



Shattered Glass

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*To my amazing family and friends who helped
guide me on my exhausting, rewarding journey through my
favorite childhood stories and beyond.
Thank you for your unwavering support.
It kept me going during the darkest of hours.*

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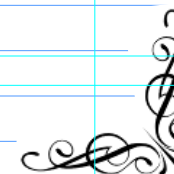




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“All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. The true courage is in facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty.”

W. W.

The Wizard of Oz





Prologue. *Mirror, Mirror...*

A long time ago...

In the dusty light of dawn, Jack Cramer hobbled through the old alleyway, his wooden leg clicking against the uneven cobblestone. For the past 165 years, 215 days, Jack's routine never changed. He woke up at 5:30, changed into his work clothes - Jack rarely showered, ate a bowl of porridge, left his filthy apartment and walked through the alley toward the store previously owned by his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

When he finally arrived at the warped door, Jack gently inserted his rusted key, careful not to make any sudden movements lest he disrupt one of the bricks perched precariously over his head.

Priceless Possessions Pawn Shop, although the name had faded from the weathered blue sign hanging outside the door, belonged to Jack's family for 750 years. It had been a prized possession passed down from generation to generation. But Jack hated the store and





had allowed the slanted building to crumble. The wooden door frame had begun to rot and the bricks were turning to ash. It would only be a matter of months before some unsuspecting patron was knocked unconscious while trying to enter the store.

Although you might not think it possible, the interior was far worse. The store had not been cleaned since Jack's grandfather, Algernon Cramer, who was an extreme neat-freak, passes it to his son 500 years ago. Since then, the single window had accumulated three and a half inches of dust and grime. So the little light illuminating the store came from one single bulb dangling on a string near the back wall.

The light shimmered off the second ceiling, a network of thinly spun thread stretching from one side of the room to the other. Over the years, thousands of spiders had taken residence in the rafters.

As Jack hung his holey brown coat on the rack, he felt an odd tickling on his head and reaching up, discovered a large daddy long-legs crawling in his matted hair.

But, Jack Cramer did not care about such things.

Flicking the fist-sized spider off of his head, Jack went to work counting the Ennet coins (\$) in the safe.

The gold Midian and silver Nuad and copper Kern coins helped calm his already agitated nerves.

This was Jack's favorite part of the day. He hated customers and spent a good portion of every day trying to come up with a way to make money without interacting with people.

So when the tiny bell chimed over the door, Jack glanced up with annoyance. The eyes floating in the jars placed strategically around the store swiveled to record the newcomer. Jack groaned, well at



least the security system was working, he thought unhappily as an enormous brown-paper package appeared to float through the store completely on its own.

"Good day, sir. I would like an appraisal, if you would be so kind, on a truly remarkable item."

Jack's annoyance returned when he realized he was actually being addressed by a tiny man who could barely see over the counter.

The man tore off the paper and Jack found himself staring at an ugly man, with an enormous neck that bulged over his yellow-stained shirt collar, disheveled hair and a wooden leg.

"Sir..." Jack looked at the man with disdain. "*That* is a mirror."

"Ahh... Yes...Yes! Of course, it is!" The little old man replied exuberantly. "You are quite right, but it is not just a mirror. Have you ever heard of the tale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarves?"

"Yeah..." Jack sighed. The people who came into his store were cash-strapped or crazy. This man was obviously the later.

"Well, my dear sir. You see, this is the very mirror from the story. Go on...go on... ask it a question. Anything you would like."

Jack, believing his assessment confirmed, decided to ask the mirror a question anyway. It would be the quickest way to get the man out. Then he could go back to counting his money.

Hesitantly, Jack mumbled his question. Not expecting any change on the face of the mirror.

To Jack's surprise though, as soon as he finished speaking, a whirlpool of rainbow light sprang forth from the depth of the mirror, coloring the drab shop walls.

Two large violet eyes filled the space where his reflection had been. A girl's face materialized around the piercing eyes. She was





running away from something the mirror, could not, or possibly would not show. Raven black hair billowed around her heart-shaped face. Deep worry-wrinkles lined her forehead. And her rosy cheeks, flushed from exertion, colored her otherwise, sickly pale hue.

The image evaporated as the girl opened her mouth in a scream of horror.

Jack, petrified by the appearance of such a ghastly image, soon found himself, once again, looking at his own reflection. But to Jack's amazement, the little man, standing only 3 feet tall seemed unperturbed. In fact, he still looked rather Happy.

"See, I told you!" The man bubbled excitedly, sensing Jack's awe. "This really is a very remarkable piece. Now how much will you pay me for it?"

"May I ask you a question?" Jack peered over the counter. Curiosity triumphed over his normally sour attitude.

"Of course, by all means!" The man smiled.

"Well... if you think this mirror is so special why do you want to sell it?" This truly was an extraordinary item - although he would never admit this to his customer.

The little man shook his head and looked down at his gold-buckled shoes, his eyes welling with tears.

"I don't want to sell it. But the mine has run dry and my six brothers and I need money for food." He sobbed, which looked incredibly odd since he was still grinning from ear to ear.

Jack nodded sympathetically, while his brain concocted a devious plan. Jack, a very sly businessman, suddenly realized he could acquire this spectacular for an insignificant amount of money.

"Well sir, you have indeed come to the right place. I will make



you an excellent offer." Jack bellowed a little too enthusiastically. And, picking up a pad and pencil, Jack pretended to calculate an offer, before writing and circling, \$50.

"Here you are sir, after calculating the cost of repair..."

"Repair? What Repair?" The man hiccupped, streaks of red lining his chubby cheeks.

"Well..." Jack walked over to the mirror. "There is the slight chipping around the top of the frame." He pointed out the invisible flaw, certain the man was too short to see. "And there are the brown spots in this corner... So, with all of these personal expenses, I am prepared to offer you this much for the mirror." He tapped the ridiculous number on the note pad.

"Really, that is all." The man squeaked.

"Yes. I am so sorry." Jack smirked.

"I suppose... if that is really all I can get, I will have to accept your offer." As soon as the man spoke the words, Jack was at his drawer counting out 50 Midian coins, which he placed in a canvas pouch and thrust across the counter.

Jack hated giving away his money, but knew he could make at least \$1,100 on the mirror.

"Thank you for the business." Jack exclaimed, the most animated he had been all day. "Be sure to come again!"

With those final words, Jack pushed his customer out the door. A moment later the little man, still smiling, was swept away by a strong gust of wind.

That night as Jack lay in bed drifting toward dreams, the image of the girl in the mirror had almost entirely faded, replaced by the angry faces of customers he swindled later in the day.





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The following morning, Jack walked to work as he had for 165 years and 216 days, but as he approached the door, Jack noticed a change in the air.

As he slipped the key into the lock, every one of the hairs on his arm stood up. Though nothing from the outside indicated there had been a disturbance in the night – the door was still locked, the windows were intact – Jack knew otherwise.

Cautiously, he pushed the door open and peered into the dark space. There were no new footprints in the dust on the ground. But looking closer, Jack realized all of the blue, green and brown pickled eyes sitting in jars around the room were now colorless. Milky-white cataracts covered each iris.

There would be no record of this intruder.

Jack hurried to the cashier's drawer. But as his eyes roved over the Midian, Nuad and Kern, he knew not a single coin had been touched. It was not until his eyes flickered to the painting which concealed his safe, that he saw it.

There in the exact same spot he had left it, was the mirror.

Its once smooth face was riddled with cracks. Splinters of glass lay strewn across the floor.

Jack began to yell, but before the sound could escape his throat, a cold hand snaked around his neck.

A moment later Jack lay unconscious on the ground.



One. *Gossip*

Present Day...

I did not want to open my eyes. Instead, I watched the pink dots dance on the inside of my eyelids. From my night stand the radio DJ's implored me to get up. But they were unsuccessful.

My eyes still closed, I rolled over and slapped the snooze button, silencing their cheerful dialogue. Personally, I thought it was unnatural for anyone to be so happy on a Monday morning.

Ten minutes later their voices interrupted my dreams again. Grumbling, I finally opened my eyes.

The clock read 7:10.

This meant I only had 20 minutes until the first Homeroom bell would ring and it took me 10 minutes to drive to school.

Jumping out of bed, I threw on my traditional school outfit. Bergen High School did not have a dress code, and yet, I wore almost identical outfits everyday of the week. My closet was packed





with jeans and baggy sweaters. I threw on my favorite pair of jeans, the worn-in kind that mold to your body and a green sweater, pulled my wavy black hair into a pony tale, and flew downstairs to the kitchen, where Grandma Bella was already into the second stanza of “Good Morning Baltimore.” (I would like to add at this point that we live no where near Baltimore.)

Winterville, Maine is in one of the farthest corners of Maine, and unsurprisingly snow is an almost constant presence.

I unwillingly returned to this white world, and my mother’s childhood home, at the beginning of sixth grade. For the previous 12 years I lived with my mother in Miami. And every day – four years after moving here – I still hope a tropical storm sweeps up the coast. I realize this is completely unlikely, but a girl can dream.

“Alex. Don’t forget your jacket.” My grandma reminded me as she had every morning. This used to annoy me. How in the world would I, someone whose hands turn purple when the temperature drops below 50 degrees, forget my jacket? But now it has become routine. And... the one day she did not say anything, of course I left it hanging on the rusted hook in the hallway.

“Got it. Thanks grandma.” I said, snatching my bright orange parka from the closet.

I hate this jacket; the color attracts too much attention. But, I bought it because I have a tendency to fall headfirst into trouble, and more likely than not, I will probably get caught in a blizzard before I graduate from high school. I am hoping the color will help the emergency rescuers locate me.

I pecked my grandmother’s weathered cheek, then ran to my car, crashing into the door frame on the way.



“Ouch” I groaned. I was pretty sure I heard Grandma Bella chuckle from the kitchen, but the wind whipping through my hair made it difficult to tell.

When I arrived at school, I knew immediately that I only had a few minutes to get to class. There were only a couple of students still loitering around the front door. Smiling, I passed Bobby, Chris, Amanda – or Mandy – as she prefers to be known, and Matt.

In a school with only 258 students, everyone knows everything about everyone else. Including where they live, who they are dating, how long their family has lived in the area, what their parents do. At first I found this quite disconcerting – especially since my 6th grade class in Miami had over 400 students, but I have accepted the lack of privacy and adjusted to small town life. Unfortunately, I can not say the town has adjusted to me.

I am still universally known as the “girl from Miami.” Even though I was born in this small town and my bronzed skin returned to its naturally pasty-white shade three months after I arrived, much to my chagrin.

I ran to my locker as the warning bell rang, praying I would not trip over the shoelaces whipping around my ankles. Fiddling with the knob, I threw my books in my backpack and hoisted it to my shoulder, buckling slightly under the weight. That was when I heard the first bell of the day.

Late again...

Groaning, I trudged to Homeroom.

“Mrs. Johnson....” I began as I entered room 313.

“Ms. Ritter, nice of you to join us.” My Homeroom teacher, a tall thin woman peered at me through oval glasses, her lips pursed





in such a thin line of disapproval they almost disappeared. “But you need to get a pass from the office. You are late. And – might I remind you that this is your fourth tardy of the semester.”

I nodded sheepishly as a couple of students, including Brianna, giggled loudly from the back of room.

Brianna moved to Winterville a couple of days before me, but she was welcomed into the town with open arms. After all, unlike my mother, her family did not shun the town by moving away as soon as possible. Unlike me, Brianna’s looks also guaranteed her a spot at the top of the Bergen social hierarchy. With long blond hair, brown eyes, and a perfect nose, my ebony black hair, pale skin and violet eyes would never be able to compare.

“You need to get here earlier. This is only the second week of the winter semester. I will not tolerate this for the next four months.”

Mrs. Johnson interrupted my thoughts. “Now go to the office.”

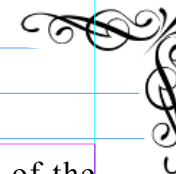
“Alright,” I muttered, trudging out the door and through the blank halls toward the front of the building.

“Good morning Miss Ritter,” the receptionist brightly welcomed when I entered the office.

“Hi, Mrs. Reynolds. How are you doing?”

“Good, good. But, William had an ear infection last night. He kept us up all last night. The doctor has given us some drops, so hopefully I will be able to get some rest tomorrow night, but you know how these things are. Johnny used to get them all the time, at least once a month...”

I smiled and nodded sympathetically while Mrs. Reynolds rambled about her life for ten minutes. It amazed me that any teacher would send a student to the office for a pass. I



would be 15 minutes late to homeroom now, instead of the two seconds.

“Anyway, you don’t need to hear about my family problems.”

She said, reaching the end of her tirade. “How can I help you?”

“I’m late.” I blushed.

“Again?”

“Yeah, I just can’t seem to drag myself out of bed.”

“Oh well, you probably just miss that Florida sunshine.”

She laughed heartily.

I smiled weakly.

“Here you are.” She slid a small slip of pink paper across the counter.

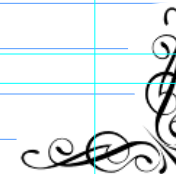
“Thanks.” I said, anxious to escape the bright fluorescent lights that made me feel too visible in the small beige space.

“Oh... Alex, try not to be late anymore.” Ms. Reynolds called out behind me. “One more and I will have to give you a detention. And I would hate that, especially since your Grandma used to babysit Johnny when I needed help. She is such a good woman...”

I gave a small wave as I opened the office door, finally able to make my exit.

For the rest of the morning, I listened to my English teacher drone on about our newest book assignment, my trigonometry teacher talk about the Pythagorean Theorem, and my History teacher expose all the inconsistencies in Europe’s past.

I filed into the cafeteria line at lunch later that day and shuddered when and saw the neon orange pasta. On the menu: Mac n’ Cheese. I grabbed a tray of the gooey noodles and spotted my two best friends, Claire Larmend and Sarah Gutig, sitting at our table in the





far corner of the cafeteria. There were only a couple of other kids at the table. Beth Leise was at one end of the table. Her head bowed, she scribbled frantically in her notebook. I breathed in relief.

Every couple of days our table is invaded by a pack of sophomore girls who giggle loudly and obnoxiously while talking about the latest celebrity gossip, but today it seemed we would be free from their inane chatter.

Claire waved frantically at me, calling across the sea of people. I looked down at my sneakers, embarrassed, as everyone turned to stare. At only 5 feet 2 inches tall, Claire defies the laws of physics every time she opens her mouth. Her voice, which she exaggerates with a bit of country twang, explodes out of her petite body.

"Hey guys," I plopped down on the bench, knocking over my bottle of water, which landed in my lap.

"Great" I sighed.

"Here you go." Sarah smiled sympathetically as she handed me a large pile of napkins which she kept on hand for my sake. "Your meal looks interesting." She said, staring at the congealed mass on my plate. "I never knew cheese could be that color."

"Yeah neither did I." I bit into my perfectly red apple.

On my way to the table I decided this was the only edible thing on my tray. It was also the one thing I brought from home.

"So have you heard?" Claire was clearly bursting at the seams with the latest news and was not interested in analyzing my lunch. Most people assume Claire is simply nosey, but she actually has excellent hearing. Her ears, shaped like rectangles, allow her to pick up sounds usually reserved for dogs and other small animals. This is how she hears every little piece of gossip



at Bergen and why I think she sometimes has trouble gauging the volume of her voice.

"Heard what?" I asked.

"About the new family moving to town." Claire bubbled.

"Someone is moving here... *Voluntarily*?" I looked at Claire quizzically. "But why?"

"I don't know?" She shrugged. "I mean Winterville is not the worst place in the world."

I did not agree with the sentiment, but kept my mouth shut. No need to get in an argument over it.

"So who are they?" Sarah jumped in, eager as always.

"Well... from what I heard, it is just the mother and son moving in. The rest of the kids are in boarding school in... *Europe*," Claire said the last word with reverence. "I think the father works in London."

"Why in the world would anyone move here from Europe? What are they thinking... and why isn't the other son in boarding school?" I wondered aloud.

Claire and Sarah looked at each other, considering my questions.

"I bet he got kicked out of school." Claire exalted, believing her detective skills were beyond reproach. "I wonder what he did." She giggled, intrigued by the possibility that a European trouble maker was moving into our quiet suburban town.

I could not blame her. Nothing interesting ever happened here.

"Do you know where they are moving? I wonder if they are moving into the Doque house." Sarah interrupted, ignoring Claire's ridiculous outburst.

"Wait, the Doque's are moving? When?" I looked at my two





friends, suddenly intrigued. No one had moved into or away from Winterville since I moved to the town and in the course of two weeks one family was moving away and another one was moving in.

"Honestly Alex," she sighed, exasperated. "You truly are out of the loop. The whole town has been talking about their decision to move for the past week. Last Monday they put their house up for sale. They leave Friday."

"So soon?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Apparently Mr. Doque got offered a new job, but he has to take it immediately. So they have to move out by Friday."

I nodded. That made sense. "Well where are they going?" I repeated my question.

"They are moving to Cal-i-forn-ia." Claire added, enunciating every syllable for extra emphasis with her country twang. Claire has never been out of the state of Maine.

Claire suddenly turned and looked at Beth, surprised. Beth looked appalled. And Sarah and I were confused.

Beth was the quite, shy girl that ate alone, keeping to herself and reading books during lunch.

"Do you have something to add?" Claire challenged, her voice bellowing across the table.

Beth looked down horrified, the skin around her freckles darkening. Apparently Claire heard something that my ears, and Sarah's for that matter, could not pick up.

"Claire, be nice!" Sarah whispered, appalled. Claire just shrugged,



unapologetic. "Beth, do you want to join us?" Sarah looked kindly at Beth and, pushed her lunch over to make space.

Sarah is probably one of the most compassionate people I have ever met. She was the little girl that used to mend little bird's broken wings after they fell out of trees. I am not just saying this; it is true; Claire has recounted many stories for me. Apparently, Sarah even tried to help an injured skunk once. The next day, the teachers sent her home because the stench emanating from her skin was too much of a distraction for the rest of the class.

