught one couple groping each other near the back half of the ferry, apparently unwilling to wait for a room.

I slid into a bench seat on the top deck of the boat, handing Pix a hot chocolate I had gotten her from the café onboard. I leaned back in the seat, watching the island slowly grow on the horizon.

Another half hour jammed in with the coupon-clipping crowd and I could get the hell off this dingy ship.

Pix pried the plastic top off the drink and blew over the swirling chocolate, trying to cool it. I watched as her

fingertips played over the edge of the paper cup, searching for a place to touch without getting burned. She finally took a tiny sip and began running down the itinerary of cars that we had decided on.

“So, we will look at the ’62 Bonneville and the ’70 Mach 1 Mustang first. And then, it looks like they put all the new models models down on Front Street, so we can wander down that way if you decide to go new. I’ve got to tell ya, everyone will be after the ’63 Sting Ray.” She took another sip, watching me over her cup.

“I bet you like the old school muscle cars,” I replied, trying not to stare at her pink tongue that was sweeping away the chocolate from her lip.

“Mmm hmm,” she replied. “I like the icons with plenty of ponies under the hood. The newer cars are so much plastic. Give me chrome and steel any day. Something that defends me on the road and blows the doors off the brat in his Daddy’s new Beamer.”

“Is that Trans Am you were working on, yours?” I asked as the wind picked up. It tossed her hair, causing her mane to twist wildly in her face, like Medusa’s snakes. She wrangled it all back into a pony tail.

“Yeah. My boss, Jack, gave it to me, and in return I work half-days on Saturday for free. I’ve been working on it

for about a year. It just takes a lot of time and money and I'm . . ." Her words stalled and she dropped her gaze to the cup as she cleared her throat. "It'll get done. Eventually."

"It's Saturday and you're not at work though. You're with me. How'd you manage that?"

She shrugged. "I told Jack that I could work a few extra hours this coming week at night to make up for it."

Jack sounded like a slave driver. I hated Jack. Didn't her parents care she worked so much for this jerk? In fact . . .

"I'm surprised you actually were able to come with me to the island. Not many parents would let their beautiful daughter wander off with a stranger."

Pix flushed at the compliment and looked away toward the island, which loomed larger and larger. I could make out waterfront restaurants and the tilting sailboats moored near the docks.

She took a sip of her drink, but didn't look back at me as she answered. "It's just my Dad and me and he owns a fishing boat, so he's gone half the time. He knows I'm a big girl – I can handle myself."

I found it disturbing that she was on her own. A lot. She was probably 105 pounds soaking wet and I knew, for a fact, that she slept in her car the other night.

Someone could attack her – have his way with her. She could be killed. Abducted. She could be one of those missing kids whose faces line the telephone poles and walls of various cities.

And her pal, MJ, didn't want her to go home. Was home worse than sleeping in a car? Scenarios began filtering through my mind, none of which were good.

The tension inside me began to tighten, squeezing me like a cheap wool sweater.

What would happen to her once I left? Would I end up seeing her face on the news, listed as yet another casualty of a rip current that pulled her down and filled her lungs with seawater? I saw those people on the TV all the time and I knew the truth every time.

A soul shark had killed them.

I'd watch as the reporters clustered around the family, capturing the agony of those the person left behind. It had never bothered me – their tears, their gasped thanks, their pleas for space. But now, as I looked at Pix, I knew I couldn't handle the idea of her being the one who was killed. I couldn't handle the idea of someone attacking her.

I moaned.

I should've never stayed on Cape Cod. Never have followed this unusual, defiant girl to the beach. At minimum, I

should've left yesterday morning, never gone to RC garage, never asked her to come with me to the Vineyard.

I should've put half the country between us, but I hadn't and now I was . . . I was . . . shit, I was screwed! I was invested. I LIKED her. Even worse – I worried about her.

It was rumored that a soul thief could become bonded to the soul of a human, and that the link, once formed, was damn near unbreakable. Up until now, I'd called it total bullshit – an excuse for those Mortis who were stupid enough to get involved with humans.

Apparently I was a Top Rank moron, because I was definitely involved with Pix . . . who was now giving me a weird look.

“Um. Are you okay?”

Hell, NO I wasn't all right! It had to be a lie – such bonds are supernatural fairy tales. I was in control of my destiny. I could walk away. I could pull out and leave her standing on the docks whenever I wanted.

Pix smiled a little. “Cause you look like you might barf, and no offense, I don't want to be barfed on. The two-hundred a day does not include puking rights.” She smiled a little. “Plus we are only stuck on the boat for maybe another ten minutes. Just keep your eye on the distance – it eases the seasickness.”

I wasn't seasick – I was heartsick – but I did as she instructed, because looking at her was too hard. Because looking at her reminded me of all the reasons I was wrong for her and all the selfish reasons why I didn't care.

I was going to stay.

Find a way to be part of her world.

I looked back at her and she gave a lopsided smile. “See? You look a little better. Told ya – keeping your eye on the horizon helps. Barf-incident avoided. I totally earned a tip!”

Oh, hell.

I'd become bonded to the soul of Ana Lane.

ANA

HOLY CAR HEAVEN.

The little fishing port of Edgartown had exploded into candy apple red, electric blue, and midnight black. The cobblestone streets were lined with chrome and glass and steel, all formed into the most amazing examples of every muscle car that had raced through my daydreams since childhood. America definitely had an addiction to fine automobiles and I was probably the lead junkie.

