



MELISSA A. CRAVEN

# EMERGE

THE AWAKENING

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Book One

Melissa A. Craven



Midnight  
Hour studio

Atlanta, Georgia

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# Dedication

For my amazing family and their unwavering support.  
And for the dude who's been around since page one.

Finally...

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*The Power is corrupted, and will remain so until a new generation is born with the strength of their ancestors, led by one with an unsullied, natural connection with the Power. His heart will guide him, giving him the restraint to wield his Power wisely. He will gather his equals and together they will stand against those who persist in the corruption of the natural order. He will be strong and fierce in his beliefs, and steadfast in his love. Born the second child of the seventh daughter of his line, he alone will possess the skills and the knowledge to heal what has been broken. He alone will have the courage to judge unbiased and mete out the ultimate punishment. Until the time of his birth, may we prepare the way and hope for the future of all the races of men—*

Book of the Indriell Queens – ca. 6000 BC

# CHAPTER

# ONE

“My friends are idiots, Allie. Don’t listen to them!”  
Gavin shouted as he pursued her across the sand dunes.

“They’re right! Why do you want me around?” She stumbled in the darkness and fell to the ground. Allie watched his friends at the bonfire party below.

*You don’t belong down there, Allie.*

“Gavin, I know how people feel about me, but walking into a heated discussion about how much everyone can’t stand me just isn’t something I can shrug off.”

“I’m so sorry,” he sighed, sinking down beside her.

She absently reached for his hand and saw it. Just in that brief moment when he tried to hide it—his subtle flinch that indicated her touch was somehow uncomfortable. It was that way with almost everyone. Allie spent most of her life alone and lonely while those around her kept a respectful distance. A rare few were

polite and friendly, trying to hide it like Gavin, but there was always an air of deference in their behavior. And then sometimes, like tonight, others would react with barely concealed contempt, no matter how hard she tried to set them at ease. She learned to accept it, choosing to keep to herself instead. It was easier for everyone that way. Everyone but Allie.

This sweet summer romance was a first for her, and she didn't want it to end. But she didn't want to come between her boyfriend and his friends either.

"See? You feel the same way." She dropped his hand.

"I do not." He laced his long fingers through hers. Allie could see his determination to power through his discomfort and she was touched by the effort he put into their relationship.

"I'm a pariah, Gavin. I don't know why. People just don't like to be near me."

"You are an intimidatingly beautiful and unique girl." He brushed a comforting kiss across her fingertips.

"Unique?" she snorted. "That a nice way of saying I'm weird?"

"Okay, you're weird." He grinned. "But hot-weird, which in my humble opinion is an excellent combination."

"Thanks." She blushed. With her long, wavy red hair, subtle almond shaped green eyes and curvy figure, Allie got a lot of looks from boys her age, but not many made the effort like Gavin had.

"Seriously," he laughed. "Don't ever try to be anything less than what you are, Allie. You're different, and that is an incredible thing. You just need to own it."

"You're right." She smiled.

“Come on, Freckles. Can I tempt you with hot fudge sundaes? My treat?”

“Extra fudge?”

“On one condition.”

“Name your price.”

“Ignore my friends, because you and I are good. More than good.” He leaned down for a kiss.

She liked kissing Gavin. Despite his trembling hands and brief fumbling hesitations, it was nice. She didn’t feel blazing fireworks, but she definitely enjoyed the connection they shared. She often wondered if she should end it before she hurt him, but was reluctant to let him go. He’d done wonders for her in the few months they’d spent together. His friends didn’t really care for her, but for the first time since she could remember, she was interacting with kids her age and doing things she’d always sat on the sidelines watching others do.

“Let’s get outta here.” He offered his hand.

Allie felt a twinge of regret as she slipped into the front seat of his beat up old truck. She shouldn’t let it get to her, but she’d been in a pensive mood all night and couldn’t seem to shake it.

“Let’s get ice cream and head up to Dover Heights before we call it a night?” He pulled into the drive-thru and Allie slid across the seat to read the menu. She smiled when his arm snaked around her.

“Chocolate peanut-butter ice cream with extra hot fudge and extra whip cream, please.”

“And one normal sundae.” He rolled his eyes. “That is entirely too much chocolate.”

“There’s no such thing.”

They drove the short distance up to the cliffs in silence but she still couldn’t pull out of her funk.

Something ominous lay ahead, but she wasn't sure of the details yet. Allie had a way of knowing things. Her strong intuition was such a normal thing for her she hardly noticed it anymore. She feared her anxious mood tonight might be a warning that her encounter with Gavin's friends this evening was only a precursor to what school would be like for them.

*Will he constantly have to defend me like he did tonight?*

"You're too quiet," Gavin sighed as they sat on the tailgate, enjoying the cool breeze of the mild Australian winter. Allie stared down at the Tasman Sea below. She'd just crossed it a few months ago when they left New Zealand for Sydney after nearly two years in the same place. A rare feat for Allie's family.

"You haven't been this reserved with me in weeks. Don't make me coax you out of that shell again."

"I am currently preoccupied with chocolate." She scraped the last of the fudge from her cup.

"Liar," he laughed. "It will be better once school starts, I promise."

It really wasn't fair, the way she dragged him down. She knew he wanted to be with her, but how long could it go on? Eventually he would tire of making excuses.

"Sorry, I'm such a bummer tonight."

"You are never a bummer. Come on, curfew's in ten minutes. Let's get you home."

It was a short drive and Gavin was doing his best to make her laugh, but her smile wilted when they parked in front of her apartment building.

*No, no, no! Not again!* Tears burned her eyes when she saw her mother loading the car with their most essential belongings.

“What’s wrong, Freckles? You look like someone just punched you.”

“That about sums it up,” she sighed. “I’m sorry, I don’t have much time to say goodbye.”

“Why does it sound like you mean forever?”

“Because I do.” She scrubbed the tears from her face. She’d done this so many times, it shouldn’t hurt anymore, but this time would be so much harder. She couldn’t face losing Gavin, or the thought of returning to the lonely life she knew before him.

“You see my mother packing the car?” she whispered. “I know what that means.”

“By the look on your face, I’m guessing a family vacation isn’t on the list of possibilities?”

“I’ve told you we move a lot.”

“But you just got here! You can’t possibly leave again so soon!”

“My parents’ jobs keep us on the move.” She shrugged. “I don’t even ask anymore, I just follow.”

“Gavin.” She reached for his hand. “I will never forget you.”

“Allie—No. Come on, let’s just go talk to your mom and find out what the deal is. It might not be what you think.”

“I don’t need to ask. I can read the signs now and I don’t want to say our goodbyes in front of my mom.”

“Dammit! Allie! I can’t do this!” He pulled her into his arms. “Promise me you will call whenever you get where you’re going? Maybe we can still see each other?”

“I’ve done this a lot. It’s usually better if I just walk away and not look back.”

“That’s not fair. You have to at least let me know you’re okay,” he insisted.

“I’ll try.” She made the vague promise, knowing she would never be able to keep it. Allie already knew this was one of those times she would be expected to cut all ties.

“Look at me, Freckles.” He tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “It hurts that I might never see these green eyes again. I need you to know how amazing you are. Whatever this thing is that makes you so different, call it whatever you want, but it’s something special. Don’t resist it. Be proud of who you are because you’re so much stronger than you know.”

“Back atcha.” She met his kiss one last time. “You have been such a great friend. Thank you for forcing me out of my shell. I was in there for a really long time.”

“Don’t go back, Allie. Be yourself and the people that really matter will stick around...despite your quirky ways.” He smiled sadly.

“Quirky? That’s better than weird,” she teased.

“You have to put yourself out there or nothing will ever change. Promise me you’ll try.”

“I will. I’ve met a lot of people in my life, Gavin. Not many are as kind and patient as you have been with me. I won’t ever forget that.”

She stepped out of the car, feeling like she left a piece of herself behind. She crossed the street, her vision blurry from the tears she couldn’t control, and the fuzzy images of Gavin in some distant future with the cute blond girl who was just right for him.

“I’m so sorry, Allie,” her mother said when she approached.

“Don’t.” She shook her head miserably. She didn’t want to hear all the perfectly logical reasons why they had to leave this very instant.

“Let’s go get your things.” She took Allie’s hand as they headed for the decrepit old elevator that would take them up to the seventeenth floor.

“Navid is here to say goodbye,” Lily said.

“I guess that’s something.” Allie was happy she would get to see him one more time. Navid was really her parents’ friend and colleague, but he’d become something of a mentor to Allie over the years.

She felt the tension when she entered the apartment and was startled to find Navid in a heated discussion with her father.

“Navid?” she asked hesitantly.

“Allie!” His smile was warm as he reached to hug her. He was comfortable with her, and as a result, she’d always felt drawn to him. “How was your date?”

“Good.” She shrugged, distracted by the way her father hung his head in his hands.

“You seem to know more about my daughter than I do.” Carson Carmichael frowned.

“Allie and I have grown close these last months,” he said in his lilting British/Middle Eastern cadence. “She is a delightful girl and a tribute to you both. You should be very proud, you’ve done a marvelous job raising her.”

“I apologize for the intrusion. Lily, Carson, always a pleasure.” He smiled graciously. “Would it be alright if Allie sees me out?”

She was surprised by her father’s glower.

“Carson, please.” Lily rolled her eyes. “Of course, Navid. It was wonderful working with you again. Perhaps next time will be under better circumstances?”

“Oh, I’m certain it will.”

“Thank you for your candor.” Carson reluctantly shook his hand.

Allie followed him into the hall, feeling profoundly affected by the awkwardness of the last few moments.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing to concern yourself with. I’m so sorry you have to go, sweetheart. I know you will miss Gavin. He’s been good for you.”

“So have you.”

“Don’t be sad, we will see each other again. We always do.”

“This sucks.”

“Allie...I need you to listen to me.” Navid grew serious. When they reached the elevator, he pressed the call button and she knew they had only a few minutes for their goodbyes. “What I am about to say probably won’t make much sense right now, but I hope my words of caution and support will come to you when you need them most. You are approaching a very important phase of your life. Everything will change in the coming months and years as you prepare for college and take your first tentative steps into adulthood. I urge you to always remember who you are,” he said. “Right now at this very moment, you are everything you should be and you cannot allow circumstances to change who you are at your core. Always remember *this girl, this version of yourself.*” He smiled. “You are a beautiful, strong willed, stubborn young woman, who just needs a little more confidence. Hold your head high and don’t ever lose the fire in those beautiful green eyes.” He hugged her tightly.

“Goodbye for now, Alexis Carmichael.” He stepped onto the elevator.

“Bye,” she said miserably, shedding a few more tears for another friend lost.

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“Hurry, we have a flight to catch,” Carson said urgently when Allie stepped back into the apartment. She cringed at the sight of the guns spread across the table. He would grudgingly check them at the airport, but they never strayed far from his side when they traveled.

“Pack quickly,” Lily said, adjusting the Beretta at her hip.

“Sorry, only what will fit in the car,” Carson added.

Without a word, Allie marched to her bedroom and slammed the door. They hadn’t left in a scramble like this in a long time, but she was no stranger to these sudden clandestine moves.

She worked in haste, stuffing her small suitcase with the things she couldn’t bear to part with. Shoving her headphones and ancient iPod into her shoulder bag, she surveyed the room, absently checking for the antique pendant at her throat before she turned to go.

“So what’s the story this time?” she asked when she joined her mother in the living room, but she knew she wouldn’t get a direct answer. They were never exactly forthcoming with the details on nights like this.

“Save your questions for later. We have to go now.”

Allie tossed her cheap flip-phone onto the coffee table as she passed. She didn’t even need to check to know the service was already disconnected. The few friends she had in Sydney would never be able to reach her.

“I know this isn’t fair,” her mother apologized again.

Allie didn’t spare a final glance around the apartment that had been home for only a few short months. With a last pang of resentment and a heavy heart, she followed her parents into the night.

Squaring her shoulders and drying her eyes, she knew she had to put it all behind her. Gavin, Navid, Sydney, everything. She had to look to the future now. If she didn't, this would tear her apart.

*I refuse to go back to the way things were. Gavin is right; I have to put myself out there. It's time to accept who I am and own it.*

“This time will be different,” Carson promised, tossing her belongings into the trunk. “This time we’re going home.”

“Home?” Allie snorted. “Right.”

“Carson! It’s too soon!”

“Lil, it’s time. I’m tired of running,” he sighed as he slid into the driver’s seat. “I’m tired of doing this to our daughter.”