Sarah was also the first person I met at Winterville Middle School. She introduced me to her friends, offered me a seat at her lunch table – a daunting place when you're the new kid – and after my "uniqueness" faded, remained one of my closest friends. She always tries to make others feel welcome, even when the rest of the school has no problem shunning you – I know from experience.

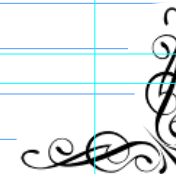
Beth hesitated, but few could resist Sarah's kind smile. A few seconds later she was settled next to us.

"How do you know they aren't moving to California?" Claire demanded, a little too roughly. Sarah glared at her. "Sorry... what I mean is why don't you think they are moving to California?"

Beth looked at Sarah shyly, who nodded, giving her the support to begin. "I... I just don't think anyone moving to California would give all of their summer clothes to the Salvation Army."

"How do you know they gave away all their summer clothes?" Claire looked at Beth. Claire had never intimidated me before, but I suddenly realized how scary she could be.

Beth looked down self-consciously at her half-eaten peanut butter and jelly sandwich and shrugged.





Dismayed, I looked at Claire and shook my head. Claire realized her mistake and her face flushed. “Beth, I am so sorry. I don’t know what to say.”

“Well I guess there is a first for everything.” I laughed, trying to alleviate the sudden tension swirling around our table. “For four years I have been trying to get Claire to shut up and three minutes after meeting you she has nothing to say. Thank you, you have no idea what this means to us.” I pumped Beth’s hand, as Claire rolled her eyes and Sarah giggled.

Beth picked up her sandwich hesitantly.

“So is the new family moving into the Doque place?” I regurgitated Sarah’s question.

Claire looked at Beth, silently giving her room to speak and I smiled. “I don’t think so,” Beth said softly. “They are having a house built just outside the town. The weird thing is no one has seen the house and there is no visible road to it.”

“Maybe it is just really deep in the woods,” I offered.

“That is probably it.” Claire nodded simply, but her eyes were glowing.

We split up after lunch, Sarah and Beth walked toward their next class, Spanish, and Claire and I toward the gym.

“We should go find it.” Claire enthused, as we changed into our green shorts and orange shirt. Bergen colors.

“What are you talking about?”

“The new house.”

“Uh...uh. I don’t think so.”

“But why not? It will be fun!”

“Didn’t you hear what Beth said? It is deep in the woods, which



means bugs and thorns and roots just waiting to trip me.”

“Come on don’t be such a baby. You’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say, you are little miss athlete. You climb mountains and ride horses. I have trouble standing on my own two feet.” Claire had a natural athleticism that most people strive for, and while they may get close, never really achieve. Even with her short stature, she excels at every one of the sports forced upon us by Ms. Bell.

“Don’t be silly, Alex. You are not that bad.”

“Are you kidding me.... Yes I am, or have you forgotten my gym record?” Last semester my class covered gymnastics. For the final I had to execute a floor routine using the moves we had covered during the previous 6 weeks of class.

While everyone else performed cartwheels, round-offs and handstands, because they are all unnaturally coordinated, I somersaulted 30 times and ended up going so crooked I was 10 feet from the corner when I finished.

That was my first, and only D. Thankfully, Ms. Bell offered to change my grade from a D to a B if I kept track of the budget for the boy’s baseball team – a compromise I eagerly accepted.

This semester I would probably have to manage the swim team.

Right now my class is “studying” volleyball. A sport that requires more hand and eye coordination than I have ever possessed. Since everyone on the opposite team knows I am spectacularly uncoordinated, the ball always finds me.

Last class I tried to spike the ball, missed it completely, well with my hands, but somehow managed to hit the ball with my head. This would have looked cool if the ball had bounced back





over the net, but it didn't. The ball dropped like dead weight to my feet. My team lost the game.

The week before, I tripped over my feet and skidded across the floor. I finally stopped next to Brianna. Brianna, kind girl that she is, simply grinned, while I flailed on the floor. Simon DeWitt finally took pity on me and helped me to my feet.

And yet three times a week, every Monday, Wednesday and Thursday, I am forced to subject myself to this humiliation right after lunch. Of course, I always feel like I am going to be sick.

I reluctantly walked toward the locker room doors after changing. Claire was not quite as hesitant. "Come on, it will be a like a scavenger hunt?" She enthused, dancing up and down.

"Claire, do you really want to be responsible for any injuries I sustain on this little hunt?" I pointed out, hoping she'd give up.

She thought about it for a second and realized I probably would trip and break my arm or gauge my hand on a sharp rock, and then she would never hear the end of it. "Alright, but I am not saying I will not harass you about it for the next couple weeks. Now are you ready to go?"

I sighed. "I am never ready for gym; let's just get this embarrassment over with."

I managed to make it through gym without another trip to the nurse – always an accomplishment, and after Chemistry and German walked into the biting fresh air, to my car and I drove the short distance home.

I live in an old canary-yellow house. It used to be grey, but in a fit of inspiration, my grandma painted it to help brighten the dreary Maine winters.



It didn't work.

The house looks like a giant school bus and inside is not any better. The living room contains a unique collection of gaudy antiques and cheap nick-knacks, and the walls are painted pumpkin-orange. Plus, no matter how much air freshener I douse throughout the house, the drab brown velvet furniture continues to smell like cats and mothballs.

"Grandma, I am home." I shouted from the doorway as I stomped my feet on the welcome mat, trying to shed the last bit of dirt from my sneakers.

"Hello deary." Grandmother Bella called, the sound of Oprah drowning out her voice. "How was school?"

"Fine" I said, making my way to the fridge for my favorite after-school snack – a peanut butter apple. "Do you need anything from the kitchen?"

"No thanks honey. I'm okay."

Going to the refrigerator, I rummaged around the pickles, pasta sauce, prune juice, finally spying my favorite comfort food. I licked one spoonful, well maybe two, off the spoon before grabbing an apple.

"I am going to go start dinner now," I called. "Any requests?"

"Whatever you feel like making is fine."

"I'll go see what I can find in the kitchen." I decided on BBQ chicken, potatoes and salad.

Dinner at my house is always a lively ordeal. Somehow, no matter what I cook, my grandmother or I manage to spill something, break a plate, or choke on our food. Every night, I sit down to the dinner with a little hesitation.





Tonight was a plate breaking night.

I did not even get to my seat before dropping the bowl of garlic potatoes, sending little russet potatoes flying around the kitchen. Bubbles, my Grandma Bella's fluffy white cat, unsuccessfully tried to dodge the onslaught. Butter and garlic matted her fur and meowing angrily, she sulked under the table.

"Oh, don't worry about her." Grandma Bella waved her excessively bejeweled hand in the air, nearly knocking over the salad dressing. "She is just a prima donna."

Bubbles seemed to understand the comment. She stalked out of the kitchen, her tail straight up in insult. When she reached the doorway, she flipped her head back haughtily and glared at us.

I shivered. "You know, sometimes I think your cat is possessed. It is like she knows what we are saying. Sometimes I think she is plotting against me, trying to figure out a way to trip me and send me careening down the stairs."

"I am not sure she would ever do that," Grandma Bella said, thoughtfully. It certainly was not an encouraging sign that my grandmother was seriously considering the possibility. "She just likes what she likes. After all, I have had her for nearly 30 years and she does not like change."

That was an understatement. Bubbles is the only cat I know who requires a buffet of dinner options, with at least five different bowls of food placed strategically around the house. She also demands a cooked chicken breast, cubed not sliced served every night at dinner time. The day my grandmother took away one, just one, of Bubble's bowls of food still haunts my dreams.



Two. *Suprises*

"The basis of the book is what makes it so amazing." I vaguely heard Mr. Swanson lecture the next day in English. "It is the idea that someone who is seemingly ordinary can have the incredible strength and determination to risk his life, not because he chose to, but because the task fell to him..."

"Tonight, when you are reading the homework I want you to think about one question: Do you think you could do it? Do you think you could be courageous enough to fight something so much bigger than yourself? Especially knowing that there is very little chance you will survive, let alone succeed? I want you to really be honest with yourself."

"Does that sound good to you, Ms. Ritter?"

I looked up startled. "Ummm... sorry?"

He looked at me disappointed. "I already know what your answer





will be; I can tell your story will not be one for the books.”

By his tone, I knew Mr. Swanson was scolding me, although I had no idea what he actually meant. Mr. Swanson uses odd phrases and fortune-cookie prophecies to reprimand his students. I mumbled an apology as the rest of the class snickered behind me. But whether they were laughing at me – or Mr. Swanson – I could not be sure.

My next class, Math, dragged on even slower than English. It is by far my easiest class. Thankfully, Mrs. Hartford usually lets me daydream in peace; she only calls on me when she has no other choice; when no one else can answer the question and she becomes so frustrated the veins in her forehead start to pop out. In some sick sense, I am her salvation.

Brian McAlroy was stumbling through a problem on the board, Mrs. Hartford’s forehead beginning to get a little splotchy, when my name sounded over the intercom.

Attention... Attention. Alexandra Ritter please report to the principle’s office. Alexandra Ritter please report to the principles office. Thank you.

“Ooooooooooh! Somebody’s in trouble.” Ryan Williams, the class clown, sitting next to me taunted as I bent to pick up my backpack. I will never forget the day Ryan decided it would be a good idea to stick a paperclip in an electric socket. He caused a school-wide blackout and we were dismissed from school three hours early. Now he is a high school hero.

“Mr. Williams, do you have something you would like to share with the rest of the class?”

“No. Mrs. Hartford.”



“Then turn around and pay attention. You are disrupting my lesson. Alex, please pack your things quietly and go to the office.”

I thought I detected a hint of sadness in Mrs. Hartford’s voice.

Watching Ryan’s face turn crimson, I nodded and trudged from my 2nd period class toward the front office. Only 9:23 and already I wanted to go home. This did not bode well for the rest of the day.

“Good morning Miss Ritter.” Ms. Reynolds smiled. “Back already?”

“Yeah, I just missed you too much to stay away...”

“That’s what everyone says when they want to get out of detention.” She chuckled. “I don’t think that is why you are here, but if you take a seat, your advisor should be out shortly.”

“Thanks.”

The seconds ticked slowly past. Ten minutes later, or five minutes after I finished counting all 127 blue squares in the carpet, a short, balding man in a maroon sweater-vest stormed out of his office.

“Hello Alex! How are we today?” He enthused, opening his arms as he greeted me.

“Hi Mr. Madrina... fine” I smiled shyly as he waved me forward into his bright blue room. The same generic motivational posters found in every guidance counselor’s office across the country lining the walls.

“So Alex, do you know why you are here today?” Mr. Madrina leaned over the desk, an enormous grin spreading across his face.

I shook my head, shifting uncomfortably under his inquisitive gaze. Whatever it was, I hoped it would be over soon.

“Do you remember the standardized test you took last year?”





“The MEA?”

“Yeah... well, the school just got back the results and your test scores were quite shocking.” He looked me up and down, assessing me. “Congratulations! You receive the highest math score in the state.”

“I did?” I tried to think back to last November when I, and every other Sophomore student in the state, was required to take the Maine MEA. It was easy, but I did not remember it being that easy.

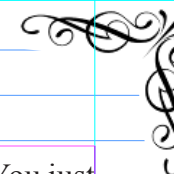
“Yup!” Mr. Madrina bubbled like a teenage girl. He was definitely more excited than me about the results. I felt kind of sick to my stomach. “Anyway, I met with your teachers and we have decided that you need to move up a level.”

He reached under the table and I watched in grim disbelief as he flourished a four-inch stack of papers under my nose, “We need you to take a placement exam, so we know which 12th grade Calculus class to move you into.”

“Whaat?” My face fell in disbelief.

“Well of course... your results indicate that you are clearly not being challenged enough in your current 11th grade level. Don’t worry; I am sure you will do fine.” Mr. Madrina assured. “Now, if you would just go ahead and sit down in the study room on the left someone will be in to administer the test.” He used the most authoritative tone he could muster, but his high-pitched voice made taking him seriously nearly impossible. It did not help that he had a grinning and somewhat sadistic-looking ceramic frog sitting on the top of his desk holding a “I love you toadally” sign.

“Uhh... okay.” I stood slowly, slightly dazed. “Do I need to bring anything?”



“No! No!... of course not! We have it all taken care of. You just worry about what 863 times 57 equals.” He smiled down at me.

49191 I calculated, situating myself at the tiny circular desk in the tiny room with a tiny widow. My small connection to the outside world.

I finished the test in two hours and 42 minutes. My stomach grumbled as I left the office. I smiled to myself, realizing I had finished just in time for lunch.

“How did you do on the math test?” Claire bounded over as soon as I walked into the cafeteria.

“How could you possibly know about that?” It amazed me. I hadn’t told anyone about my meeting with Mr. Madrina, and yet Claire still knew.

“I heard Mrs. Reynold’s talking to him when I was walking outside of the office to my History class.”

“Was the door closed?”

“Yeah” She shrugged nonchalantly.

The doors in Bergen are at least two inches thick and to my knowledge, impossible for humans to hear through.

“Hey, but don’t worry I won’t tell anyone.” She promised.

“Thanks.”

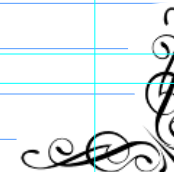
“I bet you did great, though.”

“I don’t know about that, but I am sure I will find out sooner than I would like.”

Claire looked at my indifferent expression. “Don’t you want to know?”

“Honestly, I don’t really care.”

“But why not? You will be the only junior in a senior class!”





She gushed. "It is awesome."

"Yeah awesome..." Sarcasm dripped from my words. "Look, I just want to be normal. It seems like every time I start to blend in around here something happens that brings me back into the spotlight."

"Alex, look I hate to point this out, but I am not sure you will ever be considered normal in Bergen. I mean your family history is not really on your side right now."

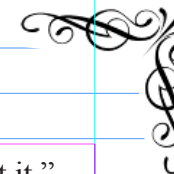
I sighed. It was true. Afterall, I was born out of wedlock - my mother never talked about my father and I had no idea who he was - my mother fled this small town as soon as she could afford a car and my grandmother spends her days singing showtunes, painting houses and attending ballroom dancing classes with her best friend, Mrs. Spratt. "I guess you are right."

"Of course I am. Why would you ever doubt me. But seriously, why is it so important for you to fit in?" Claire looked at me quizzically,

I shrugged. It is impossible to explain my desire to be invisible to Claire, who tries endlessly to stand out. I knew Beth would understand, Sarah might, but this concept was completely beyond Claire's comprehension level.

At that moment Sarah and Beth came up behind us and I, thankfully, was saved from trying to come up with an explanation. "Hey guys." Sarah spoke as they settled themselves on the opposite side of the table. "So Alex, have you decided what you want to do for your birthday?"

Claire looked confused, the horrified. "Oh... Alex I completely forgot your birthday is this weekend!" She squealed.



"It's okay, Claire." I patted her back. "Don't worry about it."

"No! It is not okay. I am such a horrible friend." Claire always was a little dramatic. "Now I am going to have to get you something really good to make up for it."

"Don't be silly. I really don't want anything. Please don't get me anything..." It started to sound like I was begging.

"Are you sure?" Claire and Sarah looked uncertain and a little disappointed.

"Yeah, After 16, 17 feels so boring. Why don't we just hang out, order Chinese and rent movies."

I saw Beth glance away, awkwardly, trying to pretend she could not hear our discussion. "Beth," She looked back at me. "Do you want to come over for my birthday?"

"Uh..." She spoke hesitantly. "Are you sure that would be okay?"

"Of course! The more the merrier."

"Well... if you are sure, I'll ask my mother tonight."

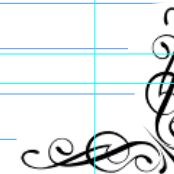
"Great!" Claire interrupted, smiling a little too brightly. She still felt bad about her behavior at lunch yesterday. "How 'bout we spend the weekend at my house? My parents are out of town. My aunt is coming by every night to check on me, but other than that, I have the house to myself."

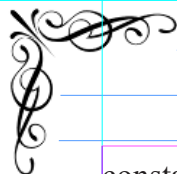
"Your parents are letting you stay home by yourself?" Sarah asked, bewildered.

"Yeah... I have to be home to watch Pax to make sure he doesn't get into any trouble."

"Good luck with that." I laughed.

Claire's family just bought a black Labrador puppy that needed





constant supervision or he tended to eat pretty much everything and anything. The last time I went to Claire's house, I left with one snow boot. Sarah's scarf and one of her mittens disappeared, as well. Pax rolled around on her back with her tongue lolling out the side of her mouth for the rest of the night. We debated taking her to the vet to have all of the winter accessories removed from her stomach. But the next time he went out to the yard to do his business, our fears passed, along with my boot, Claire's winter set, a tennis ball, gold foil from a box of chocolates, and the science project Claire had just gotten an B- on.

"Come on... please! I really could use the company and a few extra pairs of eyes."

"I am not sure how much good I will be, but it sounds like fun, so I'm in." Sarah offered.

I sighed, exaggerating the sound. "Alright, but I am warning you... Pax better not eat my cake."

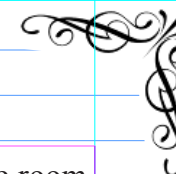
"Who says you're getting a cake at all?" Claire smirked, nudging my shoulder.

The rest of the week passed in a blur. Everyday I felt like a prisoner, waiting helplessly for the guilty verdict from Mr. Madrina, but it never came.

Friday did though.

ff

Claire and Sarah bought a cake. It was a delicious. Vanilla ice cream cake – my favorite – and Pax's too. We each managed to eat one giant slice before Pax pounced Friday night, splattering us with whipped frosting. After that cake chaos broke out.



I threw a handful of the blue decorating jelly across the room. It hit Sarah in the arm. I was amazed it hit anyone at all, although I was really aiming at Claire. A scoop of chocolate cookie crumbs hit my back and Beth ended up with white frosting in her strawberry blond hair. By the time the last of the cake had been flung across the room, my hair was matted with chocolate chips and melted dairy products.