I could feel Kian's eyes on me as I wandered through the rows of cars, chattering on endlessly about the finer points of a given vehicle's history, the uniqueness of a given engine, and the general FREAKIN' AWESOMENESS that was everywhere.

I was expecting him to tease me about my ridiculous fan-girling over horsepower and carburetors, but instead he

was attentive. He really listened, asking questions and trusting my instincts as I rambled and gushed, but he never stopped me.

And when he smiled, he really smiled, and it made my mind fuzzy, blurring away all the crap that surrounded my life. As we wove our way down the street, past the gleaming hoods and through the hoards of people, I let myself live in the moment.

I wanted to stay parked in this world of cars and color and Kian O'Reilly for as long as possible, though I would never admit that to him.

As the sun climbed higher, turning bumpers into blinding mirrors of light, we navigated our way towards the new model Corvettes. We wound our way between the tightly parked cars, and I could tell the salespeople were edgy, watching me with barely contained suspicion. I was dressed per my usual – ripped jean overalls, layers of cheap tank tops, and my well-loved Doc Marten boots which were thrift store ready. I stood out like a wart among the wealthy, who were decked out in Coach bags and Gucci sunglasses.

Their appraising glare screamed one thing loud and clear: I didn't have money and I didn't belong.

I didn't even really belong next to Kian, but his presence, dressed spotlessly in a designer, island-casual sort of

way, was the only reason the salespeople tolerated me within fifty feet of their cars.

That was, until Kian left me alone so he could grab me a drink, as I was basically baking on the cobblestone street. Jeans and boots had been a poor choice, but they were my go-to mechanic's wear – a fact, which I was beginning to regret.

Determined to continue with my job as he went in search of water, I scanned the nearby cars, my eyes landing on a new, black Vette parked next to an open-air café.

I smiled, picturing Kian and all his cockiness driving it, and I knew it would be a good fit for him. I walked over to the car and went to unlatch the hood to inspect the engine, but the instant my hand touched the paint, a salesman was next to me.

“I'm sorry miss, but you're not allowed to touch the vehicles unless you are looking to buy.” He reached to physically move my hand, but I pulled away quickly.

“I can hear you just fine, and I *am* looking to buy.” I replied, rather sharply. I reached for the hood again, but this time the salesman caught me by the upper arm.

His cheerful, *buy-my-car-so-I-can-earn-a-big-fat-commission* face was replaced by something intolerant and hard. “You need to leave, girl,” he said quietly, closer to my face than he should be. His breath stank of cigarettes and coffee, and

though he looked to be in his 40s, he acted like an entitled jerk.

“Let go,” I snarled, trying to pull my arm free, but he hung on. Alongside the café, tucked next to the other cars, passers-by didn’t see the two of us . . . although if they did, they’d probably agreed with this dirt wad.

I debated a well-placed knee to the balls, but thought better of it, denying myself the satisfaction of getting to watch him writhe like snake.

“Are you going to leave?” he asked, barely moving his lips.

“No. I’m here to buy, jerk face,” I snapped, though I was beginning to tremble, the adrenaline starting to kick in.

His fat fingers dug into my arm, and I grabbed his wrist, trying to ease his grasp. “Get lost kid. I don’t need your welfare fingers all over my bonus check.”

I blinked, sucker punched by his words, which seemed to jam in my throat like a sourball.

“HEY! Let her go!” Kian’s voice traveled over the line of Corvettes and I saw him jogging towards me, the bottled water in his hand. Relief hit me hard.

The salesman glanced over his shoulder at Kian and then turned back to me, hissing a warning for me to scam as he released my arm. He then turned his attention to Kian who

was finally closing in on our spot, smiling brilliantly at my gorgeous employer as he approached. I'd taken a few steps back from the salesman, putting distance between him and his disgusting breath.

"I'm sorry you saw that, sir. We're having an issue with kids keying the cars. Can't have teenagers damaging property, especially if that property may someday be yours." He looked back to me, glaring, "She was just leaving."

Kian stopped in front of the salesman, invading the man's personal space and forcing him to take a startled step back. "You're lucky I don't call the police on you for touching her." Kian bit out, his voice taking on a darker quality that sent chills down my back.

The salesman, apparently stupid with a sizable chip on his shoulder, looked pissed. "I suggest you do call the police – she was going to damage private property. I'm sure she is no stranger to the law."

I was so angry and mortified. Embarrassment cracked and twisted inside me, forcing me to blink away the growing tears that were threatening to show.

Kian looked at me, his gaze rooting me to the street. In that brief moment, I could have sworn his blue eyes had become darker, and something potent but unnamable passed between us.

He turned back to the salesman, his body tense. “Apologize to the lady,” he demanded.

The salesman laughed and crossed his arms, “Pfft – for what? Catching her before she could do some damage? I don’t think so.”

“I think so,” warned Kian slowly, and the hairs rose on my arms. “Apologize to her for being such a prick. For touching her and threatening her. Apologize to my *friend* and *mechanic* for stopping her from doing her job. And apologize to me, for interfering with the inspection of a car I may have bought.”

The salesman swallowed, no doubt realizing his big bonus check was flying out the window. “I . . . uh . . . I’m terribly sorry, sir. I didn’t realize she was working. My apologies.”

