

Four Seasons
Winter of Discontent
By
T S Harvey

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Prologue

Sarah

I never really thought I was different.

I liked going to the movies, bowling, picnics, I wasn't much into Xbox or computer games and I definitely wasn't into the whole Candy Saga thingy. I liked sports, pizza, and Sam Worthington, though not necessarily in that order! I quite liked school although I hated the first day of school, and I'd had a lot of those in my sixteen years, which brings me round to why I wanted to stay with Aunt Suze. I had exams coming up; I needed some stability in my education. I was also hoping I'd have a settled home life, some female company, and the chance to make some friends that I wouldn't have to say goodbye to in six months' time.

Dad's job in the Army had meant we were forever dragging our bags around Europe and I hoped that the move to Texas would be permanent; permanent and normal. Although just how normal wasn't clear. Suzanne Du Bois, my aunt, was great. She was nothing like Dad; he was regimented whereas she was really easy going. She was a lot of fun and she had a laugh that lit up the room.

The move back to the States was gonna be a good thing for me. As I unpacked my things, hung up my clothes, and set my photos out on the dresser in the smallest of the three bedrooms at Aunt Suze's, I felt strangely comfortable. I'd had many bedrooms in my life so far but this one felt unlike any of them. This one felt like home.

Erik

I always knew I was different!

Chapter One – The Geek

Sarah

It was part way through the Fall semester and Carterbrook High was bustling with life. The all too familiar groups of friends were littered haphazardly around the school grounds. The talk was likely to be of sports, boyfriends, social media, and parents that don't understand them all of which merged to make one loud bustle.

As I walked quietly and alone towards the secretary's office I couldn't help feeling downhearted. I'd hoped that today would feel different from the many other first days that I'd had, I'd hoped I would feel different, that I would have a sense of belonging but I didn't.

Just to the left of the reception was a group of girls, you'd know who they were if you saw them, every school has them, the popular girls! By the way she was holding court you could tell who was in charge. Blonde, of course, and gorgeous, why are they always blonde and gorgeous? I wasn't an unattractive girl, that much I knew but I wasn't a 'popular girl'. I got on well with people in the main and I could hold my own in most conversations but my confidence wasn't as assured as I would have liked. I guess the unsettled nature of my upbringing might have had something to do with it, maybe I'd feel better in a few days.

As I walked past the girls and into the hallway towards the Secretary's office I couldn't help but smile. 'Join The Army' was the sign hanging on the wall that greeted me. Not likely; I've had enough of travelling to last me, I thought, wryly.

Once I'd registered and got my timetable sorted I made my way over to the Math class. I hated Math. If there was dyslexia with numbers then I had it. Don't get me wrong, I wasn't stupid; I just didn't like the subject. I was more sporty than academic; just another reason why I needed to settle down, to 'knuckle down', as a girl I met in England had once said.

Mr Cartwright smiled broadly as I entered the classroom, 'Miss Trent, I presume?'

To my shame, I just nodded rather sheepishly. This bit wasn't great. The whole class turns to look at you, to judge you in the first thirty seconds, and dismiss you in the next five.

'There's a seat free next to Kacey' he said, pointing towards a face I recognized. It was the gorgeous blonde! Her shoulders shrugged as she forced a smile, the look she gave the girl on the desk to her right spoke volumes. This was quite possibly the worst start to a school day ever.

I didn't smile at her as I took my seat; I doubted she would smile back and quite frankly I could do without the rejection. Instead I sat as far over on my chair as I could to avoid catching elbows as we opened our books. As it turned out, I'd actually sat a little too far over to the side and the edge of the hard wooden seat started to press into my butt cheek. It was damned uncomfortable!

After about thirty minutes of this, I tried to move inconspicuously onto more of the seat. However fate was determined to make this impossible and the chair dragged slightly across the floor as I moved, making a sound just about as close to farting as you can get. The class sniggered noisily and Mr Cartwright had to bring them to order. I'm sure he'd heard too but he said nothing to me. In some ways I wish he had. Being to blame for being told off by the teacher was not going to endear me to my classmates. I coloured up furiously and just prayed that the bell for recess would go soon, but of course it didn't.

Three quarters of an hour later class was over and the inevitable scuffle for the canteen started. I held back, hoping that somehow I would just melt into the background; but even that was not to be.

'So, what's it like to fart in front of the whole class on your first day?' grinned Kacey.

I stood there for a moment wondering whether to just smack her in the mouth, knock the smile off her face, but I didn't. There was something about the way she smiled that wasn't entirely vicious, not quite the bitch I'd first thought she was.

'Yeah well, it was always my favourite ice breaker' I said grinning back just as broadly.

'Come on then, Trump, sorry, Trent; let's show you to the canteen'

The other two girls I'd seen her with earlier that morning, Leanne and Britney, followed us down the hallway laughing and nudging each other like they were little kids. I knew they were laughing *at* me rather than with me but I said nothing; this was about as quickly as I'd made friends in forever.

Much as it had been at the beginning of the day, entering the school canteen was like overdosing on *déjà vu*. The same groups, same cliques of students huddled together but this time sat at tables rather than leaning against cars, sat on the wall, or the grass. Having chosen what we were eating we made our way over to a table by the window.