Pax helped clean the sprinkled from Claire's face. I gagged a little, watching his giant tongue leave streaks of slobber across her cheek.

We had just finished cleaning up the mess, with the help of Pax, when Claire's grandmother came to check on us. Thankfully almost all the evidence from the ice cream fight had been cleaned from the floor and our bodies and Pax's fur. Although we did miss a little here and there.

"Claire, is this a new fashion?" Her grandmother pointed at a sticky pink sprinkle still in the corner of her eye.

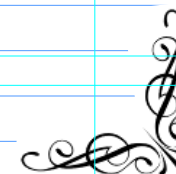
Beth tried to suppress a smile from the other side of the room.

"What?" Claire looked at the little dot of sugar. "Oh yeah... all the girls are doing it now."

For the next hour, Claire's grandmother regaled us with stories, most of them about Claire's great-great-grandmother whose black and white portrait stood in a frame on the living room side table.

Elizabeth Larmend was beautiful. She had perfect skin and I could see where Claire got her almond eyes. Her dress fell gracefully over two strong shoulders and around her neck was a beautiful necklace.

Unfortunately, as Claire's grandmother informed us, Nana





Elizabeth went crazy. When she was 30, she insisted she met several very friendly giants and was subsequently sent to the psychiatric ward at the closest hospital.

"Was that story really true?" Beth asked when Claire's grandmother had left for the night, finally satisfied we were not causing trouble.

"Yeah, I think so." Claire shook her head. "But who knows. My Aunt is kind of crazy, although then again maybe Nana Elizabeth really did see giants."

Sarah and I broke out into hysterical fits of laughter, tears squeaked from the corner of my eye.

"Hey it could happen." Claire tried to persuade. Beth sat on the side, quiet and contemplative.

"Yeah, well you let me know if it does." I smiled at my friend.

We spent the rest of the night lazing around. It was perfect. But before I went to bed that night, satiated with ice cream and Chinese, I had to wash my hair three times until finally, the last trace of the vanilla sugary-stickiness faded.

Handwritten flourish

Beth had to leave on Saturday to baby-sit her brother.

"Are you ready for your present?" Sarah asked me that morning as we finished breakfast.

"I told you guys not to get me anything." I complained wholeheartedly. I was not one of those girls who says she does not want anything, when secretly she does. I really did not want anything.

"We wanted to. I promise it is nothing big. Plus, we got it for you before you told us not to get you anything" Claire's eyes glinted.



"Wait a second... I thought you forgot about my birthday."

She shrugged. "I lied." She pulled a small black velvet box from behind her back.

"What is it?" I shook the box.

"Just open it, will you?" Claire shook her head and rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay." I took the small, immaculately wrapped package off the table and tore open the paper.

Lying on top of a small satin pillow was the same charm bracelet Claire and Sarah had given each other when they were ten. They never took it off.

For four years I had admired their bracelets wishing for one of my own. My hands shook as I pulled it from the box. I tried to speak, but the words lodged in my throat. Instead I fingered the delicate rose charm, a small smile on my face.

Sarah broke the silence. "We had another charm made for ours too." She held out her hand. There was a matching charm on her bracelet. "I hope you like it."

"It is perfect." I wanted to say more, but the emotions coursing through my body seemed to make forming sentences impossible. I settled for "Thank you."

"Your welcome." Claire ruffled my hair. "Do you want me to help you put it on?"

I nodded, still overcome with emotion.

She hooked the delicate silver bracelet around my wrist. I stared down at the silver rope on my wrist.

Claire and Sarah looked at me and smiled. "Now aren't you glad we got you a present?"

I laughed. "Yes, I am. Thank you so much."





“Your welcome.” They chimed in perfect unison. “Now what do you think we should do?” Sarah asked.

Claire’s eyes glinted as she turned to me. “*How much* do you love that bracelet?”

“This can’t be good.” I looked at Sarah; she shrugged.

“Don’t look at me; I never know what she is thinking.”

“Are you two up for a little hike through the woods?”

“Haha, very funny. You know I don’t hike.”

“Please, Alex,” She pleaded.

I must have been mentally confused for a couple seconds, because somehow I agreed to this ridiculous request and a couple of minutes later I walked out of Claire room decked out in a powder pink snow outfit. My hair hung loosely from beneath a white knit hat.

“I can’t believe I agreed to this.” I moaned, throwing my bright orange jacket over the suit. I looked like a multi-colored marshmallow, but at least I would be warm.

“Come on. It will be fun!”

“Yeah maybe for you!” I was not a fan of the cold and the prospect of walking all afternoon through the forest was not a pleasant one. Plus, I thought I heard something about snow this morning on the news.

We walked out to my car. I no longer allowed Claire to drive. On one too many occasions she has become distracted by conversations in nearby cars, forgotten to look at the road, and I have had to grab the wheel to keep us out of the forest.

“Hey Alex!” Brian McAlroy yelled across the yard the moment we stepped outside.

“Ugh... great.” I mumbled under my breath. Sarah shot me a



warning glance and I plastered a smile on my face. Claire giggled. It must look as unnatural as it feels. “Hey, Brian... How are you?”

“Great...” His face broke into a puppy grin as he scurried over. I immediately felt guilty. “Where are you all going?”

“Just going for a little hike?” Claire smiled at me.

“Really?” He looked at me curiously. “*You* are going hiking.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Brian could hear the snarky tone infusing my words. “Oh... I didn’t mean anything by it.” He looked away toward the woods awkwardly.

Sarah looked at me horrified. Great... more guilt and my birthday had started off so well.

“Listen Brain, I did not mean anything just then. I mean you are right...” I admitted. “Clearly, I should not hike through the woods, and being in my gym class you know this better than most, but in my defense I want to say that I was against this plan from the start. I never wanted to go.”

“Then why are you?” His eyebrow magnified by his bottle-cap glasses arched up in surprise.

I looked at Claire. “Because *she* really wants to.” I shrugged. “What’s a couple of stitches anyway... no big deal.”

He chuckled. “Well aren’t we adventurous today.”

“Yeah, I guess if you classify a death wish as adventurous, sure, you could say that.”

“Oh, stop your complaining. You will be fine.” Claire rolled her eyes at me.

“Brian, do you want to come with us?” Sarah interjected quickly before anyone could protest.





Claire shot her a menacing look when Brian turned toward me.
“Would you mind?” His tone hopeful.

I sighed inwardly. “No, not at all.”

“Great. Let me just grab my jacket and I will be out in a second.”

“ ‘k” I mumbled as he skipped away.

As soon as he was out of ear shot I turned to Sarah. “What are you doing?” I demanded, trying to put as much heat into my words while still whispering.

“Nothing.” She looked at me innocently. A little too innocently.

“Yes you are. I know that look. It is the same one you gave me when I went to the movies with you and John and one of John’s friends just happened to be there.”

“So?”

“Do you remember what happened that night.”

A grin spread across her face. She remembered the night clearly. She remembered me rambling on about my math class before the movie, at one point during the movie and after the movie. When I could not think of anything else to say was sat in excruciating silence for the rest of the night.

“But this is Brian. You know him.”

“Trust me that does not matter. Talking to boys at school is one thing, but outside of those walls in another.”

“But why?”

“Easy, because in school they are usually asking for my homework, or help on a test. Out here the safety net is gone.”

“You are such a pessimist.” Claire stared at me.

I shrugged. “I think I got it from my mother.”



“Yeah, well is certainly did not come from your grandmother.”

At that moment Brian came bounding out his front door and all conversation ended.

“Who’s driving?” Claire looked at me.

“Not you.” I smiled. “I’ll drive.”

She huffed loudly, but climbed into the backseat of my cherry red Mustang convertible. The car was the one possession, besides my clothes, that made the trip up from Florida. My mom had bought the car two years before she died, I refused to allow my grandmother to sell it. The car officially became mine when I got my driver’s license last year.

“So where are we hiking?” Brian asked from the backseat, where he sat next to Sarah. She had looked a little disappointed when he climbed into the backseat with her instead of taking shotgun next to me.

“Out by Troll bridge.” Claire responded.

“Troll bridge?” I looked at her confused. “Are there hiking trails out there?” Then it dawned on me. Claire, while athletic, would never hike through the woods in the dead of winter just for *fun*.

“Claire!”

“What?” She looked at me, batting her long eyelashes, innocently.

“You know what... We are not just going hiking are we?”

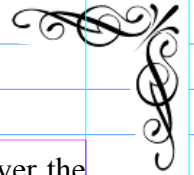
“Of course we are. What else would we be doing?”

“Claire...” I used my most serious voice.

“Alright... alright. You caught me.”

“What are you talking about?” Sarah peeked her head between the two front seats. “What are we doing then?”





“Go on... tell her.” I shook my head.

“Fine... we are going to look for the new family’s house.” Claire sighed. Sarah looked at her and shook her head simply. “*What?* I am curious.”

“You are always curious. I think you must have been a cat in a past life. So, are there any trails out by Troll Bridge?” I reiterated my question.

“Ummm... maybe.”

“Are you kidding me? It was bad enough when you wanted me to go hiking on a trail, now you expect me to go traipsing through the woods, dodging tree branches, rocks... and spider webs all without a path to guide me.”

“There are going to be spiderwebs?” Brian, who had been silently watching this exchange with an amused grin on his face, no longer seemed quite as calm as before.

“Yeah.” Claire shrugged. “No big deal.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror briefly, Brian did not look so good. “Hey, Brian. You okay?”

Brain sat there, his face whiter than I had ever seen it.

“Brian?” Sarah poked him in the shoulder, which seemed to snap him out of his sudden stupor.

“But... but I hate spiders!” Brian shuddered violently, his voice cracking in terror.

“Don’t be silly.” Claire said. “They can’t do anything to you.”

“That’s what you think.” Brian mumbled under his breath.

Claire glanced at him, expecting more, but Brian sat just sat back in his seat, silent again, the gentle hum of the engine filling the car.



I obediently pulled onto the shoulder after we crossed over the bridge. “Are you sure you want to do this?” I stared at the menacing woods in front of us.

“Let’s go.” Claire responded.

I groaned as Sarah patted my shoulder. “Don’t worry. I am sure you will be fine.”

We started forward, Claire leading, followed by Sarah. Brain and I took the back. He was hoping Sarah and Claire would eliminate any of the spiders in our path. I just wanted to walk very slowly.

We plowed forward through the trees for a half an hour. It had been slow going. I had fallen three times already. Thankfully it was so cold, I could not feel my hands or knees when they hit the ground. My body was already to numb.

“Come on!” Claire yelled a couple of yards ahead. We are never going to find out anything at this rate.

“Claire... I would like to remind you that you are the reason I am on this little quest in the first place, so I don’t want to hear it.”

Claire looked at me, taken aback, then nodded.

“Good. Then why don’t I just sit on this rock for a little bit while you continue the search. You can pick me up when you loop around.” Claire looked grateful, but Sarah and Brian did not look as sure.

“Don’t worry, I will be fine. I will not move from this spot.”

Sarah and Brian continued to look hesitant, but Claire quickly made the decision for them, dancing gracefully into the darkness. Sarah and Brian trudged behind.

As Sarah was about to disappear into the darkness, she turned back to me. “Do not move from this spot. We will be back in a little bit to get you.”





I nodded then perched myself on the cold stone and leaned against the large oak tree behind me, satisfied.

My body convulsed involuntarily and I opened my eyes. I looked around confused, staring at the white curtain swirling around me. It took a moment to realize where I was.

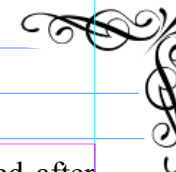
The rock I had been sitting on was barely visible beneath the layers of snow. The wind screamed through the trees, snapping branches. I tried to search for Claire and Sarah through the dense curtain, but I could not even see my hand in front of me. I looked at the ground, hoping to see their footprints, but they lay buried under a fresh layer of snow. I screamed out for them, but the wind distorted my voice, blending it into its own shriek.

Panicked, I began to pace by my rock. Five minutes passed, although it felt like an hour. What if Claire and Sarah were in trouble? What if they were lost in these woods that stretched for miles? I looked at my cellphone. No service. I needed to get back to the car. I had service on the road.

Panicked, I ran through the trees. The branches whipped my face and grabbed at my jacket, tearing the sleeve. I kept my head bent, staring at the ground to make sure I did not trip. It was harder then before. Everything looked innocuous covered by fluffy white snow. I was not fooled. With my head down, I never realized someone was in the woods with me. Well, until I ran into him.

My feet left the ground as I fell backward, but not before I caught a glimpse of his face.

Standing in front of me was the most beautiful boy I had ever seen. His thick, chestnut hair dusted with a light coating of snow hung over a perfectly smooth forehead and, as trite as this sounds,



his cheek bones really looked like they had been modeled after Greek gods. But even these were not even his most striking characteristics. The boy had the most remarkable light, sea-green eyes. They glowed in the dark woods. I thought I had seen these eyes before, but whether from a dream or distant memory, I could not recall.

His shining, eerily familiar eyes opened wide in terror as I fell. They were the last thing I saw before my head hit the forest floor.

“Alex... Alex are you okay?” A nasally-voice worried.

This voice could not belong to the angelic face I saw; it was not right.

My eyes flickered open. “Owww.... What happened?” I moaned, staring up at Brian, who was leaning over me a terrified expression on his face.

“Oh thank god...” He breathed in relief. “Guys, she is up.” He spoke to others I could not see.

Sarah’s face materialized next to me, then Claire’s. Both of their faces were streaked red.

“What’s wrong?” I squinted up at them.

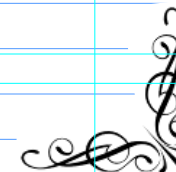
“Oh Alex! We were so worried.” Claire sobbed. “It is all my fault. I never should have left you alone.”

“Shhh... its okay.” I tried to lift myself up, but every muscle in my body protested.

“No you don’t... I think you should lay there for a little bit.” Brian pushed me back down onto the backseat of my car.

“Maybe we should call the hospital.” Claire suggested.

“No!” I shouted forcefully. I hate the hospital. I have been





there too many time. Plus, after so many injuries, I have learned to diagnose myself fairly well. This did not feel like anything a couple of painkillers could not handle. “No. I am okay.” I forced myself into a sitting position to prove it to them. They did not look convinced. I decided to try a new tactic, get them to forget about the hospital. “So did you find anything?”

Claire shook her head.

“Oh I am sorry.” And I was. I was hoping they would have more to distract them from my state.

“Don’t be. It was a stupid idea anyway.”

“So what happened?” I needed her to keep talking.

“Well after we left you,” she shook her head ashamed, “we walked for about forty-five minutes. By then it had started to snow, so we decided to find you and go home. But the snow had reduced our trail to almost nothing. We tried to follow it back to you, but somewhere along the way we got lost. We walked for ages calling your name, but it was no use. Then somehow we made it back to the road and you were already here, lying unconscious in your car.”

“Wait! You mean you never found me in the woods.” I stared at them, bewildered.

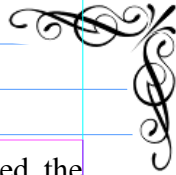
“No. I mean we would have kept up the search, but you were already here. Don’t you remember how you got here?”

“No.” It was all a haze, but then I remembered his eyes.

“I ran into someone.” I murmured, the image of his face coalescing in my brain.

“Who?” Claire was suddenly cautious.

“I don’t know. I had never seen him before.” I shrugged and



then winced in pain. Thankfully, the three of them missed the subtle movement or I am sure they would have returned to our conversation about the hospital.

“Well what did he look like?” Claire pestered.

I thought for a moment, then sighed. “Perfection. He was excruciatingly beautiful. Can we go home now?” I was suddenly very cold.

“We could, except I don’t think you should drive.” Sarah pointed out, practically.

“Trust me, for once I am not going to fight you on that.” My vision was still blurring in and out of focus.

“But, Claire and I don’t know how to drive a stick-shift car.” We all looked at Brian.

“I learned a little when I borrowed my brother’s car, but not very much.” He spoke nervously.

“Great! You can drive.” Claire punched him in the arm and he winced. Claire always forgets her own strength.

It took us thirty minutes longer to get back to Claire’s house. Brian stalled a lot at first, but once he got the speed up, it was pretty easy going.

“Alright, well I will see you guys Monday. Thanks for letting me tag along.” He said, climbing eagerly from the car.

“Sure. It was nice having you come with us.” I was surprised that I meant it. Brian had been pretty easy to talk to.

“Thanks. See you later.” He grinned at me.

“See, it was not so bad having Brian come along.” Sarah reminded me, once we were safely inside and out of earshot.

“Fine, you were right and I was wrong, as usual. Now I





think I am going to take a shower.” I was still freezing. “Is that okay Claire?”

“Sure, you know where everything is.”

“Thanks.”

I stood in the shower as the warm water beat into my back. The rhythmic pounding loosened my muscles and made it easier to move. I stood there, thinking about the boy from the woods until the water ran cold and my hands were shriveled like raisins. Toweling off, I put on my warmest pair of sweats and spent the rest of the weekend watching movies with Claire, Sarah and Beth, who came over Saturday once she had finished baby-sitting.



Four. *Change*

“Alex, it looks like starting tomorrow you will be in Mrs. Berkbile’s class.” Mr. Madrina said as I sat in his office Wednesday.

“Uhhh... excuse me?” I stuttered. “You want me to transfer into the AP calculus class?” I looked at him with a deranged smile, stretched thin on my angular face.

Mrs. Berkbile teaches the AP level calculus class, reserved specifically for seniors. She is universally known among all students, and most of the faculty, as the hardest, meanest, and most obnoxious teacher at Bergen High School. Everyday, students scatter when they hear her heels clipping along on the teal and taupe linoleum floor.

“Yup.” Mr. Madrina beamed, somehow misreading my expression.

“But, that can’t be right... I... Do I have to switch classes?!” I





cringed, realizing my voice had taken on a high-pitched, child-like whine that was not pleasant.

“I am sorry.” He tried to console. “I really am, but you do. In fact, you could easily be in a college course, but since you are only a sophomore in high school, I am afraid this is the best we can do. Don’t worry, I am sure you will still be one of the smartest students in the class and I don’t think Mrs. Berkbile is really as bad as everyone says.” He glanced down as he spoke, clearly lying.