Kian pointed to me. “Her. Now beg *her* forgiveness.”

The salesman looked like he’d rather eat rat poison, but he did it, asking for me to forgive him. For a salesman, his sales pitch sucked. I didn’t buy his bullshit apology for two seconds.

Kian walked over to me, the salesman watching him closely. “What do you say, Pix? Do you forgive this guy? Shall we spend an obscene amount of money on this car?”

I looked back at the salesman, who was fuming. I gave a choked laugh, “Hell, no.”

Kian nudged me with his shoulder, sending a weird sense of security flowing inside me.

“Good answer, Pix,” he whispered with a crooked smile as he looped a solid arm over my shoulders and led me away from the black Corvette and the scumball who would continue to try to sell it.

I felt bad for the car – it deserved better friends than that guy.

“You all right?” asked Kian, steering me towards a set of wooden stairs leading to a pretty little shop with a smiling pink whale over the door. We sat down, side by side against the white railing, and he handed me the water.

I shrugged, peeling the label from the bottle. “It’s okay. I should’ve dressed better, or something. Should’ve made an attempt to fit in and look like I belong. I’m sorry. I screwed us on that car. That’s my fault.”

I kept my eyes on the water and the people passing by, but I felt Kian drag in a deep breath beside me. “You weren’t doing anything wrong. He should’ve at least asked if you needed any help, not yanked you away from the car.”

When I refused to look at Kian or answer him, his large hand touched my wrist, playing with an old rope bracelet that I had.

I finally looked up at him, “We can go back if you really like that Corvette. I can just tell you what to offer him, price-wise, and I’ll make myself scarce.”

“I don’t need that Corvette and I don’t want you to make yourself scarce,” he replied, finally dropping his hand from mine. “People make assumptions. They think because you dress a certain way or drive a certain car, that you must BE a certain way. It’s human nature and it’s unfair.” I looked at him finally and his gaze was intense as he studied my face. “It’s unfair both ways.”

Crap. I’d done the exact same thing to Kian as the sales-douche had done to me. I judged him on the Auburn he drove, on the clothes he wore, on the money he gave me – hell, even on his watch. I studied his face and a small smile curled up the corner of his mouth.

“I guess we’re all just a bunch of screw-ups, huh?” I asked.

“Meh – screw-ups have more fun, though I will admit I AM pretty damn close to absolute perfection. Good thing I have a few flaws . . . at least, I think I do. Hang on – I need a few hours to come up with something.”

I smacked him in the arm, which felt like iron. “Ah, okay, Mr. Key to Perfection. Your humility is overwhelming,” I laughed, finally taking a swig of my water.

Kian glanced back at the store behind us. “You know – I bet this place has some outstanding swim trunks. Maybe even something with that pink whale on it? If I can pull off the cow print, I can definitely pull off a pastel Moby Dick.”

I snorted a half-laugh, which caused me to spit a mouthful of water at a lanky brunette who happened to be walking by. I gotta admit - she jumped out of the way pretty fast in her Prada heels.

A few hours later, Kian became the top buyer of the day, dropping nearly two hundred thousand dollars on the 1963 Sting Ray.

As people congratulated him, I saw the salesman through the throngs of people. He was standing beside the same black Corvette, which apparently never sold.

Karma is a bitch . . . and for once a close personally pal.

❧ KIAN ❧

ANA WAS A BARRACUDA when it came to car auctions.

She knew when to bid and exactly how high other people would go. When she inspected the Sting Ray before the start of bidding, she dropped little hints about potential problems, planting a seed of doubt in the minds of the other buyers who listened.

The girl was take-no-prisoners brilliant.

As we walked through the crowds, I felt the most alive I'd ever been in decades and I was sure it had nothing to do with my new ride.

I glanced down at Pix who was looking pretty smug about our score, her black and purple ponytail swinging fiercely back and forth as she walked.

“We need to celebrate,” I proposed. “Let’s go out and do something. Something fun.”

Pix looked up at me, surprise on her face. “Well . . . I, uh, guess we could go – .”

Her words were cut off by a young guy calling her name and waving wildly from across the street. “ANA! Hey, ANA!”

Pix finally spotted the caller a few seconds after I had, and a huge smile spread on her face. She waved and the kid ran across the street, grabbing her in a hug. I tensed and something that felt strangely like jealousy slipped through my veins.

“Girl! What the hell are you doing here? Are you scoping out new toys for Waite?”

Ana shook her head, still radiant with happiness. “No, no! I’m here as an, uh . . .” she looked at me, trying to figure out what exactly I was to her. I needed to define that once and for all . . . as soon as I figured it out.

“She’s here as a friend, whose top notch skills as a mechanic I’m using to my full advantage. Hi – I’m Kian O’Reilly,” I said, offering a hand to shake. The kid didn’t hesitate and gave a firm shake in return.

“Nice to meet ya – I’m Seth. Ana and I work for Lawson Waite. He’s got loads of cash and spends it on loads of cars, which is where we come in. He’s like the island’s very own Jay Leno, except, well – he looks like a skinny nerd.”

Ana laughed and then looked up at me, offering an explanation. “Seth works full time for Mr. Waite, but I help out as needed. He’s an investor and my Dad took out a loan from him for his business. That’s how I met him.”