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# CHAPTER

## TWO

Allie's feet pounded against the hard packed dirt as she ran along the secluded trail, the sound of Saint Saeën's *Aquarium* loud in her ears. It was still the middle of the night for most people, but she didn't sleep much these days. She liked her new home on Kelleys Island, but the whole move to Cleveland, Ohio reeked of unanswered questions. Questions she knew not to ask.

Today was her first day at the prestigious Cliffton Academy, and she wasn't looking forward to it. She'd changed schools often enough to know what to expect, and she hadn't suffered from new school nerves in years. She just didn't know if she had it in her to start over again.

*Gavin would want me to try.* She'd picked up the phone a dozen times in the last week, but never finished dialing before she chickened out. She didn't know what to say to him. In her mind, that door was closed. He was

in the past, and as much as she missed him, she knew they both needed to move on. Calling him would only prolong their misery.

As the song changed to *Pavane*, Allie heard heavy footsteps echoing behind her. She had company. Another runner following at a discrete distance. He was curious and incredibly annoyed with her—if her instincts were right—which they almost always were.

She continued along the path, increasing her pace, but the footsteps grew louder as he left the trail to crash through the woods.

*So much for my nice quiet morning.*

She felt dizzy. Her head swam and her ears filled with a rush of white noise.

*Should've had breakfast before I left.*

Allie ran faster, hoping to push through the nausea. She looked over her shoulder expecting to catch a glimpse of him, but she crashed into something hard instead. She toppled to the ground with a loud screech.

“Dammit! Watch where you’re going!” a gruff voice sounded in her ear.

“Sorry!”

“Your knee is crushing my spine, sweetheart.”

“Crap! Sorry!” She scrambled to her feet and reached to help him up.

His hand was warm and his grip, firm and confident. Allie waited for him to pull away with the flustered reaction she’d come to expect, but it never happened. She was completely thrown by his lack of response to her touch.

She met his steely gaze and her breath hitched in her throat. He towered over her—but almost everyone did. He was angry, but only one thought came to her mind.

*Friend.*

“Didn’t mean to scare you.” His cold demeanor faded along with his gruff tone. He couldn’t seem to tear his eyes from hers. “I tried to call out before I got too close, but either your hearing sucks or your music was freakishly loud.”

“Probably both,” she laughed nervously.

*Don’t be a dork, Allie!* She tended to fall apart in awkward social situations.

“Aidan McBrien.” He offered his hand like he was eager for the excuse to touch her again. “I live just up the beach. New to the city, right?”

“Um, yeah.” She nodded, distracted by the way his hand closed around hers so easily. He seemed relaxed and had an easygoing, friendly tone, but his body language said otherwise. He stared at their joined hands, fascinated by the contact. Their eyes met again, and they both smiled. The tension between them evaporated in that instant.

Something in Aidan’s eyes set her at ease. She couldn’t stop staring, distracted by the mesmerizing tattoos crossing his bare chest and arms. They reminded her of hieroglyphs and cuneiform markings, like a work in progress. A story only half told. The artist in her wanted to examine them more thoroughly, but the girl in her wanted to trace them with her fingertips.

“And you are?” he prodded. His mischievous smile was enough to send her into more nervous stuttering.

“Oh! Um, Alexis Carmichael.” She blushed. “But I prefer Allie.”

“Nice to meet you. Sorry I scared you. Bad habit of mine.”

“No damage done.”

Aidan was clearly distracted as they walked along the path together in a comfortable silence. There was a faint light in the sky now, and she was able to study his features more closely. He was frowning as if perplexed. His longish, dark brown hair tumbled into his face and his warm brown eyes were alight with confusion and curiosity, and something else—like hope.

“What brings you to Kelleys Island, Lex?” he asked. She didn’t correct his use of the hated nickname. He could call her whatever he liked.

“Parents’ new jobs. The usual.”

“You know it’s not generally considered very polite to show up unannounced.” He smiled. “But I won’t hold it against you, although your parents should check in with mine. My father is Greggory McBrien and my mother is Naeemah El Sadawii.” He announced it like they were celebrities.

“So your parents aren’t married?” was the only thing Allie could think to say.

“Of course they are.”

“Oh, your mom didn’t change her last name? That’s seriously cool.”

“Yeah...she’d like to think so.” He seemed bewildered, staring at her like she had three heads.

“Will you be going to Cliffton Academy?” he rushed to change the subject.

“Yes, today’s my first day.”

“That’s why you’re out here running at the crack of dawn? Nerves getting to you?”

“Not really, I’ve done this a hundred times,” she said. “I guess I’m just trying to psych myself up for it again. Sometimes it’s just easier to crawl back into my nice comfortable shell and keep to myself, you know?”

“I believe I do.” He smirked. “But at least there will be one friendly face in the crowd. I’ll introduce you to my sister and our friends.”

*This is actually going well!* It was kind of amazing how at ease they were together. They were almost back to her house now, and she didn’t want to leave. She was eager to spend time with him, eager to touch him, to see if he really was as unaffected by her as he seemed.

“Sorry about before.” He motioned back to the path behind them, running his fingers through his hair anxiously. He obviously wanted to linger as well.

“Sorry for crushing your spine.”

“You’re little, it’s okay.” His face lit up with an impish grin.

Allie stumbled over the uneven cobblestones and Aidan reached out to steady her. She felt the heat of his touch first, and then a swell of rage quickly followed.

“You want to keep that hand?” she snarled, surprising herself with her response as she whirled around to face him.

“Whoa! Sorry about that, I was just—” he threw his hands up and took an uncertain step back.

“Aidan, I-I’m sorry. I don’t know what got into me.” Her breath came in short startled gasps.

*Now he thinks I’m totally neurotic. Good job, Allie!* Her cheeks flushed scarlet.

“No damage done.” He winked, giving her words back to her. “You’re certainly different, aren’t you, Lex?”

“I don’t know. Is that good-different, or I-should-come-with-a-warning-label-different?” she laughed, marveling at how easy it was to be herself with him.

Aidan took a step closer. His nearness made her heart skip as she caught his earthy male scent of cologne and sweat mixed with a hint of mint.

He leaned in, tilting her chin up to meet his gaze, his fingertips lingering along her jaw. For one insane moment, she thought he might kiss her and she almost swallowed her tongue.

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say both.” His hand fell to her shoulder. “See you at school.” His fingers ran down the length of her arm, leaving a trail of goose bumps behind.

He left her gaping as he jogged off toward the cliffs in the distance.

*That was so weird.* She rubbed her arm where her skin was still warm and tingly from his touch. Aidan seemed strong and confident, and not the least bit intimidated by her. They were wary of each other, but underneath the shock, there was something amazing between them. She was eager to find out just exactly what that was.

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Allie sat in a corner booth, enjoying her last few moments of solitude. She took the early ferryboat into the city, but when she arrived at the impressive Art Deco gates of Cliffton Academy, she wimped out and ducked into a coffee shop on the next block. She had a meeting with the headmistress soon, but was determined to put it off as long as possible.

From her vantage point, she watched the students among the businessmen and women shuffling down Saint Claire Avenue. Everyone in a Cliffton uniform appeared to be the silver spoon type.

*This place is so not me.*

“Aidan!” She heard an insipid giggle drift in from the noisy street. “When are you going to take me for a ride in your BMW?”

“Sorry, sweetheart, I wrapped it around a tree a few weeks ago.”

Allie watched the exchange. Aidan was very different. He even sounded different, arrogant and full of himself.

“Hasn’t your dad bought you a new one yet?”

“I’m afraid I am grounded and at the mercy of my sister for transportation for the foreseeable future.”

“Well, maybe I can take you for a ride in my little Mercedes sometime?”

“Sure, maybe.” He walked into the shop with the girl on his arm. His eyes scanned the room until they landed on Allie, like he expected her to be exactly where he found her. He beamed his incredible smile at her and took a step toward her table.

“Aidan!” Another polished and coiffed brunette practically lit up for him.

“Hey, sweetheart.” He gave her a forced smile; completely unlike the one he’d just given Allie.

*That is not the guy I met this morning.*

She watched him approach the counter with an arm around each girl. His laughter was strained and he looked uncomfortable.

*He has absolutely no idea who he is.* She frowned. *Friends, Allie. Nothing more.*

“Brianna. I’m sorry, I just don’t date Cliffton girls.” She heard a pleasant voice behind her.

“Vincent, why not?” The stunning blond pouted her perfectly painted lips.

“I’m not the Cliffton type.”

He was kind, but firm in his rejection. He was also the first person Allie had seen in a school uniform that didn't have "trust fund brat" stamped across his forehead. He moved confidently and was totally at ease with himself.

*And that is a guy who knows exactly who he is.* He was so much more approachable. Not as intense.

*Safe.*

"Vince! Coffee's getting cold!"

Allie turned to see a petite girl with beautiful, waist length blond hair waiting for him.

"Thanks, Kayla!" He jogged to catch up with his friend.

"Hey, Lex." Aidan left his collection of girls at the counter to slip into the booth beside her. There was something strange about his behavior, like he was hiding behind a mask that hadn't been there this morning.

"You know, I really hate that name." This was fake Aidan, and she wasn't sure she liked him.

"It suits you."

"I prefer Allie."

"Aidan? Come on! Stop flirting with everything in a skirt and let's go!"

Allie felt her head spinning from all the noise. It was like everyone was speaking at top volume.

"This screaming harpy is my big sister, Sasha."

She looked up into the kind blue eyes of a tall, caramel skinned Haitian girl who belonged on a runway somewhere.

"You were serious?" The girl rolled her eyes, her outrageously curly hair bouncing.

"Adopted sister," he amended, his eyes twinkling in amusement.

“I thought he made you up to screw with me.” Sasha beamed a bright smile as she slipped into the booth—taking the seat furthest from Allie.

“Who’re your parents? Did they check in—?”

“Sasha, don’t you have coffees to order?” He cut her off with a warning glare.

*Yeah, I don’t like this Aidan. He’s an ass.*

“Fine, hog the new girl,” she huffed in her subtle Haitian-French accent. “You’re a junior, right? I’ll see you in class later? We’ll talk?”

“Sure.” Allie liked the sister. She kept her distance the way most people did, but she also seemed willing and eager to overlook the awkward chasm between them. It reminded her of the way Gavin tried so hard to befriend her when they first met.

“She talks too much.” Aidan watched his sister move to the counter with her friends. “But she’s awesome. Just don’t tell her I said that.” He winked.

The mask was gone and the real Aidan was back. Allie couldn’t keep up.

“The tall, dark, quiet one over there is my best friend, Quinn. He’s a senior. He’s been around Sasha too long, so he doesn’t talk much. The short, pale, hungry looking one, ordering half the bakery, is his little brother, Graham. He is the most genuinely kind person I know. You’ll love him.”

“I take it at least one of them is adopted?” She noted the ethnic differences between the brothers.

“They both are.”

“So am I!” She smiled.

“Interesting coincidence,” he said dryly.

“The cute Asian girl with Graham is our friend, Chloe. She’s the only one of us not adopted.” His smile

was sincere and full of love for his friends, but there was some sadness there too, as if he saw himself as an outsider.

Allie observed them from a distance. They were a close group, sharing the kind of deep friendship that came from growing up together. It was the one thing she'd always wanted, but never had. She felt like she was staring at her future. A future she wanted very badly, but was afraid it would disappear the moment she felt like she belonged.

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# CHAPTER

# THREE

“Alexis Ann Mareé Carmichael! Get back in this house right now!” Lily shouted from the terrace balcony of Allie’s bedroom.

“Crap! Four named. That can’t be good.” She wandered through the mass of rooms and stairs of the rambling old church until she finally found her room. She hadn’t come the same way twice since they arrived. The church-house was great, especially the bell tower that was now her bedroom suite, but the guesthouse across the gardens was a bit much considering they didn’t know anyone. Her parents were so wonderfully weird. No cul-de-sac with granite countertops and white picket fences for The Carmichael’s. They were far too unique for such normalcies.

“We need those ‘you are here’ maps.” Allie scowled as she drifted into her bedroom, but Lily glowered right back at her.

“Jeez, what’d I do this time?” She flopped onto the bed.

“We haven’t been in this house two weeks and you’ve already painted your walls?”

“I paint when I’m stressed, Ma. It helps me think.”

“Is it school?” Lily instantly made the switch to mom-mode. “I thought your first week went well?”

“No, Ma, school’s fine. I’m still just really confused about this move. It’s different.”

“We always intended to come back home, and when the opportunity presented itself, we felt like we had to take it. I’m just sorry it was so sudden.”

“So we’re really just ignoring the mad-dash across the planet in the middle of the night? The guns? The fact that you yourself were surprised when Dad announced we were coming here?”