To the left were the jocks, you know the type, fit, athletic, toned, spoilt, and not a brain cell between them! Well, that's not entirely fair, I'm sure they weren't *all* spoilt.

Just over from them were the plain Janes. These were the nice girls, well behaved, somewhere between average grades and almost achieving, but all decidedly ordinary.

The table behind us was the 'different' girls. Nose rings, Goth make-up, attitude of doom and anarchy, but always hinting at the kind of intelligence that your stereotyping of them wouldn't allow for.

Three tables in front were the 'geeky guys'. Thick-rimmed glasses, haircuts that begged to be mocked, painful degrees of acne, not a long pass between them but a clutch of Valedictorians in their future. I lingered over this group a little too long and got a sharp elbow in the rib for my sins.

'If you're gonna hang around with us then don't go looking in that direction' snapped Kacey.

'I wasn't. I'm sorry' I protested.

I was really annoyed at my response. How dare I apologize for myself like that! I hadn't done anything wrong.

'Well, see you don't do it again' she snarled with half a grin.

I shook my head, kept my mouth shut and just smiled.

When lunch was finished, we had to pass by the geeks on the way out. I couldn't tell you what it was but I was strangely drawn to them. There was one geek in particular. I couldn't see how tall he was as he was still seated but he had broad shoulders, and he stood out from the others. His skin was

clear and although he was wearing glasses he wore them well. I couldn't help but smile at him as we went past. I can't believe how gutted, how offended I felt when he didn't smile back. There was no point making an issue though as Kacey had made it quite clear I shouldn't be bothering with them. I did want to say something but in the end I just shrugged my shoulders as if to say 'please yourself' and walked off with the girls to our next class.

Kacey sat next to Britney in Art Appreciation so I found myself sat alone toward the back of the room. The teacher, Miss Kingston, had just told us to open our books to Page 23 when in walked the geek that had ignored me at lunch.

'I've been transferred to this class' he said to the teacher.

'Fine, go find a seat. Do you have the right books?'

'Yes, Miss'

There were two empty seats in class. One next to me and one over by the window next to a girl with greasy hair and body odour issues. I thought I'd been put out when he hadn't smiled back at me at lunch but as he sat down next to her instead of me, I was stunned. I'm by no means vain but I was a far better bet than she was. Clearly he likes his women grubby, I thought spitefully.

As the lesson went on I noticed him looking across at me. Of course he'd turn away when I saw him but soon enough he was doing it again. This set me thinking. I bet he's shy, I bet that's why he chose to sit with her instead of me. I felt decidedly better about it now. My ego was repaired! I determined that I would test out this theory after class. I held back slightly when the bell went and waited until the geek had gotten up from his seat. As he started to head for the door I cut him off and 'accidentally' bumped into him.

'Sorry' I said smiling at him so warmly that I was sure he would smile back.

I was wrong. He didn't smile, he didn't speak, nothing. Not a damn thing.

I was livid. I wanted to smack him; I wanted to get a reaction. But more than that I didn't understand how someone I'd never had a conversation with, someone I hadn't really met properly could get me this wound up.

Who the hell was he to ignore me like that, to wind me up so easily? I tried to shake it off but when the final bell went that day and I headed off to the parking lot it was still riling me.

Aunt Suze had a scooter she hadn't used in months and I'd used it to ride to school. As I headed over to where I'd parked it I saw him; *the ignorant geek*. I stood back for a moment not wanting to bump into him again. As he walked between a row of parked cars, he stopped just briefly. He turned to look over his left shoulder and I could swear, I really could swear he stood and stared right at me. The really weird thing was though it felt like he was inches from my face not the hundred yards or so he was actually away. I went a little cold, a sudden shudder went down my spine and the hairs on my arms stood erect. I shook it off as he turned back and walked away.

This hadn't turned out to be the worst first day in the history of my school life so far but for some peculiar reason it somehow felt the strangest.

Chapter Two – The New Girl

Erik

‘I’m telling you, Dad, there is something really odd about the new girl’

‘Sit down and eat your breakfast’ was the only response I got, before Dad sat down opposite me and picked up the morning paper.

I hadn’t been able to get the new girl out of my head the night before and had barely slept. I didn’t know what it was but there was something. You know what I mean, you meet someone for the first time or see them at a distance and you form an instant impression. I guess sometimes instinct isn’t right and they turn out to be perfectly normal but sometimes, just now and then, your instinct is spot on. This, I felt, was one of those times.

‘What’s this about a weird girl then, E?’ laughed Jared, my older brother, as he pushed me jokingly by the side of the head.

Jared was four years older than me. A lot of siblings can be a bit competitive or a bit resentful of each other but not me and Jared; he wasn’t just my brother, he was my best friend.

‘I don’t know what it is, J, there’s just something’

‘Good looking?’

‘Not sure really. Too busy trying work out what it was that unnerved me about her’

‘Unnerved you?’ said Dad putting down the morning paper. ‘What do you mean unnerved?’

‘I don’t know. I just felt unnerved, like something was gonna happen’

‘Unnerved? Or do you mean horny?’

‘Jared!’ said Dad quite harshly.