“I see,” I replied, easing myself a little closer to Pix, as if I could define her as a piece of property I’d optioned. “Mr. Waite sounds like someone I could probably get along with. Is he like Gatsby? Big parties and buckets of champagne?”

Seth laughed, “Yeah, that would be a big, fat ‘no.’ With the exception of the guard dudes that are always at his place, the guy is pretty boring.”

Ana nodded.

Suddenly I didn’t like Mr. Waite so much. Men with bodyguards and lots of money usually have enemies – enemies that aren’t exactly law abiding citizens. “What’s with the bodyguards?” I asked.

Seth shrugged. “Word is that he was mugged once. I mean, he travels a lot and he’s worth a fortune. Given that Ana could probably flatten him into a pulp, I get why he wants some hired muscle with him.”

Pix played with her ponytail, pulling a piece of fluff from a purple strand. “Waite is nice to me when I go there – well, when I see him anyway. I don’t go up to the main house very often. I hang out in his sick garage.”

“With ME!” Seth grinned.

I was not thrilled with the arrangement at all.

“Speaking of hanging out, any chance you could swing up to Waite’s with me and check out what is going on with his ’59 Electra? It cranks over, runs for five minutes or so, then dies. I’ve been through everything.” Seth looked hopeful.

Ana stuck out her tongue, acting disgusted. “God – he still has that thing? That is the ugliest car on the planet. Can’t we just declare it dead and bury it?”

“Sorry, but Waite wants it running. Can you come and add your sexy, brilliant head to our motley crew?”

Yeah – I really didn’t like Seth.

Ana looked up at me, then back to her friend, wincing. “I’m sorry Seth, but I can’t. Kian just grabbed the ’63 Sting Ray and we’re going to go celebrate and then we have to grab the ferry back. I just don’t have time.”

Seth raised an eyebrow. “Ferry? What ferry? All the boats have been cancelled until tomorrow. Rough seas from an offshore storm. You ain’t going anywhere with that Corvette until tomorrow.”

Ana’s eyes went wide. “When did they cancel?”

“A couple hours ago. Lemme guess – you don’t have a room booked, do ya?” Seth was irritatingly delighted.

“DAMN!” she moaned, turning to me. I loved the fire in her green eyes, even if it was fueled by frustration. “There won’t be a single room left by now. I’m sorry, Kian, but I hope you like sleeping on the beach.”

“Or in a 1963 Sting Ray,” added Seth, totally chipper. “On the plus side, now you DO have time to come and bail out my butt with Mr. Waite.”

I watched Ana and she looked torn on what to do.

There was a loyalty to her that I respected and it was pulling her in two different directions. I wasn’t thrilled with this Waite guy, and Seth was definitely checking out Ana for more than her mechanical skill, but I also couldn’t just tell her I already had a room. She’d figure out that I’d planned to stay on the island all along, and that tentative friendship we were starting to build would implode.

I didn’t want to let her go, but I had no choice.

I touched her fingertips, and she looked up at me, surprised. “Listen, Pix – it’s okay if you want to go and check on the car with Seth. I’ll look for a place where we can stay for the night. I can pick you up in the Vette – how long do you think you’ll need?”

“I . . . uh . . . Are you sure? I mean, I feel like I’m stealing from your piggy bank. You’re paying for me to work for you, not someone else.”

Seth gave me a weird look, probably trying to figure out what exactly I was buying from Ana Lane. The thoughts, which I knew were running through his head, made me want to squeeze his skull like a stress ball.

“No – it’s fine. Just give me a time and place, and I swear I’ll be there,” I assured her.

She smiled at me as she rattled off an address in Lower Makonikey. “I’ll be waiting for you out by the main gate at 8pm. Don’t be late, Mr. O’Reilly,” she instructed, her smile growing.

“I’m never late, Ms. Lane. Never.”

“Overachiever,” she accused, poking me in the side, and I grabbed her hand, stopping her. In that instant, something flickered over her face – something that looked like longing and hope mixed together. “What can I say? You bring out the best in me.”

“I try,” she whispered, a little dazed.

I dropped her hand and she finally turned and walked away with Seth, talking to him about engine heads, crank shafts, and why I called her “Pix.”

I watched them move through the crowds, but just as she was about to round a corner and leave my sight, I saw her look over her shoulder and she gave me a little wave.

It was like winning the lottery. Pix . . . liked me.

❧ KIAN ❧

AFTER ANA HAD LEFT with Seth, I had to wait at the auction for another hour before I could take possession of the Sting Ray, which I'll admit, was spectacular. As I drove to the address the woman from the ferry had specified, I thought about how perfect my new ride was, and how much I wanted to share in the moment with Pix.

Without her, I would've never gotten the car. I would've never even thought about coming to the island and spending my day shopping for vehicles among throngs of humans.

I wasn't acting like myself, and I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. I needed to remember *what* I truly was and what Ana *thought* I was.

She saw me as human. I doubted she could ever accept me as a killer.

My thoughts haunted me all the way to the address in Edgartown, but then I made a deal with myself. A deal with the devil, as it were.

I told myself that I'd pretend to be human – for myself, and for Ana. I'd lock away my past, turn a blind eye to the violence and the memories.

For one weekend, I would be the Kian O'Reilly I was before I was turned. No, not *was* – I'd be the Kian O'Reilly I would *want* for Ana Lane to have. The man she deserved.