“Honey, you need to focus on making a life here.” She expertly skated over the taboo subject. “I was so proud of you in Sydney. It was wonderful to see you come out of your shell. I’ve always hated how our jobs have kept us on the move so much, but—”

“Don’t, Mom,” she sighed. “You can’t keep calling what we do ‘moving.’”

“That’s all behind us,” she said firmly. “I promise this is our home now.”

“Until next time,” Allie muttered.

“Have you had time to check out the beach?” Lily changed the subject.

“Yeah, I did some investigating last night. The beaches here are weird. And it smells funny.” She made a face at her mother.

“I’ll miss the ocean too, but it’ll feel like home in no time,” Lily promised. “You should go exploring, get familiar with the island. I loved it here when I was a kid.”

“I don’t know, something’s off about this place, Ma.”

“Alright, Allie-girl. Dinner will be ready in an hour. I trust you don’t need a GPS to find the kitchen?” she laughed as she left the room.

Allie headed up to her rooftop garden where the grass and wildflowers grew tall in a haphazard kind of way. A small weathered deck at the center was raised just enough to maximize the view of the city across the Lake Erie bay.

*Who knew they had islands in Cleveland?* She leaned over the parapet to gaze at the skyline in the distance.

She fiddled with her necklace, a nervous habit. Lily had given her the glittery, coal-black pendant a few years ago. It was a family heirloom, and as their adopted daughter, Allie treasured it more than anything she owned.

She tugged at her necklace now, feeling anxious and uncertain about everything. She wanted to believe this really would be their permanent home, but it was hard to accept. The way they left Sydney, only to arrive on Kelleys Island—to this house, like this fabricated, perfect life had been waiting for them all along. It was just too easy.

Then there was Aidan and his friends. She was curious about them and the way they accepted her so readily, but Aidan was especially intriguing. He was totally comfortable with her. Even with Gavin, it was always like he had to power through his hesitation, like it

was some unpleasant thing he had to deal with if he wanted to be with her. With Aidan, there was no uneasiness—something she'd never experienced before. But there was something else there too. She liked him more than she cared to admit. Their initial attraction to each other was intense, and Allie knew she wasn't ready for that. But if anyone was truly capable of being her friend, it was Aidan, and if she was truly honest with herself, she was desperate to explore that possibility. She could not face the lonely life she'd learned to accept before Gavin. Not now, when she knew what it was like to have real friends. She refused to go back.

Allie was determined to connect with Aidan. The real Aidan. If he could put his mask away long enough to let her in.

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Exhausted after another sleepless night, and not in the best of moods, Allie sipped her coffee as she leaned over the ferryboat railing. Shivering in the cool breeze, she watched the queue of cars creeping onto the deck below. She was suddenly hyperaware of the sleek, steel gray car passing beneath her feet. It was one of those expensive, sporty European hybrid things with dark tinted windows.

*Aidan and his friends.* She didn't pause to consider how she knew they were in that particular car.

He soon joined her on the upper deck, while the others strayed off with their friends. He had fake Aidan firmly in place as he sidled up beside her. His elbow brushed her arm and they both stilled at the normal contact. The spark of attraction was definitely still there, but Allie felt a strong urge to put him securely in the “friend” box and keep him there. He obviously did not.

“Morning, Lex.” He slid closer, letting the mask fall away. He didn’t seem capable of keeping it in place around her.

“Knock it off with the Lex crap,” she snapped.

*Jeez, Allie!* She winced at her tone. *No wonder you have trouble making friends!*

“Not a morning person?” His grin was contagious. He was more like himself now.

“Sorry, I guess I’m not really the bright-eyed sort.” She couldn’t help her smile. “Dude, is that a violin strapped to your back?” she snorted.

“Yeah. That supposed to be funny?”

“Band geek? Doesn’t really fit the whole tattooed-muscled-pretty-jock-boy thing you’ve got going on.”

“Pretty?” he scowled. “I do not play in the marching band, sweetheart. I’m first violinist and concertmaster of the Clifton Orchestra.”

“Eh, play me some Bach and this cranky redhead will shut up.”

“You’re all sorts of trouble, aren’t you?” he said dryly.

“Me? You might as well be holding a sign that says ‘WARNING: dark and dangerous. Keep out.’”

“Are you normally this mean or is it just me?” he grinned.

“Sorry, it’s me. I haven’t slept in like a year, so I’m crabby. But I’m afraid the sarcasm comes with the package. You hang out with me long enough you’re bound to get burned.”

“Allie, how old are you?” The odd question caught her by surprise.

“I skipped second grade so I won’t be sixteen for another month.”

“That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“I’m just trying to figure you out.”

“I promise I’m not all that complicated.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Enough about me. What’s with them?” She rolled her eyes at Sasha and the others. Quinn and Graham were pretending like they hadn’t been caught staring. Sasha waved, mouthing something Allie couldn’t quite make out. And Chloe took a bashful step behind Quinn. Aidan’s friends all reacted to Allie the way most people did, but they also seemed utterly fascinated with her and that kinda creeped her out.

“They find you bizarrely intimidating.”

“Most people do,” she said frankly, “but could you make the staring stop?”

“I’ll talk to them.”

“It’s kinda strange how all your friends are adopted,” she said.

“You know anything about your birth parents?” he asked.

“Not a thing.”

“Same here.”

“Sometimes I actually forget Lily and Carson aren’t my real parents. They seem so much a part of me.”

“My dad and I are a lot alike,” Aidan said hesitantly. “It’s like he was supposed to be my father, and Sasha might as well be my twin. What’s your family like?”

“My mom’s an archeologist and my dad’s a cultural anthropologist, which is why we’ve moved so much. My older sister, Joscelin, is their biological daughter, but she’s busy doing her residency at a hospital in Bali.” Allie really missed her big sister and wished she could

have seen Joss one more time before fleeing the hemisphere.

“So, who was that with you back at the dock?” Aidan asked absently.

“My mom.”

“What? How?” he frowned.

“What do you mean how?” Allie laughed. “The usual way. Mom without a baby, baby without a mom. Sign some papers, instant family.”

“Right. I ah...she’s an archeologist, huh?” he rambled.

“Yeah, we’ve spent a lot of time on some cool sites, but my favorite was the dig in Luxor where I got to visit Hatshepsut’s Temple and the Valley of the Kings and Queens.”

“So *your* mom is the new Egyptian curator at the museum.” He grinned.

“Yeah, how’d you know?”

“My dad is head curator. He was totally psyched to get her here.” A dark shadow crossed his face, like he was struggling to put fake Aidan back in place.

“You’re kinda strange,” Allie said bluntly.

“Back atcha, sweetheart.”

“No, no. Don’t you sweetheart me. I’ve seen you with all your idiot girls. Don’t lump me in with the rest of your sweethearts,” she mocked.

“I wouldn’t dare,” he laughed. “I guess I do that when I can’t remember their names, but I couldn’t possibly forget yours, Lex.”

“Clearly your memory is failing you again. It’s *Allie*.”

“You sound like my friend, Wendy. She tells me I’m an idiot all the time.”

“You know you can be yourself around me, right?”  
she asked carefully.

“I’m beginning to see that.”

“You’ll have to introduce me to Wendy. She sounds smart.”

“She is a very gifted cellist and was just accepted to the Cologne University of Music in Germany a few weeks ago,” he said sadly.

Allie could see how much he missed his girlfriend. Despite the strange vibe between them, she was intrigued with Aidan. He was just as fascinated with her as she was with him, but the overwhelming relief she felt just being near him was enough to tell her they would either be really good for each other or really, really bad.

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# CHAPTER

## Four

Allie wandered across the courtyard after her English Lit class to wait for Sasha and Chloe. She took a seat at one of the many fountains dotting the perfectly manicured Cliffton grounds. The noises of the city center were muffled by the trees and the lake breeze that was ever present along the shore.

“Crap,” she muttered as a striking blond headed her way. “Why does every school have mean girls?”

“You’ve just identified their queen.” Allie recognized the voice from several of her classes.

“Vince, right?” she smiled. “I’m Allie—”

“You’ve been here nearly a month, Short Stuff, everyone knows you.” He grinned. “That is Brianna Spelman Prentice.” He crouched down beside her. “She’s the great-great-granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller and she scares the hell out of me. So, I’m going to hide

behind you and this fountain if you don't mind. I have no shame."

There was something about Vince that reminded her of Gavin. It was his gentle confidence and the way he looked directly into her eyes when he spoke. He felt it; that awkward discomfort, but he brushed it aside as if it were nothing.

"Vincent, hi. Walk me to class?" Brianna asked sweetly.

"Sorry, I'm hanging with Allie right now."

"I'll come find you at lunch then." She shot him a brilliant smile. Allie might as well have been wallpaper.

"Brianna, I've told you I don't date Cliffton girls."

"I guess that doesn't include trailer trash?"

"Not cool," he growled.

"Vince, it's fine," Allie said. "I'm sorry, Brianna. I've never lived in a trailer, but I did live in a fabulous tree house in the Amazon. Does that count?"

"Nice!" Vince laughed.

"Whatever!" Brianna abandoned her sweet tone completely as she stalked off leaving Allie alone with Vince.

"So, tree house in the jungle? That actually true?"

"Yeah, we lived in Brazil when I was in middle school and I spent a lot of time with my dad out in the jungle. We had this huge tree house in the upper canopy with awesome views."

"You're kinda cool, Allie Carmichael. I might have to reconsider my 'no Cliffton girls' rule. See you around." He headed off across the courtyard.

*Wowsa.* She grinned as she watched him go. She really liked him, but she also felt a huge surge of guilt about Gavin. She shouldn't be flirting with boys so soon.

“Allie?” She heard the hesitant voice across the fountain.

“Senior Physics and Calculus? McKayla, right?”

“Just Kayla.” She smiled. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I thought I should warn you. Vince and Aidan kinda hate each other.” Allie detected a note of sadness in her voice.

“Ew, boy drama.” She wrinkled her nose. “Any advice?”

“Fraid not.” Kayla giggled and Allie decided she really liked the shy older girl. She was certain they would be friends.

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“You should have warned me basketball practice was at five-freaking a.m.!” Allie yawned as they headed for the locker room after her first practice with the team.

“Would you have still tried out?” Sasha asked, swatting Allie with her captain’s jersey.

“Probably not.” She dodged the cheap shot.

They were quickly becoming close friends. She wasn’t always comfortable with Allie, but Sasha tried very hard to hide it.

“I have a meeting with the coach, so I’ll catch up with you later if that’s alright?”

“Yeah, sure. No problem.” Allie frowned. She found it incredibly odd how her new friends seemed to defer to Aidan as some sort of authority figure, but it really creeped her out when they started doing it to her.

“I do not understand what he sees in you,” Brianna said, slamming her locker door with a bang.

“Me either.” Allie smirked. “Who’re we talking about?”

“Vincent!” Brianna rolled her eyes. “I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to, and seriously? You know he prefers Vince.”

“Whatever, you can have him, just stay away from Aidan. He and I are social equals and you have no place in our circle.”

“We’re just friends. I haven’t known him long, but I do know you are not his type.”

“Let’s let him make that decision.”

Allie tossed her bag over her shoulder with a disgusted snort, watching Brianna storm off toward the courtyard.

“There you are,” Aidan called when she stepped outside. He was looking decidedly irritated. “I just barely managed to avoid Brianna again.”

“Iced coffee? Cheers to that!” She took the drink gratefully.

“It’s a bribe. You’re much less mean when you’ve been properly caffeinated.”

“Har, har. At least you’re learning...in some things.” She arched her brow at his offered hand, tossing her gym bag over her shoulder instead. The deep attraction between them was always there, and as much as she wanted to put her hand in his, something held her back.

As they turned the corner to the conservatory, they ran into Brianna, lying in wait for him.

Allie steeled herself for more scathing remarks, but Brianna shoved past them, unable to hide the anger in her eyes.

“What is it with that girl? I’m a perfectly lovely person,” she said dryly.

“Well, let’s see. She claims you stole her spot on the team. She’s been chasing Vince forever, but he’s been

steadfastly running in the opposite direction. Then you show up and manage to turn his head without even trying—and thanks for that,” he growled. “Because she is now turning her attention on me.”

“Eh, some people just don’t like me.” She shrugged.  
“I can’t imagine why.”

“I’ve been warned to stay away from you.” Allie giggled.

“Please tell me you’re joking.”

“Nope, apparently you are ‘equals’ and I am to keep my distance.”

“That’s rather ironic.”