I smiled and raised my eyebrows in a ‘trust you’ kind of way. I had to wonder whether he might be right, though; she was kind of cute.

‘Come on then, get a move on. Jared, if you want a lift in, you’d better be ready in five minutes, and you, young man, you need to make sure you don’t miss the school bus’

I nodded briefly as I stood up and took my cereal bowl to the sink and without saying anything further went into the hall, collected my jacket from the hook on the wall by the door, picked up my books, and headed off to school.

I’ve always enjoyed school. I know most folks think I’m a bit of a geek, a bookworm, study wart, but that was OK by me. I’d never felt the need to seek the approval of others but then with a family like mine why would I. My dad, Logan, was a successful lawyer. We weren’t really rich but we certainly weren’t poor. My brother had graduated from Carterbrook three years earlier and was due to graduate from The University of Texas in a few months’ time. As for me, I had the next few years all mapped out. I’d decided I would go on to college after high school and then on to University and I certainly didn’t need any distractions.

As I strolled down the lane that led to the main road, I tried hard to get the new girl out of my head; I figured I’d spent enough time thinking about her. Maybe Jared was right, maybe it was my age, my hormones. Perhaps I was attracted to her and underneath it all I just wanted to screw her. I’d steered clear of having sex with girls my own age, and girls from the same school, well that was just asking for trouble. The more I thought of this possibility the better I felt; if it was just attraction, I knew I could shrug it off. I knew how my life was gonna go and no girl was gonna get in the way of that. Most guys at school will have thought I was still a virgin and as I didn’t give a damn what others thought about me it wasn’t an issue. But I got enough mocking for being a geek as it was, so I could do without being mocked for being a virgin geek as well. I did find the geek tag a bit annoying sometimes; although the rest of the school viewed me like that, I knew that wasn’t the case. Underneath the geeky shirt, the geeky jumper, and behind the geeky glasses was an extremely fit and capable sixteen-year-old boy who could hold his own in any football tackle, in any wrestling match for that matter. I had my reasons for staying to the shadows and I was sticking to them. I was a good student, I didn’t come top in my class, though I’m sure I could have, that was just another area I

needed to be 'just good enough'. Good enough to go unnoticed but good enough to get the grades I needed for college.

I'd just about got my head on straight when the school bus turned up. My stop was about as far from school as it got so I had my pick of the seats, always the same one, six rows up on the right next to the window. Stop after stop the bus started to fill up. It wasn't until two stops from school that anyone would sit down next to me; by then there were only the aisle seats left, so people had no choice. They would lean across the back of the seat or out into the aisle to speak to the people they actually wanted to sit next to. Sometimes, if it was a girl I liked or felt sorry for I would offer up my seat and swap with her friend so they could sit next to each other; this didn't happen often and it didn't happen today. The bus pulled up outside the school grounds at around 8.20. I had to be over the other side of the campus for my first lesson, English Lit, so I took a steady stroll over. I felt much better now than I had when I set out forty minutes ago. I hadn't thought about the new girl since I boarded the bus and I was looking forward to the drama review in class. We'd been studying Shakespeare, *Richard III*; it had been a bit heavy going for some of the students but I loved it. All that "Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun of York". For me this was as close to family betrayal as I ever wanted to get but I found it fascinating. Did the author really believe what he was writing, was it how he believed he would have felt had he ever had siblings, was he really the most genius, 'genius' of his generation? I certainly felt so. If I had a time machine he would be the first and last person I would ever choose to meet. First because there hadn't been before or since a mind like his, and last because I couldn't imagine there being another human being that could possibly make me feel as humble as he surely would. All of this was rattling around in my head when I was brought back to earth with a bump.

As I turned the last corner before the entrance to the far campus I saw her; the new girl, standing over by the far wall laughing and joking with her new friends. I felt weak, all of sudden I felt very weak. I can barely explain what it was, like fire meeting ice, joy meeting sorrow. The inability to understand the way I felt was almost as unnerving as how I actually felt. You know how it feels when

you are in the middle of a dream and you're naked in front of everyone you ever knew? Well, multiply that by ten and that's kind of how I felt. As I walked almost sheepishly passed her and into the hall I felt her gaze fall on me. Just for a second, a brief moment I raised my eyes to meet hers. She smiled but my expression remained unchanged. I'm not sure if that was me trying to fake confidence, whether it was just confusion on my part for how she made me feel or simply just nerves. Either way, I tried to remain as visibly unmoved and unaffected as I could. Inwardly I knew I had failed at this deception but I just prayed that outwardly she was convinced.

As I thought it would be, English Lit was pretty great. Unfortunately it was over too soon and it was off to meet up with friends for lunch. Simon Jenkins was a geek. I don't mean the kind of geek people thought I was but a genuine 24 carat, 100 per cent geek. Head of the electronics, math, and science club the guy was Einstein for the 21st Century. Hanging around with him might not have been the most exciting chapter in my life but he was a good guy. You could hold a conversation with him that didn't come down to Salma Hayek's bra size, who was leading the NFL, or whether McDonalds were better than Burger King; as such he wasn't as mind numbingly boring as the jocks tended to be. We had sat down for less than a minute when 'she' walked in with Kacey and her 'pet dogs' – so called as they nodded at her every word like the nodding dogs you used to get in the back of cars. I determined I wouldn't catch her gaze. This proved easier said than done as they sat at the only free table in the canteen; the one next to ours. I kept my head down and just ate my lunch. I ached to look up every time I heard her laugh, speak, or cough. I wanted to know what was so amusing, wanted to know what she was saying and I wanted to join in, but I didn't. In the end I just blocked out the sound of her voice and talked to the guys.