But could I get Pix to shed her troubles for a day? Would she be able to put herself first and release the stunning, inner girl that was caged beneath the hair dye, the grease, and the faded blankets in her car. For two days, could we be different people and damn fate to another dimension?

By the time I made it to Edgartown, I was convinced anything was possible.

The owners, two married ladies named Kayla and Evie, had greeted me with huge smiles, and then Evie led me to their post and beam barn at the back of their land.

The space above the barn was perfect – intimate yet beautiful, with a small balcony that overlooked the sleepy harbor of Edgartown. It was designed with romance in mind, though Pix would probably relegate me to sleeping on the

floor, or in the car. It didn't matter though, because I was sure she'd be pleased.

Kayla had apparently taken the time to fill a wicker basket full of luxury bath products and velvet white towels. She had also loaded a few antique vases with flowers that resembled hundreds of tiny cobalt butterflies, clustering in giant balls and tumbling down the side under their sheer weight.

I wasn't a flower guy, but the effect was elegant.

While I didn't eat, I knew that Pix would probably be starving by the time I picked her up. Evie recommended a local delicatessen, which I called, placing an order for a picnic dinner. I then headed back to the pink whale shop.

I wasn't sure if Pix had a change of clothes in that old leather backpack of hers, so I thought that I would make good on her request for a tip.

With the help of a young, *very* flirty sorority girl, I purchased something called a wrap dress in sunset yellow. According to Miss Hair Toss, the soft cotton outfit tied to the side, making it idiot proof size-wise. Shopping would have been easier if Pix and her petite frame had been with me, but she was still working for Mr. Waite.

I didn't like the sound of that dude at all.

After packing Pix's new dress in a about ten yards of pastel pink paper and a whale bag, the sales clerk suggested a pair of golden sandals for my "girlfriend." When she said it, I was hit with a strange longing that I couldn't define. It was a hunger, but not like I was used to – not that drive for a soul to quench my need, but something else.

Something deeper. Sharper.

I added the sandals to my purchase and asked about the swim trunks I had mentioned to Ana (they didn't have any, thank heavens), and left.

I drove straight to Lower Makonikey, knowing I was going to be an hour early. Knowing that I had every intention of getting the low-down on who exactly Mr. Waite was and what business he really had.

❧ KIAN ❧

LOWER MAKONIKEY MAINLY consisted of three things: huge homes, huge price tags, and huge egos. Most of the properties came with a sizable chunk of land as well, and Mr. Waite's was no exception. His fully gated compound sat in the center of an open expanse of rolling green lawn, which was a surefire way to keep an eye open for uninvited visitors, like me.

I stalked the tree line, using dusk's shadows like a bodysuit of blackness, and studied the many windows in the massive Tudor style home. I didn't see a single soul walk by any of the glass, though the house was lit from inside, so someone had to be home.

What I did see, however, were several men built like NFL rejects, walking the perimeter of the house with sidearms tucked under their jackets. I also counted at least twenty

security cameras and what appeared to be motion sensors near all entrances to the home. Add a couple of cannons and a few of those bear-like things from *The Hunger Games*, and it could be a fully outfitted fortress.

The whole layout made me uneasy.

Even worse, Ana was somewhere inside.

Security on this level was more apt for a major politician or major criminal, not an investment banker. From what little detail I had found on Mr. Waite over the past hour, he was seen as an altruistic businessman and philanthropist, giving frequently to charities.

The town sang his praises, the neighbors thought he was a saint, and the cops invited him to their charity ball every year . . . all of which told me one thing: he was an ass.

No one was THAT perfect.

After about an hour of seeing absolutely nothing of usefulness, I headed back to my Corvette that I'd parked down the street, returning to the main gatehouse with the car.

Two big guys were inside talking, but straightened as I pulled the car's bumper to the gate. Thug 1, who was sporting a crew cut and a side arm, stepped out of the little shack and approached my car, looking over the Vette. "Can I help you?" he asked.

Thug 2 had come out of the gatehouse with a mirror on the end of a long steel pole. He wedged it under my car, walking along the side.

He was checking for a bomb, which officially landed Waite on the top of my scumball list. Who checks for bombs? Nobody except the people worth blowing one's self up to murder, that's who.

"I'm here for a pick up," I said, hoping my response might give me insight into what Waite was really up to.

The guy narrowed his gaze, "We've got no scheduled pick ups tonight." I heard the click of a gun being cocked and glanced in the sideview mirror to see Thug 2 easing his gun from his holster.

I didn't need this to go south right now – not when I had no clue where Ana was in the sprawling estate. "I'm here to pick up Ana Lane – she's a mechanic here."

The change in demeanor of the two, gun-toting gate keepers was instant. Thug 1 relaxed as Thug 2 slipped his gun back in his holster. "You're here for Rosie, huh? You must be some kind of brave to take her on."

"Rosie? No I'm here for Ana. ANA LANE," I stressed, starting to worry I just blew her cover or something.

Thug 2 laughed, placing the mirror back in the gatehouse. "No, no. We call her Rosie like *Rosie the Riveter*. The

girl is fierce. Stupid here tried to ask her out once. Once!” he laughed, thumbing toward Thug 1, who nodded.

“That girl has a razor sharp tongue. She scared the crap out of me.”