“Alright....” I mumbled as I rose to my feet. “Am I supposed to be in her class tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I have already spoken to your teachers. Mrs. Berkbile expects to see you in class tomorrow. And Alex, I know you might not believe this, but some day, when you are out of high school, you will learn there are much more important things in life than fitting in.” I nodded, seriously doubting his psychobabble, before making my exit.

At lunch, I shared the unhappy news with Claire and Sarah. Claire was slightly more eager about the change. She showed her approval by gleefully clapping and hopping up and down on the cafeteria bench as several students turned to stare. “You are going to be in a senior class. I wonder if there any cute guys... I wonder if Aylmer is any good at math.” At the mention of his name, I felt my stomach tighten and my face flush.

Aylmer was the name of the boy from the woods. Since Monday, his first day at Bergen, he had been the most interesting topic of conversation. Already, all of the girl’s fancied themselves in love with him and all of the boys wished he had never set foot inside our small school.



“Really... Claire.” Sarah sighed, “Don’t you ever think about anything else?”

“Ummm... no, not really.” Claire giggled.

For the rest of lunch, I could not pay any attention to my friends, who continued to talk about boys – something I had little experience with. Instead I rolled peas – today’s vegetable – around on my plate, thinking.

“Alex?” Grandma Bella called out as soon I entered the house after school that afternoon. “Mr. Madrina called a little earlier to let me know the results of your math test. Are you all right? He said you were a little upset when you left his office this morning.”

“Yeah, grandma, I am fine. Just tired. I think I am going to lie down for a little bit. Do you think you could manage to make yourself dinner tonight? I don’t really have an appetite?”

“Alex, I have been fending for myself for years. I think I can manage to pick up the phone to order pizza.” She said, tisking from the T.V.

I smiled. My grandmother has many talents, but cooking is not one of them. When I first moved to Winterville, she decided to try her hand at cooking balanced meals for me, thinking that would be the adult, responsible thing to do. In those couple weeks, I lost more than 15 pounds and, as much as it pains me to admit, actually looked forward to cafeteria food.

At 9:33 the next day, I felt every eye turn on me as I shuffled into my new 3rd period math class. Very slowly, I moved to the back of the room, staring at the ground.





I was careful not to trip on any of the hazardous material littering the narrow aisle. I had no desire to draw additional attention to myself by falling on my face. Mrs. Berkbile strode in to the room, muttering to herself at the same time that I reached the safety on my seat.

Mrs. Berkbile, a thin, stern-looking woman, had an abnormally long face, an extremely pointed nose, and lizard-like eyes. They literally bulged beneath her wire-rimmed glasses.

As she took her place in the front of the classroom, her reptilian eyes landed on me. "We have a new student today. Alex Ritter raise your hand. I want everyone to know who you are; after all we mustn't let your genius go unnoticed." She sneered.

I weakly raised my hand to my chin, while staring at the flower someone, must likely the desk's previous occupant, had doodled on my desk during a particularly boring class.

"Good." She said, although she continued to glare at me with her stone grey eyes. "Now that we have taken care of that, everyone take out last night's homework. We are going to go over it on the board."

I felt every student stiffen in his or her seat as soon as the announcement was made.

Mrs. Berkbile began drawing names from a hat. "Rachel, number 1; Carrie, number 3, Steven, 5, Andrew 7, Veronica, 9, Aylmer, 11, and Alex 13."

I looked around confused and the boy next to me took pity on my ignorance. "Mrs. Berkbile does not wait for us to volunteer to answer a question. Instead, at the beginning of the year she puts everyone's name in a hat and randomly selects a person to put the



homework on the board. It looks like you have the hardest problem from last night." He said; a twisted smile on his face.

"But I have not even seen the homework assignment." I protested. His smile grew wider, his eyes amused.

"I don't think Mrs. Berkbile cares. Do you?"

"Hurry up Mrs. Ritter. We do not have all day." Mrs. Berkbile commanded, noticing my absence from the board.

"Uh... Can I at least borrow your book?" I asked quickly, realizing that I was the only student called to the board still at their desk.

Hurrying, well as much as I could with a 30 pound book in my arms, I weaved my way to the front. When I got to the board, I realized I had no idea what page the problem was on.

I turned to ask the boy next to me. To my dismay, after speaking for 14 years, I seemed to have forgotten how to form words. I am not sure how long I stared open-mouthed at Aylmer, his green eyes glowing; it could have been seconds, minutes or years.

"Miss. Ritter... Miss. Ritter. Complete the problem. We are all waiting." Mrs. Berkbile's shrill voice brought me back to the present.

"I am sorry. What page is it on?" I blushed red.

"Page 92." A deep, buttery voice responded beside me. I nodded, thankful, but did not trust myself to look at him again, instead I focused on solving the problem at hand.

A few minutes later I returned to my seat before anyone else. Aylmer was the next one to finish at the board. I stared at him as he walked back to his seat at the very front of the room.

"How... how did you figure out the problem so quickly?" The boy next to me asked when I returned his book.





I shrugged. "I don't know. It just comes to me."

He stared at me for a second and I felt incredibly self-conscious. Finally, after what felt like hours, he turned his attention back to the front, where Mrs. Berkbile was berating the students who had incorrectly solved their problem on the board. One poor girl even looked like she was going to cry.

She said nothing about the solution I put on the board.

For the rest of class, I struggled to pay attention to the lesson as, apparently, did the rest of the class, well everyone except Aylmer. They kept taking furtive glances back at me throughout the hour. However, my thoughts continued to wander to the unusual boy. Why was no one else fazed by his glowing eyes? Was that something you got used to? I doubted it. Aylmer was too remarkable to ever appear normal.

I looked up from my desk as the rest of the class began to shuffle their things around, packing up their book, notebook and calculator, and realized Mrs. Berkbile had once again called my name. "Alex, you will be working with... Aylmer" She said. I noticed several girls around me draw a sharp breath at the announcement. Jessica Evans looked horrified.

"This project is due in two weeks. No excuses." Her eyes flickered to me with disdain. "You need to start meeting with your partners immediately."

Every student nodded obediently as they filed out of the classroom, each walking next to his or her partner in perfect pairs. I glanced around the room, looking for Aylmer. He was gone and I was standing alone.

"Alex, please see me after school today" Mrs. Berkbile requested as



I walked past. She wrapped her cold, bony fingers around my slender forearm. "I want to make sure you are all caught up on the material. I wouldn't want our star pupil falling behind..." She spoke haughtily, finally releasing her iron grip and marching off to torment her next class.

That afternoon I went to see Mrs. Berkbile, but stopped just outside the door when I recognized the voice of someone else speaking to the teacher.

"Mrs. Berkbile. I would really appreciate it, if you could pair me with another student." A soft voiced rolled through the room, sending warm shivers across my skin.

"Fine, Mr. Huter. If you can give me a good reason why you can't work with Alex, I will consider the request."

My breath caught as I waited. For a long moment there was simply silence.

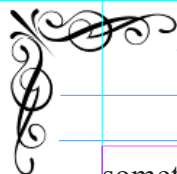
"Please, Mrs. Berkbile. I can not work with her." Aylmer begged awkwardly. I was almost certain, that with his outrageously good looks, Aylmer had never begged for anything before in his life. I was surprised Mrs. Berkbile could resist. It irked me when I realized I probably would not have been able to. "I am sure Alex is a fine girl and I would never normally request this, but this is a matter of great importance. Alex and I can not work together."

"I am sorry. I need more information than that."

"Fine. She is too young. She won't be able to understand the material."

I bristled outside the door. His open admission of my inadequacies shook me. I knew most of the students did not think I belonged in the class, but to openly admit it to the teacher was





something I had not expected, especially from the new student.

“Aylmer, don’t be ridiculous. You are only two years apart in age. I am sure you will find that Alex is an excellent partner. In fact, from what I saw today, after assigning her the most difficult homework assignment, which she completed faster than any other student I have ever taught, you probably won’t have to do any work and you’ll keep your A average. Take it as a blessing. Now I don’t have any more time to discuss this with you.” Mrs. Berkbile said, clearly drawing an end to the conversation. “Alex will be here any minute.”

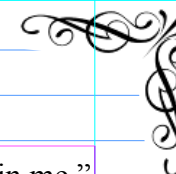
“Thank you anyway. I am sorry I wasted your time.” Aylmer stated coolly, leaving the room. I pressed my body into the lockers trying to make myself invisible. It must have worked. He walked right past me, never realizing I was there and I was listening to every word.

I waited for my flushed face to return to its normal shade before walking in to see Mrs. Berkbile. I did not want to give any indication I had heard her conversation with Aylmer. A couple of minutes later I walked into the room. The wave of noxious fumes hit me in the chest. Mrs. Berkbile’s lavender, paisley perfume coated my tongue. The scent was so thick in the air, I could taste it.

Mrs. Berkbile seemed unaware of the smell. She was bent over papers, scribbling furiously with a red marker and mumbling to herself. “No no no! Wrong again.” The red pen moved rapidly across the paper.

“Umm... Mrs. Berkbile?” I spoke softly, wishing I could breathe through my ears; the smell was suffocating.

She looked up surprised, then her expression took the same look



of disdain from earlier. “Ah... Mrs. Ritter, nice of you to join me.”

It did not feel very nice, but I tried to make my lips curve into a small smile, anyway.

“Sit down.” She pointed at the chair across from her. I obeyed. “Now since you have missed so many lessons, I want you to complete every assignment I have given this class since the beginning of the year. There are four assignments a week, each with 20 problems. Since you are the math genius, I’ll let you figure out how many problems that is.” She cackled, pushing a paper with all the assignments listed toward me. It took up both sides of the paper.

My calculations were right, I had 64 assignments, totalling 1280 problems. “Uh... okay. When is this due by?”

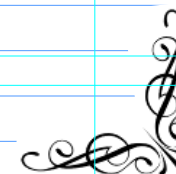
“Well normally I would give someone at least three weeks to get all of this done, but for you, well I am going to give you 24... hours. After all, *you* should not need any more time than that. Should you?” She glared at me across her cheap wooden desk.

“No.” I sighed. “I will have it done by tomorrow.”

“That’s what I thought. Now get out.” She pointed her bony finger toward the door and she did not have to tell me again. I scrambled from my seat.

“Oh.. and Alex, if it is not done perfectly, without a single error, by tomorrow, forget about coming back to my class. I will make sure you are put in the basic math class and a permanent mark scars you transcript.”

I nodded. Then ran from the room, my mind rioting. Thankfully, the air in the hallway felt lighter than the suffocating air in that room. I walked out to the car visibly shaking with anger. I know,





because someone, I can't remember who - my mind could not process the face it was in such an uproar, actually asked me if I was cold. Relief washed over me as I walked out the door. However, it was quickly replaced with dismay.

The sun reflected off the fresh snow, glittering like a million diamonds in the afternoon sunlight.

Great... I thought as I approached my car. Just what I need.

Everyday I pray my mustang makes it down the single-lane highway to school. It has not failed me yet, although, the heater and radio are broken and one of the windows refuses to close all the way. It is also almost impossible to drive after it has snowed, making it wildly impractical for the harsh Maine winters.

I cleared the white dust off my windshield and climbed into the driver's seat. Delicately touching my foot to the gas, my car drifted sideways across the slick surface. The wheels squealing.

I groaned.

Thankfully, there was only one car still left in the student parking lot and it was all the way in the opposite corner. I did not recognize the silver Mercedes Benz CL600. It probably belonged to a visitor. No one I knew could afford a \$150,000 car.

I finally reached the exit after sliding in zigzags across the slick pavement. Once there I quickly glanced in the mirror, making sure no one was waiting to exit, since it would take me a couple of tries before I would be able to make it onto the road.

Someone was behind me. My breath caught when I saw his reflection in the mirror.

Aylmer stared back at me through the windshield of the silver Mercedes, an unreadable expression on his stunning face.



I glanced down embarrassed, then fury filled me. I revved the engine, secretly hoping the ribbon of slush splattered his pristine car, and sped, wheels groaning, onto the main road.

Aylmer followed me all the way home.

I made Chicken stir-fry for dinner. The systematic dicing and chopping soothed my frazzled mind. What had I done to make Aylmer hate me? Was it because of the incident in the woods? It did not make sense. At least Mrs. Berkbile made it clear why she could not stand me. She felt threatened, but Aylmer. I had no idea.

"How did school go today?" Grandma Bella asked, loudly as we sat across from one another at the dinner table that night.

I looked up suddenly. "Hmmm?"

"I have been talking for the past ten minutes and you have not said one word to me."

"I'm sorry." I gazed back down at my plate, suddenly realizing I had not taken more than three bites of food since I sat down.

"Did something happen at school today?" Grandma Bella looked at me, expectantly. How could she know about Aylmer?

"Something happen in your math class?" She hedged.

I sighed, I had completely forgotten about all of the homework I still had to do. "yeah..." I shrugged and looked down at my plate. "It is no big deal. I just have a lot of homework. I think I am going to go start it. Would you mind cleaning up tonight?"

My grandma smiled sadly. "Sure honey, go ahead. I can clean up down here."

"Thanks." I shuffled upstairs. I felt bad about being so silent but I was not in the mood to talk, my mind was already occupied with other thoughts.





That night I got three hours of sleep. It took me nine hours to finish the extra homework assignments Mrs. Berkbile demanded I have done. At four o'clock I finally drifted into a fitful sleep.

ff

I woke up exhausted, frustrated, annoyed and depressed. I could not remember anything about my dream except flashing blue and red lights, but my body ached when I got out of bed and I knew instinctively that the dream had been unpleasant at best and horrendous at worst.

The day did not start any better, but at least I knew what to expect this time. At the beginning of Calculus, I walked up to the front. "Here Mrs. Berkbile, I completed the additional homework you assigned me last night."

She looked amazed. She had obviously meant for me to fail the task and thus be removed from her class. "Oh I don't want to see it. All that matters is that you did it" Mrs. Berkbile smirked without even glancing at the 50 sheets of college-ruled notebook paper I held under her nose.

"This took me nine hours to finish and you don't want to see it?" I asked; my voice sounded weak. "I thought it had to be perfect."

"Yes, well I said that because I know you double or triple-checked every answer to make sure they were right. So now I don't have to worry about checking the assignment. Now go sit down, I am about to begin." She instructed.

I marched through the aisle, anger welling in my chest.

"Alex, 25." Mrs. Berkbile called out after searching through the names and selecting the only purple paper in the bunch.



"Fine." I mumbled. Once again, I finished the problem before anyone else.

"Lucky guess" Mrs. Berkbile sneered, loud enough for the rest of the class to hear.

I wanted to yell, to scream, to march to the front of the class and show her I was better. Instead I bent my head and stared at the thin blue lines on my paper until they began to blur. I could feel warm heat rushing up toward my the back of my eyes.

I kept my head bent for the rest of class.

"You just have to ignore her."

I looked up, realizing Jason was leaning over my desk. I had not even heard the bell ring. "Sorry?"

"You just have to ignore her. She wants to upset you, that's her goal. So if you don't react, she loses and you win."

I just stared at the boy with the ruddy blond hair. That kind of made sense. I nodded. "Thanks..."

He smiled and I could not help feeling better. "No biggie. I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you." I said, watching him walk out the door.

"You okay?" A familiar, rich voice came up behind me as I lifted my backpack. "You looked a little upset earlier."

"Yeah, well. I maybe I am just too young to be in this class." I retorted, turning on my heel. Unfortunately, as usual, my commanding exit was interrupted when I caught tripped over the leg of a chair, and fell face first down in the aisle.

"Are you all right?" Aylmer asked. I was horrified, but even angrier that he was clearly trying to suppress a laugh. "Here let me help you up."





“No! I am fine. Just go away.” I sniffed. There was no way I was going to accept help from him.

I tried to right myself, supporting my weight in my arms. As I shifted my weight to my legs I felt my ankle buckle with a horrendous SNAP and I collapsed back to the floor in a heap.

“ouch...” I whimpered, laying there, awkwardly, in between the desks, refusing to move and resting my cheek on the cold linoleum floor.

“You are not ‘fine’. I am taking you to the nurse,” he said, trying to wrap his arms around my waist, as I tried to crawl away, feeling utterly ridiculous. “Look... You need to go to the nurse, but you can not put weight on that ankle. So either you let me help you, or you sit in this class till the janitor finds you at the end of the day.”

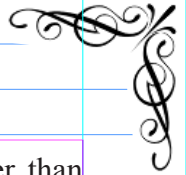
I moved slightly closer to his feet, wordlessly giving him permission to replace his arm. He got the message. I gasped as I was suddenly I was cradled in his arms. In a matter of moments he had managed to lift me from the ground, as if I weighed no more than a feather. A warm energy pulsed through me. If I had been paying attention I would have noticed that it was emanating from the small of my back – in the exact place where his hand was. Instead, I distressingly reveled in the woodsy smell of oak and cedar with a hint of peppermint that exuded from his shirt.

“Put me down!” I demanded. “I can walk on my own.”

“Well I think that is up for debate.” He smiled, refusing my request. My face burned under the curious stares of my fellow students as he carried me through the hallway in awkward silence.

“So how is the leg?”

“It hurts.”



“Well, I am not surprised. It looked like you fell harder than Humpty Dumpty did off his wall.”

“Really! Harder than Humpty Dumpty.” I mocked.

“So why were you trying so hard to get away from me?” Aylmer looked down as he strode through the halls, seemingly oblivious to my weight.

I shrugged. “I don’t know...” There was no way I was going to tell him the truth while he was carrying me. He might decide to dropped me right in the middle of the hallway.

“I don’t believe you. What’s the real reason?”

“Do you honestly think I am going to tell you anything while you are carrying me five feet off the ground?”

“Do you want me to put you down?”

I thought about it for a second. No I did not. My hesitation seemed to reaffirm his choice and we continued down the hall. Me still in his arms.