Twenty minutes later the bell rang for the end of recess. Now the hard work began. Phys. Ed. I loved sport but I couldn't excel at it. I had to stay invisible, remain the geek. Sports classes were hard for me. I wanted to show what I could do but how could I? It was like cheating and I was no cheat. My father, my brother, and I worked hard to be 'normal' so self-control was a must. I could never allow myself to be the dark horse. I was more than capable of handling myself under do-or-die fourth

down and goal, last play of the game pressure. It would have been too easy to score a touchdown, make that basket from halfway down the court, hit a home run first ball in, but would it be fair, would it be normal? No, it wouldn't. Although I wanted to be, I wasn't normal.

I was a Warlock.

Chapter Three – Nurture Over Nature

Erik

Being born into a family of Warlocks was pretty cool; being born into a family of Warlocks that wanted to be normal however wasn't quite so cool.

Dad made the decision that we would live a normal human life many years ago. I was never really happy about it but I loved him very much and I would never go against him. It certainly wasn't easy though, I think the difficulties that came with it were one of the reasons why Jared and I were so close. There were so many times when we wanted to get involved in school activities but weren't able to because of our physical advantages. We would often sit up for hours discussing how fantastic it would be to stick it to the jocks who mocked us as geeks but of course we never did. After one particular, disappointingly long week of sporting activities Dad took us on a trip out to the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. He'd hired a secluded log cabin by a lakeside where Jared and I could swim and dive to our hearts content. We would run for hours at speeds that would have had Usain Bolt stuck in the starting blocks. It was great. Dad knew it was hard on us and I know he was proud of how we coped with things. I got a bit frustrated sometimes though when Dad wouldn't use magic for anything at all. I remember one time; we spent the whole evening in darkness when a power surge blew out all the bulbs. It was too late to get into town for replacements and he wouldn't use just the simplest of notions to fix them. I didn't get it. It wasn't like there was anyone around to see him. We lived away from close neighbours and had no one overlooking our property, but no, he wouldn't do it and just insisted that we deal with it like any other normal family.

Phys. Ed should really have been reclassified under the heading of Drama for me. I can't tell you how many times I allowed myself to be convincingly fouled, to turn in last over the line and the odd 'trip up' over my own feet. Just once I would love to have been first but I had to resign myself to

knowing that although I *would* win, I never *could* win. Today was basketball. Ryan Enders was captain of the squad and a real dick. I so wanted to smack him up a bit. He had slept with more senior girls than the rest of the squad put together and then bragged about it to anyone that would listen. I hated that. It wasn't a Warlock thing to dislike his behaviour it was a family thing; there was nothing wrong with wanting a lot of sex but slagging the girls off afterwards wasn't on. Nurture over nature you might say. Anyway, by the time we had warmed up and each had two quarters it was time to head home.

As I walked back toward my locker, I sensed her again. Before I'd even turned the corner into the hallway I knew she was there. And she was. I'd spent most of Phys. Ed side-lined following a *foul* by one of the jocks and therefore sat brooding on the bench thinking how I'd love to have pushed him back, and when I wasn't thinking about that I was thinking about her. I'd come to a decision. I was gonna smile back, speak even. I had to find out what it was about her that made me feel uneasy and I wasn't gonna do that if I didn't at least acknowledge her.

I can't really describe how this sense of heightened anxiety left me feeling. Sick to my stomach doesn't really cover it, I'd never broken a sweat inside of school before but I could feel the back of my neck sticking to my shirt and it felt really uncomfortable. *Relax, relax* I repeated over and over to myself. This was alien territory for me. I may play the geek for the sake of camouflage but I wasn't that person underneath. I was confident and assured; so why didn't I feel like that? As I got closer to her I saw her turn toward me. She had beautiful long dark brown hair, almost to her waist. It had the tiniest hint of a wave and it bounced when she turned around quickly. She was hot! My realisation that that was my opinion made me think that perhaps Jared had been right; maybe I just had a hard-on for her. I'd never given any real thought to who I had sex with before so maybe feeling like this meant I had a crush on her. The possibility that it might be as simple as that was strangely reassuring.

My locker was just over to the left from hers. As I unlocked the door and took out my books I purposely looked in her direction. I was gutted. She was stood with her back to me now and at such an

angle, unless she moved, I wouldn't be able to make eye contact. In my frustration, I slammed the door to the locker shut. The noise it made when it closed shocked most of the students into silence as they turned round to see what it was all about.

'Oops. Don't know my own strength' I said trying to laugh it off.