I smiled, thinking of Ana hurling her ego crushing thoughts at either of these two morons. I pointed at the gate, “So, can I go get her?”

Thug 2 shook his head. “Sorry man, gotta wait here. We’ll call down to the garage and get her to walk up.”

I nodded, “Should I stay here, or . . .”

“Here’s fine,” said Thug 1, no doubt wanting to keep an eye on me. I wanted to ask them about the extreme security measures, but I feared my curiosity would set them off and I’d never get Pix out.

I needed to remember that she’d been coming and going from here without incident for a while. I needed to not rock the boat, or she could pay the price.

So I kept up small talk with the two guards, my eyes scanning the rolling lawn as I waited for Pix, who eventually appeared over the rise with Seth in tow.

She finally reached the gatehouse and Thug 1 and 2 wished her goodnight. Seth gave her a wave from behind the gate as I held the door to the Vette open for her.

“Thanks again, Ana!”

“No worries, Seth! I’m just thrilled he’s finally getting rid of it!” called Pix as she slid into my car.

I waved to the guards as I got in the drivers side and backed away from Waite and whatever underhanded business he was really dealing in.

“Thanks for picking me up,” she said to me, a smile on her face.

“Anytime. Car all fixed?” I asked, thrilled she was safely tucked into my car and no longer hidden on Waite’s property.

“Of course. Do I ever fail?” she snorted, crossing her arms in defiance.

“Somehow I doubt failure is an option with you, Pix. Oh, and dinner is in the back seat.”

She turned and fetched the small picnic basket, opening it on her lap. “Oh thank goodness, I’m starving,” she replied, then glanced to me, confused, as I drove. “Uh, there is only one sandwich in here.”

“I already ate,” I offered, smooth in my lie.

She sighed. “Typical dude. Can’t think of anything but his stomach.”

As I watched her eat, her mouth moving with every bite, I became plagued by a different kind of hunger entirely.

One that involved her lips and mine.

14

ANA

I DON'T KNOW HOW he did it, but Kian managed to score a room for the night. And it wasn't just any room, but a stunning post and beam barn which had a loft area that had been converted into a beautiful bedroom suite.

A ONE BED, romantic getaway type of suite.

"If you're uncomfortable with me sleeping in here, I'm happy to crash in the car," said Kian, watching me as I walked around the room, taking in the aged wood, little white lights, iron canopy bed, and clusters of hydrangea flowers. I opened another door to a small, but well appointed, bathroom complete with rain head shower.

I looked back at Kian who stood casually by the open staircase that led to the lower floor. "How'd you ever manage to find this place?"

"Dumb luck. Is it too much?"

I chocked out a laugh. “It’s uh, amazing. I mean – there’s even a view of the harbor,” I said, pointing to a massive arched window that framed a perfect view of the boats. “It’s just, I uh, don’t really . . . um, know you.” Jeez, I felt like a jerk, but I really wasn’t cool with sharing a bedroom with Frat Boy. I mean, we barely knew each other – I just met him a few days ago.

Weirdly, though, I wasn’t afraid of him . . . but not being able to read him DID make me nervous. I stood in the room, trying to get comfortable. “Listen – I can just sleep in the car. I love cars – it’s totally not a big deal.”

Kian laughed and came the rest of the way into the room, depositing a pink whale gift bag on the bed. “I’m not letting you sleep in a car while I snore away in a luxury barn. You can have the room. It’s really not an issue for me.”

“That’s not right – this is your money, so it’s your room. I can’t take – ” He placed a finger to my lips, which shocked me for a moment and then he slowly dropped his hand.

“Take the damn room, because I ain’t sharing my car with you all night.”

“Are you sure?” I asked again. This was just weird.

He sighed, “Yes, for god’s sake. Now open your tip.”

“What?”

“Your TIP. It’s in the bag,” he said, sitting down on the soft bed next to the bag.

I gave him a questioning look as I picked up the bag and sat beside him, pulling a mile of pink paper out of the bag. Nestled in the bottom was a pile of silky yellow, and I slowly pulled it out, unfurling it into a delicate sundress.

I looked at him, stunned. “It’s a dress.”

“So glad you could identify one,” he chuckled and my eyes narrowed. He raised his hands, an act of surrender, “I only meant I’ve yet to see you in one. You seem like a tank top and jeans type of gal.”

“That’s because I am. Is this a hint that I need to embrace my inner *female*?” I questioned, a little offended.

He smiled, leaning back on the bed. “Actually, it was an impulse buy since I thought you may not have planned on being stuck here overnight. I figured you might want a clean outfit for our celebratory evening.”

I’d totally forgot about that. “Oh. Well, um, thank you.”

“Thanks for helping me find the car,” he replied, easing himself to stand. “I’m going to go and give you some privacy so you can take a shower and get dolled up.”

“I don’t ever get dolled up, so you may be disappointed. Fair warning, is all.” I replied, easing the dress

back into the bag. I noticed there were also sandals in with the dress and I began to wonder how much this “tip” cost Kian.

“Aye Aye, captain. Warning received,” he replied with a brilliant smile, and my tummy flipped around like a fish caught on land. Kian seemed to pull me into a whole different world, and I felt completely out of my element . . . and gasping for air.