“So are you going to tell me why you tried to run out... or am I going to have to try and con it out of you. I would like to remind you that you can’t really go anywhere.” His grip tightened, proving his point.

I sighed. “It was nothing, just something that happened yesterday.”

Suddenly, he looked at me seriously. “What did you say right before you fell?”

I stayed silent.

“You heard me talking to Mrs. Berkbile yesterday after school, didn’t you?”

Again I said nothing.





“Alex...”

I waited for more, but he said nothing.

Shaking his head once, sadly. He finally spoke. “You were never supposed to hear that.”

“Yeah well I did.” If that was supposed to reassure me, it was not working very well.

Aylmer and I were silent as he walked the last couple feet into the nurse’s office.

“Oh my goodness, Alex. What happened today? Did you trip again? Or did you faint this time?” Mrs. Robbins, the school nurse, bustled over quickly and instructed Aylmer to set me down on the cot in the corner of the room.

“Hi Ms. Robbins... it is nothing, *He* would not let me walk on my own.” I rolled my eyes. “I just tripped at the end of calculus class.”

“Oh I see.” She looked curiously between me and the excruciatingly flawless boy next to me, somewhat bewildered.

“It looks like you are in good hands now.” Aylmer said speaking for the first time since the hallway. I could tell he was clearly amused by my close relationship with the school nurse.

“Thanks for carrying me.” I mumbled

“No problem. I’ll see you later. Oh, by the way, the reason I came over to you in class today was to determine when we could meet for our project. When are you available?”

Anytime, I thought miserably, thinking about my lack of social engagements. “I can meet on Friday after school this week.”

“That sounds good. I have writing classes Tuesdays, fencing Wednesdays, and piano Thursday -”



Of course you do, I thought. I would expect nothing less.

“So Friday is perfect.”

“Fine....” I shrugged nonchalantly, trying to prove my leg was not still throbbing. But, I grimaced slightly and he laughed, noticing the movement.

“Alright, I’ll meet you by the main office after school?”

“Sure.”

“Goodbye, then. I hope your leg feels better.” He grinned, before exiting the room.

“Ughhhh!” I groaned.

“Does that hurt?” Nurse Bell worried.

“What?... Oh no sorry.” I waved off her concern.

“Ahh...” Nurse Bell smirked knowingly. “Well it doesn’t look like there is any permanent damage. You may just have a little swelling later today, nothing too serious. Why don’t you take some Tylenol and ice it for a little.”

I nodded, the leaned back on the small cot and stared at the ceiling.

“Alex! What happened? I didn’t think you had gym already.” Sarah hurried over as I limped into lunch that afternoon. Nurse Bell had offered me a pair of crutches that I am pretty sure she has on reserve for me, but using two wooden sticks to walk is more dangerous than limping on two feet.

“I didn’t. I just twisted my ankle in math class.”

“Math class?” Claire joined in. “That is impressive, even for you.”

“Yeah well it is all Aylmer’s fault.”

“Oh... how so?” Claire grinned.





I sighed. “I did not want to talk to him so I was rushing out of the room and I tripped. He had to carry me to the nurse.”

“Seriously?” Sarah looked at me.

“Yeah, but it was nothing.” I said, more to remind myself than for any other purpose.

“Why wouldn’t you want to talk to *him*?” Claire looked shocked. “He is *gorgeous*?”

Sarah just rolled her eyes and returned to her bologna sandwich.

“I overheard him talking to the teacher the other day about me.” I said answering Claire’s question.

“What did he say.”

“Let’s just say it was not good.” I did not want to repeat his words. It would only upset me.

“Oh... I am sorry.” Claire spoke softly.

Beth looked up then from her sandwich, suddenly interested. “That does not make sense.”

“What doesn’t? What are you talking about?” Claire argued, thinking she was talking about Claire.

“Oh,” Beth looked shocked. “I was not talking about you. No, what I meant was that Aylmer was not making sense.”

Beth looked at our confused faces.

“His actions and his words contradict one another.” She clarified. “One day he is talking about you, the next he is carrying you through the hall. It just doesn’t make sense.” She said, returning to her peanut butter and jelly.

“How is Mrs. Berkbile?” Sarah asked reasonably.

“She hates me. Everyday she pulls names out of a hat to decide



who puts which homework assignment on the board. But, for some reason, she thinks I always deserve the hardest problem.”

“But I thought you just said she pulls names from a hat.”

“She does but my name is written on the only slip of purple paper in the bunch. She is trying to make me prove that I belong there, but is getting really annoying.”

“Well I think we should do something this weekend to take your mind off of it. Are you guys free?”

“Yeah” Claire nodded. “Can we go to the mall? I need retail therapy.” My parents are driving me crazy.

Claire’s father is a real estate mogul and her mother is one of the top physical trainers in the country, she has worked with many celebrities and athletic teams. They love Claire – but are never home and when they are they try to “better” Claire. Her mom makes her work out for hours on end and her dad has her practice crunching numbers. So instead of showing Claire love in the customary manner, they shower her with gifts and presents. Claire is always dressed in the top designer clothes and shoes. Even her dog, Pax, is a shoe aficionado. He has no interest in my “common” shoes when I go over to her house, but everyday treats himself to one of the pairs on Manolo Blahniks, BCBG, Jimmy Choos or Coach shoes in Claire’s enormous walk-in closet.

“Let’s meet at my house at 1 p.m.” I offered.

“Which means you should plan on us being at your house by 12:30, since you are always at least a half hour late.” Sarah amended.

“Okay... 12:30, then.”

Claire and I left lunch and headed to the girls locker room. We





changed into our green shirts and orange shorts – Bergen colors and moved to the gymnasium.

“Would everyone sit down for just a second,” Ms. Bell instructed. “As some of you may know, Mrs. Lawrence is six months pregnant. This weekend she went into early labor – don’t worry,” she responded looking at our concerned faces “-she and the baby are fine – however, the doctor has order her on bed rest for the remainder of her pregnancy. As a result, since the sophomore gym class is the smallest, it will be combined with the seniors.”

As soon as she finished her proclamation the doors to the gym flung open and, 20 senior students trudged into the gym. I felt my stomach knot. One face stood out above the rest. Aylmer was in the class.

“This should be interesting.” Claire smiled, giddily. She looked directly at Aylmer.

My expression leaned more toward abject horror.

The Ms Robbins selected Simon, Kelly, Rachel and Jason as team captains.

Normally, I am always the last person selected for the teams. Apparently, Jason did not know my track record in gym. When he called my name during the third round, I looked up, more than a little surprised.

Claire was on Kelly’s team.

I followed my team to the other side of the net and settled into the last row.

“No, Ritter. You’re up front today. Go stand next to Aylmer Huter.” Ms. Robbins yelled across the gym. Aylmer turned and grinned at me.



Oh great... I knew I should have faked sick. Although with my luck and the brick of food currently residing in my stomach, in ten minutes, I probably wouldn’t need to fake it.

“Heads up Ritter! Watch the ball” Ms. Robbins hollered as the ball sailed inches from my ear.

Oh my god, could this humiliation get any worse?

Unsuprisingly, we lost that point.

The next time the ball came near me, it miraculously sailed back across the net.

The first time this happened, I thought a miracle had occurred, and I had somehow managed to not only hit the ball, but send it back in the right direction.

It was not until the third time, when I realized I had not moved that I looked around. I noticed Aylmer casually walking back to his place across the court.

For the first time, my team won.

“Aylmer was certainly watching you today.” Claire smiled as we changed back into our clothes. She looked at my baggy sweatshirt and ripped jeans and frowned.

“What are you talking about?” My brow furrowed. “He was only helping out team. You know what I am like on a volleyball court.”

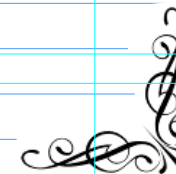
“Alex, he was staring at you all through gym class!”

“I really just don’t understand that boy...” I sighed, but my heart leapt a little in my chest.

“What do you mean?” Claire looked at me confused.

“I don’t know, but like Beth said, I just does not make sense.”

When I walked outside that day, I was pleased to find most of the snow from yesterday’s storm had melted. My happiness lasted for





a few seconds. The seconds before I realized, the slush had frozen into a deadly sheet of ice.

My tread-less sneakers searched for traction on the smooth surface. I slipped three times and each time my heart lodged itself in my throat. Clutching the back of cars, I tried to guide myself safely through the maze.

Since I am consistently late, my mustang is always in the farthest corner of the lot and today was not an exception. I approached my car from the drivers side and was about to climb in when I realized the two front tires were lifted several inches above the ground.

What now? I thought, getting out to inspect the problem. On more than one occasion my car had been ransacked by Brianna and her minion of friends.

I shuffled around the car, clutching the icy frame.

Someone was bent over the passenger side tire.

“What do you think you are doing?!” I demanded, looking at the broad back of a boy. The car’s front tires landed with a sudden thump on the ground. The windows rattled.

“Hey!” I yelled again. “I’m talking to you!” I was tired and pissed. Whoever this was, he would regret this decision.

Aylmer turned and looked at me, his eyes wary. He unfolded himself so close I could see the gold flecks in his otherwise, perfectly green eyes The blood surged to my head and I started to feel a little woozy.

He stared down at me and I could not look away. My cheeks flushed with color and my stomach clench. I tried to continue my rant, but all the anger seemed to have dissipated in those few awkward moments when I just stood there staring, unable to look



away, but unable to force words from the back of my throat. Then, never saying a word or offering an explanation, Aylmer brushed past me. Bewildered, I stared at his back as he moved gracefully across the frozen road.

His hands empty.

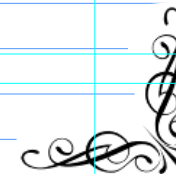
I turned back to the car, looking for any changes. A mix of emotions washed over me making it difficult to fill my air with lungs as I stared at the silver glinting against my black tires.

Aylmer had put snow chains on my car.

Grumbling, I climbed back into driver’s seat. That afternoon I drove home with unusual ease.

Why? Why had he done this?

My mind mulled over the question while I made dinner. I finally came to the conclusion that Aylmer was selfishly protecting his car.





Four. *Memories*

The last bell on Friday produced a deep sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and to my consternation, a couple butterflies. Aylmer had avoided me for the rest of the week and I still did not know what to make of the snow chains. I trudged to the front office where Aylmer was already waiting. And, as always my heart did a small flip-flop when I saw his glorious face.

“Would you like to study at my house or yours?” He asked.

“I don’t care, either works for me.”

“Fine, let’s go to my house then. Do you care if we just take my car today. My house is off the beaten path and I don’t want to lose you.” His eyes burned into mine, seriously.

I shrugged coolly, although my stomach was performing Olympic-worthy gymnastics. I watched as he hit the unlock button.

The lights winked on the black Mercedes Benz coupe.





“This is the CL600... This is a \$150,000 car!”

Aylmer just stared back at me. I am not sure how long we remained like that, but neither of us seemed willing to break the silence. Finally, Aylmer shrugged – an awkward movement on his rigid shoulders, as he opened the door for me.

“My father gave it to me as a parting gift when we moved here.”

I felt stupid. Why couldn’t I just let it go? “Oh... I am sorry.”

“That’s okay.”

“I know how difficult it is to pack everything and move.”

“Mrs. Reynolds mentioned you moved here.” Aylmer turned and looked at me sadly, “She said I was the first new student since you moved to the town four years ago.”

“Yeah, well... As I am sure you noticed, this town is not extremely welcoming to outsiders.” I muttered.

“But I thought your grandmother lived here?”

“She does, but it didn’t matter. My mother fled town as soon as she could, taking me with her. We finally ended up in Miami, a city which had no discernible similarities to her old home. I am not sure the town ever forgave her for leaving and now they expect me to repent for her sins. I am sorry.” I had no idea why I had just unloaded my personal baggage on a boy that until 10 minutes ago, I had sworn to hate, or at least remain indifferent towards. What was getting into me? “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to share my sordid history with you.”

“It’s okay. I think I might be the only one in this town that knows exactly how you feel. I only have one friend at Bergen, and I think he might only be my friend because his mom – Mrs. Reynolds –



threatened me.” He said gently placing the back of his hand against mine in the center of the seat. Heat pulsed from the contact.

“Really? I figured your old high school was easy for you.”

“It was to some degree, I had a lot of friends. But there was definitely a group of students that did not think I belonged there.”

“Why?”

He paused for a moment. “My family traveled a lot, so I always was the new kid in school.”

“I am sorry, I never realized.”

“It’s okay. But I understand exactly what it feels like to be an outsider, wishing we were on the inside.”

I nodded, staring out the window.

We sat in silence as we moved toward the edge of town. The hum of the 12 cylinder engine filled the car.

“Where are we going?” I wondered aloud when we turned off the main road and continued down a mile-long, tree-lined drive, the little car bouncing over the ruts in the road.

“My house, of course.”

“Yes, but where exactly is your house. All I see are trees.” Ahead the road narrowed and the tree branches whipped at the tinted windows, before ending in what appeared to be a wall of trees. I gasped as Aylmer accelerated toward them.

Screaming, I closed my eyes. I pictured firefighters picking through the mangled wreckage that had been our car. Surprisingly, the impact never came.

I peeked out from beneath my lashes. Aylmer was staring at me, an amused grin plastered on his excruciatingly flawless face. “Why are you smiling? That was not funny.” I yelled.





“Sorry.” He mumbled apologetically, but his eyes continued to laugh at me.

“Yeah, you look real sorry.” I turned toward the window, and then I forgot to breath.

A huge meadow had been carved out of the forest and a wall of trees ringed the 100 acres, which contained a lake, garden, apple orchard and the most spectacular house I had ever seen. The four-story Victorian mansion sprawled across an enormous perfectly-manicured lawn, and at first glance, I counted five fireplaces. Off to the right stood a separate five car garage. We pulled into the only open space.

Inside there were four other cars: a Toyota Prius, a Porshe 911 Turbo, a Jeep Grande Cherokee, and the Volt, the electric concept car from Chevy that has not been mass produced yet. Aylmer snickered, looking at my gaping mouth.

“Come on.” He said pulling me from my seat and out of the garage toward his house.

I followed obediently behind as we walked through large rounded oak doors, each adorned with an intricate dragon-shaped knocker.

“Welcome to my house.”

I exhaled slowly. The wooden floors of the foyer gleamed and large split staircase shimmered under the colorful light filtering through the stained glass window stretched above the door. To the left, in what appeared to be a ballroom, I could see elaborate golden molding along the walls and a rose-colored marble floor. But the most shocking characteristic was the ceiling. An elaborate painting of a castle and maiden with violet eyes, incredibly similar to my own, stretched from one side of the room to the other.



On the other side of the foyer, a long hallway stretched. Light from floor-to-ceiling windows patterned the walls and illuminated portrait paintings of beautiful men and women.

“Mom, I am home and I have a guest.” Aylmer emphasized to my amusement.

A breathtaking woman materialized at the top of the stairs, her deep green eyes luminous as she floated down the stairs. Long, curly red hair streamed over her strong shoulders and rippled down her back, enhancing her porcelain skin and high cheek bones. “Who have you brought home, Aylmer?”

“Mom, I would like you to meet Alexandra Ritter.”

I watched surprised as a look of anger washed over her immaculate face, before quickly disappearing.

“It is very nice to meet you Alex. Can I get you anything?” The woman asked with a forced smile on her lips.

“Oh no Mrs. Huter. I’m fine. Thanks though.” I said returning my attention to the wood floors, but looked up surprised as a musical laugh escaped her mouth.

“Oh... please call me Etti. And don’t hesitate to ask if you change your mind. We have fruit, cheese and crackers, chips, and I just finished making cookies”

“Okay, thanks.” I shifted uneasily under her inquisitive gaze.

“Alright mom,” Aylmer said, as an imploring look flitting across his face. “Alex and I have a lot of work to do, if you need us we will be in the library upstairs.” I carefully removed my holey sneakers, which looked painfully out of place in the immaculate foyer, before crossing the polished floors and up the stairs.

We walked down the hallway on the right, past the rows of





paintings. I stopped abruptly in front of one of them. This one stood out from all the others.

The large portrait depicted a teenage girl with long black hair, pale skin, deep, almond-shaped violet eyes, a petite nose and small full lips.

She looked exactly like me.

“Who is this?” I asked Aylmer, who had already reached the door at the end of the hall.

When he did not answer, I repeated the question. He must not have heard me, I thought. But again, he remained silent.

“Come on Alex. What are you staring at?” His tone sounded unconcerned, but his eyes revealed something completely different – fear, maybe?

“I’m coming.” I hurried forward, but in that moment I decided to find out the truth about the girl. Aylmer’s refusal to answer would only make it more of a challenge.

“Here we are.” Aylmer said, standing in front of two large oak doors. He flung them open easily.

Inside, bookshelves wrapped around the rectangular room from floor to ceiling breaking only for the door, windows and the large stone fireplace that dominated one wall in the room.

“It is beautiful.” I sighed, walking over to the nearest shelf and fingered the weathered, leather books, delicately pulling one out. *Sneewittchen* (Translation: *Snow White*). Intrigued I opened the cover. Publication date: 1857. Impossible, this was one of the earliest versions of *Snow White* ever recorded.

“How did you get this?” I held the book up in reverence.

“I am not sure. My mother is an expert on fairy tales and myths,



she collects these things. This one is my favorite.” He said, moving in front of a glass case. Inside was the most dazzling book I had ever seen. The old leather cover seemed to shimmer under the dim interior lights. But the most stunning feature was the large castle pictured on the cover. It seemed to move and waver in the light and as I stared, I swore I saw movement in one of the far turrets.

“Have you ever seen anything like it?” Aylmer whispered in my ear. Startled I jumped, knocking the case. I watched horrified as it began to lisp on two legs.

Two arms flashed past me and steadied the glass, pressing me back against the cool surface of the case.

“I am so sorry.” I trembled, whether from my clumsiness, or Aylmer’s closeness, it was impossible to tell.

“That’s okay. But why don’t we get to work. I think you are probably less of a risk sitting.” He said unwinding his arms and folding himself gracefully on the large leather couch. I followed and flopped next to him, the couch engulfing me.