You can imagine the comments that brought. 'Yeah right, Mr Puniverse' was the loudest and got the most laughs! She wasn't laughing though. Kacey and the rest of her pets were roaring for all they were worth but not her. She looked quite sorry for me, like she didn't approve of the mockery. I didn't let this throw me; I grabbed the moment and smiled at her, just briefly. Unfortunately it wasn't brief enough and Kacey caught my look and grabbed her sharply by the arm.

'No flirting with the geeks, Trent' she snapped sharply.

'I wasn't' came her reply. 'He was the one smiling, not me. I was laughing, not smiling back' she stammered as she turned her face away from me.

It confused me as to how disappointed I felt in her. I had no right to feel like that. I didn't even know her name for Christ's sake so how could I feel disappointment? I tried to shrug it off as I headed out of school but it hung over me like a lead weight. Oh well, yet another sleepless night ahead, I thought, as I boarded the bus for home.

Chapter Four – The Photograph

Sarah

I was so annoyed with myself. Yet again I'd allowed Kacey to pressure me into saying something I didn't mean. I wasn't laughing at the geek; I felt for him. I'd scraped the floor with my chair on my first day and, as the class laughed, I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me. He must have felt a little like that and I felt bad for him.

'I'm starting to think that perhaps you don't really want to hang around with us' snarled Kacey as we headed out of school.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, it seems that whenever the geek squad is around you are more interested in what they are doing than what we are'

Kacey could be spiteful, I'd realised that almost from the first moment we'd met. I decided I would put up with it though. Making friends wasn't easy especially when you are a newcomer part way through the semester. Kacey had sort of welcomed me into the fold on the first day and I didn't want to argue about some geek that had snubbed me. Some geek whose name I didn't even know!

I tried to convince Kacey and the rest of the girls that I couldn't care less about what the geeks were up to but Kacey was clearly in a snide mood and was having none of it.

'Prove it' she said, firmly refusing to believe me.

'How?' I asked sheepishly.

'You need to show us you don't give a damn about Erik'

'Which one is Erik?'

'Shut the fuck up' said Britney.

Britney didn't say a lot but when she did she always cursed. Fuck this, shit that, bastard the other. I hated it but I didn't say anything.

'The geek that you were flirting with' she elaborated.

'I wasn't flirting with him' I protested again.

'Well, if you don't care for him then you'll take up our little challenge' Kacey goaded.

'Sure' I said, as *blasé* as I could.

'OK. Then I reckon you should get a photograph of him in his underwear and then post it online'

Kacey laughed out loud and the others lauded their approval.

'Fine, no problem' I scoffed lightly, as we continued towards the parking lot.

As I got on Aunt Suze's scooter, I couldn't believe I hadn't just told them to go to hell. This was so unlike me. I wasn't mean spirited, I didn't mock others and I sure as heck didn't set out to hurt people.

I felt pretty miserable and I should have gone straight home. I had plenty of homework to do, enough of an excuse not to take up their challenge today but I didn't. I parked up a few hundred yards from the bus stop where Erik was stood waiting. When the bus arrived and he'd safely boarded I followed closely behind. I had no idea where he lived so I just pulled in each time the bus stopped and watched carefully to see who got off. It was a good twenty minutes out of town before we finally reached his stop. The road was quite open and not really busy so I held back quite a way. Fortunately, as he got off, he walked in the direction the bus was going and didn't look back. About three hundred yards up on the right there was a lane leading up to a lone house set back from the road.

I remained where I was wondering how best to approach the challenge. I gave it another fifteen minutes and pushed the scooter up the lane. It was a bit old and the engine was quite noisy, as I didn't want to be spotted I figured turning it off was the best way to go. Erik had clearly reached home by the time I got to the top of the lane and there wasn't a soul in sight. It was already starting to go dark; this wasn't great as I didn't know my way around too well. Just then a light came on in an upstairs

room. The house was quite big and there was a balcony on two sides. There may have been one on the back as well but I couldn't see that from where I stood. Just then the patio doors opened and Erik walked out towards the railing that edged the balcony.

It was pitch black now; there was no lamp light in the lane. The weirdest feeling came over me. Just as he had at the end of my first day at Carterbrook he turned to look in my direction. He couldn't have seen me, surely he couldn't, I could barely see me, so there was no way he could. It was eerie though. Stood on the balcony to what was almost certainly his bedroom I could clearly make him out and I could swear he was smiling across at me.

I decided there was no point lingering, there was no chance of getting the photograph tonight, besides which Aunt Suze wouldn't be too impressed with me. It was almost 8 p.m. and the sun had set a while back. I couldn't believe what time it was. It felt like I'd left school no more than an hour ago. This was really weird. How could I possibly have been stood here for three hours? I checked my phone and sure enough Aunt Suze had tried to call me; she must have been worried, I wasn't usually the sort to go AWOL without explanation. I pushed the scooter back down the lane before I dared start up the engine then set off for home.

'Where the hell have you been?' screamed Aunt Suze when I finally arrived back.

'I'm sorry, I should have called. I had my phone on silent. I ... erm, I went round to a friend's after school'

This was as close to the truth as I could get without blatantly lying.

'Right, well next time, call!' she said, with what was clearly a relieved smile.

'I will. I promise'

'What on earth have you been doing? Or dare I ask?' she said pointing at my legs.