ANA

"I'M NOT SO SURE this is a good idea, especially with your tendency towards seasickness. We can skip this if you want," I offered, rethinking my grand idea of taking a spin on the Flying Horses carousel.

Kian waved me off as we waited in line behind some blue-faced kid that was sucking on a Popsicle. If he turned around and touched my dress, I'd break his chubby little fingers.

"I really don't get seasick. The smell on the boat got to me, that's all. Plus, I will absolutely score the golden ring. You've got no chance on this one, Pixie Pants."

"HA! Show's what you know! I always score the gold ring and a free ride, because I've got a system! A strategy!"

The Smurf in front of us gave me the fish eye over his shoulder as he slowly dragged his tongue over his frozen treat

repeatedly. The slurping sound he made nearly pushed me over the edge, and I visualized grabbing it from him and chucking it through one of the open barn windows that housed the carousel. I pointed a sneaky finger at the kid and made an ugly face.

“Stop harassing children,” whispered Kian in my ear with a chuckle, and the heat from his body sent a weird tingle over my skin.

“He keeps STARING at me,” I hissed through my teeth, and the little brat’s lips curved into a smile not unlike some demon spawn.

Kian knelt down next to the kid, putting himself at eye-level with the first grader. “So, kid. You gonna get the brass ring?”

“Yuuup,” he replied between licks.

Kian glanced back at me. “I don’t think this girl here is gonna get the ring, do you?”

“Nooope.” Lick.

My mouth dropped open, shocked. But then Kian leaned in a little closer to the kid, whispering, “I’m kind of on a date with this girl. Do you think she’s kinda pretty?”

The kid took a long slow lick of his melting pop as he appraised me with a serious eye, and I bit my lip, trying not to laugh. He then leaned a tiny bit towards Kian. “Yup.”

Kian looked back at me, “Me too, kid. Me too. But see, she really wants that ring, so how about if *you* get it, you give it to *me*, so I can give it to her and impress her. Huh? Wadda ya say?”

“Noooope.”

I covered my mouth, stifling a snorty-laugh.

Kian stood up with a sigh, shaking his head, “Hey, I tried. You and your brilliant ring-grabbing abilities better be something special, because that kid has come to throw down.”

I couldn’t help it – I burst out laughing, which caused the kid’s mother to finally realize her child was talking with two random strangers. She gave him a yank to pull him along in line, and as he moved away from us, he gave a little wave goodbye.

As the carousel slowed and the line moved forward for our turn, Kian studied the wooden horses, picking out his steed.

I poked him in the side, “You better hang on Frat Boy – this sucker is one fast carousel.”

He laughed at me, “Pfft – I’m not the one wearing a dress. I hope you can hang on sidesaddle, Pix, otherwise the world will see your underwear.”

I looked down at my silky yellow dress and swore as Kian laughed harder.

* * * *

I had never had a more perfect night in my life. Between the carousel, the cobblestone streets, the live music and the harbor, Kian and I had a fabulous time.

As the evening wore on, the armor I kept inside me started to slip. I began to lose myself in Kian's presence and by the time we wandered into a little, dusty club, I could feel my attraction to him like an electric buzz. I let him touch me – hold me in his arms as he lead me through the dance floor.

Being with him was unlike any moment I'd ever had with a guy before. As we danced, he watched me with an intensity that unraveled my reservations, sliding his thumb over my palm and easing his other wide hand slowly around my back.

“Be selfish,” he whispered against the side of my face, his voice a velvet tone that seemed to curl through my mind. “Let go of the world, Ana Lane, and put yourself first.”

I exhaled a trembling breath and began to soften under his hands, daring to believe I'd be safe with him. I began to move with him, swaying to the haunting melody and the singer's mournful voice that snaked through the dim bar, twisting around us like a witch's spell.

Slowly, he pulled me tighter to his hard body and soon the lines that defined us blurred into one. He was no longer rich and flawless. I was no longer poor and damaged.

We moved as one, hip molded to hip, breath for breath, as his body guided me to the music. He smiled down at me and I could feel the defensive walls within me become thinner. In a handful of days, Kian O'Reilly had begun to scale my fears, urging me to find myself once again.

The music began to turn faster, and his smile lit brighter as I gave him a knowing dare with my eyes. Suddenly he swung me off my feet, spinning us in the center of the dance floor.

I gasped and hung on to his shoulders as I pressed my face against his solid chest, the vibration of his chuckling channeling through his shirt. Finally he slowed, letting my feet drift back to the wide pine floors but holding me steady as the room stopped tilting.

He watched me, his smile turning into something different. Something more serious and fierce. I could feel it rising inside me as well, seeking my heart, and it terrified me.

I had a goal – a place in the time frame of my life that I needed to reach with the fewest stumbling blocks possible. Kian, however, was one magnetic boulder that had rolled right in my path.

His jaw hardened as he watched me, his eyes brilliant chips of sea glass in the darkness. I think the band was still playing, but if they were, I couldn't hear them. All that filled my ears was the pounding of my pulse as I reached up and touched Kian's face with the tips of my fingers. I traced the stunning contours of his jaw and brow, committing them to memory, because that's all I could allow.

He needed to be a phantom – something unreal and uncomplicated. He could be nothing more than a stolen moment, or he could ruin me. But I wanted to remember this boy – this man – who saw me like no one else did. Who dared me to be selfish and escape my life.