Twenty-five minutes later we had finished a math assignment. A project it would take all of the other groups several hours to complete. “Well that was easy.” Aylmer said as we got up. “Are you hungry?”

“No. I’m fine.” I said, but as usual my body betrayed me as my stomach grumbled loudly.

Aylmer laughed. A deep and rich sound that pulsed through the room. “Come on. Let’s get something to silence that stomach of yours.”

I struggled to hoist myself from the leather, gratefully accepting his hand when I gave up hope of ever getting free.





“What would you like? We have everything my mom mentioned, but we also have cereal, soda and ice cream.” He offered in a kitchen that was larger than the first floor of my grandmother’s house.

“umm... I don’t really care,” I said suddenly feeling shy in the large bright room.

“Come on, there must be something you like to eat everyday after school.”

“Well... Do you have any peanut butter?”

“Let me check.” He opened the pantry door as I looked over his shoulder into the large space. “Mom, do we have any peanut butter?” He yelled upstairs, closing the door.

“There should be some in the pantry.” Etti’s melodic voice called back.

“Don’t worry about it if you don’t have any.” I knew there had not been a single jar of peanut butter on those shelves.

“Let’s just take one more peek. Shall we? Just in case we missed it.” He reopened the cabinet. There sitting on the third shelf where I had just been staring was a brand new jar of Skippy.

“How...? How did... Where did that come from?”

“We must have missed it.” Aylmer relied nonchalantly.

“No. I am sure that was not there a second ago.”

“Well since I can not magically make peanut butter appear, what other explanation is there?”

I thought about this for a second... but could not come up with a solution.

“Here, hold this.” Aylmer handed me the peanut butter. “I will be right back.”

“Wait, where are you going?”



“Outside. Don’t worry, I will only be a second.” He promised, a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

After a couple of minutes my stomach began grumbling loudly and Aylmer had not returned. Annoyed, I peeled the seal off the jar of peanut butter and dug my spoon into the creamy spread. A large hand gripped my shoulder and screaming, I lurched forward. The peanut butter rolled across the counter and landed with a satisfying plop on the Italian tile.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.” The hand slowly moved away from my shoulder.

My entire face burned in embarrassment, the red hue extending down my neck. “That’s okay. But I would appreciate a warning. That is the second time today you have scared me and I have knocked something over.”

“No it’s not. You did not knock the case over.”

“Well I would of if you had not been there.”

“Then it is good I was.”

“I am sorry about the floor,” I said softly, staring at the sticky mess.

“The floor will be fine. Now let’s see if we can salvage any of the peanut butter.”

“You’re worried about the peanut butter?” I asked incredulously. “Won’t you mom be mad about the mess?”

“No. This will only take her a second to clean up. Plus, you can not make peanut butter apples without the peanut butter.” He winked, placing two perfect red apples on the counter. “Oh good. Just enough.” He said picking it up the now half-empty container as I pulled a handful of paper towels off the rack. “What are you





doing?”

“Cleaning up, of course.” I kneeled down on the floor.

“You don’t need to do that. My mom will take care of it.”

“No that’s okay, I got it.” I said, mopping up the sticky mess.

“Please don’t.” Aylmer said, easily lifting me to my feet in one swift motion. “I appreciate the effort, but it will only take my mom seconds to clean up.”

I glowered at him, but he refused to let me go. “Please?” He spoke softly.

“Alright, but make sure your mom knows I offered. I don’t think she likes me that much as it is.”

“Don’t worry. I will make it clear that it was my fault. So...” Aylmer’s eyes curved up. “I noticed you are very accident prone. Is that normal, or do I just frighten you.”

“Maybe a little of both.” I replied, unsure why I was being so honest. “I am a huge klutz; it’s hereditary, but my clumsiness seems worse around you.”

“Hmmm... a hereditary clumsy gene. Never heard of such a thing. So who else was the klutz, your mom or dad?”

“Grandma, actually. I think it must have skipped a generation because my mom always seemed to be in control” – well until her death, I thought. “But Grandma Bella has just started salsa dancing with Marie Spratt, so she seems to have gained more control over her limbs.”

“Have you ever considered it?”

“What?”

“Dancing.”

“Oh no... I avoid all sporting activities that require movement.”



“You can not really be that bad.”

“No, trust me. I am.”

Aylmer looked at me curiously, seeming to struggle with an internal debate. Before he got the chance to decide one way or the other, Etti came whistling into the kitchen.

“Hello, Alex. How did the assignment go?” She asked kindly, although I still detected a hit of disapproval in her tone.

“Great, Etti. You have a beautiful home.”

“Thank you. It reminds me of home.” Etti smiled.

The only type of home it reminded me of would need a drawbridge and a moat.

“Would you like to stay for dinner tonight?”

“Oh... I am not sure. I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“Oh nonsense, you would be nothing of the sort. I always end up making more food than Aylmer and I can eat because I am so used to cooking for a large family.”

“Well if you are sure I won’t be an inconvenience.”

“No you won’t. Plus I want to hear all about you, Alex Ritter.” I thought it was a little unusual that she used my last name.

“Okay, well let me just call my grandmother and make sure she does not need me to cook dinner for her tonight.”

My grandma was going out with the Spratt’s tonight, so she would not even be home for dinner. “Dinner would be great if you are sure you don’t mind.”

“Not at all.”

“Well is there anything I can help with? I make dinner every night for my grandma, so I am pretty good around a kitchen.”

“Oh, thank you. That would be wonderful.” Etti smiled conniving





at me. "Do you know how to blanch potatoes?"

"Oh, sure. Where do you keep the pots?"

Etti face dropped, as Aylmer snickered behind me. She recovered and pointed to one of the large bottom cabinets. Aylmer came in a couple of times to check on me, but walked out of the kitchen with a confused expression on his perfect face when he saw us laughing.

After an hour cooking with Etti – who seemed to require no time to prepare her dishes – we carried steaming bowls of mashed potatoes, string beans, honey-glazed ham, salad and fresh bread to the dinning room table.

I could not fathom how they ate like this and looked like they did. I have a high metabolism. But even I would weigh 300 pounds if I ate like this every night.

"Well you two seem to be getting along splendidly." Aylmer rolled his spectacular green eyes at me. "I hope you are not telling too many embarrassing stories about me mom."

"Oh, honey. No." Etti laughed. "We have actually not talked about you at all."

"Really?" Aylmer looked from back and forth from me to his mom. "Then what were you talking about?"

"Really, Aylmer. Do you think you are the only thing we have in common?" Etti looked at Aylmer, exasperated.

"Well... yeah."

"That figures." I shook my head, smiling.

"Now, what were you telling me before my son rudely interrupted?"

We shared stories through dinner. Etti wanted to know everything



about me. It was exhausting. Some of the questions were easy, like what is my favorite food; others were a little harder to answer. She asked me what I wanted to do when I was older. That was a question I did not know how to answer.

Sometimes I felt self conscious, but her rapt attention made me continue until I realized it was 9 p.m. and I had not begun the rest of my homework.

"Thank you so much for dinner, Etti. I really enjoyed it."

"You're very welcome. Feel free to stay for dinner whenever you want. It was nice talking to another girl for a change." She beamed at me.

Together, I walked with Aylmer to the garage.

"So, which one do you want to ride back to school in?" He waved at the spectacular row of cars.

"You're letting me choose?"

"Sure." Aylmer shrugged. The movement looking more natural every time, "Why not?"

I picked the Volt.

"You and my mom seemed to get along." Aylmer commented as we bounced along the little road to the highway.

"Yeah. I enjoyed talking to her. She reminded me of my mom." I said staring out the window as the trees blurred past. "Four years is a long time. I had not realized how much I had forgotten. But being around your mom brought all the memories back."

"I am glad." Aylmer reached out and squeezed my hand gently.

"When did your mom die?"

"When I was 12."

"That explains the look."





“What look?” I asked perplexed.

“A look of pain and indescribable sadness. It washes over your face sometimes. Only for a second, and then you put the mask back on. But in that second, when I see your pain, I can barely stand to look at you it hurts so much.”

I sat, stunned into silence. “How... how could you possibly see that?”

“Don’t worry it is not you. You hide your true feelings very well. I... I just have an uncanny ability to see what others miss. You don’t have to tell me what happened, but if you want to talk...”

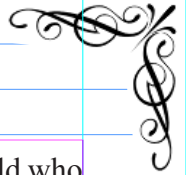
“No it’s okay.” I interrupted, uncharacteristically eager to share. “But do you want the short censored version, or the long uncensored version?”

“I would love to hear whatever you want to tell me.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you the truth. My mom died a couple of days before school started four years ago. I can still remember the day like it was yesterday. It was August 22nd. I was supposed to go to the hospital with my mom that night to drop off toys at the local hospital. I didn’t feel well so I decided to stay home.

“While she was out it started to rain. The drops came down hard. The sky turned dark and angry and the roads became slick. That night I remember thinking to myself how much I loved the rain and I went to bed early, snuggling down in my safe, warm bed. At 2:30, I woke up because someone was at the door. It was two police officers who kindly” I laughed harshly “informed my mom had died in a car crash on her way home from the hospital.

“For the next 3 days I walked around like a zombie, barely eating or sleeping. I stayed in my pajamas the entire time. I had no one to



call. My dad died years before, and my mom was an only child who had lost contact with her mom.

“About a week later, my grandma showed up on my doorstep. I think I must have cried in her arms for the first eight hours she was there. I remember thinking I would die of dehydration. But when I didn’t she brought me up here to live with her.

“For the two months after my mom’s death I was so angry. I had been angry before. In fact I had been a pretty angsty middle schooler, but nothing compared to this. This hatred was a constant burning in my heart. I hated my mom. I hated that she spent so much time with other people’s children. I hated that on the night of her death, she had been giving gifts out at the hospital. That she had been with other kids instead of with her own daughter. I hated that for the two years before her death, we barely spoke. We were like two strangers living in the same house. Going about our business without acknowledging the others presence. The look you see is the result of the searing pain that sometimes shoots through my chest. It has been four year, but it still has not faded.”

Aylmer sat there absorbing this information. “Maybe, the pain you are feeling is not the pain of loss, rather it is the pain of regret. The fact that you could have had more, but you always thought you had time. Maybe that is why it hurts so much more.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I considered his words thoughtfully. They sounded too accurate to be a lie. “But now I live with my grandma and I go to Bergen High. I have friends... and enemies. Life for the most part has returned to normal – I have returned to normal, or as normal as I will ever be.”

“I am so sorry Alex. I wish I could have done something.” I





wondered silently about his odd choice of words, “But, I am here for you now.”

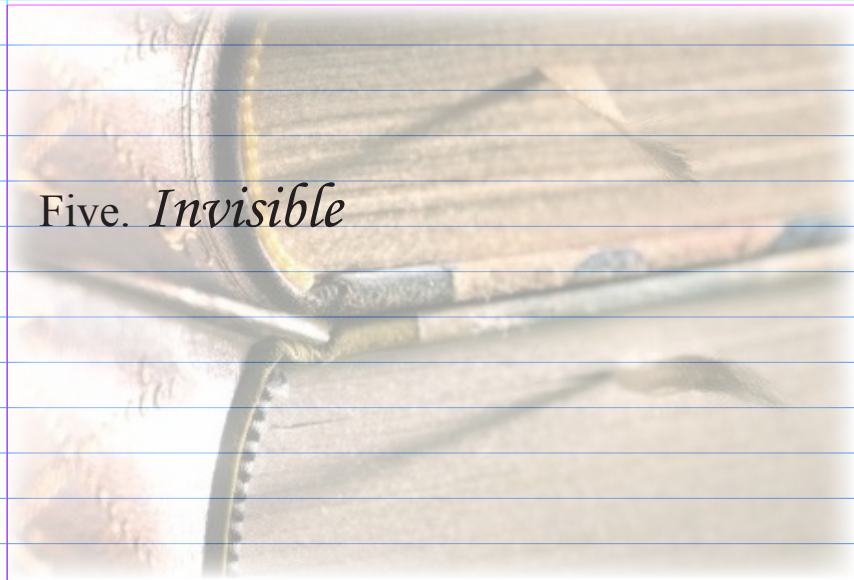
“Thanks Aylmer.” I smiled. “You know, sometimes you seem so much older than 18. You are much more perceptive than most high school boys.”

He chuckled, but the laugh sounded a little too forced. “No I am only 18.”

For the rest of the ride, we sat in companionable silence. Each lost in our own thoughts.

“Thanks for the ride... and dinner.” I said as he parked next to my convertible.

“No problem. I’ll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend.”



Five. *Invisible*

I woke Saturday morning as the sweet smell of pancakes and maple syrup wafted through my room. Climbing out of bed, I followed the scent to the kitchen where I found Grandma Bella flipping pancakes in front of the stove.

“Grandma... what are you doing?!” I asked confused.

“And a good morning to you too, Sleeping Beauty.”

“But... but you’re cooking?” I looked over her shoulder and examined the pancakes in the pan in front of her. They certainly looked and smelled edible.

“Why don’t you go finish waking up and get dressed” she laughed, fingering my lopsided hair, “while I finish making breakfast.”

When I did not move – afraid she would burn down the kitchen - she threatened me with the spatula. “Skedaddle... I’ll call you when they are done.”





“Okay,” I consented, still a little uncertain as I made my way to the stairs. “I need to get ready for the mall anyway.”

Thirty minutes I reappeared in the kitchen.

“So you were out late last night.” My grandma smiled slyly. I knew this was coming. “What were you doing?”

“Nothing I was just working on a math project with my partner.”

“Oh, and who is that?”

“No one you know. He is new to town.”

“Alex we live in a town with less than 1000 people. You very quickly recognize a new face.”

I knew there was no way to argue. It only took a week before people were calling out to me as I walked through town. “His name is Aylmer Huter.”

“Oh... He is quite handsome.” She tried to wink, but could not keep one eye open so it looked like an exaggerated blink. “Actually he looked exactly like your grandfather at your age.” She said, her eyes wistful. I had seen old pictures of my grandfather, and had absolutely no idea what my grandmother was talking about. They could not look more different. My grandfather had big ears, dark brown eyes and red hair.

“You were at his house for a while. Is it a hard project?”

“No... not really. It was actually pretty easy, but I hung out there for a little bit after.”

“Doing what?” Grandma Bella pestered.

“Nothing.”

“Come on. I live vicariously through you. I need these little details. Plus, I am your grandma. I need to know what you are doing.”



“Nothing, really. We just talked.” I said as Bubbles wrapped herself around my feet, meowing loudly. “It was nice.” The meowing got louder. “Well, I better get my stuff together for the mall.”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. We need to discuss your wardrobe.” Grandma disapprovingly eyed my baggy grey sweater and ripped jeans.

“Graaandma...”

“Now... now. You listen to me. I know you don’t think I have the best sense of fashion, but I love what I wear, so I don’t care. But your outfits... well, they need some work.”

“But, I love what I am wearing.”

“Alexandra Ritter, you could not lie as a little girl and you certainly can not lie now.” It was true, I never could lie well. But, until that moment, I thought I had improved slightly.

“I want you to take this.” Grandma Bella pulled out her Chase Mastercard.

“Grandma... I can’t.”

“If you don’t, I am going to go buy outfits for you – Is that what you want?”

I eyed my grandma’s bright purple sweater, silver leggings and large woolly brown socks, and immediately reached my conclusion.

“That’s what I thought.” She said as the doorbell rang. “I don’t want any grandchild of mine going over to a strangers house in those clothes. I can’t even imagine what Mrs. Huter thought when she saw you. And don’t think you are going to get out of it. I am going to make sure your friends know they can not leave the mall





until you have at least on new outfit. And maybe a new haircut.”

“What’s wrong with my hair!?” I fingered my split ends as Claire and Sarah walked in.

“It needs a cut. Now I am not going to say anything else to you.” She turned her attention to Claire and Sarah. “Will you two please make sure Alex gets a haircut today and at least one new outfit.”

Claire and Sarah, nodded, giggling.

“Come on. Let’s go before she decides I need a pedicure and manicure, too.” I urged my friends out of the kitchen.

“I love your grandma.” Claire laughed as we piled into her Volkswagon Jetta. “I can not count the number of times when I desperately wanted to attack your hair with a pair of scissors and burn your clothes.”

“What is wrong with my clothes?” I demanded, defensively.

“Nothing. But how old is the sweater you are wearing today.”

“Ummm...”

“Exactly. In four years I have never once seen you buy new clothes.”

“Don’t worry. We will make sure you look great by the time we leave the mall.” Sarah added.

“Fine.” I grumbled, “but I am only going along with this plan because I do not want to look a miniature version of my grandma, which is what she threatened if I did not buy myself new clothes.”

“Once again, I love your grandma.” Claire enthused as I sat in the back of the car, slightly traumatized.

That day at the mall felt like a marathon. I knew there had to be an end, but it never seemed quite within reach.

Claire dragged me through department stores, shoe stores,



accessory stores, jewelry stores. Clearly in her element, she barked orders at the sales associates scattering them in every direction.

One of the associates returned with a pair of sparkling red pumps, which Claire insisted on buying for me. I told her I would never wear the shoes, but she was not listening. She was already at the register charging them.

After considerable pleading, she allowed me to go into one book store. A new second-hand book store had just opened, yet as we entered I could already see dust floating adrift among the piles of books. The laughter and voices from the busy mall outside were left at the door, leaving an eerie silence in its wake. I wandered through the rows, delicately fingering the worn, cracked spines of the books.

“Alex, Sarah and I are going to the clothing store next door. Meet us over there when you are done.”

“Okay,” I waved my friends away, pursuing the shelves and disheveled piles of books.

I gently pulled out a worn leather storybook. It’s cover, like Aylmer’s seemed to shimmer in the light. I delicately opened the book and something cold slipped through my fingers, clattering to the floor.

There, lying on the floor among the dust bunnies and boxes, was the most exquisite key I had ever seen. Curious, I picked up the cool tarnished silver, and wrapped my fingers around the large garnet stone dangling from the chain. I marveled as it warmed the palm of my hand, suddenly glowing brightly.