“Well, you seem to have the one thing she wants.”

“What? A pulse?”

“A pedigree. Like a puppy.” She cocked her head in amusement. “That’s one scary stalker-girlfriend you’ve got.”

“Protect me?” he pleaded in mock horror as they headed in opposite directions.

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# CHAPTER

## Five

Allie ran swiftly along the beach, enjoying the chill of fall in the air. It was just over a month since she'd arrived on Kelleys Island and the leaves were a riot of colors. She loved her new home and its illusion of stability, but she didn't trust it to last. She was more herself here than she'd ever been before, but she was so scared it would all disappear. Something loomed over her like a dark cloud—an ominous storm that threatened to destroy everything.

She slowed to a walk when she neared the shady grotto nestled at the base of a massive cliff. A winding flight of steps rose from the sand up to Aidan's palatial home along the ridge. He really did have a pedigree, with a trust fund and a panoramic view of the city across the bay.

She could hear the peaceful vocals of *Miserere a 9* on the surround sound and she paused to watch him. He

was texting, a slight frown creasing his brow. It was noon in Germany, and he wouldn't miss the opportunity to check in with his old girlfriend.

"How's Wendy?" She dropped to her usual place beside him on the stone sectional covered in brightly colored cushions. Everything in the grotto was carved right from the limestone rock. Even the huge dining table was a slab suspended from the ceiling. The fire pit was formed right into the floor where flames crackled cheerfully this morning, but dark black soot marred the low ceiling where a fire had recently burned out of control.

"She's good." He grinned. "And awfully curious about you."

"How so?"

"Coffee?" He slid a mug across the table.

"Ahh, the nectar of my people," she sighed, settling back comfortably. "But I'm not so easily distracted. Why's your old girlfriend curious about me?"

"She wanted to know if you were hot," he snorted in a very un-Aidan like way.

"Um?"

"You're more her type than I am," he laughed.

"Oh." Allie giggled as *Benedictus* filled the air. "Feeling depressed this morning, are we?"

"I happen to like choral music. It helps me think."

"What's on your mind?"

"I need to know exactly when your sixteenth birthday is."

"Halloween. Why?"

"You were seriously born with that orange hair on Halloween?"

"Orange?" she scoffed.

“Is that a date you picked or is it your actual birthday? We don’t know when Sasha’s is, so we let her pick her own when she was little.”

“It’s my real birthday, but you still haven’t answered my question.”

“Just want to make sure we have enough time for party planning.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

“You’ve met me, right? I hate birthday parties. Mom always invited a bunch of random kids I didn’t even know. She gave up when I punched a kid for making fun of me because I didn’t have any real friends.”

“You have real friends now, but you seem determined not to accept it. I know you’re happy here, but why does that scare the hell out of you?”

“I will allow that blatant attempt to distract me, but if you throw a party, don’t be surprised if I don’t show up,” she said. “To answer your question, I am happy here, but it can’t last. I didn’t want to get attached, but it’s too late for that. It would break my heart if I had to leave now.”

“Your parents promised. No more moving.” He draped his arm around her.

“Yeah, well, I’ve never known a world where we don’t move.” She pulled away. Allie always reacted strongly to his touch. If she were honest, she craved it. They were so drawn to each other, and shared an amazing connection, but she didn’t want to encourage anything more than friendship. He felt differently, but his intensity made her nervous.

He caught her chin and lifted her gaze to meet his. “It’s just us, Lex. If I’m affectionate, it doesn’t have to be weird. I can see you aren’t into me like that, and that’s

okay...for now." He smirked. "I am happy to have you as my best friend."

"Aidan, it's just—" But he ignored her protests and tucked her securely under his arm.

"You're still afraid you're going to wake up one morning and have to leave again?"

"It's inevitable."

"You need to get over that constant fear or you're never going to be happy."

"I thought Quinn was your best friend?" She switched to a safer topic.

"Sure, but there's still an awkward wall between us. It's very different with you. Our relationship is...you let me be me. And I've never had that."

"I've always felt so disconnected from everyone around me," she said. "I don't feel like that with you. It's nice."

"And comforting." He absently stroked her hair. "Most kids our age are so exhausting and immature."

"Immature?" she snorted. "Aren't you the guy who took the school bus out for a joyride with your football buddies after the last away game? And didn't I hear something about racing trains? Not to mention you have half the girls in school begging for your attention with that fake Aidan crap."

"It's an act, Allie. Surely you can see that by now?" he said.

"But why? Fake Aidan's an idiot. I like this guy." She shoved him playfully. "But why does he only show up when we're alone?"

"Back atcha, Lex. You hide behind your humor and sarcasm, but you're real with me." He smiled. "And you're not so scary."

“Could be if I wanted to,” she muttered, a little unnerved by how clearly he saw her.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” he laughed.

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“You’re disgusting!” Sasha shrieked as Aidan rummaged through the fridge.

“Dude, you do stink,” Allie added in amusement.

“Football practice got messy.” He stuffed half a club sandwich into his mouth. “I might have tackled Vince a few times just for fun.”

“Aidan!”

“The guy’s a douche.” He shrugged. “Want to stay for dinner? You can finally meet our parents.”

“Sure.”

“Shouldn’t you be discussing that with me?” Sasha hissed.

“Uh, I can just go home, Sash—”

“Crap!” Sasha’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment. “I just meant...I...er, how does she *do* that?” she glowered as Aidan tried unsuccessfully to stifle his laughter.

“Sometimes I feel like I’m just not surfing the same channels as you guys,” Allie sighed.

“Hey, it’s my turn to cook this week.” Aidan shrugged out of his muddy shirt. “Want to help? You can just watch, uhh...I’ll do the actual cooking.” Since he was her unfortunate partner in their Culinary Arts class, she didn’t blame his caution.

Allie took a moment to admire his tattoos when he grabbed a clean shirt from the laundry.

*Did they change?* Something was missing...

“See something you like, sweetheart?” He grabbed her around the waist.

“Yeah, the tattoos.” She gave him a shove. “They look different than I remember.”

“Work in progress. I’ll show you the plan sometime. I was thinking you might draw my next one.” He quickly pulled the clean shirt over his head before they headed down to the grotto kitchen.

She sat at the bar and watched as he pulled several trays from the fridge: steaks marinated in something that smelled wonderfully Mediterranean, chicken and beef kabobs with onions and brightly colored peppers, ribs and chicken.

“That’s a lot of food for five people.”

“Er...when it’s my week to cook, I like to do it all at once. How do you like your steak?”

“Just short of mooing.”

“That’s my girl!” He grinned.

Allie heard a rush of white noise and looked around in alarm. She got that creepy feeling a lot these days, but never so strongly.

“Relax, it’s just my mom.” He winked.

Allie’s eyes widened at his blatant acknowledgment of her feelings. She stared at him in surprise, but his only response was his typical arrogant grin.

“Dinner smells wonderful, son, but I see a lot of meat and very few vegetables,” his mother said as she and Sasha joined them.

“Hey, the kabobs have fruit, peppers *and* onions.” Aidan draped his long arm around his petite mother. Allie noticed how she flinched, as if her son’s touch bothered her somehow. It was such a familiar reaction, it didn’t register right away that it wasn’t in response to her.

“Just like your father.” She smiled, all traces of her discomfort gone, but Allie saw a flicker of sadness cross

Aidan's face. Without thinking, she reached for his hand and he gently squeezed her fingers in silent affirmation of her offer of comfort.

"Allie, I'm delighted to finally meet you!" His mother was dazzling in her exotic Egyptian beauty.  
"Please call me Naeemah."

"Th-thank you." She stared at Aidan uncertainly.

"Aidan Loukas McBrien! Front and center! Right bloody now!" his father called from the steps above.

"Coming Da!" He winced. "I know I'm in trouble when the Scots comes out."

"What'd you do this time?" Allie giggled at his use of the Scottish endearment.

"I brought an unruly redhead home for dinner." He winked as he rushed up the steps to meet his father.

"Come on girls, let's see if we can find something green in this kitchen. The boys will be along shortly. I'm sure Aidan will have some fabulous excuse for whatever it is he's done this time."

Allie laughed. His mother sure wasn't fooled by his charm.

"Sorry, Nae." She heard the subtle Scottish burr when Aidan and his father joined them. Allie's heart skipped a beat when he turned his attention on her. She glanced at Aidan, confusion written all over her face, but he just gave her shoulder a sympathetic squeeze.

"Allie!" She looked up to see an all too familiar smile. "Greggory McBrien, it's nice to finally meet you." He winked.

"Oh no. There's two of you." She glanced between father and son who looked nothing alike, beyond their mischievous smiles, yet they shared some elusive quality she couldn't place.

“I’m starving, let’s eat.” Aidan hefted two full dinner plates onto the table. Naeemah arched her brow at her ravenous son as he slathered an absurd amount of butter on a tiny dinner roll.

“How did you come to be with your adoptive family?” she asked.

“I was abandoned in a hospital waiting room in South Africa,” Allie said. “I was only a few hours old, but I was placed with my parents immediately and the adoption was finalized not long after.” She forced a smile. She didn’t like talking about the circumstances of her birth.

“Aye, family isn’t always about biology,” Gregg said. “We’re the epitome of the melting pot, but we make it work.”

After dinner, Allie sat quietly listening to her friends, but she couldn’t concentrate. She felt like Aidan was trying to tell her something—something he had no intention of putting into words.

As she slipped into the bathroom, she heard Naeemah and Gregg talking in the study below, their voices carrying up through the vents.

“How could this happen?” Naeemah asked.

“...must be making excuses,” Gregg said.

“What can we do?”

“...have to be careful...”

“...can’t overwhelm her, she is... see her touch him?”

“...might finally have someone,” Gregg added.

“Allie!” Sasha rapped loudly on the door. “We’re going out for coffee!”

She finished drying her hands, trying to hear over the ruckus.

“Come on, let’s get out of here!” Aidan shouted.

She caught his gaze when she stepped into the hall and knew he saw the questions in her eyes.

“Relax, Lex. Take a deep breath and don’t overthink it.” Aidan grabbed her hand and she felt a wave of calm wash over her. Sometimes he had the most remarkable effect on her.

“Alright, but seriously, drop the Lex crap already.”

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# CHAPTER

## Six

“If I hear ‘I don’t date Cliffton girls’ one more time, I will punch you in your whole face.” Allie rolled her eyes. She was walking to Physics with Vince, which had become their habit after lunch.

“Can you reach that high?” he grinned.

“Har, har, funny guy. I was not hinting for a date.”

“I know. And trust me, you’re about as much of a ‘Cliffton girl’ as I am.”

“So come to the party at North Shore Beach this weekend? It’ll be fun.”

“Well, I guess we could try the friend thing.” He frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever been ‘just friends’ with a girl, but I suppose I could give it a shot.”

“I’m honored,” she snorted.

“I’ll come to the party.” He took an unnecessary step closer. “But something tells me ‘just friends’ is never going to work.”

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“Come on! Let us plan a big party?” Sasha begged as they wandered down the beach early Saturday evening. Allie saw familiar faces everywhere: people from town, neighbors, and kids from school. Tiny bonfires dotted the sand in the growing darkness, and there was a festive atmosphere of anticipation for the live music and fireworks to come later in the evening.

“Seriously guys, I know like ten people, so keep it small if you expect me to show up.”

“Sure.” Chloe’s promise was not convincing.

“Hey, Allie!” Vince called. “I knew you were a jeans and t-shirt kind of girl.” He nodded appreciatively at her casual, non-Cliffton attire.

“You actually came!”

“Promised, didn’t I?” He fell in step with her as Chloe and Sasha melted into the crowd.

“Come on, there’s a volleyball match about to start.” He grabbed her hand. It felt nice; comfortable and exciting at the same time, but safe. With Vince, everything was exactly as it appeared.

“I played volleyball at my last school,” she said as they took their seats near the pit. She inched a little closer when she felt his hand at her back.

“You’ve moved a lot. Should I be worried?”

“It seems we’re staying here for good.” She rested her hand on his knee. “Maybe I’ll play for Cliffton this spring?”

“How is it that one who travels so low to the ground can play sports with tall people?” he grinned.

“I am stronger and faster than I look.”

“Well, you and Sasha play like you’ve been partners for years. It cracks me up when you two sneak the ball down the court and the other team hardly notices.”

“You’ve been to my games?”

“Every one I can.” His hand closed over hers.

They slid so easily into their comfortable banter and silly flirtation, Allie knew “just friends” was doomed.

“Let’s eat. I’m starving,” she said when the game ended.