As I looked down I could hardly believe what I saw. The front of my skirt was dirty, had at least a dozen pulled threads, and my pantyhose were torn to pieces.

'I have no idea. Really I don't'

Now I was really worried. How the hell could I get in that state and not know how? Aunt Suze just seemed to laugh it off so I didn't make a big deal of it. Still confused I made my way upstairs, ran the bath, and lay back amongst the bubbles to try to work things out in my head. Unfortunately all that thinking did was give me a headache so I turned in just after 9 p.m. and exhausted fell fast asleep.

When I awoke the next morning, my head hurt like hell. I'd slept surprisingly well considering the previous evenings state of confusion but even so I woke up later than normal and had to rush round like a headless hen in order to get to school on time. I failed miserably! Fortunately for me my first period teacher was also late so I managed to get away with it.

Kacey was on fine form when I met her and the girls at recess. Within thirty seconds of saying hello she had snatched my phone from my hand and went straight into the photo app. I stood, almost speechless at her rudeness; however rather than protest I submissively started to shake my head.

'I haven't got it yet' I said apologetically.

Kacey just shoved the phone back at me and gave me a look of thunder.

'I knew you wouldn't. All mouth'

'I'm not all mouth' I said, rather pissed by the insinuation that I'd chickened out. 'I went round after school but didn't get chance'

'Yeah, of course you did.'

'Are you calling me a liar?'

Kacey didn't answer. She simply turned her back on me and walked off with the others leaving me stood alone like an idiot. The bell for class went and I have to confess to being more than a little relieved that none of my classes this morning were the same as Kacey and the girls. Lunchtime, however, gave no such relief.

I'd sat at a table on my own over on the far side of the canteen. I'd been there for just a few minutes when the geeks walked in, then not far behind them were the girls. I really hoped they'd avoid me; I was in no mood for another standoff with them. No such luck though. The geeks had sat a

couple of tables away and I don't know whether that was what spurred her to come and sit with me but my quiet lunch suddenly turned into yet another bitch-fest.

'Right then, Trump' spat Kacey, after she'd finished pulling apart what the geeks were wearing today, 'when are you gonna try again?'

I wanted to tell her to stick it but I didn't. I don't know whether it was because I'd been so wound up that she'd thought I'd bottled it but I felt really determined to go back and try again. In the end I just shrugged my shoulders and suggested I try again later that day.

As we were leaving the canteen the geek, Erik, looked across at me. I fully expected him to blank me again so was really thrown when he didn't. I'd have smiled back but was conscious of Kacey giving him daggers and I could really do without another argument.

Later that day when school had finished, I text Aunt Suze to tell her I was going to see a friend after school; there was no point getting on her wrong side again.

As I'd done the day before, I followed the bus all the way to Erik's house. Once he'd been gone up the lane for ten minutes I parked the scooter about halfway up and walked the rest of the way. I'd figured that the balcony closest to the lane led to his bedroom as I'd seen him standing looking out from there last time. I decided to wait until it got a little darker.

I was starting to wish I'd bought a proper camera with me. If I'd had one with a decent zoom then I wouldn't have to climb the trellising, I could have taken it from where I was stood. The thought of going up there was quite worrying. I thought back to last night, again trying to figure out how I'd gone home in such a mess. I looked up at the balcony and wondered whether I'd attempted the climb last time, whether I'd taken a fall, maybe knocked myself out. If I had, then that would explain why I couldn't remember getting into such a state. I dismissed this idea pretty quickly though, as I clearly remembered waiting in the lane, watching the house for signs of life.

It was dark again now and I was starting to get cold. I looked down toward the scooter wishing I hadn't left my jacket on it. I hadn't seen anyone moving about upstairs and there was no point climbing the trellising unless he was actually there.

I checked my phone for the time and it was just after 7.30 p.m.! What the hell! 7.30 p.m.? I'd told Aunt Suze I would be late back but I didn't expect to still be here at this time.

I was just thinking of heading home when the light came on in the bedroom, the patio doors opened and Erik walked across to the edge of the balcony as he had yesterday. This felt every bit as weird as it had before. Looking out into the darkness he stared over in my direction, just like he was staring right at me. I felt really uncomfortable and started to edge backwards further into the shadows. I was pissed at not getting the damn photograph and the thought of facing Kacey without it the next morning made me feel quite sick, that wasn't the worst of it though, when I got back to the scooter some bastard had nicked my fucking jacket!

When I finally got home Aunt Suze had gone out for the evening with friends, leaving a salad in the fridge for my dinner. I was pretty pleased. Not about the salad, about Aunt Suze, I really didn't want to lie about what I'd been doing so now I could just avoid the subject altogether. I got my dinner out the fridge, poured some juice, and sat down in front of the TV to watch Ellen. I put the plate on the coffee table and pulled it towards me. As I did so I noticed my pantyhose were ripped; again! I sat for a moment trying to think back to how this had happened. I could have sat there all night and not been certain but in the end I figured I must have caught them on the bracken hedge on the way back to the scooter in the dark. I felt a bit better at this point as this could well have been how I'd gotten in a mess the previous night.

The next morning was every bit as bad as I thought it might be. Kacey almost spat venom at me when I told her I still hadn't got the photograph.