“What is your name, child?” Spinning, I found myself face to face with on old woman, who peered at me curiously through one





bright blue eye. The other seemed to have clouded over with a white milky substance.

“Alex” – I had no desire to share my last name with the hunched woman, who reeked slightly of mildew.

“Please, child. Your last name.” Her eye grew anxious as she moved close enough for me to see the gold teeth lining the back of her mouth.

“Ritter.” I mumbled, hoping it would encourage her to move a little farther away. I did not want to remain in the store, by myself any longer. Claire and Sarah had, a long time ago, grown board and left for the clothing store next door.

“Interesting...” The woman cackled, making the hair on my arm rise to attention.

“What is so interesting?” I stuttered.

“Did you know your last name is German...? It means Knight.”

“Yes, actually, I take German.”

“Ah, fascinating.” She said, coming so close I could see the hair sprouting from her nose.

“I am sorry I have to be going, but I would like to purchase this book?” I held up the weathered copy of Persuasion.

“Certainly.” Her eyes alight.

“Oh, this fell out of the book when I opened it,” I held up the thin key, which scattered a myriad of red colors around the small store when the little light coming from the mall pierced it.

“Thank you my dear, but since it was in the book it is yours. It was destiny. And it was my destiny to make sure you found it.”

“Uhh... so you are giving this to me for free.” I did not believe in destiny, to many things had gone wrong in my life to believe that



everyone had a set fate which could not be avoided, but if it meant I got an incredible charm for free, who was I to argue?

“Well I would not say that.” The woman’s pale, cracked lips curved in a lopsided grin. She had a point. I was paying \$35 for this book. “Thanks.”

“Sarah, Claire... you in here?” I wandered through the sparkly tops, chunky sweaters, and tight jeans strewn across the floor of the clothing store.

“We’re back here.” I heard Claire call from the dressing room. How in the world she had heard me, I had no idea.

“So did you get anything from the bookstore?” Sarah asked

“Yeah, I found my favorite book and a charm for my bracelet.”

“Ooh, let me see!” Claire bounded from the room.

I pulled out the small key.

“That is beautiful.” Claire exhaled, reaching out. “What kind of stone is that?”

“I think it is a garnet. My birthstone.”

“It really is gorgeous.” Sarah agreed. “How much did it cost you?”

“That’s the really weird thing. It was free.”

“What?!” Claire looked at me.

“Yeah. I was looking through the books and it just falls out. The woman told me it was my destiny. She tells me to just take it. I didn’t argue so I bought the book and came to find you.”

“That is incredible. I am not an expert or anything. But that looks like it is probably worth at least a couple hundred dollars if not more.” Claire fingered the delicate gold work.

“Really?”





“I am completely serious. I approve. Now, what do you think?” Claire swirled in front of a mirror in a delicate blue empire dress dotted with beads that fell just below her knees. “I think I am going to get this for Winter Formal.”

Winter Formal, I thought grimly, of course.

The annual dance was still a month and a half away, but the hubbub from the girls at Bergen was deafening. Every girl wanted the perfect dress, which of course no one else could be seen in. It did not matter that the dresses were probably manufactured by the thousands and girls across country would be wearing ‘their’ gown.

“It is perfect for Winter Formal.” I agreed.

“Do you think anyone else will have it?”

“No, I doubt it.” I smiled.

“Good, well then I think we are done.” Yes! She forgot about my hair.

“Let’s go get your hair done.” Claire flounced out of the dressing room, dashing my hopes.

I merely sighed. “Where are we going?”

“Bello Salon. It is by the Macy’s.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Don’t worry, it is the place I go.” Claire responded to the distraught look on my face. “Carlos is a genius. You can’t even see my enormous ears under his design.” She flicked the layers next to her chin.

An hour and a half later, we finally left Stonybrook Mall. My black hair was shoulder length with cute face-framing angles and layers. I had originally protested the style. Claire gave Carlos specific instruction as soon as we entered the salon, giving me little



choice in style. But in fact, I loved the cut – although I would never admit this to Claire.

Claire dropped me off that night outside the house and I lumbered into the house with two new pairs of jeans, a pair of brown cords, several sweaters, one dress, one skirt, a pair of sneakers, two pairs of heels, which I was pretty sure I would never be able to walk in. That night, after my grandma left for her card game, I decided to model my outfits again. There had been such a flurry of activity in the stores, I actually had no idea what Claire had forced me to buy.

I slipped into an emerald green skirt that reached just below my knees and watched giddily as it swirled around my legs. It was in the middle of one of the spins in front of the full length mirror, when I realized the doorbell was ringing downstairs. Very, very carefully I sidestepped downstairs in my new red heels.

“Hi Alex.” A rich voice greeted as I opened the door.

“Uhh... hi Aylmer. What’s up?”

“I came by because I was wondering if you wanted to see a movie. Or something. And I never got your phone number. So I thought I would stop by. But never mind I should not be here anyway. This is a mistake. I’ll just see you at school.”

“Wait! Where are you going?” I asked. I had never heard Aylmer ramble before. It was unnerving.

“I am leaving...”

“I can see that, my question is why?”

“We’ll it seems pretty obvious you have other plans tonight.”

“What are you talking about?” I looked at him bewildered.

“What other plans?”





“You don’t have other plans?” He looked confused.
“No, why would you think that I did?”
“It just that.... Well...you look so nice.” He smiled sheepishly.
“I figured you must be getting ready to go out.”
“Oh... Uh. Thanks....for saying I look pretty.” I mentally slapped myself. “But, I don’t have any other plans. So if you still want to ‘see a movie. Or something’.” I teased. “I would love to.”
“Really? Is there anything playing in the theaters you would like to see?”
“No... not really.”
“Well then, are you hungry?”
“Famished, actually.” I smiled.
“Okay, would you like to go to dinner, Alex?” Aylmer asked politely; extending his hand.
“Sounds great. Let me just grab my jacket.” I said scampering off.
Forty-five minutes later we were tucked into a quaint Italian restaurant on the edge of town. Several students from Bergen High School were on dates at the restaurant and I could feel their curious gazes burning into the back of my neck as I sat down across from the most attractive boy any of them had ever seen.
Jessica Evans was there with her boyfriend so I knew before the meal was over most of the students body would be wondering what a thin, completely ordinary junior would be doing out with him. I gazed down at the intertwined spaghetti piled high on my plate, wishing we had gone a little farther away from the probing eyes of Bergen High School girls and their insatiable need for gossip.
“Why do you always do that?” Aylmer asked, looking annoyed.



“Do what?” I looked up.
“Stare down.”
“I don’t do that.” I denied.
“You were doing it a second ago.” He gazed at me intently. “What is so fascinating about your meal, or the floor, or your shoes? I mean they are very nice shoes.” He laughed as he looked at the worn blue sneakers, I had changed into. I still did not trust myself in my new heels. “But you miss out on so much when you always look at the ground.”
“Well...” I struggled to find the right words. For some unknown reason, I could not fathom why, I desperately wanted to explain myself to him. “I guess the best way to explain it is, do you remember when you were a little kid and you thought that if you couldn’t see anyone, they couldn’t see you?”
Aylmer nodded.
“Well, I am not sure I ever got over that phase.”
“I see” Aylmer said, his eyes gentle. “So, when you are embarrassed or sad, you stare down, hoping that because you can’t see anyone, they can’t see you.”
“Yeah, I know it sounds stupid, but...”
“No it doesn’t.” He interrupted seriously, “But, can I ask you one thing?”
I nodded.
“Do I make you uncomfortable?”
“No. The scary thing is that I feel more comfortable around you than anyone I have ever met. I find myself sharing things I would rather not. It is kind of unnerving.”
“Then why have you continually looked down at you plate during





dinner. I counted,” He said as I started to protest. “You have done it nine times already and we have not even gotten to dessert. So I was wondering if I made you nervous.”

“No, it is not you, I am worried about.”

“Then who is it?”

“Them... I said glancing at the tables around us. I know they are wondering what I am doing here with you?”

“What do you mean? We are eating dinner, what else would we be doing in a restaurant?”

“No, they are wondering what I am doing here with you? Me, a completely ordinary sophomore and you, well look at you.” I waved at him and all his gloriousness. I watched as understanding dawned and his eyes softened. “On Monday everyone in school will know that we went to dinner together. Brianna will spread more rumors about me, and I will, once again, become the topic of ridicule.”

“Alex, people will do things you don’t like. Free will is a gift that can not be taken away ” – I watched as Aylmer’s eyes darkened, slightly. “You cannot control everyone.”

“I know. I know. I am trying to get over it, to get over them.”



Six. *Truths*

That Monday was the most excruciating and, at the same time, delightful day I had ever spent in school. It was excruciating because everywhere I went, students stared at me and whispered among their friends. But, it was the most delightful day because I finally got to see Aylmer again since Saturday night.

Math class went by too quickly, and I did not even care that the teacher decided to give me three problems to put on the board while some students got away without having to walk to the front of the class once.

I floated through the morning.

“What!” Claire exclaimed the first time she heard the news that I went out with Aylmer on Saturday. “But I thought you hated him!”

“I can’t stay mad at him.” I smiled.





“But what about every thing you heard him say to the teacher. Are you just going to forget all of that?” Claire demanded.

“Yeah. I am. I can’t explain it, but every time I am with him I feel like we have known each for years, instead of days. It is the most comfortable I have ever been around anyone I have just met – and he is a boy, which makes it even odder – for me at least.”

“Hey... but what about us?” Claire insisted. “We became friends pretty quickly.”

“Are you kidding me?” I laughed. “Do you remember the first time we met?”

“Um... wasn’t it when we had gym together, and you needed someone to take you to the nurse after you got hit in the stomach with a baseball?” Sarah asked uncertainly.

“No, I wish.”

“Really?” Claire asked. “I thought that was how you two met, and then Sarah introduced you to me.”

“That was the first time I had a conversation with you, but that was not the first time you tried to talk to me... You really don’t remember do you?”

My friends shook their heads. “Alright, well I am not sure I should refresh your memory.” I began, seriously. “I still remember the first day I started at Bergen Middle School like it was a week ago. That day, and for the next couple of weeks, I was so angry at everyone. On my first day, you two approached me at lunch to see if I wanted to sit with you. But when you asked, instead of graciously accepting, I snapped at you both. I can still picture your dejected face as you turned away, but I didn’t even care.

“It was not until a few weeks later, when I got hurt in gym, that



I actually began acting like a normal human again. After that we began slowly hanging out together at lunch and, when we got paired together for that silly history project, we started hanging out after school. But, even then it took me a while to become comfortable around you both. Does any of that sound familiar?” I looked at my friends.

Sarah was the first one to speak, recognition flickering in her eyes. “Yeah, I guess I vaguely remember that. But Alex, I can understand why you would be mad – you had just moved to a new town, were living with a relative you barely knew, your mom was gone, and you had left all your friends. If I were you I would have more than just snapped.” Sarah said, truthfully, but I could never picture Sarah acting like that.

“And I probably would have been the girl that locked herself in the bathroom during lunch and ate on the toilet.” Claire laughed. “But I guess it did take you a little while to get comfortable around us. So, if it is true, and you feel like you have been friends with Aylmer for years, then I guess we approve.”

“Thanks you guys.”

I left lunch, surprised that I could have been any happier than I was before it started. However when I saw the thick rope, carabineers and harnesses as I walked into gym, my good mood literally came crashing down.

I had completely forgotten that today was the first day of rock climbing.

“Settle down, everyone.” Ms. Bell instructed as she walked in. “Today, we are going to go over the basics of rock climbing. Would everyone please grab a harness and a partner?” I looked for Aylmer





after the announcement, but realized that Claire was tapping me on the shoulder.

“Partners?”

“Of course.” I replied. “Who else would I choose?” I smiled, innocently.

For the rest of class we went through the basics of climbing, including how to tie a figure-eight knot, put on the harness and the basic climbing commands – which, I already knew no one would use once given the opportunity to scale the 40 foot wall in on the north side of the gym.

I sighed gratefully when class ended and we were released to the safety of the locker room. Just looking at the wall had made me queasy.

“Hey, so are you dating Aylmer.” Mandy came up next to me as I was lifting my shirt over my head.

“Mmmmm...” I struggled to respond, my voice muffled by the cotton of my shirt. “Honestly, I am not sure. We just went on one date.” – I had no idea how much she had understood.

“Wow...” She looked at me awestruck. “Doesn’t he make you nervous?”

“No, why?”

“Well... look at him.”

I looked at her confused.

“Doesn’t he intimidate you? I would never be able to hold a rational conversation with him.”

I stared back at her, befuddled.

“Well I had better go.” She smiled picking up her bag. “See you later Alex.”



A couple of minutes later, I trudged out behind her. But as I swung open the door, I accidentally ran into Brianna. Knocking her books out of her hand, I stumbled backwards and fell, spewing papers and notebooks through the hall. “Get up and pick up my books you moron! Look at the mess you made!” Brianna screeched, pointing at the books by her feet and drawing every eye in the corridor to the disaster area and me at the center of it.

“Sorry.” I mumbled at her feet.

“I don’t care if you’re sorry. I am going to be late because of you and I still don’t have my books in my hands!”

I felt the blood surge to my head. Quickly I tried to get up, but my foot slipped on one of the notebook papers next to me, and I collapsed back on the floor.

Horried, I felt tears prick the back of my eyes, but prayed they would not slip down my cheeks. I was mortified, but knew crying would only give Brianna additional ammunition to use against me. Hanging my head, I allowed my hair to cover my face and sat there.

A couple of minutes later, I was vaguely aware that Brianna had gathered her things, tired of waiting for me, yet I could not find the energy to move.

“Are you alright, Alex?” Aylmer’s kind eyes peered at me from behind his thick brown lashes, as he bent down beside me.

I sniffled, nodding.

Aylmer lifted me to my feet like I weighed no more than a feather. Thrown off balance, I staggered slightly, but was steadied by a pair of strong hands. “Alex, Are you okay?” He asked soothingly, slowly pushing the hair away from my face.





I looked up at him through wet lashes, noticing Aylmer's jaw tighten slightly. But his eyes remained tender. Slowly, he brushed his thumbs over my cheeks, wiping away the single tear that had escaped.

I shuddered involuntarily, even though I had never been warmer in my life.

"Shhhh... it's okay. It's okay. Please don't cry." He cooed, pulling me against his shoulders.

"I'm...not...crying," I hiccupped.

"Okay, well then would you stop drooling on my shoulder? Something is getting my shirt wet."

"Haha, very funny." I muttered, pulling away slightly. "I am sorry." I said, furiously rubbing my eyes.

"You know you really should not let Brianna get to you like that."

"I know, but ever since I got here, it is like she has had the ability to humiliate me and degrade me more than anyone else in this school."

Aylmer smiled grimly, "I have noticed you and Brianna don't really get along."

"Yeah. She hates me."

"How come?"

"Well, when I got to Bergen Middle School, I was the new girl, in a town where everyone else has known each other since diapers. I was also from Miami, a big city. I think Brianna felt threatened. She was afraid I would steal the spotlight from her, which is just silly, because I hate the spotlight. So anyway, she did her best to alienate me. She spread rumors about my family, about why I



moved, about my past. It hurt." I smiled ruefully. "Now I think I have only made it worse, by going on a date with you - " I looked up at him to make sure he did not object to the term. He didn't.

"I don't understand. How did that make it worse for you?"

"You really don't see it do you?" I looked at him

"What are you talking about?"

"Alright, I guess I will have to explain. Aylmer you are gorgeous. Every girl at Bergen has a crush on you, including Brianna. Do you remember the first day you came to school?"

"Yeah."

"Do remember Brianna offering to give you a tour of the school."

"Yeah."

"Well you said no."

"So?"

"So..." I began, exasperated. "You rejected her."

"But all I said was 'no thanks'"

"Yes, and in any other place except high school that would be a perfectly polite response, but here, when you say no the most popular girl in school, every one else calls that a rejection."

Aylmer stood there dumbfounded. "I didn't realize."

I looked at him curiously, "Haven't you ever been in high school before? Actually, where did you go to school before Bergen?"

"Truthfully... I was not in school."

"Oh... were you home-schooled, or something like that?"

"Yeah, something like that." Aylmer nodded. "So acclimating to Bergen has been a little difficult. Much more difficult than I would have thought."





“Aylmer... This is high school.” I said as we walked to our classes. “Nothing is ever easy in high school.”

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Thursday, I woke up with a stomachache and knew it had nothing to do with what I had for dinner last night. This was a different pain. This hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach was a side effect of the day.

Today, two weeks after starting Calculus, I would have to present the project.

The weather outside my window seemed to mimic my mood. Dark menacing clouds loomed overhead and wind whistled past the window. It whipped through the trees, chilling the skinny, bare branches.

The moment I stepped outside, my mood brightened.

I was not looking forward to the cold ride to school in the morning, and as if sensing my distress, Aylmer’s car was sitting in the driveway outside my house. I hesitated for a moment. Not sure how to react. But when he rolled the window down and I heard his voice, my reluctance disappeared. The heat flowing out the window and skimming my cheek also helped. Holding on to the door frame I lowered myself into the Mercedes.

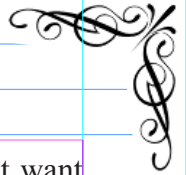
“Good morning.” His soft voice.

“Hi.” I said flushed. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to give you a ride to school. I thought we could go over our presentation on the way to school.”

“Okay.” I said, trying to hide the disappointment in my voice.

“Plus,” He continued and my heart leapt irregularly. “I heard



there was supposed to be a storm later today, and I did not want you to have to drive in it with your mustang. I can not bear the thought of something happening to you, especially when I could have prevented it. So here I am.”

“Oh...” I could not hide the disappointment in my voice. I thought I heard him snicker in response, but with the drone of the car, I could not be sure.

For the rest of the ride we practiced the presentation and talked about school work. When we arrived at school I was not eager to leave the confines of his car, but with four tardies already, I really could not afford to be late again.