He absently slipped his hand into hers as they made their way over to the vendor booths.

“You have mustard on your face.” He laughed when she swiped at the spot and missed.

“Here, I got it.” He wiped the corner of her mouth with his thumb. Their eyes met briefly and he looked away, as if he just realized their whole evening had been a date, which was exactly what he hadn’t intended it to be.

“Don’t freak out,” she whispered playfully.

“I should go check in with my friends.”

“Aw, you freaked out,” she teased.

“Did not.”

“Did too. See you a bit later?”

“Of course.” He smiled as he left in search of his friends.

“So how’d it go?” Sasha asked before Allie had taken a step.

“Seriously? Where did you come from?”

“You’re sitting here, where they keep the food, and you don’t expect to see me?”

“Good point.” Sasha was always hungry.

“Come on, music’s about to start.”

The band was taking the stage just as they found their seats. Allie did a double take when she saw Aidan join them.

“Is he seriously about to sing?” she cringed.

“Don’t worry, he’s actually good,” Quinn said.

Allie cheered with the crowd. He was amazing and he’d chosen one of her favorites. A perfectly tortured lyric with an angry rhythm that totally suited him.

“How did I not know he could do this?”

“He’s shy.” Quinn grinned.

“Yeah, I’ll buy that for a dollar,” she said dryly as she watched him trade the guitar for his violin.

She expected him to play a classical piece, but was blown away when he played along with the rock band instead.

“So how’s it going with Vince?” Sasha asked when Aidan left the stage after his last set.

“Pretty good. The friend thing isn’t working, but he seems determined not to get involved.”

“Where is he anyway?”

“Ahh...I just saw him with some hot blond,”  
Graham offered.

“Ow! Chloe, that hurt!” he growled, rubbing his arm where she hit him.

“It’s alright, Chlo, we’re not really together.” But Allie felt like the one who just got punched.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Sasha insisted.

“You’re probably right.” She left her friends to search the crowd. It didn’t take long to find him with the strikingly beautiful college girl attached to his hip. Tattooed, with silvery blond hair, her arms snaked around Vince’s neck. Allie watched in dismay when she kissed him, running her fingers through his hair in a very

familiar gesture. She turned away, refusing to let a stupid boy ruin her night.

“Lex, wait!” Aidan called after her.

“Enough with the Lex crap!” She turned on her heel, swinging a punch before she could register what she was doing.

SMACK! Her fist slammed into his hand. She gaped at him, surprised by her uncharacteristic violence, as much as his quick reaction.

“How did you—why did I?” she sputtered.

“Relax.” He maneuvered them through the crowd and onto the dance floor.

“I’m going to make a crazy prediction and say that’s not going to be the last time you take a swing at me.”

“But...”

“Just breathe. Vince is an absolute idiot. Forget about him and your pathetic attempt at throwing a punch. Dance with me?”

“Pathetic?”

“Dreadful.” He smirked. “I’ll have to teach you how to do that properly.”

“Cheers to that, next time I’ll be sure to hit your face,” she muttered.

“Sure,” he scoffed as he twirled her around. He was a fantastic dancer and they moved together so easily, as if they’d been partners for years.

“You play guitar and violin, which was totally awesome by the way—and you dance, and you’re smart. It’s kind of annoying.”

“You forgot tortured, broody and ridiculously handsome,” he added.

“And arrogant.” She rolled her eyes. “But thanks, Aidan. I needed this,” she said as they headed back to the bonfire.

“I don’t dance, but how about a walk?” Vince waited for her at the edge of the stage.

“Sure.” She accepted his hand with a smile.

“See you for another dance later?” She turned to Aidan.

“Of course, Lex, just come find me.” He winked and sauntered away.

“Listen, what you saw back there was so not what it seemed,” Vince said earnestly.

“You don’t have to explain.”

“But I want to.” They walked along the beach until the crowd was far behind them.

“Ella was someone I went out with a few times back over the summer, and I guess she thought we could pick up where we left off. I got rid of her two seconds after you left. She was never my type. Besides, lately I prefer redheads.” He grinned.

“You seriously have to stop that crap if we’re just going to be friends.”

“I know. I can’t help it. The flirt in me rears his ugly head when I’m with you.”

“Well get it under control, because it’s confusing. If you just want to be friends, I’m cool with that, but this back and forth has to stop.”

“You know, I totally expected to find tears and drama when I came looking for you,” he laughed. “When I found you with McBrien, I thought you were trying to make me jealous. Then I realized you were just having fun with your friend and weren’t giving me a second thought.”

“I wasn’t going to let it ruin my night.” She shrugged.

“That kind of maturity is rare, Allie, and insanely attractive.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but is that whole ‘I don’t date Cliffton girls’ crap really code for ‘I don’t date high school girls?’”

“You see right through me, don’t you?” he said.

“Yes, I normally date older girls, but I have my reasons.”

“The last few years have been really rough, Allie. My mom was diagnosed with breast cancer and my dad was always working. I took mom in for her chemo. That’s how I met Vanessa. She had her treatments at the same time, and we became friends. She was twenty and I was only fifteen, but we just clicked, and it got really serious, really fast.”

“When my mom died, Vanessa was my rock, but then she took a turn for the worse and she died too. Not even a year ago.” He struggled to get the words out.

“Oh my God, Vin! I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“Thanks, Allie.” He snaked his arm around her. “Sometimes I feel so much older than most of our friends. Since I lost mom and Vanessa, I’ve only thought about getting out of here. I promised myself I wouldn’t let anything tie me to this city. But then you showed up and you’re all different, with your pretty red hair and your uncanny ability to see right through my crap. I’m still kind of a mess and I’m afraid I’ll just hurt you. Part of me thinks it would be better if we didn’t even try to be friends, but the other part of me wants to say ‘screw it’ and kiss you.”

“Vince, I’m so sorry.”

“You’ve been a great friend, and there is definitely something between us, but I just don’t think I’m ready. I feel so much guilt. Although, Vanessa would have thought you were awesome.” He smiled. “I need to take this slow and see what happens.”

“Of course, Vin. I know it’s not the same, but I understand the guilt. When I left Sydney, it was spur of the moment, and I had to say goodbye to my boyfriend in a rush. He didn’t understand, and wanted me to call when I got settled, but I still haven’t. I kinda thought it might be better for him if I didn’t, and I feel really bad about that, and even worse for liking you.”

“Slow works for both of us then?”

“Definitely.”

“We should head back. I’ve got work early tomorrow,” he said reluctantly.

“I know that wasn’t easy for you,” she said as they walked, “but thank you for sharing with me.”

“It’s easy to talk to you. You get me in a way no one else does. It’s like you just took one look at me and understood exactly who I am.”

“I’ve been told I’m very perceptive.” She smiled as he pulled her closer, leaving his hand at her hip as they walked.

“So, my little redhead freak, I hear your birthday is on Halloween?” he grinned. “Can I be your date?”

“News travels fast,” she muttered. “Is that a date-date or a friend-date?”

“How about an exclusive-friend-date? Neither of us dates anyone until we see where this goes?

“Friends, huh?” she sighed dramatically, luxuriating in the very non-friend-like way he had his hand on her hip.

“Maybe friends with certain...benefits?” he amended.

“No. We should do this right.” She took an exaggerated step back.

“So I can’t kiss you at all? That won’t last a week.” He pulled her to a halt.

“Seriously, in the interest of taking it slow, we probably shouldn’t.”

“Alright, but that rule starts tomorrow.” He tilted her chin up to meet his lips briefly.

They continued walking, skirting the crowd as they headed to his car along the path through the woods.

“I guess it’s time to say goodnight.” He wrapped his arms around her, backing her up against the car. “If this is going to have to last a while, we better make it good.” His breath was warm against her throat as his teeth grazed her sensitive flesh. Allie’s pulse raced as he pulled her closer and she greeted his kiss eagerly, sliding her fingers through his hair. He held her tightly, his lips moving slowly with hers.

“You’re one fiery little redhead.” He finally backed away, leaving her to stand on shaky legs.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” he promised, leaning in for one last kiss. “Yeah, that rule’s never going to last.” He ducked into his car with a smirk.

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“Fireworks are starting soon, let’s find a good seat,” Aidan said when she found him waiting for her along the trail back to the beach.

“You do know the guy’s a tool, right?” he sighed in resignation.

“I think I see him a little differently than you do.”

“He doesn’t deserve you, but if you like him I suppose I can tolerate him,” he said, “but if he hurts you, I hurt him. Got it?”

“Thanks, Aidan.” She smiled.

“Hey guys!” Kayla called. “Come share our fire for the show?”

“Sure.” He pasted on his fake smile as they joined her friends around the driftwood fire.

As the night sky burst into bright colors, they fell silent, watching the brilliant sparks trailing down to the water.

“Just don’t move too fast, Lex,” he murmured, the light reflecting strangely in his eyes. “You’ve got a lot on your plate.”

“I’ll be careful. I don’t want to rush into anything either.”

“Watch out!” someone shouted as a loud screech pierced the night. Allie watched the bottle rocket sail over them, landing in the dry willow branches above. They were sitting under a grove of kindling and the rocket was about to explode.

“No!” Kayla cried when the trees erupted in flames.

Scalding hot embers rained down around them in an eerie silence. Allie smelled her hair singeing just before the excruciating pain hit her. Her jacket melted from the sudden intensity of the heat and she screamed in agony. Her skin bubbled and burned, melding with the oozing fabric of her jacket. She was so paralyzed from fear, she couldn’t move.

“No! Lex!” Aidan shouted, working frantically to strip her jacket off, but it came away with chunks of her skin and some of his. She shrieked as her arms went

numb and she choked on the gritty smoke filling her lungs.

Cries of alarm went up all around, but they were trapped when their driftwood fire suddenly raged, merging with the fire overhead. In mere seconds, they found themselves caged inside a blazing inferno. It was unnatural the way the fire spread so quickly—burning hotter and brighter than it should, as if there was an accelerant.

“Rein it in, Aidan!” She heard Quinn’s booming voice beyond the wall of flames.

A loud crack sounded and before Allie could register what was happening, Kayla pushed her to the ground just as large flaming branches crashed on top of her.

Kayla was pinned under the burning debris, screaming as her body burned.

“No!” Aidan cried, leaping into action, beating, cursing and pleading with the flames in a futile attempt to help his friend. Allie watched in horror as Kayla grew quiet, the fire consuming everything around her...except her body.

Aidan worked feverishly, grabbing the smoldering branches with his bare hands, panting and sweating from the effort, gagging on the stench of his own burning flesh.

“Get out of here!” He shoved the heavier limbs aside as if they were mere twigs.

She crawled across the hot sand, the tiny grains ripping into her wounds like shards of glass.

“Is she alive?” She choked on the thick black smoke. He finally freed Kayla and reached for her limp form.

“I told you to run, you stubborn pain in my ass!  
Go!”

Holding Kayla with one arm, he reached to pull Allie to her feet with the other. She looked up just in time to see the fire in front of them snuff out, creating a convenient path to safety.

“What the—?”

“Run. Now!” Aidan shoved her.

When she stumbled through the smoke, Quinn swept her up like a feather and carried her far from the flames.

“Kayla’s hurt! We have to help her!”

“She’ll be fine with Aidan. Just try to breath, Allie.”

“Kayla needs to get to the hospital now. If she wakes up she could go into shock,” Aidan said urgently.

“Paramedics will meet her at the docks at Gordon Park, but we have to get her over there now,” Quinn said. “Graham’s flagging a speed boat in now.” Aidan carefully placed Kayla on the grass and leaned over her, grimacing in pain. He clutched her hand with his badly burned ones.

“Aidan, you’re hurt!” Allie cried.

“I’m fine!”

“Stop, you can’t do this here!” Sasha sobbed.

“It’s Kayla!” He grasped her limp hand.

Allie watched helplessly as her friend drifted into consciousness, crying out in pain, her breath growing shallow.

As Aidan held Kayla’s hand tightly, Allie noticed how the charred skin around his fingers, flaked off, revealing healthy pink skin beneath.

“I’m so sorry. I-I can’t help you!” All the color drained from his face when she passed out again.

Allie crawled to Aidan's side and gave in to the strange impulse to wrap her aching arms around him. She felt him shudder and her vision grew blurry as a wave of lethargy hit her. His trembling subsided and the color returned to his face.

"Allie, you are amazing!"

"What was that?"

"That was not me, but if you've never been patient a day in your life, now's a good time to try." He reached to wipe the trickle of blood from his nose.

"Please stop! You're not strong enough!" Sasha begged.