‘For Christ’s sake, give me a chance. It’s not easy. I’ve been stuck up that lane for two nights running waiting for the chance, someone stole my best jacket and for what? Why the hell do you want a photograph of a geek in his underwear, anyway?’

‘I don’t want it; I just wanted you to take it. It’s just a bit of fun but clearly you aren’t up to it’
We bit back at each other for a few minutes until I couldn’t take any more.

‘Well, stick it, Kacey. I didn’t wanna do something so stupid in the first place. You only want it to humiliate the poor bloke on Facebook. You’re such a bitch. I really don’t need this or you’
She shouted spiteful abuse after me as I walked away but I really couldn’t have cared less. The rest of the day I sat alone and I ate alone, it really dragged by. I was more miserable now than any first week of school ever.

Despite my misery what I decided to do next was really shameful. Without any goading or pushing from either Kacey or the girls I decided I would have one more go at getting that damn photograph. I think this time I just didn’t want to admit defeat; I always was very competitive and the thought of letting something beat me didn’t sit well. This time however I couldn’t believe how easy it was. I had to wait until it went dark again but eventually he came out onto the balcony, in his underwear! Bright red boxers, I was elated. I waited until he went back inside, crept up the trellising, took the photograph from outside the patio door and then climbed triumphantly back down again. I knew what I’d done was childish and immature but what I did next topped even that. I uploaded the picture to my email and sent it to Kacey. The very minute I pressed send I pressed recall but it was too late. Anyone that’s ever tried to recall something knows it doesn’t always work and it didn’t work this time either. It took Kacey just under seven minutes to open the attachment and upload it to Facebook.

Chapter Five – What an idiot!

Erik

I had wondered whether to skip school today. After what had happened lately and in particular last night I didn't know if I could face her without giving something away. In the end I'd set out an hour earlier than usual. I didn't have any classes with her today so by getting in early I'd been able to avoid seeing her at all. I spent most of the school day and the bus journey home going over and over it all in my head. It had started off as a bit of a joke but now I was starting to feel really guilty. I'd wiped her memory of what had been happening but what if I hadn't gotten it quite right? Using too much power in this way could cause long term memory loss but I'd had to do it. I couldn't risk her knowing who or what I was. It was stupid of me really. It was even a touch rebellious. Dad had decided we would never practise magic, ever, but now and again I couldn't help it I just had to do something; perhaps to remind myself of who I really was and what I could do. Selfish, in truth. Dad had warned me that one day I'd trip up and that I shouldn't take risks.

It had started innocently enough. I'd sensed her following me home that first time and I knew it was likely to be some kind of dare from one of the girls, most probably Kacey. She'd dared girls before to try to find ways to humiliate me and I guess this time I'd just had enough and I decided to fight back. She'd shimmied up the trellising and was stood, hid as she obviously thought, outside the patio doors that led to my bedroom. I was just gonna shout at her; perhaps frighten her a little, after all I owed her nothing so why should I care. In hindsight I wish I'd done just that. I waited until I knew she was looking and I did something I really shouldn't have. In the instant that I'd done it I wished I hadn't. I sensed her fear, in fact I didn't just sense it I felt it. She stumbled backwards over the chairs on the balcony as she ran back towards the trellising. I reached out to grab her but even with my speed I wasn't quick enough and she fell almost head first to the ground below. I leapt over the balcony wall

onto the floor beside her and screamed for Jared and Dad to come out. Jared didn't hesitate, but then he never did, he never panicked. Holding his hands over her for just a moment, concentrating quietly in the darkness it didn't take too long before she started to come around. Dad told me to bring her inside to make sure she was OK; what he really meant was to make sure she didn't remember anything.

I'd bought plenty of girls back to the house before now and Dad was really cool about it. This time though I hadn't bought her back, she'd followed me. After I told him what I'd done I knew he was angry. He was also concerned as, like me, he sensed something about her. Jared was the most worried though. His ability to sense was the best there was and although he recognized something he couldn't pin point it. This wasn't normal for him and I think he felt a bit threatened by it. The whole thing was a mess and I really wished I'd handled things differently.

When she came around I spoke gently to her, not because I felt like being gentle but because that was just part of the process. Whenever I performed mental changes my voice would be calm, my tone measured and reassuring; my insides however weren't necessarily as calm as my outsides portrayed.

After we felt confident that she would be OK to get home I led her to the top of the lane. I'd instructed her to forget everything that had happened and that she would only remember seeing me on the balcony once. Any intelligent, clear thinking individual would have left it at that, but not me. I was still way too curious about her to let it go at that and I instructed her to come back the following night! What an idiot!

The following night, so she'd know I was in I'd allowed her to see me on the balcony for a moment before going back inside. After she'd started to climb the trellising I crept back out onto the balcony to wait for her. I could hear her wincing whenever she caught a thorn or lost her footing and I felt bad that I'd let it get this far, that I hadn't just invited her inside instead of keeping up this pretence. After she'd hauled herself over the top of the wall she stood for a moment, straightening her

skirt and complaining to herself about the state her pantyhose were in. As you can imagine she was pretty shocked when she turned around to see me standing there.