I trailed my finger carefully over his full bottom lip and glanced to his eyes. We had stopped dancing and Kian's gaze channeled such intensity that I became cemented to the floor.

“Tell me to stay,” he breathed.

“I won't be a summer fling and you can't stay,” I replied quietly.

“You are not a summer fling, Pix. I swear.”

I let my hand drop from his face and backed out of his embrace, trying to shake the tight sensation in my chest. He needed to leave. I needed to stay the course. I needed to move out of my house and get my father help.

Kian couldn't be here.

"You can't stay," I said again as I began backing towards the door. The people bouncing and moving around me felt like a human cage, drawing the air from my lungs and crushing my sanity.

I needed to get out of the crowd before I snapped.

I needed . . . freedom. From everything. From everyone.

I turned and bolted for the door, the sound of Kian calling after me ringing in my ears. I was freaked – by my growing feelings for Kian, by my fear that I was losing control of my life. My goals.

Out on the street I started running past the tightly packed shops and cafes, toward where I didn't know. The tops of sailboats glowed under the moon and people seemed to fill the streets, laughing and enjoying the evening.

I envied them and how they lived in the moment, shedding their worries and problems. I wanted to be them – to be the kid with the sparkler, drawing neon creatures in the night air. I wanted to be the couple kissing against the side of the Flying Horses' barn, tipsy from the carousel and one another.

Suddenly Kian stepped out from an alleyway in front of me. Shocked, I tripped forward, nearly crashing into him,

but he grabbed me with lightning fast reflexes. How in the hell did he get ahead of me?

“Pix – what are you doing?” he asked, confused as he let me go. “Did I say something to offend you?”

I shook my head and started past him, but he grabbed my hand, halting me. “Slow down. I can’t help you if you won’t tell me what is going on in that head of yours.”

“I’m not your charity case, Kian,” I snapped, emotions messing with my temper.

I pulled my hand free and concern creased his forehead. “What makes you think I see you as a charity case, Pix?”

“Oh please! The extra money in my car? The trip over here? The room? Let’s face it – you and I are from two different tax brackets. Hell, we are from two different galaxies. We don’t work, you and I.”

Kian carefully took a step forward, as if he was worried I’d run again. “You don’t know that, and help from a friend is not charity.”

I tossed my hands in the air, frustrated. “Oh my god! You’re impossible! Look, you can’t help me, all right? I have a goal – a finish line. If I can just make it there, everything will be okay. And you – you complicate things.” I sighed, studying our surroundings but refusing to look at him.

People still flowed by us, once in a while paying us a curious look as we stood like statues on the sidewalk.

Finally Kian spoke, “What’s the goal, Pix? Where’s the finish line?”

I shook my head, not wanting to answer him as I fiddled with my rope bracelet.

He reached out and touched my chin, turning my face to look at him. “I won’t tell your secrets, but I need to know where you are running to. As your friend, I deserve that much.”

Memories of my dad were playing through my mind: the good, the bad, and the brutal. I had survived this long without telling anyone, except MJ, what my life was really like, and Kian couldn’t become part of that inner circle. He could end up reporting my dad and everything that I’d worked so hard to avoid would land right on my doorstep.

I swallowed, “The future. A better future.”

He seemed to turn that answer over in his head. “What if you only get today?” he asked.

“Then I got this far, in one piece and on my own.”

“Do you like to always be on your own? I mean, I know you’re friends with the ice cream cowboy, but don’t you want . . . oh, I don’t know . . . a really hot guy with a sick car as a partner in crime?”

I couldn't help but smile, some of my tension slipping, and I finally met Kian's eyes with my own. "Partner in crime, huh? MJ could be a master criminal for all you know. You may be trusting his wholesome demeanor a little too much."

"Yeah, I don't think so. That kid is total vanilla, despite the fact that he was devious enough to sell me overpriced cow hide."

I laughed, Kian smiled, and just like that, he made the shadows in my life flee. He was so different from anyone I'd ever known, like a burst of oxygen in a room starved of air.

"Pix – even if all you'll let me be is your getaway driver, I'll be happy. And I can even overlook the stranglehold you have on your life and the fact that you've probably got a Daily Planner filled out for the next two decades. Just slate me in somewhere, will ya?"

I thought about the two of us, laughing and tormenting one another over the past two days and how much more alive I felt when I was with him.

A mutinous part of my mind whispered that maybe he didn't need to be a roadblock. Maybe he could just be a more scenic route to get to where I needed to be.

Mentally, I was fried. Making it to my eighteenth birthday, would be a test of sheer bone-grinding

determination. Despite MJ's best efforts, I was getting exhausted, and lately I felt more alone than I ever had before.

Maybe Kian was placed in my path to save me from myself. Maybe I just needed to give up a little of my control.

I crossed my arms as I looked up at him. "I guess it's a free country. If you want to stay, who am I to stop you? But I'm busy – I work, I have a life." Well . . . a semi-life at least.

"You have a life?" he asked with a smirk.

I poked him in the chest, "Watch it, Frat Boy, or I'll evict thee from my corner of the Cape. And if you start following me around like a lost puppy, I'll kick your ass."

He snatched my finger, but then gathered the rest of my hand in his. "Jeez – your country sure sounds like a dictatorship."

I smiled evilly. "Where you're concerned, it's a monarchy and I'm the queen."