Her words made no sense, but Aidan was turning a sickly shade of gray and he broke out in a cold sweat. He reached for Allie, still clutching Kayla's hand with his perfectly healed one.

"This isn't your fault," Sasha insisted.

"Bullshit!" he spat. "Everyone here knows this was my fault."

Allie felt completely disoriented as the world tilted, and the ground rushed up to smack her in the face.

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# CHAPTER

## Seven

“Aidan?”

“I’m here, Lex. You’re okay. Just breathe.”

“Where’s Kayla?”

“She’s headed for the hospital now. I’ll take you to see her later. Just rest.” The ambulance doors closed and she sagged against him. They’d crossed the bay while she was passed out and were now speeding toward Cleveland Clinic.

“What the hell was that?”

“What was what?”

“Don’t do that—don’t make me sound crazy! Why do I feel so weak? What was that and why did I pass out? And how exactly were you flinging burning tree limbs around like they were nothing? And your hands! They were completely charred not an hour ago! How did we just walk out of that ring of fire?”

“Now is not the time to discuss it,” he said firmly, nodding toward the paramedics.

“Aidan, please?”

“Not now.”

“When?”

“Later!” he snapped.

“Fine!” She winced at the splotchy blisters covering her arms.

“I’m sorry you got burned.”

“It’s not as bad as I thought. I just don’t understand...how do you not have a scratch on you?”

“Not now, Alexis Ann!”

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“Allie,” Gregg sighed in exasperation. “You’ve been through a traumatic experience! You’ve got severe second-degree burns along both arms and shoulders. You need rest, sweetheart.”

“I need answers!”

“I told you she’s stubborn.” Aidan smirked.

“Aye, you weren’t kidding.”

“Enough! I am *not* crazy! Strange things happened during that fire! Things that should not be possible and I want a rational explanation!”

“She needs to calm down, son.”

“Be careful, Da, she can hear you.” He sounded amused.

“Of course I can hear you! I’m not deaf!” Angry tears glistened in her eyes.

“No, you aren’t crazy—”

“Aidan,” Gregg warned.

“I can’t stand this. Look, Lex, I know you’re confused and totally pissed off, but I need you to relax.”

“How?” She felt a fire burning in her chest and couldn’t breathe.

“Da, I don’t know how to do this. Help her! Please?”

“We’re different, Allie,” Gregg said gently but firmly. “I think you’ve known that for a while now, and I’m certain you’ve encountered others like us.”

She nodded hesitantly, taking another slow, shaky breath. She thought of Navid and the countless strangers she’d met in the past—the ones she was always drawn to. But every time she felt that connection, they moved almost immediately. Somehow, she never put it all together.

*It’s like I refused to see the connection!*

“You are drawn to us because you are what we are,” Gregg continued. “How you came to be wholly ignorant, I do not know. You want logical answers, but I have none to give. I need you to trust that now is not the right time. I will not elaborate any further tonight, so don’t even ask,” he finished firmly.

“Alright, I’ll be patient—”

“It’s a freaking miracle,” Aidan muttered.

“IF you can tell me when it will be the right time,” she added stubbornly.

“Alexis Ann—”

“Like you’d be any less irritating?” Gregg chuckled. “It will be the right time very soon, and it will be the right time because you’ll know it is.” He grinned mischievously at his complete non-answer. “Now, give him a break, Red.” He nodded at his son. “He’s a fixer. And he cannot fix this. It’s driving him crazy, which is driving me crazy.” He winked.

“Don’t look at me like that, Allie,” Aidan sighed. “I know you don’t understand, but you helped me save Kayla’s life today and I’ll never be able to thank you for that. But I need you to forget it. Don’t try to force it to make sense, just move on.”

“Look at your hands, Aidan! I can’t just move on! That fire was unnatural and it just went out. Poof! Like you...willed it!”

“Do you trust me?” He leaned in close and took her bandaged hands in his.

“Yes, but—”

“Do. You. Trust. Me?”

“There’s no one I trust more, but—”

“No but’s. We’re done with the but’s and the why’s, and the tell me’s. Whatever else comes out of your mouth tonight better not be a question!”

“But what about—?” She couldn’t help smiling at his answering growl.

“Trying your patience, is she?” Gregg chuckled.

“I’ve always heard redheads were a handful.”

“Lad, you’ve no idea.”

“How’s Kayla?” Allie ignored their teasing banter.

“Still critical.” Aidan scowled. “She has severe second and third degree burns along the left side of her body, face, and neck. The doctors are optimistic, but it’s—”

“Aye, the doctors claim she is very lucky she did not go into shock,” Gregg said. “And they are attributing that to the very good care she received on site.”

Aidan glowered at his father, but Allie’s parents returned from chatting with the doctor before she could ask why he seemed so determined to take responsibility for the accident.

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“Got it!” Allie shouted as she rushed downstairs to answer the door. She was discharged from the hospital the previous evening, but Lily insisted she get a good night’s rest before Vince was allowed to visit.

“Careful!” Lily said as Allie dashed past her study.

“Burned my arms, Ma, not my legs!”

“Hey, Short Stuff.” Vince grinned when she flung the door open. His smile faded when he saw her bandages. “Are you in pain?”

“Not really. Just itchy and numb in places.”

“I was so scared.” He hugged her carefully.

“How boyfriendly of you,” she murmured against his chest. “Be careful, you might catch the Cliffton girl cooties.”

“Do you have any idea how adorable you are?”

“Some.” She grinned from ear to ear. He had a remarkable knack for making her feel so normal.

“Wow, sweet house!” He took her hand as she led him into the giant living room facing the walled garden.

“Your hair is shorter.” He reached to touch her shoulder length tresses.

“Had to cut it. I looked like a half-plucked chicken.”

“You’ve got a bandage stuck in it. Sit, I’ll fix it.”

She sat on the edge of the sofa, and a chill swept through her when he pulled her against his chest. He trailed soft kisses along her throat, stopping when he reached the angry blisters at her shoulder.

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you.” He tugged the stray bandage from her hair.

“I’m fine.” She leaned back, taking comfort in his embrace. “Better now.”

“Are we revisiting the just friends label already?”  
She giggled when his hands began to wander.

“Don’t you think that ship has sailed?” he sighed. “I was so scared when I heard about the fire and I didn’t know if you were okay. It just made me realize how much I want to be with you, despite my reservations.”

“Well, I do need a date for my birthday party.”

“Then I’m your guy. Your party, by the way, was on the verge of ridiculous.”

“I told the girls to keep it small!”

“They were planning some kind of outrageous masquerade ball, so Aidan and I fired them. We figured you’d ditch your own party if anyone tried to put you in a hoop skirt.”

“You two are working together? Should I be scared?”

“We figure if the redhead’s happy, everyone’s happy.”

“Wait...hoop skirts?”

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# CHAPTER

## Eight

*I feel like death on a cracker.*

Allie shuffled to the bathroom; her head throbbed and she just felt weird. She'd been on edge since the fire last week, but was losing patience with Aidan. He insisted she needed time to recover, and promised to explain the strange things she'd witnessed, but he wanted her to enjoy tonight. Allie was feeling incredibly anxious about her birthday party, but not entirely sure why. It was like an ominous storm churned on the horizon, just out of sight.

Allie stared at the bandages covering her arms. They were a constant reminder of the scars that would be with her forever. Her doctor claimed her recovery bordered on miraculous and the scaring would be minimal, but she didn't know if she could trust her definition of "minimal."

The fire left her with hideous burns from shoulders to wrists. But if it weren't for Kayla, it would be so much worse. Allie constantly relived that moment when Kayla pushed her out of harm's way. She felt so guilty and wondered if the situation had been reversed, if she would have—could have—done the same for her friend.

Allie was trying very hard not to be vain, but accepting her permanent disfigurement was proving difficult when the image of Aidan's perfectly healed hands was still so fresh in her mind.

*I saw something that didn't happen...that's all.*

Kayla had accepted her more substantial scaring without pause, and Allie was determined to be forever grateful for her sacrifice.

"Presents already?" She smiled when she joined her mother in the kitchen. She eyed the small gift-wrapped package on the counter as she poured a cup of coffee.

"Morning, Allie. Happy day-before-your-birthday!" Her father beamed.

"Thanks, Dad! What's with that car-key-sized-box there?"

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

"Har, har. You're killing me!" She slammed her mug against the concrete countertop for emphasis. The cup shattered and hot coffee splattered everywhere.

"Oops! Sorry, Ma. Guess I don't know my own strength."

Carson eyed his daughter warily, a shadow of sadness crossing his face.

"Really, stop teasing her." Lily swatted her husband playfully as she swooped in to mop up the mess.

“Alright.” Carson eagerly handed her the box. He was almost as excited as she was.

“Yes!” Allie shrieked when the keys fell into her palm. “Where is it? Can I drive to school? Does it run yet?” Her dad loved fixing up old cars. She knew he wouldn’t have passed up the opportunity to do some restoration work.

“It’s in the driveway.” Lily smiled.

“Oh, Dad, it’s beautiful,” Allie whispered reverently when she stepped outside to see her present. “When did you do this?” She stared at the silver, sixty-five Chevy Impala. It still had the original faded black leather seats, but the new chrome trim and rims sparkled in the sunlight.

“I’ve been working on it since we got here.”

It still needed a lot of work, and would never stand out among the expensive cars parked in the Cliffton student lot, but it suited her.

She lunged at her father, catching him around the middle in a bone-crunching hug. “Thanks, Dad,” she mumbled into his shirt. “Can I drive the guys to school?”

Carson winced, rubbing his ribs.

“Aw, come on. You’re not that old.”

“Yeah, *old*,” he rasped.

“You might want to call Sasha first,” Lily said, “but you’ll need this.” She handed Allie a shiny new iPhone.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my parents?” she grinned. They’d always had cheap pre-paid phones before. This new smartphone came with a contract, and that meant more to her than anything. It meant permanence.

“Go have fun, honey, but please be careful. And no texting and driving! It’s a stupid way to die!”

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“What’s with all the fuss?” Allie dropped to the lawn beside Vince during their morning break. “Everyone’s extra interested in me today.” She scarfed a pack of crackers in record time. She was starving, her head was pounding, and she couldn’t give a flying crap about her party tonight.

“You’re cute when you’re grumpy,” he laughed.

“I told you guys, she doesn’t like surprises,” Aidan said.

“Cheers to that.” Sometimes it was astonishing how well he understood her.

“We’ll tell you if you stop with the moaning and groaning.” Chloe rolled her eyes.

“I promise.”

“We’re just going dancing.” Aidan winked.

“Dancing? I could get on board with dancing. But why is everyone so excited? Did you invite the whole friggin’ school?”

“Just meet us at Aidan’s later this afternoon and we’ll get you ready,” Chloe sighed patiently.

“Why do I feel like you guys are trying to distract me?”

“Trust me, Lex, I planned this party, and who knows you better than me?”

“Hey!” Vince frowned, affronted by the insinuation that he did not know Allie as well as Aidan.

“Sure man,” he scoffed.

“Does the jerky behavior take work or is it some kind of gift?” she growled. Allie was getting annoyed with the ever increasing boy drama.

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“Chloe, you made this?” Allie admired the cute shimmery green dress. It was super short with a banded bottom and draped off one shoulder with a pretty rhinestone detail.

“I’m afraid I didn’t think about hiding your burns.”

“It’s okay. I’ve decided to embrace them proudly. I’m just a little worried about that off the shoulder thing. It’s a wardrobe malfunction waiting to happen.”

“We’ll tape you in. Don’t worry,” Sasha said.

The girls spent the afternoon getting ready and Allie finally relented and let Chloe attempt to tame her unruly hair.

“Such a pretty shade of red,” she sighed wistfully, carefully pinning her curls.

“Ouch!”

“Did I stab you?”

“No, it’s this stupid headache.”

“You have a headache already?”

Allie didn’t miss the sharp looks that passed between the girls as Chloe stammered, “I mean...the music hasn’t even started yet and you already have a headache?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Time to go, girls!” Aidan banged loudly on the door. “It can’t be difficult to make her pretty! She was already hot!”

“Alright already!” She rolled her eyes, stalking to the door.

“Whoa, nice dress.” He gave her a lingering once over.

“I trust you remembered to invite Vince?”

“Keep your hair on, Red, he’ll meet us there.”

“You would plan a night of dancing when you know very well my date doesn’t dance.”

“This is your night, and you love to dance.”

“And with whom will I be dancing?” She arched her brow.

“Me, of course,” he said arrogantly.

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“Happy birthday!” Graham presented her with a small, plastic card as she and her friends headed down West Sixth Street after dinner with their families.