We walked side by side to the front door, under the suspicious stares of the rest of the students. Finally we parted outside of my homeroom, which he insisted on walking me to. I told him that was unnecessary. I was sure he would be late if he did. But he insisted, confident that he could get to his homeroom in time. I eagerly conceded, but seconds after I walked through the door to my homeroom the bell sounded. He would be late because of me.

Through first and second period, Claire and Sarah tried to come up with solutions to help get me out of the presentation. Even after preparing in the car on the way to school, I was terrified to give the Calculus presentation. And, both Claire and Sarah had witnessed my projectile vomiting from a previous presentation and, being the considerate girls that they were, would never wish that torture on anyone else.

“You could fake food poisoning...” Sarah suggested.

“Or you could eat the food from the cafeteria and then you wouldn’t have to fake anything.”





"No, I used that excuse last time and there is no way I am going to subject myself to that torture again." I grimaced remembering the Sloppy Joe, that was, in actuality, every left over piece of meat ground into a soupy concoction, and spread on crusty, week old bread. That was the day I desperately wanted to get out of a German presentation on the Brothers Grimm.

"You could always just hope you hurt yourself in the hall on the way to class."

"Yeah..." Claire laughed. "That is not really a stretch for you, either – totally believable."

"Gee...thanks guys."

Unfortunately, I managed to make it through the morning unscathed. As I walked into my Calculus class, I noticed that everyone, including the teacher, was sitting as far back from the front of the room as possible. If anyone had passed by the room and did not know any better, they probably would have thought I did not shower.

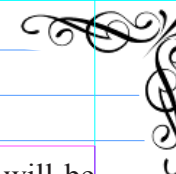
"Alex, are you two ready to present?" Mrs. Berkbile smiled, thinly. I stared at the teacher, afraid to open my mouth. Something else might come out besides words.

"Yes. We are." Aylmer's strong voice assured as he came to stand by me, and I was amazed how much better I felt with him beside me.

"Alright, you may begin whenever you are ready."

"Thank you." Aylmer smiled, flashing Mrs. Berkbile his dazzling smile.

"Aylmer, I don't think I can do this." I whispered as we set up the materials.



"Yes, you can. Don't think about anyone else and you will be fine. I am here."

"Okay." I whispered. My voice sounded weak.

"Good. Now let's get this over with."

With Aylmer standing next to me, the presentation went flawlessly. He drove me home after school as snow cascaded from the sky. I had never felt warmer.

That night, I called my friends to tell them about the presentation, although I could guarantee Claire already knew everything.

"Hello." Claire answered. I never knew how she did it, but no matter what she always got to the phone before it had a chance to ring a second time.

"Hi, Claire. It's Alex"

"Oh, hey what's up? I heard the presentation with Aylmer went well? You two official, yet?"

"Claire..." I groaned. "How many times do I have to tell you? We are just friends."

"Oh. Yeah right!"

"It's true." I insisted. "We understand one another."

"Well, maybe. But you can not tell me there isn't any chemistry between you two."

"Fine, maybe there is..." I compromised. "But I am pretty sure I like him a lot more than he likes me."

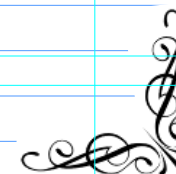
She laughed. "I would not necessarily say that."

"What are you talking about?"

"I am not blind. I see the way he looks at you."

"I have no idea what you are talking about!" I demanded.

"Come on, everyone sees it. He looks at you with googly-eyes."





It makes everyone want to gag.” She giggled boisterously. “But seriously...” She amended, her voice suddenly becoming serious. I have never seen two people more focused on each other. It is intense.”

“Really?” I stuttered.

“Yeah. Really. You two will end up together. You have too.”

“Claire, let’s not get carried away. You know I don’t believe in fate or destiny.”

“Well Sarah and I disagree with you.”

“You two have talked about this!?”

“Of course. But don’t worry; we have kept it between the two of us.”

“I can’t believe she agrees with your nonsense.”

“It is not nonsense. But if you don’t believe me, why don’t you just call her, yourself.”

“Fine, I will.”

“Fine. Make it a conference call I want to hear what she says.”

“Alright.” I dialed Sarah’s number.

“Hello.” Sarah soft voice came on the line, dramatically different from the bickering tone Claire and I were using.

“Hi Sarah. It’s me and Alex.” Claire jumped in before I had the chance to open my mouth.

“Oh, hi guys. What’s going on?”

“I have a question for you?” I said a little more forcefully than I intended.

“Uhhh... okay.” Sarah caught the tension in my voice and I immediately felt guilty.

I tried to speak a little more calmly.



“Claire and I have been having a discussion and we want your opinion.”

“Sure.”

“Sarah, Alex wants to know what we think about Aylmer.” Claire urged.

“That’s it?” Sarah laughed. “I like him. He seems nice.”

“No, she wants to know what we think of them together.”

“Oh... Well... I kind of think you two were destined to be together.”

“Sarah! I didn’t think you believe in all this fate stuff!” I cried.

“I don’t.” Sarah said matter-of-factly. “But Alex, I can’t deny the obvious” She said gently. “I see how he looks at you. It gives me goose bumps, and I am usually across the room.”

“Okay, so maybe has good eyes” I conceded.

“Alex, Aylmer has more than just good eyes...” Claire chuckled. “But it is more than that. It is like he can only look at you, like nothing else matters.”

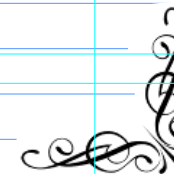
Shivers pulsed across my skin at the description. How could I have missed this? My friends were right. I really am oblivious.

Anyway, I heard your presentation went well” Claire interrupted my thoughts.

“Yeah, it did. How did you know?”

“Well” Claire exclaimed. “I heard from Robin, who heard from Jason, who heard from Rachel, who is in your class, that you managed to hold on to breakfast.”

“Oh so that was how the whole school knew.” For most of the day, students and teachers, many of whom had never spoken to me before, stopped to congratulate me. My 9th grade





History presentation must have been even more legendary than I realized.

“Actually, no. Some of the students were betting on whether or not you were going to be sick. I heard Sam Lions lost a lot of money today.”

So that explains why Sam, a pale, thin, blond boy had been glowering at me all through German.

“People were betting on me?” I was appalled.

“Yup, even some of the seniors got in on the action.” Claire added, clearly awed. “Great...” I sighed.

“Isn’t this a good thing?” Claire piped in. “Now everyone knows who you are.”

“Exactly! This means that when I do another embarrassing thing, AND I will do another embarrassing thing. The entire school will know.”

“Alex, why do you always think you’ll embarrass yourself?”

“Are you really asking me that question?”

“Okay, so what if you do?” Claire realized she was talking about me. “We will still be your friends... Well, maybe. I guess it depends on what you do” Claire laughed.

“Ha ha. Very funny.” I mocked. “Well I have to finish me homework and go to bed. I will see you guys tomorrow.”

“Night.”



Seven. *Falling*



On Tuesday Aylmer was absent, sick with the flu and the day passed uneventful and I was grateful. The past couple weeks had been a roller coaster of emotion.

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On Wednesday, I woke up early at the sound of scrapping against my window. It was only 6:15 am. Curious about what was making the unusual sound, I climbed out of bed and found a blue jay staring at me from the other side of the glass.

The bird cocked its head as if examining me. This, I knew, was utter nonsense but I patted down my hair, embarrassed anyway, trying to calm the spikes that had formed during the night.

Unnerved, I gave up on sleep and started to get ready for school, but not before tightly closing the curtains.





The scrapping continued behind the blue and white curtains. But, I did not open the window curtains again; instead I made my way downstairs for breakfast.

My stomach dropped when I walked into math. Aylmer's seat was empty and my mood plummeted. The rest of the day seemed to drag on.

"Class, today we will begin the first day of climbing." Mrs. Bell announced as we filed onto the rubber floor for gym. "Is everyone's partner here?"

"Mine's not." A blond boy called from the back of the group.

"Who is your partner?"

"Aylmer Huter."

"Hmmm... anyone else?"

The class went quiet.

"Alright, well you will just have to join another group and trade off."

"Now does everyone remember the commands?"

"Yeah..." A couple of students chimed in.

"Good, good. Well then, one person needs to set up to begin climbing and the other to belay."

"Alex, why don't you set up to climb and go through the commands for your fellow students."

"Ummm...." I gulped, staring up at the 40 foot wall, looming in front of me.

"Come, come. We don't have all day."

I nodded meekly and harnessed myself to the rope. It took me twice as long to tie the figure eight knot my hands were shaking so horribly.



"All ready?" Mrs. Bell encouraged.

I nodded, staring straight ahead at the multi-colored handholds.

"Belay..." I mumbled.

"Belay On." Claire enthused.

"Climbing..."

"Climb On"

I reached out, hesitantly grabbing the first rock I saw with my right hand.

You can do this, I thought to myself, before grabbing a rock with my left hand and lifting my body weight onto the wall.

"Good Alex." Mrs. Bell encouraged. "You are doing wonderfully."

My legs shook as I continued to climb. Not daring to look down, to smile or give a thumbs up, I continued on my upwards path. Higher and higher, I climbed until I was almost touching the top of the wall and the victory bell. I could not believe how close I was – almost there.

That was when I heard the gym door bang open and as I glanced down, my stomach plummeted when I realized how high I was from the ground. I missed the hold for my left leg and in that moment, in those few tiny milliseconds I knew I was going to fall. There was nothing I could do. I remember hearing someone scream, but I never recognized the voice as my own. My body plummeted downward, and I kept waiting, waiting for the moment when the rope would break my fall and I would hang there, dangling above the ground.

That moment never came. Instead I heard a the sickening snap of rope fibers, and I watched, horrified as the wall and the rocks





sped past my eyes. In the last few moments before I hit the ground, I saw every student's face turned up. They were all wearing the same mask of shock, but one person stood out, he seemed to be glowing brightly from below, as if lit from the inside. Aylmer's skin glistened as the light escaped through his pores and radiated around him. He was the last person I saw as the ground raced closer, as the screaming began.

When I opened my eyes the gym was in pandemonium; Claire was sobbing in the corner, with a cluster of students gather around her, Mrs. Robbins was running out the door toward the nurse, and Brianna's eyes stared, unseeing, out of an ashen face, but all I could focus on were the strong warm arms supporting me.

"Alex? Alex? Are you okay?" A familiar, rich, velvety voice worried.

"Oww..." I tried to move, but his arms were like an iron vise around my waist. "My leg, I think it is broken."

"Shh...shh...Just stay still for a second, Mrs. Bell went to get the nurse. She should be back any minute."

I sighed and leaned against his broad chest. I vaguely recall being pulled closer and Brianna leaning over my leg.

"Brianna, help her." Aylmer whispered as my eyes flickered closed. I could no longer feel the throbbing pain in my leg.



Eight. *Dreams*



I opened my eyes as harsh fluorescent lights glared down on me. I recognized the white walls, and knew immediately where I was. I had been here many times before, for a broken leg, two broken arms, a rampaging fever and a head laceration.

I shifted, staring at the flowers and balloon filling the room, and was startled by the erratic beeping that followed. I guess that meant I was alive.

"Your up!" Grandma Bella was suddenly glued to the side of my bed. Next to the sliver bars that barricaded my in. "I was so worried."

"I am fine, grandma." I sighed.

"Yes, well you almost weren't, what were they thinking, putting you up on that wall?! Really!" She shook her straightened pink hair, emphatically.





"It's okay, I'm okay." I smiled brightly, hoping to alleviate her concern. As I said the words I realized they were true; I did feel fine.

My leg felt perfect.

"Your up!" Claire and Sarah rushed into the room carrying at least 15 balloons and life-size teddy bear. How they had gotten that past security was a mystery. "We were so worried."

"Alright, I am going to speak with the doctor. Don't excite her too much" Grandma Bella looked pointedly at Claire.

"Not to worry," Sarah promised, "I'll make sure Alex is okay."

I watched as my grandma left the room, shaking her head all the way to the nurse's station.

"How are you feeling?" Sarah demanded.

"Okay. My back is a little sore, but considering I fell 40 feet to the ground, I suppose I am doing quite well."

"Alex, don't you remember what happened?" Sarah looked confused.

I tried to remember hitting the ground, but all I could see was a haze of colors and one blinding light.

"I remember were the rocks speeding past and the rope snapping, but not much more."

"Oh Alex... I am so sorry!" Claire, who had been unusually quite, sobbed, throwing herself across my bed. "I don't know what happened. I thought I did everything right, but now I don't know. Thank god Aylmer walked in when he did. I don't want to think about what would have happened if he had not been there." Claire's voice trembled.

"What are you talking about!?" My brow furrowed. "Aylmer



was the reason I fell." Claire frowned, her brows knit together. "Don't you remember? He walked in and that was when I lost my footing."

"That's true, Alex." Sarah hedged. "But I don't think it was entirely his fault. What would have happened when you reached the top and had to belay down?" I considered her statement and did not like the picture in my head.

"Either way, you were going to fall and I am not sure it was an accident." Sarah continued. "The police came after you and Aylmer were taken to the hospital. They think the rope was cut."

"Why did Aylmer need to go to the hospital?" I demanded. I did not want to think about the implications of the other statement, so decided to ignore it for the time being.

"Alex... He caught you." Claire looked at me, quizzically. "You really don't remember?"

"No..." I squinted my eyes, searching for a vision. Nothing came to me.

"Then I guess I should fill you in. Seeing as I had a front row seat," Claire shuddered.

"You were doing so well. I was sure you were going to make it to the top. But then you lost your footing and you fell. Does this sound familiar?"

I nodded.

"Good. Well, then I braced ready to belay, but you didn't stop. Oh Alex, I am so sorry! I did not know what to do." She sobbed. "You just kept falling. Then I heard the rope snap. It all happened so quickly. How Aylmer got to you in time, I don't know. He was not even nearby. I don't even remember him catching you, but





then I saw your limp form in his arms.” Claire cried. “I thought you were dead – I thought I had killed my beast friend.” A keening sob cut through the silent room.

“Claire, come here.” I wrapped my arms around my friend and pulled her down beside me, rubbing her back as she cried. “Is Aylmer okay?” I decided it would probably be best to direct this question to Sarah. Claire would probably not be able to talk for a couple minutes.

“Yeah, he is fine. The doctors were all amazed. Aylmer did not have a bruise or broken bone on his body. They released him from the hospital an hour after he got here.”

That figures. I am stuck in this hospital - probably for days and Aylmer gets out in an hour.

“Alex, are you really okay?” Sarah looked at me.

“Yeah, I am.”

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I dreamed of Aylmer and the accident that night. Sometimes I was the one falling, other times I was the spectator, watching. But no matter who I was, there was a constant in almost every dream.

Every time I came close to hitting the ground a bright light appeared, and I awoke, sweating.

The last dream was different though. It began as all the others before; I was climbing up a wall. But in this dream, it was a sheer cliff and I was climbing without a harness or rope.

This time, when I fell towards the jagged rocks and trees below, I realized there would be no bright light. There was no one there to catch me.



I woke up screaming. One name poured from my mouth “AAAYLMER!”

“Yes?” A rich voice whispered from beside my bed. Incredibly, I could tell he was trying to conceal a laugh.

It took several moments before I realized I was no longer in the dream and the voice was real – and that Aylmer had actually heard me scream his name.

“Ughhh... How long have you been here?” I asked, hoping he had not been there for the other 13 dreams.

“A while. I brought you these.” He held up a bouquet of roses.

“No.” I whined.

“You don’t want them?”

“No... I meant, no, you have been here for a while.” I did not know if that made sense. My brain still felt a little fuzzy from all the medication they had me on. But Aylmer understood.

“Don’t worry, you are cute when you dream, entertaining in fact. You like to move a lot. I had to fix your covers four times.”

“Did I say anything?” I looked down at the paisley bedspread.

“Not too much -” he hesitated, debating whether to continue. “Mostly you said my name. The last dream was different, though. Usually you said my name quietly, almost gratefully, but the last time you screamed it, terrified.”

“You weren’t there in the last dream. There was no one to catch me.” I admitted, then shook my head horrified. “You were not supposed to know that.”

“It’s okay.” He smiled. “I am glad you told me. So, do you remember anything that happened?”

“Some things, Claire and Sarah filled in the details. But there





is one thing I can't explain. I remember looking down as I fell and you were—" I stopped, debating whether to continue. He would think I was crazy if I told him the truth.

"Go on..." He smiled; his expression giving me confidence.

"You, you were.... glowing. I know that sounds ridiculous, but I clearly remember you standing by the door glowing and then everything goes blank."

"Well that is certainly interesting." He smiled, but the smile did not reach his eyes. "It was probably just your mind playing tricks on you."

"Yeah... I guess." But, I refused to believe it had only been in my head.

"I had better go now, before Etti – I mean my mom – wakes up. I'll see you later." He stood up and patted my leg gently, then turned to leave.

"Aylmer..." I spoke softly, unsure he could even hear me.

"Yes?"

"Thank you..."

"For what?"

"For saving my life."

A sad expression passed over his eyes. "Your welcome."

And then he was gone, and I felt a chill permeate the room.

"You cold?" A young, nurse breezed in.

"No, I'm okay." I smiled, still shivering slightly.

"Well, I'll turn up the thermostat a couple of degrees. Call me if you want it turned down."

"Okay..." I exhaled, as I drifted back to sleep and more dreams of Aylmer.



"Alex... Alex!" Jason waved at me as I walked into math on Tuesday, my first day back since the accident.

"Hey Jason" I smiled, embarrassed, glancing at the empty seat next to Aylmer on the way to my desk. I had hoped that after the accident, Aylmer would be a little more forthcoming about his feelings. But, in fact, it seemed the opposite had happened. He was even more distant than before.

When ever I peeked at him through my hair during math class, his eyes remained unflinchingly focused on Ms. Berkbile.

"Alex, are you okay?" Jason noticed the agonized look on my face as I stared at Aylmer's back.

"Yeah," I said forcing a smile on my face and dragging my eyes away. "I am feeling much better now. Thanks."

"I am so glad. I was so worried during gym class. We all thought you had died."