She looked scared but nothing like as scared as she had been the night before. I could hear her heart racing, beads of sweat on her forehead starting to edge down towards her eyes. She'd stammered awkwardly at first but then started to laugh, she had a great laugh. Instead of acting surprised I just invited her to come and sit down. After a little coaxing to get to the truth it turned out that Kacey had dared her to get a photograph of me in my underwear and whilst I felt a little annoyed I didn't show it. I'd punished her enough already and she was genuinely embarrassed at having agreed to do it.

We spent the next couple of hours talking, laughing mostly, and by the time she left I knew that was it. I'd fallen for her and fighting all my instincts to stay away from someone that made me feel I wasn't quite in control was not gonna be easy. Before it came time to leave I wiped her memory again and instructed her do the same thing the following night. I knew Dad and Jared weren't happy about her being around but they always let me make my own decisions and I knew they'd cover my back if I got it wrong.

The following night was pretty much a mirror image of the night before. This time however, after going through the pretence of coaxing her to tell me why she was there I persuaded her to take a photograph of me in my brightest boxers. I figured this would get Kacey off her back once and for all and then perhaps we could start over. After I'd walked her back to the top of the lane I should have just smiled and said a friendly goodnight, but I didn't; like I said, what an idiot. As I reached out and tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear I leant in and kissed her. Softly at first but, as she responded, my kiss became more powerful, more urgent. I could feel the Warlock in me rising, her aroma was overpowering and I was ready to take her there and then. It took everything I had to resist my natural urges; well, it took everything I had, plus Dad calling out to me to come inside! As I walked back to the house I had no idea what I was gonna do next. I hadn't instructed her to do anything but forget we'd talked, forget we'd kissed; to remember only that she finally managed to get the photograph. I'd

been tempted to Influence her to come around the next day but I didn't. She believed I was just some geek and yet she'd still been happy to spend the last few hours laughing and flirting with me. For a sixteen-year-old, I'd had a lot of meaningless sex with a lot of random women and none of them meant a thing to me. With Sarah, though, things felt different; this time I wanted it to be something else. This time I wanted it to matter.

After school and before I'd even turned into the lane that led up to our house, I'd sensed that Dad was already home.

'Erik! Come in here please' came a firm shout from the lounge.

'Yeah, be right there'

I hung my jacket up on the hook by the front door, left my bag and books on the bottom of the stairs and went through.

'So you want to tell me exactly what happened last night?' he asked calmly as I sat down on the chair by the hearth.

'Nothing happened. I didn't let it get that far'

'Look, I know you're not gonna like this but I think you should stay away from her'

'But ...' I tried to interrupt but Dad cut me off.

'I'm not finished' he said sharply. 'I have no problem with how many girls you hook up with. You've always made sure nothing came back on us but this is different. We can't be sure what it is about her, Erik, but you sense it too. You can screw any girl you want but not this one. Are we clear?'

I nodded submissively.

'There's something else I need to tell you, Erik'

The look on Dad's face told me not to speak but to listen.

'You know I didn't decree we shouldn't use magic just out of a sense of wanting to be normal, don't you? I told you The Council were hunting down Segans but what I didn't tell you was why. Many centuries back The Council's Seer, Luka Menaë, foretold of a child, a child between a Warlock and a Moirai and that this child would bring about the downfall of The Council. For this reason they tried to kill off the Moirai line. About thirty years ago, a descendant of Menaë had the same vision but

this time he named our Segan line as the Warlock involved. This is why they hunt us; this is why we don't perform magic and this is why we need to stay under the Tracers' radar.'

I knew that a Warlock's magic was like a fingerprint; a fingerprint on the air that could be sensed by the Tracers as well as other Warlocks. I was certain that had we lived in town then the little magic I did perform would have been picked up by a Tracer. Tracers were agents of The Council. They had used them to hunt down and kill the children of the Moirai line in order to ensure there could be no progeny. Along with the Grenae, the Moirai were the most powerful and feared of all witches, more powerful even than Warlocks. The struggle to remove them from the earth raged on for centuries. In the end The Council deployed the Tracers as they were the most adept at infiltrating covens and ultimately they believed their line was extinct.

'But what has this got to do with me seeing Sarah?' I asked.

'Jared thinks she might be the Moirai they are looking for'

'No! She can't be. She's just an ordinary girl, Dad. If she'd been a Moirai, I wouldn't have been able to instruct her'

'Yes you would. Whilst their magic lies dormant, a Moirai is just like any other human. If she hasn't been released, she is just like any other girl'

Jared had extraordinary senses, much better than Dad or I could ever hope to have but this time he was wrong, I was certain of that. When he joined us in the lounge a few minutes later his hesitance to confirm for sure what he felt made me more confident than ever that he was wrong. Unfortunately Dad wasn't so convinced.

'Just in case, Erik, you need to stay well away from her. You can have your pick of the girls but not this one. I don't want to have this conversation again. Understood?'

'Yes, of course' I said, somewhat despondent at it all.

'You need to stay well away from her'

'I will, Dad, of course I will'

The words almost stuck in my throat. The truth was, not only did I not want to stay away from her; I didn't know if I could.