“College I.D.?”

“Enough to get you in. Just don’t try to order a drink.”

“First stop is the Velvet Dog.” Aidan ducked down a dark alley, leading them to the secluded club entrance.

“I know you hate dancing, but you’re going to have to suck it up tonight.” Allie grinned as she and Vince made their way to the dance floor.

“Well, I suppose I could manage a dance or two for the birthday girl,” he sighed reluctantly. “Just don’t judge me too harshly.”

“Happy birthday!” Allie turned to find the girls’ basketball team beaming at her.

She and her friends were just getting started when Aidan announced it was time to go.

“What? We just got here!”

“This is a mobile party.” He steered her out the door. “We’re going to Liquid for live music.”

“Vin! We’re leaving!”

“Let’s stay at this one longer than five seconds?” Sasha grumbled as she and Quinn darted into the club just around the corner on Lakeside Avenue. Allie found more of their school friends waited to greet her there.

“Something told me you’d do better with friends in small doses.” Aidan winked, drifting off to dance with one of her teammates.

“Can I kidnap the birthday girl?” Vince pointed to a secluded alcove with dim lights and comfortable looking seats.

“Yes, please.” She was eager for some alone time.

“Sorry, I know all this isn’t your thing.”

“Don’t worry about me, this is your night.” He leaned in for a kiss.

“Ahem...sorry to bother you,” Chloe whispered loudly, “but we need the birthday girl. Aidan’s about to join the band.”

“Thanks, we’ll be there in a sec,” he said, removing a white satin bag from his pocket.

Allie tugged on the black cord to find a simple silver chain with tiny barbed studs that gave it a hint of a harder edge. “Oh Vin! It’s perfect!” She clasped the bracelet around her wrist. She knew he couldn’t afford anything extravagant, but she was thrilled by the gesture.

“It’s not much, but when I found this dainty little barbed thing, I immediately thought of you and that sarcastic mouth of yours,” he said wryly.

“Sarcasm? Me?”

“Come on, Allie. I’m sure McBrien’s dying to show off for you.”

They headed back to the party where Aidan was taking the stage with the band, and to her delight, he had his violin.

He played furiously, covering some of her favorite songs. He had the whole club cheering, but Allie groaned when she recognized a slow, mellow version of U2’s *With or Without you*.

“Asshat!” Vince shook his head at Aidan’s audacity.

Allie felt a stab of regret as the song hit a nerve. It was time to put a stop to the boy drama, but she didn’t want to face that tonight.

*He pushes too damn hard!* She adored him, but she knew she could never be the girl he wanted. Everything would be so much easier if he could just be happy as friends.

He began a different melody she didn’t recognize and suspected it was something he composed himself. It was slow and broody and she knew he was talking to her.

It seemed like every Clifton student came by to wish her a happy birthday, but no one lingered, thanks to Aidan’s careful instructions.

“One more stop, Lex!” He ushered them from the club and several blocks over to Midnight Hour on Superior Avenue for food and music.

“Care to try again?” Vince asked, and they eagerly slipped off for some privacy.

“That’s a killer dress, Allie.” He pulled her close, planting a kiss just below her ear.

“Mmmm, thanks,” she murmured as his lips trailed along her jaw and she turned to meet his kiss.

“Oops, sorry!” Chloe winced. “We’re going to miss the last boat if we don’t hurry.”

“Alright, we’ll be right there.” Allie leaned back into his embrace.

“I think she’s been paid to chaperone.”

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# CHAPTER

## Nine

“Dude, the shoes are killing me!” Allie giggled as she made her way up the stairs.

“You were drooling over those damn things just last week!” Vince reached down to take them off her feet.

“Yeah, because they’re awesome—Oh, that’s nice.” She wiggled her toes. “They’re so much more comfortable in the box.”

“You’re sleeping in McBrien’s room?” He frowned. “Bet he loves that.” He followed her into the messy bedroom.

“He’s certainly not going to be here.” She flipped on the music and the room filled with Aidan’s favorite late night songs. “We’re doing some early morning birthday thing they’ve been all secretive about.”

“Well, if I had a chance to get my sheets smelling like you, I’d offer you my bed too. You always smell incredible.”

“No more interruptions?” she asked when he locked the door behind them.

“Nope.” He moved to capture her mouth in a slow, lazy kiss. “I’ve been trying to do that all night. You look smoking hot in that dress, if I’ve failed to mention it.”

“Thanks, but I have to get this thing off. It’s killing me.”

“Seriously? There’s not much to it.” He nipped at her earlobe.

“The only thing holding this dress up is tape and prayer.”

“Well, I’d be ever so glad to help you out of it.” He grinned.

“Nice try.”

“Had to give it a shot.”

She closed her eyes, rubbing her temples absently.

“Headache?”

“Yeah, it’s the pins.”

“Alright, let’s get you out of that dress and those pins out of your hair. I promise I’ll behave.”

“Fine.” She gestured with a twirl of her finger for him to turn around.

With Vince’s back to her, she quickly slipped into a silky black tank and her favorite worn jeans. Then she slipped back into his arms and he held her close as she titled her head up to meet his kiss. Allie’s heart raced as his lips moved slowly with hers.

Vince pulled away, carefully running his hands down the length of her arms. He frowned at the nude bandages still covering the worst of her burns.

She flinched. For a moment, she’d forgotten about them.

“You’re gorgeous, Allie. Scars and all, inside and out. Don’t ever forget that. Besides, they make you look bad ass.” He grinned. “Now, let’s take care of those pins.” He sat down in the chair by the bed and pulled her onto his lap. She felt a surge of guilt. It felt so wrong to be with him like this—in Aidan’s domain—listening to his music.

She moaned when he pulled the first sharp pin from her hair and ran his fingers through her curls, hunting for the next one. She melted against his chest, enjoying the easy intimacy they shared.

“Mmmmm, that feels nice,” she sighed drowsily, curling up against him.

“Better?”

“Much, thanks.” She felt his warm hands slide up the back of her shirt and enjoyed his deep growl of appreciation at the softness of her skin.

“Allie?” Sasha called. “You up here?”

“I’m going to start throwing punches,” Vince said.

Allie scrambled up to unlock the door.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we need you downstairs for your real party.”

“My real party? Where were you during all the club hopping ridiculousness?” She zipped her Cliffton basketball hoody over her tank.

“Time for presents and cupcakes!”

“I never say no to a cupcake,” Allie said as they joined the others in the living room. She sorted through her presents, shocked and amused by the expensive Marchesa bag stuffed with a package of toasted coconut from Kayla, who was still in the hospital but in good humor.

“This one next.” Graham tossed her a small package.

Allie read the card from the boys and her parents.  
“You guys! My gift from you was the party!”

She tore the wrapping paper off and scowled.  
“Funny, you’re giving me the phone I’ve been looking for all freaking day? I thought I lost it.”

“Lex, I picked your pocket earlier so we could pass your phone around for everyone to take pictures and add their favorite music to your Spotify.”

“Quinn and I added some cool features I’ll show you later,” Graham said.

“Aw, that’s an awesome gift!”

“Alright, this one’s from Chloe and I,” Sasha said.

With a huge smile, Chloe passed her a long rectangular package that covered most of the coffee table. Allie tugged at the ribbon and stared at the white box with the iconic black label, looking at the girls before she peeked.

“You. Did. Not!” She shook her head. “Jimmy Choo boots?”

“You maybe want to take the lid off so you can see them?” Sasha giggled.

“In a minute. I’m trying to think of a reason for you to take them back.”

“Well you better stop trying because we bought them on sale and they are non-refundable-Allie-sized-boots.” Chloe smiled.

“I hoped you’d say something like that.” She grinned, pulling on the gorgeous black boots.

“How are shoes better than a pimped out iPhone?”  
Graham asked.

“Girls and shoes, man.” Quinn shrugged.

“Well, she looks hot. Other than that, I got nothing,” Vince said.

“Oh, honey! These are Jimmy Choo *boots*.” She pointed at her feet as if the boys were slow.

“Yeah, we don’t get it, Lex.” Aidan winked.

“Dude, stop winking at my girlfriend,” Vince growled irritably.

Allie rolled her eyes and reached for another cupcake. She settled back with the people she loved, realizing she was happier in that moment than she’d ever been. She was finally right where she belonged.

“Ouch.” She flinched, reaching to rub her temple.

“Time for the birthday girl to get some sleep.” Aidan sounded apprehensive as he checked the time.

“Yeah, I suppose I should get going.” Vince yawned.

“I’ll walk you out,” Allie said.

They stepped into the cool night, walking hand in hand toward his car, a seventy-six Dodge Challenger that totally complemented her Impala.

“Happy birthday, Allie.” He pulled her close and she inhaled the scent of him.

“Thank you for my bracelet, it’s my favorite.”

“Well, it’s no iPhone or Jimmy boots...or achingly sweet Impalas I’m itching to drive.”

“Jealous?” She tilted her head back with a grin.

“Absolutely green with envy.”

“Alright you two,” Chloe called, “time for the birthday girl to get some rest.”

“Chloe, you could hire yourself out as highly effective birth control,” Vince said.

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# CHAPTER

## Ten

“Stupid headache.” Allie crept into the bathroom in search of an Excedrin, but found not so much as an aspirin—or any other medication for that matter. No half-empty bottle of antibiotics, no expired prescriptions, not even an old box of Band Aids. Nothing.

*Weird.*

Before she thought about what she was doing, Allie had her bag packed, eager to crawl into her own bed. She hastily scrawled a note to Aidan before she stepped into the hall. It was the middle of the night, but she heard voices.

“Stop pacing! You’re driving me nuts!” Sasha snapped.

“Allie, what are you doing?” Aidan gaped as she made her way down the stairs.

“I don’t feel well. I-I just need to go home.” She felt dizzy, like she might faint. She took another step and a

blinding light split her skull. Allie tumbled down the stairs with a blood-curdling scream. Aidan flew to her side as she clutched her head in agony.

“H-hos-pital!” Something was terribly wrong. She’d never experienced pain like this.

“You’ve got to be kidding me, Alexis Ann! Do you do everything the hard way?” He scooped her up like a rag doll. “You need to trust me, hospitals aren’t going to help.” His face grew blurry and his voice distant.

“Aidan, I—” Her words came out with a strangled choke. A spasm ripped through her body, stealing her breath.

*I have to get out of here!* She needed fresh air. Needed to clear her head. To think. She struggled out of his arms and shakily rose to her feet. The room swirled as nausea threatened to overwhelm her. She stumbled for the door. The wind whipped her hair around her face. The sky was an eerie red with strange clouds. The ominous storm she’d dreaded was closing in on her.

“Allie! Stay with me!” Aidan’s voice echoed weirdly. She felt the sting of his slap to her cheek. Then she was running, her heart pounding in her chest. Allie stumbled along the path through the woods—their favorite running trail, where they first met. The gusting wind stirred the trees, but did nothing to alleviate the burning fever blazing hot inside her core.

*It's a nightmare. I'm back in Aidan's warm bed having a scary dream.* She tried convincing herself with a pinch. Nothing. She was still running. He pursued her, but she couldn’t control the anxiety rising within her. She feared what would happen when he caught her. She heard his voice. Naeemah’s too.

“Allie!” She sounded faint. “I heard her scream. It’s started so early and with such a vengeance.”

“She’s fallen into the trance already,” Aidan said.

“I had hoped she would sleep through the beginning at least. I suppose it is fortunate she has fallen so soon. She will think she dreams. It will be a long day. Are you certain you can do this for her, son?”

“I can handle it.”

“She must let it happen, and then she must fight for control.”

“I know.”

Allie lifted her tear-streaked face to the sky but couldn’t feel the wind on her face. Gripped in terror, she couldn’t think, couldn’t react. She wasn’t alone.

Someone chased her. The sensation was familiar. Just like the morning she met Aidan. He pursued her now, but this time she saw his face and it frightened her. He was a stranger. His friendly brown eyes were cold and hard, with a shifting golden light reflected in their depths. She heard a scream—possibly her own, but didn’t recall making the sound. She ran faster as the perversion of Aidan closed in on her. The lake at her right, and the dense forest at her left, she had no escape as the storm closed in on her.

The spike of pain drove into her skull and she stumbled to the ground, spewing the contents of her stomach. Early morning fog swirled around her, hiding her from sight. Allie’s hands fisted in the rich soil. It called to her somehow. A burst of sunlight shone through the clouds and it lifted her soul. Her body churned and shifted, but the pain of it held her rooted where she crouched. Tilting her face to the sky, the sun warmed her and gave her the strength to face him. He would find her

soon and she would be ready. The storm wouldn't hold back much longer.

She stood her ground, her face twisted in anguish, forever frozen in that moment of transformation, her body stiff and immobile, but still a raging tempest within. She saw Aidan now—his expression full of loss and regret. He did not catch her in time. Her metamorphosis complete, she had escaped him. Lifting her arms to the sky, she felt one moment of sweet relief and then the red clouds had her.

"Lex, I know you can hear me!" His voice came to her now, full of concern. This was her Aidan, not the monster that chased her. "Don't resist me." She felt his hands encircle hers, but she was lost in the darkness, no longer in the forest. She drifted.

The heat came first, then rage, as some intrusive force pressed against her mind. She recoiled from his touch.

"Easy, Allie. I know it goes against the grain, but you gotta let me help you."

She reluctantly obeyed his distant plea. A sense of calm swept through her, but only for a moment.

She wandered in the tempest, lost in the burning ache shattering her skull. It felt like everything that made her *Allie* was changing. She could literally feel her mind expanding.

"We should have prepared her for this somehow," Naeemah murmured. "We train our children for this moment all their lives. How can we expect her to succeed in ignorance?"

"The shock would have done more harm, but she isn't completely ignorant. Allie has strong instincts and she's a fighter. She'll figure it out." He stroked Allie's

palm and she felt his calm reassurance, but struggled to define reality from her nightmare.

“I suppose your way was best, but it seems monstrous to let her suffer. She is resisting when she needs to submit to it. You have to convince her, Aidan. Soon.”

“I will, Mom. Just let us do this alone. Please.”

As the door closed behind Naeemah, Allie screamed. Her eyes flew open wide and she caught his worried gaze. It was a raw moment of stark reality. She was back in his bed, but she was sweaty. The sheets twisted around her body as if she’d thrashed around for hours. Her mind worked rapidly, attempting to take in everything at once. It was too much. The jackhammer reverberating through her brain made it impossible to focus.

“Take a deep breath.” He reached for her hand. It was a fleeting comfort. Her body seized violently, consumed with convulsions that left her incoherent.

“You have to stop resisting. It will only—”

*It has to be a nightmare! Please...just let me wake up!* But deep down, she knew it wasn’t a dream. Whatever was happening, she’d known it was coming; had anticipated it for weeks. She clawed through the cloud of confusion, determined to hear Aidan.

“W-what’s happening?” she gasped.

“Shhh. Look in my eyes, Lex. Stay with me.”

Her eyes were wild with fright, but she was finally lucid.

“You know we’re different, Allie. At sixteen, everything extraordinary about us begins to emerge. It’s called an Awakening. You are in the throes of it right

now—a trance-like state. Not quite awake, but definitely not asleep, and you are resisting it.”

She bolted upright, her stomach roiling with dry heaves.

“An Awakening is a traumatic rite of passage, but I need you to trust me. I know exactly how much this hurts. But please don’t be scared. It will end, but you must allow it to happen. Only then will you have the strength to fight for control when you need it most. I’ll be right here with you, I promise—look at me!”

She focused on him for an instant. But it was long enough to help ease her fear.

“I won’t leave you, and I will not let you fail.” His words gave her hope, but still she struggled.

“Let go. Trust me. Submit to it. Then, when it’s time, you’ll have the strength you need.”

With a deep breath, she stopped fighting. Trusting him at his word, she knew she had nothing to fear. It felt like drowning, struggling in that last moment before succumbing to the inevitable. It was almost a relief.

She spiraled into the trance again. The pain was still there, but it was subdued for the moment.

“That’s my girl. You’ve got this!”

Her mind whirled with confusion and pain until that blinding light burst and she was back in her nightmare. Aidan was still by her side, but she was no longer aware. Long forgotten memories flashed before her eyes, leaving her nauseated and dizzy. A stifling concussive force gripped her now. Allie’s head exploded with scorching hot light, like the brightest sunlight. The pressure built, settling around her ears with a shrill high-pitched wail. Then the visions came.

She saw her mother and father, chasing a giggling child with blazing red hair as they walked along the beaches of South Africa. The memory was not one Allie recalled, but the little girl had to be her. She broke away from Lily and ran, screaming with laughter toward two figures in the distance. She screamed for them, her laughter dying, replaced by tears.

The shadows returned before she could reach them. The hot light preceded each vision and highlighted every significant event of Allie's life. She revisited her home in Nigeria when she was a baby; she watched the expression on Lily's face when a local woman took a special interest in Allie. They left for Egypt not long after. Then the Sudan. Joss left home for school in London. She didn't see her big sister for several years after that. Whenever someone got just a little too close to the young Allie, they left. Seeing it now, it was obvious. They were running—running from those she connected with. Those like Aidan and his family.

A sudden move to rural Scotland bought them some time when she began school. But one of her classmates made her cry with his strange stories. They left that night for Germany where they spent the next several years bouncing around Eastern Europe. She recalled these memories more easily. They spent a year in Amsterdam when she was only nine, but the new neighbors down the street threatened her family, so they ran again.

They landed in the Philippines next. Allie fell in love with the ocean there. But they didn't stay long. Brazil came after, then back to Egypt. Year after year, they stayed on the move, but someone always seemed to take notice of Allie.

Finally, she saw the little beach house in New Zealand. They spent nearly two years there. Allie vividly remembered the day she and her father came home from a long kayaking trip to find one of Lily's grad students leaving. She was tall, her dark hair pulled severely back from her perfect face. There was something familiar about the way she moved, graceful and fluid, like she was comfortable with her height and slender limbs. She was angry, afraid and confused all at once. She was searching for something and hadn't found the answers she wanted.

They left the next morning for Sydney where Navid became part of Allie's daily life for the first time in years. He was like the others, but her parents trusted him. He was safe—at least until his last visit. They fled halfway across the world that night.

It was all related: the moving, the strange connection she shared with Aidan. His burned, but healed, hands. The things Allie just knew—those things she'd always attributed to her strong intuition. Her parents were aware enough to bring her here, to people she could trust, people who could help her, but she also understood that Aidan and his family didn't need to know that.

*This is real.*

Something strange and powerful awoke deep within her. It was both wonderful and frightening at the same time. She couldn't deny what was happening was positively terrifying, but somehow it was also the most natural thing in the world.

“Wake up, Lex. You have to fight for it now. You must gain control of that immense power stirring in your chest. You are strong. So much stronger than you know. You can do this!”

Her body raged, but she still couldn't speak. She didn't know how to fight this. She only wanted to sleep.

"Wake up!" She felt his slap, and her eyelids fluttered, but she couldn't shake it off.

"Too much," she murmured.

"No, it's not. It is never more than you can bear. Everyone's Awakening is different. Mine was violent and lasted twenty-two hours before I fought it off. If I can do it, you can do it."

*Twenty-two hours! I'll be nothing but ashes by then!*

"I know you hear me, you stubborn redhead! Come on, Allie, don't lie down and give up now! That's not you. Fight it. Take control and end this!"

*How?* Whatever this was, it was winning. She fought just to take a breath. Her heart raced like it would beat right out of her chest.

"Your power is raging inside you. You have to tame it, push it back. If you don't you'll never recover. I will not let that happen. Now take deep, long breaths and ignore everything else."

She did as he said, holding on to the sound of his voice. She felt the heat radiating in her chest; a swirling mass of raw power. She did the only thing she could think of. She visualized it. The heat enveloped her, creeping down into her limbs. If she let it cover her whole body, she was gone. With every deep breath, she imagined that heat receding back into her core.

"That's it! That's my girl!"

The warmth eased back from her biceps into her shoulders and chest. She gasped for breath, sweat poured down her face. She pictured the heat searing her legs, willing it back up her thighs until her core blazed white-hot. With a last shuddering breath, she seized control,

confining the raging tempest into the deepest, strongest part of her body.

“Aidan?” Her voice was nothing more than a rasp. Her throat was raw from screaming, but she was alert now. The pain hit her like a hot knife—every nerve ending like a live wire.

“Don’t talk, just breathe, Lex.” He kissed her fingertips; the relief in his bloodshot eyes gave her strength. “It’s not over yet. You’ll slip back under, but the worst of it is behind you. Just don’t lose control.”

He looked haggard and tired, like he’d experienced everything she had. She lifted a trembling hand to his face. For the first time since it all began, everything felt real.

“Water,” she whispered. He lifted a straw to her lips and she drank greedily.

“What’s happening? I don’t understand.”

“Now’s not the time. I know that pisses you off, but after today, I’m done dodging your questions. After today, I’m a big giant open book.”

Allie shivered as if dunked in icy water. Aidan carefully wrapped her in warm blankets and held her.

“Why are you doing this?”

“That’s a stupid question. You think for one second I’m going to let you go through this alone?”

Her slight reprieve lasted only a short while before she slipped into the trance again. She was on her rooftop, collapsed in a heap among the tall grasses that grew there. She couldn’t move. A pins and needles sensation swept her body and escalated into a new kind of torture. Allie laid completely engrossed in the mindless ache that left her limbs feeling bloodless and heavy. Her face

began to itch and no amount of scratching would relieve it. Soon, she was a bloody mess, clawing at herself.

She could feel the tight bands of Aidan's arms around her, but in her mind, she was still on her rooftop alone, the storm clouds churning overhead.

She thrashed in anger, begging it to end.

She fought him, sometimes breaking free to scratch at her recent burns, which seemed to be the source of irritation. She quickly expended what little energy she had, falling limp against the grass she knew wasn't really there. The sight of her blood staining the ground should have frightened her, but it just made her want to give up.

"Don't stop fighting yet! It will be over soon."

She knew he was lying. The night was growing late and still her body raged, burning away all traces of the girl she'd been.

She heard an echo of Navid's voice fill her mind.

*Remember this girl, this version of yourself.*

It was a warning. He knew this was coming and wanted to help her through it. She really missed Navid.

Her sight blurred and dimmed as she stared at the ominous sky. A blue fog descended over her. Thunder clapped in the distance and eerie golden-green lightning flickered in the sky. The visions returned. They were no longer memories now. She saw a figure in the distance. Aidan, his eyes filled with anguish. Quinn's mother comforted him. Then Allie saw him leaving for Germany with Wendy. He looked broken.

In a flash of green light, she saw herself with her family. A strange young woman joined them. She was tall, with dark ebony hair. She was beautiful, her perfect face so familiar. Allie laughed with her as they watched Joss's children playing with Carson. Another man sat

nearby with his beautiful blue-eyed daughter, who reminded Allie of someone she knew but couldn't place. Aidan was there among the strangers, each so vitally important to her, but she didn't know them yet.

She saw herself standing defiantly with Gregg before a panel of judges as Aidan and their friends moved in behind her.

In another instant, the dark young woman returned, but this time she loomed over Allie with hate and fear clouding her icy gray eyes.

*Alexis, remember her!* Navid's voice echoed in her mind. For a moment she thought he was there with her, but in a flicker of that strange green light, he was gone.

With a violent jerk, the bizarre images faded and the excruciating headache returned. On the beach now, Allie fisted handfuls of the sand beneath her. The waves rushed over her. She cried out, suddenly blind and deaf, the water swept her out into the depths of the cold, dark lake.

“Aidan!” She knew he was close. She wasn’t really drowning. She felt his warm embrace, but she slipped into an oppressive void. She was dying, her senses shutting down one by one, plunging her into darkness and solitude.

“Fight it, Allie!”

She panicked in the emptiness. It felt like days before her pain lessened, but in the torment of her oblivion, it was not the sweet relief she longed for. She continued to drift.

*We have all been exactly where you are right now. You are different even among those like us. I cannot imagine the incredible loneliness you’ve endured all your life; how isolated you must have felt when others shied away from your touch. Never understanding what set you*

*apart. Despite how much you love your family, they just haven't been enough. You are safe among these dear friends. Trust them. They will teach you and guide you. They will protect you in a way your mother and father never could. No matter the agony and fear you've suffered today, it will end very soon! But you must keep fighting! Don't let the void take you.*

The mysterious words gave her the strength she needed. Allie struggled to find the surface, but refused to give up. Gradually, all sensation returned and she could feel Aidan's arms around her. She fought hard, hanging on to his warmth. Peace washed over her. She clutched him tightly, grappling for that tenuous thread of reality. And just as suddenly as it all began, the trance lifted.

With a deep breath, clarity returned. "It's over!" she gasped, but she was so tired, she couldn't keep her eyes open.

"It's safe to sleep now, Lex. I'll be here when you wake. Just remember...I'm still me," Aidan whispered as an unnatural sleep took her.

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